

Maintaining the Role of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure

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1. Introduction

In November 2016, EU-wide representatives of the Fitness and of the Outdoor Sectors identified as the main actors of the Active Leisure Sector, EuropeActive and the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE), strengthened their existing cooperation through the Active Leisure Alliance (ALA) by formally establishing a **Sector Skills Alliance (SSA)**.

The so-called Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure was created as an instrument in order to:

- gather relevant labour market intelligence and foresight to enable evidence-led decisions,
- understand employer needs to support growth,
- develop sustainable jobs and promote entrepreneurship,
- support the sector in addressing its most pressing challenges and achieving its medium and long-term goals,
- direct resources and coordinate the position of the Active Leisure Sector with its stakeholders, governments and institutions.

This report outlines the main characteristics of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure, including its aims and objectives and governance structure; then it presents its main achievements over its 3-year existence; finally, a conclusion explores ways to maintain the SSA beyond the BLUEPRINT project.

2. Characteristics of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure: a think tank of the Fitness and Outdoor Industry

The **Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure** was primarily designed to tackle the skills agenda for the Active Leisure Sector by aligning Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems with labour market needs. It offered the opportunity to increase sectoral cooperation in order to design and deliver joint curricula and methods targeting the sector specific professions and occupations while providing the identified vocational skills required by the labour market. The main goal was to establish a systemic approach to vocational training in the Active Leisure sector in order to boost the quality and relevance of VET provision and increase competitiveness and growth of the sector and beyond.



Figure 1 - Overview of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure

1.1. Aims and objectives of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure

The objectives of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure are to support sectoral growth and employment for the future, and to identify sector-specific labour market needs, as well as demand for new occupation profiles and skills needed to perform in the Outdoor and Fitness sector, using scientific evidence.

The Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure has the following core, and overriding functions:

- To gather relevant labour market intelligence and foresight to enable evidence-led decisions,
- To understand employer needs to support growth,
- To develop sustainable jobs and promote entrepreneurship,
- To support the sector in addressing its most pressing challenges and achieving its medium and long-term goals,
- To direct resources and coordinate the position of the Active Leisure Sector with its stakeholders, governments and institutions.

The Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure promotes the development of vocational skills from the perspective of labour market needs (and especially as it is employer-led), and to ensure cooperation between education and employment.

The Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure addressed the challenges of vocational skills mismatches and shortages – and to give advice and direction to future skills needs for the Active Leisure Sector.

The Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure was successful in identifying priorities and timings for action and developed concrete solutions, such as directing the sector standards bodies (e.g. Professional Standards Committee) in creating and updating curricula and standards based on new research evidence and new occupational profiles.

As an Alliance it did not make rules or insist on any specific courses of action – all its outcomes were presented as being advisory. For the proposals were then put for the 2 sub-sectors of fitness and the outdoors to determine their own priorities and procedures based on the advice given by the Sector Skills Alliance.

1.2. Governance structure of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure

The governance structure of Sector Skills Alliance was generally composed of where possible: national and European sector representatives; employer; employees; public and private education and training providers; public and private universities and research centres; national public sector representatives.

In order to be the most representative of the Outdoor and Fitness sectors, members of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure have included:

- employers (individual and/or organisations such as an employer-based national association),
- employees (possibly trade unions),
- researchers and independent consultants,
- education and training institutions including from VET and higher education,
- suppliers,
- public authorities and other relevant Government and institutional agencies.

More precisely, the composition of each sub-sector of SSA (Fitness and the Outdoors) aimed for the following mix of representation:

- 6 employers
- 2 employees
- Research/independent consultants as required
- 2 VET providers
- 2 higher education providers
- 1 supplier
- Public and/or government representation as required
- Chairperson to be appointed
- Secretariat – EuropeActive for fitness and EC-OE for the outdoors

When acting as the 'full' SSA comprising the 2 sub-sectors, the composition of the was based upon:

- 6 employers
- 2 employees
- Research/independent consultants as required
- 2 VET providers
- 2 higher education providers
- 2 suppliers
- Public and/or government representation as required
- Chairperson – rotational between the 2 sub-sectors
- Secretariat – EuropeActive

3. Main achievements of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure

The first sub-group meetings (Cologne, 04/04/2019 and Brussels, 27/06/2019 for Fitness; online, 20/05/2019 and Brussels, 27/06/2019 for Outdoors) enabled them to develop sub-sectoral skills strategies to support the objectives of the expected growth for the sector.

This strategy was the first key “deliverable” identifying desirable, concrete actions and with an indicative but clear set of activities, timing and outputs, which included:

- Checking and reviewing the labour market intelligence and foresight work,
- Discussing the findings with the employer representatives to agree on the principle points needed to support growth,
- Agreeing on the main trends which are likely to affect jobs and skills needs,
- Developing a plan to suggest how to match demand and supply of skills,
- Describing the expected timeline of developing a strategy for the short and medium term.

Then, the first combined meeting of the SSA (Brussels, 27/06/2019) merged the two sub-sectors’ approaches into the first draft of the combined Active Leisure sector strategy, aiming to:

- Develop a common methodology for assessing the current situation and anticipating future needs as well as how to establish ongoing changes in trends, capacity, etc.
- Agreeing on the strategy for informing individuals, the main sector stakeholders, regional organisations, national governments and their agencies, VET providers, higher education, and the European Institutions on the key issues required for the delivery and development of skills for Active Leisure.
- Propose concrete examples of policies and initiatives aiming at addressing skills shortages and mismatches as well as fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships (e.g. between industry, social partners, education and training, public authorities) to encourage fostering support and funding for the delivery of the strategy.
- Identifying occupational profiles/roles that need to be revised or created and their corresponding skill needs as well as their required proficiency level. This may extend to sub-group working to create qualifications, etc.

The results, recommendations, and decisions of the full SSA meeting set the agenda for the second sub-sector meetings to ensure all positions have been properly considered, and can be properly actioned.

Then the second sub-sector meetings reviewed how the strategic approach can be linked to the overall growth strategy of its sub-sectors, with a view to providing direction in addressing the most pressing challenges and achieving its medium and long-term goals.

The focus was put on the foresight work carried out in the frame of the BLUEPRINT project, which identified the most pressing current and future challenges faced by the Active Leisure sector. A foresight research is a systematic, future intelligence-gathering process, assisting present-day decision-making, in order to stimulate discussion and long-term thinking about the future. This research emphasised the massive skills shortages and mismatches faced by the sector and the key drivers for change and the direction of the industry, which all pointed out the crucial need to address soft skills.¹

In 2020 the SSA deepened its research into employer skills needs analysing empirical results of foresight. In its work the SSA continuously took into account and to reflect upon the main policy developments and expectations in how they apply to the main EU instruments and current policies such as for ESCO, Europass, ECVET, EURES etc. At its meeting on 10th November 2020 the members of the full SSA revisited the 2019 pledge to review its relevance in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each sub-sector also reported on their expectations for changes during the recovery period.

From the perspective of the fitness sector, particular reference were made to concerns if people would go back to the gyms and how trainers could attract new clients. There was a perception of professional roles shifting towards a concept of general well-being and with ever closer connections with health services. Specifically some key areas of skills considerations covered and extra emphasis on:

- Communication and soft skills will become increasingly important – how to connect with people and build relations in online spaces. But these skills are lacking – how do fitness trainers deliver that?
- Better understanding of the working of the immune system,
- Developing exercises and programming with minimal equipment and based in alternative environments (i.e., not bricks-and mortar fitness clubs),
- Online exercise provision – changing exercise prescription delivery of services through online platforms.

Other key areas to consider covered limitations and safety considerations related to the online provision of fitness services, and the future role of online marketing and customer communication.

For the outdoor sector the SSA members emphasized the varied aspects of the new work reality and for the adapting of skills needed during the recovery period. These included:

¹ See BLUEPRINT Intellectual Output 3 for an extensive description of the skills foresight methodology and findings.



- Individualisation of supervision and the need for continued social distancing with this presenting huge limitations,
- Improved service delivery preparation and guidance to customers,
- Adaptation of current practices around safety issues to include new group management techniques,
- Better understand the psychology of trainers – and people joining to understand that they are still exposed to covid19 even outside and need to be careful,
- Further and better ‘soft skills’ will be required in order to deliver better services, to connect with clients and to make them feel safe,
- There will also be a need for some new technical skills, with learning to use new tools and the consequences of modifications.

The members of the SSA then revisited the content of the pledge and agreed that it was still valid, but with the addition of a further point:

- Supporting, representing and inspiring the Sector to promote its political and societal importance

The updated pledge (or commitment) from the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure agreed on 10th November 2020 is in Appendix 2.

4. Conclusion: Maintaining the role of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure beyond the BLUEPRINT project

In 4 years, the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure has demonstrated its pivotal importance as an appropriate instrument to develop and promote standards, and to help the sector rely on a skilled workforce in the future.

As a result, the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure Pledge ² signed in 2018 was reiterated in November 2020 by all its members, showing the shared commitment to engage further in the work undertaken by the Alliance in the future.

For the fitness sector, the advisory role of the SSA will be crucial in the future. Regarding mobility for fitness professionals, it will keep promoting relevant sectorial qualifications, facilitating cross-border certification and therefore easing professional mobility in the sector.

The SSA will be permanently established as an Advisory Group to the EuropeActive Professional Standards Committee. ³

For the outdoor sector the emphasis in the shorter term will be on recovery from the COVID-19 dissemination of business activities with a focus on the second half of 2021 and beyond.

Overall, the shared wish of the Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure members is to continue to support economic development through exchanges of knowledge and practice between professionals, training providers and the labour market, with particular reference to the industry. The role of the SSA will be key in tackling new national and EU policy agenda priorities, such as life skills; digital skills; 'green skills' and sustainable development; transnational partnerships for the development and delivery of joint VET curricula and qualifications.

It will keep on acting as a platform to provide evidence for political (future) decision making.

² See Appendix 2.

³ <https://www.ereps.eu/tags/professional-standards-committee>

Appendix 1

EuropeActive and EC-OE joint statement on cooperation

The Active Leisure Alliance Development of a Sector Skills Alliance



EuropeActive and EC-OE joint statement on cooperation
The Active Leisure Alliance Development of a Sector Skills Alliance

As the EU-wide representatives of the Fitness and of the Outdoor Sectors identified as the main actors of the Active Leisure Sector according to the Eurofound Study on Representativeness¹ and as defined within the NACE Rev.2 classifications 93.13 (Fitness facilities) and 93.29 (other amusement and recreation activities) which represents some 80.000 private companies, employing approximately 500.000 of the 800.000 employees of the whole "Sports and Active Leisure" Sector (Vocasport, 2004)², EuropeActive and the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE) hereby confirm to extend their existing cooperation through the **Active Leisure Alliance (ALA)** which was agreed and signed in November 2012.

In recognition of the publication of the New Skills Agenda³, including the review of the European Qualification Framework (EQF), and the work of the Erasmus+ project Key Action 3: The relevance of the Active Leisure Sector and International Qualification Framework to the EQF⁴ the principle objectives of the new cooperation between EuropeActive and EC-OE as the two originating and representative employer organisations is:

To establish a **Sector Skills Alliance (SSA)** which is designed to tackle the skills agenda for the Active Leisure Sector by aligning Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems with labour market needs. This will be done by:

- modernising VET by adapting to skills needs and integrating work-based learning,
- strengthening the exchange of knowledge and best practices,
- improving labour market mobility,
- increasing the recognition of qualifications.

The SSA for Active Leisure offers the opportunity to increase Sectoral cooperation in order to design and deliver joint curricula and methods targeting the Sector specific professions and occupations while providing the identified vocational skills required by the labour market. The main goal is a systemic impact on vocational training in the Active Leisure Sector in order to boost the quality and relevance of VET provision and increase competitiveness and growth of the Sector and beyond.

The SSA will develop vocational skills from the perspective of labour market needs (and especially as it will be employer-led), and to ensure cooperation between education and employment. The SSA will address the challenges of vocational skills mismatches and shortages - and to project future skills needs for the Active Leisure Sector.

¹ Representativeness study on Sport and Active Leisure industry; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012

² Vocasport (2004), project pages 17 & 74, supported by the European Commission (DG Education and Culture, Contract n° 2003-4463/001-001)

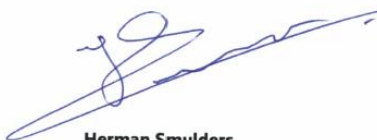
³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council and the Committee of the Regions – a New Skills Agenda for Europe - SWD(2016) 195

⁴ <http://www.europeActive.eu/projects/siqaf-project>

Signed in Athens on Thursday November 17th 2016.



Julian Berriman
Director of Professional Standards Committee
EuropeActive



Herman Smulders
President
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Appendix 2

**Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure Pledge
(Updated November 2020)**



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Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure Pledge

The Sector Skills Alliance for Active Leisure is committed to developing the skills and employment opportunities to meet the needs and expectations of the market.

The Alliance will do this by:

- Collecting relevant labour market information on a regular basis
- Identifying sector-specific labour market and skills needs
- Tracking trends to support new occupation roles
- Developing occupational standards and systems to develop the skills needed by its workers
- Creating forums for stakeholders and especially employers to debate and discuss skills and employment issues
- Supporting, representing and inspiring the Sector to promote its political and societal importance

The Alliance commits to inform its sector employers, employees, and training providers to help strengthen the exchange of knowledge and practice between education and training institutions and the labour market.

The members of the Sector Skills Alliance

November 2020

References

European Register of Exercise Professionals (2020). *Professional Standards Committee*. [online]
Available at: www.ereps.eu/tags/professional-standards-committee [Accessed 18 December 2020].