

A STRATEGY FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN ARMENIA 2021-2025

NOVEMBER 2021



ABOUT RUEA

Established in 2007, the Republican Union of Employers of Armenia (RUEA) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that represents the common interests of employers in Armenia. RUEA implements business promotion and socio-economic development programs, and it is the only official social partner in the Armenia together with the Government of Armenia and the Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia (CTUA).

MISSION

Promoting continual improvement of business environment, protecting interests of the business community and employers driving towards economic growth and prosperity.

VISION

Become the universal voice of employers - the most influential organization in Armenia representing economic, labour and social issues to foster sustainable and competitive entrepreneurship development and decent work creation.

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

We provide services targeted business development and strong continuity, and we represent the interests of RUEA members and the Armenian business community at various state levels. We also organize trainings, business forums, conferences, various events for our members, aimed at developing business networks, B2B and member-to-member cooperation, improvement of your business, as well as awareness increase about various legislative updates.

We can help you raise your business issues to the Government of Armenia, promote your business, establish business networks in Armenia and abroad. RUEA membership includes a number of advantages that can contribute to the success of your business.

RUEA TODAY

Today, RUEA has about 14000 member companies, representing about 20% of the businesses operating in Armenia in nearly all sectors of the Armenian economy. About 40% of total employees in the private sector are employed in RUEA members companies. RUEA unites 31 sectoral and territorial unions, which represent different sectors of the economy in all regions of Armenia.

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Executive Summary

The Republican Union of Employers of Armenia (RUEA) believes that a high quality system of education, training and lifelong learning is critical to help workers to find good decent jobs and enterprises to find the skilled workers they require. A competitive and skilled workforce based on strong education-business linkages is essential for Armenia's future prosperity.

The analysis and recommendations in this Strategy are based on robust research including a comprehensive Employers Survey on Skills Needs which was developed with ILO support. This quantitative research was complemented with targeted focus groups with employers to identify existing problems and to provide more detailed insights into how the system could be improved. The research was also compared with policy analysis and recommendations from the Armenian Government and international agencies.

The research indicates that the Armenian education and training system has some of the building blocks for an effective system – a special attitude of the society towards education for centuries, a long tradition of education, a social partnership model and well-developed institutional structures such as a national qualifications framework. However, there are significant implementation gaps and the system still does not meet labour market needs completely and can not effectively meet the anticipated challenges. The Strategy highlights the main challenges and key actions needed in five areas.

The Employer Voice in the Education and Training System

Employers, with a close knowledge of business needs and opportunities, are well positioned to help identify where education and training policies and initiatives can narrow skills and abilities gaps. Therefore, co-operation among employers, policymakers and education institutions is critical for strengthening the employability of individuals and for the formation of a civilized society. The challenges identified in this Strategy include: extremely low awareness about the education and training system amongst Armenian employers; ineffective social partner engagement structures; few employers having a meaningful role in the governance of skills development; disruption of skills policy development because of constant political change; and lack of comprehensive cooperation and integration between the education and economic Ministries.

In order to meet these challenges, the Strategy recommends a comprehensive review of social partner engagement structures (national, sector, college and university level), allocation of resources to enable the Sectoral Skills Committees to fulfil their mandate and strategy completely and effectively; more active employer engagement on College and University Management Boards, increased support from the economic ministries on the development of new skills, abilities agenda; targeted business input and mutually beneficial participation in the design and operation of academic programs; and a long terms strategy for higher education.

Aligning Skills Development with the Needs of the Labour Market

Armenia's prospects for competing in the global economy largely depend on the relevance and quality of the education system. The overwhelming evidence in the research underpinning this Strategy was that the system is seriously under-performing in this regard. A broad range of challenges were identified, including: a significant mismatch between labour supply and demand; a lack of work-based

learning opportunities: a significant gap between university education and the labour market; a shortage of reliable labour market forecasts; lack of a systematic approach to new capacity building activities, regional disparities between skills provision; the cultural preferences of young people and significant oversupply of humanities graduates; lack of parity of esteem for VET; inadequate career guidance, particularly at school level; low skilled and unprepared candidate referrals from the State Employment Agency; an ageing population and high emigration, significant rate of professionals with the necessary skills and abilities among emigrants, as a result of which the local labor market is deprived of the already few specialists with many professions.

Practical recommendations in this Strategy include: tax relief and insurance cover for technical and technological equipment proved by employers for apprenticeships; targeted Work-based Learning (WBL); training of business relations coordinators in vocational schools; co-funded skills provision for key occupations to be provided through the public procurement framework, continuous implementation of generational change of the teaching staff and introduction of effective means of motivating the youth, training opportunities for academic staff to improve their knowledge of new technologies and business practices; a single skills and labour market intelligence body; and an enhanced State Employment Agency service.

Quality of Teaching and Learning

The political, social and economic challenges of post-Soviet transition have undermined the quality of Armenian education, particularly VET, and contributed to its diminished relevance. The following challenges were identified: teaching quality and the requirements for it; technological preparedness of students and teachers for a post-pandemic world; lack of quality in STEM education; inadequate public funding for skills-related education; governance issues in higher education; limited awareness of the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ); and shortcomings in early education and the school system.

RUEA's recommendations include: deeper involvement by employers in coordination of the NFQ; the development of a Technology Skills Action Plan; increased pay and clear career structures for VET teachers, rejuvenation of VET teachers staff; embedding new technology, tools and e-learning skills in the VET curriculum; a pilot centre to update the business, technology and labour-market knowledge of university professors and lecturers; financial support a RUEA-led Engineering Services Centre for both students and workers to address serious skills and abilities deficit in specific occupations; and improvements in preschool education

Lifelong learning (LLL) and upskilling

From an economic development perspective, the continuous training and upskilling of people in the workforce is particularly important in maintaining and developing business competitiveness to address poor export performance and to make Armenia an attractive location for investment. The Skills Development Survey indicated that most companies had not recently provided, and were not planning to provide, staff training. Lack of State support for in-company training was the key challenge.

RUEA has recommended new funding models for Armenian providers to deliver on the wide spectrum of lifelong learning, acquisition of new skills and upskilling needs including enterprise-led and co-funded sector skills training networks for short and focused training interventions. It has also suggested dedicated funding streams to support employers to address specific occupational skill deficits, and called for a holistic policy to integrate LLL and upskilling opportunities into the formal public education

system.

Challenges faced by SMEs

Given the importance of SMEs to the Armenian economy (accounting for two thirds of total employment), this policy statement has singled out the sector for particular attention in order to help SMEs to meet the challenges of a business environment that is constantly reshaped by new technologies and processes, changing consumer behavior, and broader social and economic trends.

The Strategy recommends: entrepreneurship modules across all formal education levels, a communications strategy for management development that highlights the benefits for SMEs of using best practice management skills and practices; additional funding for SME lifelong training; enhancing the capacity of business and employer organization regional offices to provide SME support; and online tools to enhance small business training.

Introduction

The policy recommendations in this document are based on Republican Union of Employers of Armenia (RUEA) identification of the need for a competitive and skilled workforce based on strong education-business linkages. They recognize that the expansion of human capabilities through high-quality systems of education, training and lifelong learning are important for helping workers to find good decent jobs and enterprises to find the skilled workers they require.

The recommendations build on a detailed assessment of the current business environment in Armenia and an analysis of the areas for improvement in 2016¹. The assessment was conducted in line with the ILO methodology on Enabling Environment for Sustainable Enterprises (ESEE). Education, training and lifelong learning emerged as one of seven critical pillars of the business environment that require urgent and significant reforms.

During 2021, RUEA started to develop its skills development agenda and to research the conditions for the more active and substantial involvement of employers in education and skills policies, programs and activities within Armenia. As part of this research, ILO supported the development and deployment of the Employers Survey on Skills Needs². The research sought to identify key skills issues facing employers and to provide improved insights into the demand for skilled labour for future planning and programming of education and training in Armenia. The ILO supported RUEA in complementing the research also with targeted focus groups with employers to provide a qualitative perspective on the research. The findings were also compared with policy analysis and recommendations from international agencies such as the ILO, the World Bank, United Nations and the European Union.

The research indicates that the Armenian education and training system has some of the building blocks for an effective system – a long tradition of education, a social partnership model and well-developed institutional structures such as a national framework of qualification (NFQ). However, there appears to be a significant ‘implementation gap’ and the system is not meeting the needs of the labour market. The most significant shortcomings are the lack of practical and ‘employability skills and abilities, cooperation between employers and education institutions and employability skills amongst students.

The challenges have been defined through robust research. This document uses the research to formulate concrete policy recommendations which RUEA is confident will, if implemented, significantly improve the quality and relevance of Armenia’s education and training system in line with current market demand.

¹ The enabling environment for sustainable enterprises in Armenia, Republican Union of Employers of Armenia, International Labour Office, Enterprises Department. - Geneva: ILO, 2016

² Armenia Employers Skills Development Survey and Research Report, Republican Union of Employers of Armenia, Business Support Centre, International Labour Office, 2021

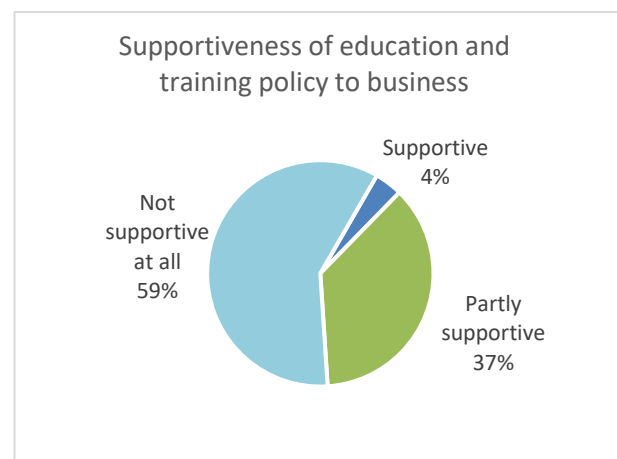
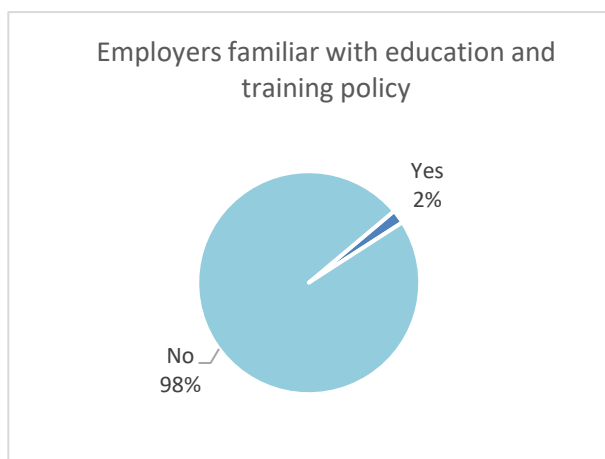
Challenges to Skills Development in Armenia

RUEA has identified five thematic areas where there are significant challenges for skills development in Armenia

The employer voice in the education and training system

Employers, with close knowledge of their business needs and opportunities, are well positioned to help identify where education and training policies and initiatives can narrow skills and needed abilities gaps. Co-operation among employers, policymakers and education institutions is therefore critical for strengthening the employability of individuals. There are a number of critical challenges that must be addressed to improve employer-education mutually beneficial linkages.

Overall awareness about the education and training system amongst Armenian employers is extremely low. The research indicates that employees are unaware about the policy implemented in the field, existing national, sectoral and local engagement mechanisms or the existence of any skills statistics. They are also largely unaware of the National Qualifications Framework. Further evidence of this situation is provided by the ILO Skills Development Survey. Only 2% of survey respondents were familiar with the Armenian national education and training policy and only 4% thought it supported business development. 99% were unaware of any recent improvements or reforms to the education and training system.



Armenia Employers Skills Development Survey and Research Report, Republican Union of Employers of Armenia, Business Support Centre, International Labour Office, 2021

Social partner engagement structures are not working effectively. There are a number of intermediary structures, which support the Ministry for Education, Culture and Sport (the MoESCS) to implement policy. In the VET Sector, the principal structures are: National Centre for Vocational Education and Training Development, National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance, National Training Fund, National Centre for Educational Technologies, and the "Professional Orientation and Competences Development Centre" branch of the National Institute for Labour and Social Researches (under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA)

Social partners are also involved in the governance processes. For example, the National Council for VET

Development (NCVD), established in 2008, is tripartite consultative body based on the principles of social partnership and includes equal number of representatives of Government, employers and trade unions. At the institutional level, the social dialogue is implemented via Governance Boards which are the management bodies of the Colleges and Craftsmanship schools. Since 2018, there have been attempts to strengthen and develop social partnership at the sectoral level through increasing the role of the 14 Sectoral Committees and expanding the scope of their responsibilities.

While, in theory, social partners are involved in the skills governance processes at a national, sector and local level, this is not matched by reality. Some committees meet irregularly and are poorly attended. There is also a serious imbalance in the NCVD with most participants adopting a passive role and deferring to the MoESCS. It would also appear that the Ministry itself regards some stakeholders as a threat and does not approach the work of the Council in a genuine spirit of partnership. More generally, the number of social partnership meetings is very limited (1 or 2 times), the agenda is mainly overcrowded and this prevents in-depth discussion. The NCVD's underpinning legislation is also out-of-date.

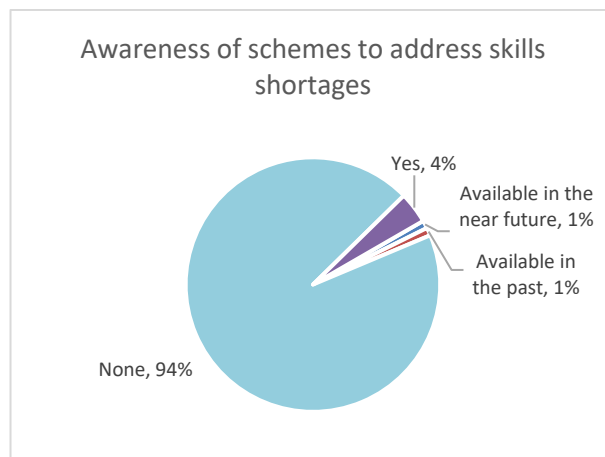
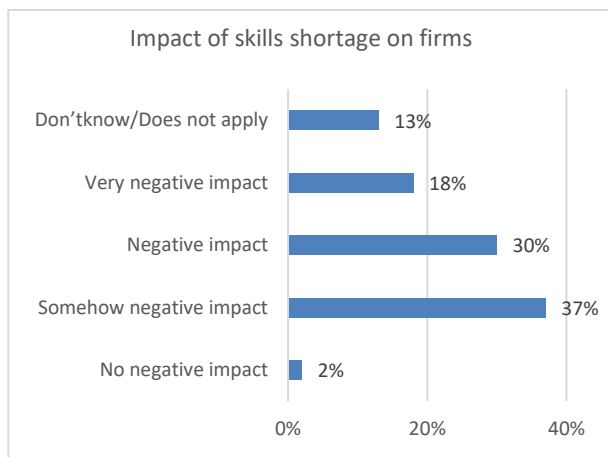
Political change is disrupting skills policy development and makes it difficult for employers to engage effectively. There has been a number of government decrees, decisions and laws introduced to stimulate education reform, particularly in vocational educational and training (VET), over the last two decades. International donor programmes (e.g. European Union, World Bank, United Nations, Gividd) have also supported significant interventions in the education and training system. However, this potential is undermined by disruption caused by changes in government. If a Minister is replaced, the whole system changes and institutional memory is lost. This has also engendered a lack of trust which could undermine the deeper partnership approach required for skills development

Lack of integration between the education and economic Ministries. The work of the four main ministries – the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport (MoESCS), the Ministry of High-Tech Industry, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs – is not sufficiently coordinate. While there is co-operation on specific projects, the relationship should be much closer and targeted. Armenia's economy is heavily reliant on domestic demand, which is itself driven by remittances that support local construction and consumption. The country will need to shift to an export-led strategy and this will require new abilities and a skills development system that is closely aligned with enterprise policy.

Aligning skills development with the needs of the labour market

Armenia's prospects for competing in the global economy will depend on its ability to produce a highly-skilled workforce. This largely depends on the relevance and quality of the education received by the students. Therefore, the education system needs to be aligned with the modern requirements of economy, both in terms of technical and employability skills. The system also has a critical influence in shaping employability attributes from an early age. The overwhelming evidence in both the quantitative and qualitative research was that the system was under-performing in this regard. The most significant shortcoming was the lack of practical and 'employability abilities and skills for most sectors of the economy. There was also a lack qualifications and specialized programs for specific sectors providing the necessary results. A broad range of challenges emerged during the research:

Significant mismatch between labour supply and demand: the structural disparity between the real needs of the labour market and the labour supply produced by the education sector has led to considerable gaps in workforce supply and demand³. The recent ILO Skills Development Survey indicated that 85% of respondents believe that skill shortages negatively affect firms in their sector in terms of loss of time, financial resources, productivity, clients and quality. This has also been caused by the education and training system’s inability to keep up with diverse and rapidly changing economic needs. There has been a consistent shift in employment from industry and agriculture towards services. However, agriculture continues to play a major role and still accounts for almost one-third of jobs in Armenia. This has led to shortages in specific occupations.



Armenia Employers Skills Development Survey and Research Report, Republican Union of Employers of Armenia, Business Support Centre, International Labour Office, 2021

Strengthen work based learning. The Armenian government has, in the past, wanted to establish a system of work-based learning. It launched a new working group in 2017 to frame an initial policy and adapt the concept to Armenian conditions. An official concept note presents three types of work-based learning: internships, company-based schools, and an apprenticeship/dual system. The government drew up a road map for execution but progress has been extremely slow, mainly in a few specialties. This issue is particularly serious in higher education, where internships for a four year Bachelor’s program are typically limited to six weeks. This compares with 25-30 weeks on a three year VET program.

Missed opportunities in university education: there is still a significant gap between university education and the needs of the labour market. Universities have started to include internships in their curricula, but they form a very small part of the curriculum which, of course, cannot provide the necessary practical skills. They take place only in a short period of time, and they have no guiding entrance and exit requirements. The lack of adequate facilities for training, lack of modern logistics, inefficient use of existing database the short duration of internships, the absence of well-formulated internship training programs, and the lack of buy-in on the part of both interns themselves and field of industry are some of the underlying factors for the disconnection between tertiary education and labour market. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that ‘transversal’ competences such as communication, teamworking, flexibility and adaptability, technical skills and ready to learn skills emerged as the key

³ European Training Foundation: Country Fiche 2020 Armenia - Education, Training and Employment Developments; https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Country%20Fiche%202020%20Armenia%20-%20Education_%20Training%20and%20Employment%20Developments.pdf

deficits in the ILO Skills Development Survey

Lack of reliable labour market forecasts: despite the improved availability of statistical data, the skills intelligence system remains fragmented and uncoordinated, preventing the development of more systematic and sustained flows of analysis and indicators.

Regional disparities persist between the capital Yerevan and rural areas: With one-third of the population living in the capital, Yerevan accounts for half of all companies, 70% of employment and 72% of turnover in the country. Over two-thirds (70%) of Armenia's poor live in secondary cities and rural areas. According to workshop participants, the disparities are generally due to limited economic activity, a lack of job creation beyond the agricultural sector and the inability of young people and their families to afford the cost of pursuing educational opportunities in Yerevan.

Cultural preferences of young people: the significant oversupply of humanities graduates and the ambition of young people to work in 'fashionable' professions (e.g. economists) was frequently highlighted in the research. This was contrasted with their lack of appetite for 'getting their hands dirty' and pursuing practical VET courses and gaining practical skills. It was also pointed out that technology is transforming even traditional sectors with the example of 'smart' barns in agriculture.

Parity of esteem for Vocational Education and Training (VE): VET continues to face critical constraints at the structural level. The constraints include very low levels of funding, lack of motivation and low level of professional orientation which appears to be insufficient to enable the system to develop, and an overall negative perception of VET among students and their parents, who see this kind of education as a last resort for the weakest students.

Inadequate career guidance, particularly at school level: career guidance has been introduced in the VET system since 2013, and in almost all institutions, career guidance units with at least one trained career specialist, have been functioning since 2018. Higher education institutions run career centres to support students and graduates in their transition to work. However, employers have questioned the knowledge of career advisory staff and also emphasised that guidance should be happening at a school level and with the direct participation of employers.

Low skilled and unprepared candidate referrals from the State Employment Agency: this view is supported by low labour force participation rates which are driven by information asymmetries that prevent appropriate matches between employers and jobseekers and by the failure of employment promotion programs. It is also attributed to lack of training of State Employment Agency staff. This view is supported by the ILO Skills Development Survey in which 94% of respondents were unaware of state employment and training schemes that could assist companies with skills shortage

Ageing population: the Armenian population is declining and aging. Therefore, the supply of workers from this source will decline in line with the fall in the population of young people. The shift will also categorically change the target audience for training and development from students to workers

High emigration: Armenia has one of the highest emigration rates in the world. Data from the United Nations indicate that there were an estimated 937 000 Armenian migrants in 2015, equivalent to 31.1% of the country's total population. Poverty and lack of employment are the main drivers. While the main group of emigrants are low-skilled workers, employers are also concerned at the migration of talented and skilled workers whose number is increasing year by year.

Quality of teaching and learning

The political, social and economic challenges of post-Soviet transition have undermined the quality of Armenian education, particularly VET, and contributed to its diminished relevance. The following themes which emerged from quantitative and qualitative research were supported by secondary research provided by international agencies.

Teaching quality: teaching is not an attractive career path at school, VET and university level; there are critical issues particularly at a VET level with regard to teacher recruitment, rejuvenation and generation change of the teaching staff, management, deployment, career path development, compensation and performance evaluation up to higher education. The research also highlighted the fact that teaching staff are not being replenished with new talent. Large numbers of teachers approach retirement (in some universities, the average age of the main teaching staff is over 60, which is very worrying), the necessary forms of motivation are missing and the salaries are too low to attract enough professional young recruits.

Education in a post-pandemic world: MoESCS has had to face several challenges during the pandemic: the technological preparedness of students (a lack of computers, smartphones and internet connection for low-income families), alternative channels to provide online lessons, content preparedness (the availability of teaching and learning materials aligned with national curricula), and pedagogical preparedness. Almost 50% of teachers had never used IT for distance learning or provided lessons using the distance learning mode, and nearly one in four teachers reported a lack of computers in their homes.⁴

Inadequate prioritization of investments to improve the quality and delivery of education in STEM fields: In an interconnected and competitive global economy, STEM education has a central role to play in enabling the students of today to participate actively in knowledge-based innovation. Low levels of STEM enrolment in vocational and tertiary education in Armenia are a constraint to building a skilled workforce for high growth sectors. Armenia's engineering and computer science curricula are severely lagging industry requirements⁵.

Inadequate resources: Public expenditure on education is very low. At 2.8% of GDP, it corresponds to only 58% of the EU-28 average of 4.7%. Expenditures on labour market programs are also low. Lack of resources has a direct impact on quality, with some university leaders reporting basic literary deficiencies among significant numbers of students. The institutions are unable to address this issue systematically because of their dependence on tuition fees to cover staff costs.

Governance issues in higher education: the unhelpful proliferation of private universities and the governance issues that this has caused. The governance and quality control system needs to provide a level playing field between public, private, and cross-border institutions in terms of basic regulation. It was also suggested that state resources are allocated to public universities without reference to labour market demand.

⁴ European Training Foundation, Digital Factsheet 2020 https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-03/digital_factsheet_armenia_0.pdf

⁵ "World Bank. 2020. Realizing Armenia's High-Tech Potential. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33027> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO."

Limited awareness and utilization of the National Framework of Qualifications: MoESCS has developed tools and approaches, but the framework has not yet had an impact on end-users.

Shortcomings in early education and school system: According to the World Bank⁶, human capital formation in Armenian children is lower than the levels in comparator countries. In 2017, Armenia's Human Capital Index was lower than the average for the transition countries of the former Soviet Union countries and the average for countries in Europe and Central Asia. This is primarily due to its poorer performance on early years school. Other international surveys suggest that near-universal access to general education has not necessarily translated into widespread high achievement among school students. In addition, there is limited availability of and access to good-quality pre-school education, which is essential for improving performance in general education.

Lifelong learning and upskilling

From an economic development perspective, the continuous training and upskilling of people in the workforce is particularly important in maintaining the competitiveness of companies in order to address poor export performance and to make Armenia an attractive location for investment

There is a lack of support for in-company training. Most current measures address skill development through educational institutions, in preliminary and middle VET schools. There are few other options for workers to participate in recognized state-supported training. Multiple actors provide business-related training, but the sector is mainly fragmented. One research respondent indicated that he had to send key staff to China for two to three months to develop mechanical skills. Others criticized the 'passiveness' of the VET colleges. The ILO Skills Development Survey indicates that 85.36% of training interventions came from companies' own resources. Over 73% of companies had not participated in any training course in the past 12 months and, of even more concern, 83.6% were not planning to provide training for employees in the next 12 months. Almost 92% did not have an annual budget in the company reserved for training. The small amount of training carried out was mostly to meet compliance with regulatory requirements.

⁶ "World Bank. 2020. Survive, Learn, Thrive : Strategic Human Capital Investments Toward a More Prosperous and Inclusive Armenia. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34512> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO."



Armenia Employers Skills Development Survey and Research Report, Republican Union of Employers of Armenia, Business Support Centre, International Labour Office, 2021

Challenges faced by SMEs

Almost all firms in Armenia are SMEs. In 2019 they represented 99.8% of all companies, and accounted for two-thirds of employment and 63% of turnover in the business sector. Moreover, 93% of Armenian firms are micro-enterprises (having fewer than 10 employees; 58% of micro-enterprises are non-employers). It is well known internationally that there are particular challenges for smaller business to participate in education and training. These challenges include:

Owners and managers have limited time for training sessions and few resources to fund and implement development programs in time. In addition, since many owners lack formal training, they sometimes question its value and expediency.

Lack of upskilling opportunities for owner managers. There are limited programs available for people working in small businesses, particularly in rural areas where the presence of own-account workers is significant.

Lack of incentives to provide apprenticeship and work based learning opportunities. This was a recurring theme in RUEA research. While participants saw the value of these interventions, they also come at a significant cost, particularly for small and micro enterprises. Newly qualified trainees who leave to join other larger companies is also a challenge.

Objectives and Key Actions

Objective 1: Employers will participate actively in skills development and make effective use of skills in their businesses, to become more productive and competitive

Skills development is more effective if the world of learning and the world of work are linked. Learning in the workplace allows students to develop 'hard' skills on modern equipment and 'soft' skills such as teamwork, communication and negotiation, through real-world experience. Employers, with close knowledge of their business needs and opportunities, are also well positioned to help identify where education and training policies and initiatives can narrow skills gaps. Therefore, co-operation among employers and policymakers is critical to ensure that the most effective structures are in place.

This was acknowledged, in theory, by the Armenian Government's new Concept on the Social Partnership in VET which was endorsed by the NCVD and then approved by the MoESCS in March 2018. However, our analysis above indicates that many changes in the last decade are cosmetic and the aspirations contained in government decrees do not match the reality of the passive involvement of some stakeholders, the defensive attitude of the Ministry and lack of meaningful dialogue. Therefore, RUEA recommends the legislative basis of social partner engagement structures should be reformed with a view to giving employers a more meaningful role in the governance of skills development.

The new Concept also targeted a considerable strengthening of social partnership at the sectoral level through increasing the role of the Sectoral Committees (SC) and expanding the scope of their responsibilities. Under the Ministry's proposals⁷, the SCs are to have a role in:

- provision of consultations to the stakeholders on various issues related to sector development,
- analyze and communication of information on the competences required in the sector, current and expected vacancies, to the educational institutions and employment centres;
- identification of new skills and abilities needs (both qualitative and quantitative) in the sector's companies, provision of recommendations on the qualification level and certification requirements for each occupation;
- provision of recommendations on the occupation profiles, state education standards, workforce skills and competences related to the sector;
- provision of technical (professional) expertise of the VET sector-related state educational standards;
- Identifying and assessing the needs of new professions and educational programs;
- dialogue with VET providers to improve the education and training content for making it more relevant.

RUEA supports these proposals and urges the Government to ensure that the legal status and resources

⁷ Government of Armenia: National Report to the Torina Process 2018 – 2020 , <https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/trp/torino-process-2018-2020-armenia-national-report>

are in place so that the SCs can fulfill their mandate independently and effectively.

Co-operation between education institutions and employers is also critical for strengthening the employability of individuals. Methods to improve co-operation can take different forms, such as providing incentives to education institutions to engage with employers, raising awareness among employers about education trends, and fostering joint initiatives to help develop work-based learning opportunities. The College Governance Board structure is in place, and the Concept on the Social Partnership in VET in 2018 strengthened the employer voice and attached important new functions such as education quality assurance, links with employers and organisation of students' practical training, career guidance, etc. However, an information awareness campaign is required to encourage more active involvement of employers at college board level. The greater acceptance of using technology for virtual meetings across the business and education communities since Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns provides more opportunities for this type of engagement. A short guide to help employers to engage more effectively with College Boards would also help.

There is also a significant gap between university education and the needs of the labour market. RUEA will work with employer representatives on university boards to increase their effectiveness in working with the partnership model.

KEY ACTIONS

1. The legislative basis of social partner engagement structures such as the National Council for VET Development should be reformed with a view to giving employers a meaningful role in the governance of skills development.
2. A comprehensive review to measure the effectiveness of social partner engagement structures (national, sector and college level) should be undertaken.
3. The MoESCS should ensure that the legal status and resources are in place for Sectoral Committees to fulfill their mandate independently and effectively.
4. RUEA and the MoESCS should organize an awareness campaign to encourage the active involvement of a wider employer base on College Boards.
5. RUEA and the MoESCS should develop a short guide to help employers to maximize the opportunities provided by participating on College Boards.
6. RUEA will work with employer representatives on university boards to increase their effectiveness in working with the partnership model.
7. The MoESCS should allocate a legal quota of seats specifically for RUEA representatives on university trustee boards.
8. Given the importance of skills to Armenia's productivity and future economic prosperity, the Ministry of Economy should play a more active role on the National Council for Vocational Development.
9. Universities should involve more employers in the design and operation of academic programs, to acquire students' new practical abilities and skills, as well as on the institutional boards of trustees.
10. There is an urgent need to have a strategy for higher education and a new law on higher education in order to set the course toward a joint vision for the sector and the country.

Objective 2: Government and education providers will place a stronger emphasis on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the economy, learners and society

Armenia, like many countries, faces the phenomenon of high-levels of long-term unemployment at the same time as businesses often report that they are unable to find suitably skilled candidates to fill job vacancies. This trend is now increasing with skill demands and shortages reported across a much wider range of occupations. The challenge can be addressed by providing relevant skills development opportunities and appropriate career guidance information and advice. Effective career guidance has the potential to improve the efficiency of the education system, prevent early school leaving, promote a tighter connection between education and work, extend the length of careers, support economic and labour market goals and support social equity and inclusion.

The expansion of Work Based Learning (WBL) opportunities, such as apprenticeships and internships at a VET and higher education level, is critical to providing relevant skills opportunities. While the MoESCS has been implementing the “Concept Paper and road map for development of work-based learning (WBL) in Armenia for 2019-2025”, progress has been extremely slow. The European Training Foundation argues that that WBL should focus on various target groups, such as young people and adults. It also argues that the national regulation on WBL (dealing with insurance, confidentiality, protection of students’ rights, etc.) should be adopted without further delay⁸. At a VET level, priority should be given to the training and employment of business relations coordinators, one from each vocational school. Lessons learned from successful donor-projects should be made available to other vocational schools.

There are examples of good practice. For example, in the past, the RUEA has provided the Ministry with a list of 30 companies that had agreed to offer their workplaces and resources for on-the-job training, so that students could acquire practical business skills. This is particularly important at VET level, where most colleges do not have the physical infrastructure to provide practical education opportunities. WBL is not supported by public funding and the system relies on the sporadic and fragmented funding that is available through international agencies. Therefore employers require WBL incentives, such as tax relief and insurance for technical equipment used to provide apprenticeships and internship opportunities.

This type of engagement can also be productive in the other direction. For example, the National Polytechnic University of Armenia has well equipped laboratories and Continuous learning center which could be made available to provide upskilling opportunities to workers, as a model of good practice.

The economy would also benefit from regular assessments of the needs of the labour market, which could help increase the relevance of training for both jobseekers, employees and employers. The National Institute of Labour and Social Research produces brief overviews of sectors and conducts analyses on specific issues of labour market and skills development. Other research centers also contribute to the analyses. In addition, there are ad hoc surveys by VET institutions, employer associations and, occasionally, international institutions.

⁸ National dissemination seminar on progress in work-based learning (WBL) in Armenia, May 2021:

<https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/flash-report-national-dissemination-seminar-progress-work-based-learning-wbl>

However, this type of activity requires coordination of multiple ministries, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders, not only the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. For these purposes, it is important that the government recognizes employers as strategic partners and formalizes their role, in setting priorities and in enhancing skills-upgrading for workers. As a first step to address this critical issue, RUEA will propose a list of key occupations and skills that are urgently required by employers to be provided through the public procurement framework. Its members will fund 20% of the training costs provided by the government in these specific skills areas.

Better matching of skills to employment opportunities can also be achieved by promoting the full range of skills provision available across the VET and higher education sectors and the value of these skills in meeting the needs of the labour market and providing career opportunities for individuals. Genuine progression paths between VET and higher education will help to address the perception that vocational education is a 'second-best' option. RUEA has, in the past, provided lectures to university students on career planning and labour market requirements.

Armenia has a functioning labour market agency. The State Employment Agency (SEA), which operates through 51 local centers, provides employment services to jobseekers, including intermediation services and career information and guidance. The SEA also organizes job fairs and provides professional training for unemployed people. In 2017 the SEA launched an improved online system to match jobseekers and job vacancies and has committed to provide targeted services for jobseekers, particularly those who are long-term unemployed or formally unemployed. However, there is still potential for significant reform.

KEY ACTIONS

1. The Ministry of Finance should provide tax relief and insurance cover for technical and technological equipment provided by employers for apprenticeships, internships and other Work Based Learning (WBL) opportunities
2. Targeted WBL opportunities should be supported with the adoption of the national regulation on WBL and the continuous training of business relations coordinators in vocational schools.
3. RUEA will propose a list of key occupations and skills that are urgently required by employers to be provided through the public procurement framework. Its members will fund 20% of the training costs funded by the government in these specific skills areas.
4. Higher education institutions should be incentivized to strengthen practical trainings soft skills development, in-depth revise study programs and internships in all degree programs. This will not only give students a chance to use their skills in the work environment but will also improve the labor market relevance of the curriculum.
5. The Armenian Government should consolidate all skills and labour market intelligence gathering, which is currently spread across multiple ministries and agencies, into a dedicated technical skills forecasting body. This should involve key data providers equipped with the analytical capacity to establish a forward-focused skills and labour market information system. It should also include employers as formal strategic partners.
6. Government should provide VET institutions with the legal basis to expand their activity to the commercial provision of services to employers and learners
7. The capacity of the State Employment Agency to develop a better understanding of employer needs and help prepare appropriate candidates for job interviews should be enhanced.

Objective 3: The quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education will be continually improved

Education and training have always been a cornerstone value and strongly interwoven in the social fabric of the Armenian society for ages. Historically, learning crafts was deeply embedded in Armenian ethos. This legacy flourished into an inherent appreciation of learning in the Armenian culture, which resulted in very high literacy rates and quality professional education in Soviet times.

More recently, the Government program for the period 2019–2023⁹ aimed at building a high-tech, industrial, competitive, export-oriented, inclusive economy. It recognized the development of human capital, including through the modernization of education and an improvement in its quality, as one of the key factors to achieving this goal.

There are pockets of good practice, usually supported by international donors. For example:

- Armenia's employment and vocational education policies were both backed by an EU budget support program called Better Qualifications for Better Jobs¹⁰. The program targeted the efficiency of Armenia's labour market and the employability of its workforce, with an emphasis on agricultural employment.
- The WBL4JOB project consortium¹¹ has 12 organizations, including state and public institutions, higher education institutions from five countries, which is advising on the introduction of work-based training programs in Armenia's higher education system.
- The "Armath" engineering laboratories program applies an innovative curriculum and pedagogical approach to STEM learning that is effective and scalable. Implemented since 2014, the "Armath" model exposes children between 10 and 18 years old to STEM education through interactive after-school classes, competitions, and camps¹².
- With support from the German development agency GIZ, dual education is being piloted in five sectors (ICT, tourism, maintenance and repair of motor vehicles, winemaking and agriculture). It is planned to introduce a dual system also with a new Logistics specialty.

While this activity is welcome, international research indicates that high quality initial and continuing education for staff involved in direct provision of education and training is the critical requirement to sustain better learner outcomes. As McKinsey, the consultancy company, has argued "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers¹³". International good practice has seen a move from the explicit specification of content towards a more generic, skill-based approach to discipline knowledge. As well as having more responsibility for what is taught, teachers are increasingly expected to teach knowledge and understanding. There should be a strong emphasis on improving accountability and the use of evaluation to measure outcomes.

Two years ago, the MoESCS recommended a complete package for the VET teachers career

⁹ Government Decision No. 65-A, 08.02.2019. <https://www.gov.am/files/docs/3562.pdf>

¹⁰ European Training Foundation: Better Qualifications for Better Jobs <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/news/eu-continues-contribute-creating-stable-jobs-armenia>

¹¹ WBL4JOB project - Introducing work-based learning in higher education systems of Armenia and Moldova for better employability of graduates <https://www.wbl4job.com/>

¹² <https://armath.am/en>

¹³ McKinsey & Co (2010). How the world's best-performing school systems keep getting better, www.mckinsey.com

development, including particularly:

- VET teachers job profile,
- VET teachers pre-service training,
- policies and procedures for selecting the teachers including vacancy announcements competition procedures, etc.,
- mechanisms for assessment of VET teachers' performance,
- increase of the VET teachers' salaries at least to the level of general schools' teachers and provision of the "social package",
- continuous growth ensuring system of teachers grading and salaries ranking,
- other financial incentives,
- improvement of the teachers' in-service training system,
- induction and mentoring of new teachers.

This package should be implemented without further delay.

The relevance and quality of university education should also be addressed. Academic staff's knowledge of new technologies, and business developments could be strengthened through training and exposure to modern workplaces. University institutes and faculties should also be made aware of the present and future challenges and development trends in the Armenian labour market. This requires a new style of mutually beneficial and long-term work and interaction between employers and universities because, currently, there are very few industry-related professional development opportunities for academic staff. In order to address this challenge, RUEA has proposed a new national center for the professional development of university professors and lecturers. This would offer short term professional enterprise-related courses which have been developed in collaboration with employers and for which academic staff will receive State accreditation. In the first instance, a pilot project involving the National Polytechnic University, National University of Architecture and Construction, the National Agrarian University and the State University of Economics.

Overall, there needs to be greater transparency on teaching qualifications required in preliminary and secondary VET education, and at university level. The MoESCS should provide more clarity on how State funding will be used to support properly qualified and mainly young lecturers.

While the ILO Armenia Employers Skills Development Survey has revealed broad skills deficits across the labour market, there is a particularly acute skill shortage in a few specific occupations – notably production engineers, metalworkers, assemblers, electronic specialists and machine operators. These exist in a range of sectors such as food processing, metal processing and construction. Therefore, RUEA has started work on short-term measure to address an urgent labour market priority - the development of an Engineering Services Centre which will supply practical training opportunities to (i) existing VET and higher education students who require practical training opportunities (ii) workers who need to develop specialist engineering-related skills and whose employers will pay for this service. While RUEA will lead this project, it requires seed funding from the State to equip the center and get it off the ground. This is a national priority for the development of a high quality workforce on which the future of both foreign investment, exports of domestic products and services and indigenous industry depend.

Armenia has made progress in National Qualifications Framework (NQF) development in recent years¹⁴. In addition to supporting overall improvement of quality, it aims at providing more transparency to education and training qualifications. If properly implemented, the framework has significant potential in terms aligning the different elements of the education system, assisting employers in assessing the workforce skill level, and informing government decisions on skills matching adjustments.

The development of digital skills is another key area for reform. The ICT sector is a potential driver of Armenia's productivity growth, a key contributor to total value added in the economy, as well as a driver of exports and high quality, highly paid employment. The application of high-level ICT skills across other sectors of the economy could also drive their productivity, competitiveness and economic resilience.

As the World Bank has highlighted¹⁵, addressing deficiencies in schooling must begin at the preschool level as early childhood education creates a foundation of cognitive, physical, and social development in children that will help them to learn throughout lives. Low preschool enrollment is predominantly a challenge in rural areas in Armenia, where a small number of children and limited budgets at the community level make the traditional kindergarten model financially unsustainable

KEY ACTIONS

1. The National Qualifications Framework requires effective coordination and a stronger involvement from employers, particularly in the area of VET colleges where employer engagement is an important metric in the National Centre for Professional Education quality Assurance (ANQA) qualifications and quality assurance process. The development of a qualifications register could also make the NQF more visible, and support career guidance services and recognition practices.
2. The MoESCS and the Ministry of High-Tech Industry should co-operate on the development of a Technology Skills Action Plan as an effective mechanism for improving the supply of skills. Due to the pace of technological change and global competition, the plan should be revised regularly to take into account the current and future skills requirements across the digital economy.
3. The MoESCS should develop clear policies and procedures in VET institutions during the processes of selecting teachers, rejuvenation and motivation of the teaching staff, continuous provision of generational change, developing teachers' job profiles, providing higher salaries and formal mechanisms for assessment of teachers' performance.
4. Greater transparency on teaching qualifications required in preliminary and secondary VET education, and at university level. The MoESCS should provide more clarity on how State funding will be used to support properly qualified and mainly the young lecturers.
5. The curricula of all formal VET qualifications should be reviewed with a view of teaching more and advanced IT skills to the students as well as imbedding elements of IT application in the other modules, where relevant.
6. School and VET teachers, private sector instructors and university staff should continue to be trained further in how to develop and implement e-learning content. This requires a general improvement in digital skills among VET teachers and managers.
7. The MoESCS should support the launch of a pilot national center to update the business,

¹⁴ European Training Foundation: 2021.National Qualifications Framework – Armenia.
<https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Armenia.pdf>

¹⁵ World Bank. 2020. Survive, Learn, Thrive : Strategic Human Capital Investments Toward a More Prosperous and Inclusive Armenia.
World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank.

technology and labour-market knowledge of university professors and lecturers. The center would offer short term State accredited enterprise-related courses which have been developed in collaboration with employers.

8. The Armenian Government should allocate ring-fenced funding to support early stage researchers and young scientists teaching in the field of VET who are not part of state funded thematic research projects in order to encourage them to pursue careers in VET institutions.
9. The Armenian Government should provide seed funding to equip a RUEA-led Engineering Services Centre which will be established for both students and workers to address the serious skills deficit in specific occupations such as energy saving and ecological transport, engineers, metalworkers, assemblers, electronic specialists and machine operators.
10. An alternative cost-effective model of preschool education for rural communities, based on best international practice, should be developed.

Objective 4: People across Armenia will engage more in upskilling and lifelong learning

Lifelong learning and upskilling brings benefits to the individual, to society and to employers. It has an important contribution to make to people's wellbeing, to creating a more inclusive society and to supporting a vibrant and sustainable economy. From an economic development perspective, the continuous training and up-skilling of people in the workforce is particularly important in maintaining the competitiveness of companies and establishment of new businesses in order to address poor export performance and to make Armenia an attractive location for investment.

Lifelong learning in Armenia is defined by the Education Law as 'learning outcomes achieved through participation in formal education, and non-formal or informal learning throughout the entire life, by which the individual forms or improves his/her knowledge, skills, competences and system of values'.

Armenia joined the Bologna Process in 2005 and lifelong learning principles have been included as priorities in supplementary and continuous, non-formal and adult education policy documents. Institutional capacity has also been developed.

However, a number of challenges remain¹⁶. They can be summarized into three major categories: valuation of lifelong learning as a new guiding principle for organizing education, assessment of the existing frameworks for implementation and gaps between the policy and practice.

RUAE believes that there are opportunities provided through the proposed Sector Council infrastructure to develop enterprise-led skills training networks for short and highly focused training interventions. These networks could consist of businesses within the same sector with similar workforce training needs. The proposed network could help employers to collaborate in identifying the skills needed to make their business more competitive and source the training partners at the appropriate level (VET or higher education, private or public) to provide the relevant upskilling where and when it is needed.

¹⁶ Lifelong learning policy and practice in the Republic of Armenia: 2013 Europe XXI Foundation

The primary objective of the proposed skills network is to increase participation in enterprise training by businesses. RUEA believes that training and upskilling are key elements in keeping businesses competitive in both a domestic and international context. We also believe that training and upskilling significantly enhances the career and mobility of the workforce.

The network could operate on a joint investment model, where Government grants are combined with contributions from enterprise, thus reducing costs and other barriers for businesses.

Encouraging enterprise to lead the process in this way would help to ensure that programs delivered through the sector network are highly relevant to the modern demands and needs of industry. This approach also enables cohesive enterprise networking and the flexibility to respond to ever-changing skills demands through both formal and informal learning.

KEY ACTIONS

1. Introduce funding models for Armenian providers to deliver on the wide spectrum of lifelong learning and upskilling needs. This will mean appropriate approaches to funding that support different types of part-time provisions, module-based delivery systems, collaboration across education and training providers (including between VET and universities) and access by all potential lifelong learners.
2. The Sector Skills councils should pilot an enterprise-led and co-funded sector skills training networks for short and focused training interventions
3. Develop concrete mechanisms and instruments for enhancing social partnership in lifelong learning policy implementation and involve all the stakeholder groups in all the phases of policy making. Focus on the demand of the society and the labour market;
4. Dedicated funding streams to support employers to address specific occupational skill deficits (e.g. ICT, skills for the low carbon economy) should be established and ring-fenced.
5. Develop a holistic policy to integrate lifelong learning and upskilling opportunities into the formal public education system.

Objective 5: There will be a specific focus in the supply of skills to Armenian SMEs

There are particular challenges for small and micro businesses in most countries to participate in education and training. They need to be incentivized to invest more in continuous workforce training. There is also a need for managers to upskill – especially in SMEs – to underpin company development and growth. Given the importance of SMEs to the Armenian economy (accounting for two thirds of total employment), this policy statement has singled the sector out for particular attention in order to help SMEs to meet the challenges of a business environment that is constantly reshaped by new technologies, changing consumer behavior, and broader social and economic trends.

Management development is fundamental to improving the productivity of SMEs. Managers that adopt best practice management skills and practices are better placed to formulate clear strategy, adopt

modern methods, develop better teams, innovate and grow. Research has shown that better managed firms are more productive, grow faster and have significantly better survival rates.

There is a particular challenge with workforce design - the process of analyzing the workforce, determining its future needs, and identifying the gap that exists between what the firm needs now and what it will need in the future. The need to have the right people with the right skills and tools, in the right roles at the right time is more critical now than ever. Workforce design is essential to keep enterprise ahead of the curve, building human capital and capacity at a sectoral and regional level.

A well thought-out entrepreneurial education policy will also maximize the potential of young people to develop the next generation of innovative products, services and processes. The education system has a critical influence in shaping entrepreneurial attributes from an early age. Therefore, it is extremely welcome that the Armenian government that VET programs such include a compulsory module on entrepreneurship. This should be extended to the school and higher education systems. In the past, the RUEA has organized short and very well-attended programs for aspiring entrepreneurs and students in universities. This experience should be used in developing new entrepreneurship modules.

Young people who benefit from entrepreneurial learning develop latent business knowledge and essential skills including creativity, initiative, tenacity, teamwork, understanding of risk, assessing the importance of social partnership, a sense of responsibility and social resilience. These are the high level skills necessary for all commercial and social endeavors which make young people more employable and entrepreneurial.

KEY ACTIONS

1. The Armenian government's decision to introduce modules for key competences in entrepreneurship across all levels of formal education should be completed without delay
2. The relevant ministries should develop a Communications Strategy for Management Development that informs, listens and persuades owner managers and SMEs on the potential benefits of using best practice management skills and practices.
3. Government departments and state agencies should create the available management development opportunities cooperatively so that they become more accessible and coherent. They should also develop more flexible approaches, consistent with managers' time constraints and scale the offer so that a far greater number of SME managers undertake management training.
4. Government should Identify channels through which additional funding for SME training can be accessed. The impact of training interventions should be measured and assessed.
5. The capacity of business and employer organization regional offices should be enhanced to provide information and advice to small and micro enterprises on how to access potential markets for their products and services, and on how to develop the abilities of workforce to support their business development strategy.
6. The Ministry of Economy should develop a productive online Management Skills and Practices Benchmarking/Assessment Tool for SMEs. This should identify an introductory/recommended basic suite of training.

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