



MAKING SKILLS COUNT



Conference Report

Brussels, **8-9 June 2023**

#EuropeanYearOfSkills



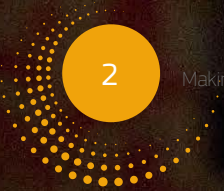
DG for
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MAKING SKILLS COUNT

Conference Report



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1. Conference overview

On 14 September 2022, in her State of the Union address, **President VON DER LEYEN** announced that 2023 would be the European Year of Skills.

The **European Year of Skills** (EYS) officially began on 9 May 2023 for a twelve month period, as decided by the European Parliament and the Council. The EYS will address skills gaps in the European Union and boost the EU skills strategy, which will help upskill and reskill people with a focus on digital and green skills.

The European Commission organized the **Making Skills Count** conference, a flagship event of the European Year of Skills, on the 8 and 9 of June 2023, in Brussels and online.

The conference explored a variety of ways in which skills “count” and matter to individuals, organisations, and at society overall.

The main objectives of the event were:

1. To stimulate discussion about the gaps in skills development, and the changes needed in public policy and in the business world;
2. To promote the value and visibility of skills.
3. To bring together stakeholders **who play a vital role in the concrete delivery of opportunities for skills anticipation, development and validation** and seek new insights from high-level speakers and experts while also providing space for discussion.

The event in Brussels brought together some 300 people in-person and more than a thousand online. The participants represented key stakeholders - companies, social partners, chambers of commerce, public authorities, training providers, guidance and validation services, and many more - all involved in the delivery of upskilling- and reskilling-related programmes, activities and policies. High-level speakers - including **Commissioner Schmit** and **Vice President Schinas** - and experts provided new insights into ways to **promote the value of skills** and changes that are needed in public policy and business.

There was a **wide consensus on the importance of the European Year of Skills**. There were calls for further outreach, increased communication, and an **action plan** to push forward with the aim of boosting the EU skills strategy.

Clear evidence was presented that the **Skills First** approach can help **broaden the talent pool and bring disadvantaged people into the labour market**.

There was also a focus on the importance - both for individuals and employers - of the **recognition of skills**, particularly when it comes to attracting third-country nationals. The conference called for further investment in recognition processes.



The conference also confirmed the **importance of public funding for skills**, not least through the use of the **ESF+**. It was agreed that more funding is needed for training systems (including skills validation and recognition) and for upskilling and reskilling programmes.

It was encouraging to see that participants - and employers in particular - endorsed the **Individual Learning Accounts** (ILAs) and **Micro-Credentials** schemes.

Many sessions echoed the view that **training should be viewed as an investment, not a cost**, given that training, upskilling and reskilling lead to increased productivity, better innovation, and social fairness. In this vein, there was a call for more financial incentives to encourage employers to invest in skills. The conference also identified **skills intelligence** coupled with good **partnerships** among key stakeholders as two of the main priorities in addressing skills challenges.

In conclusion, the conference confirmed the relevance of the **European Year of Skills** and the commitment of stakeholders to embark on achieving a **skills revolution**.

2. A European Year to Make Skills Count



Nicolas SCHMIT,
European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights

“We have to invest in people as, without investment in people, we cannot maintain Europe’s economy and social model.”

Nicolas SCHMIT, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, provided the conference with a broad overview of the key issues. He highlighted the **urgent need to take action** and the need for a **change of mindset** when it comes to skills and training.

Skills had a key role to play in the green transition. Climate change means that many industries will need to adapt. Over 18 million workers across Europe would need to reskill and upskill. However, he emphasized that *“the talent and skills of that labour force must not go. We have to build on these workers’ skills and reskill them.”*

This would be a massive task involving vast investments, but it was the only way to go - **and no one should be left behind.**

Workers’ fears of being replaced by technology were understandable. However, *“technology does not mean the end of work. It will mean the end of some jobs, but the creation of many new ones”*, said the Commissioner.

In the future labour market, people need to be given a chance to reskill and upskill, a right stated under the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. Motivating people to undertake regular training is key to this. More investment needed to be made in **childcare**, not least so that **women**, often highly educated, could be given more opportunities to re-enter the labour market.

Turning to the **role of companies and businesses** in the reskilling and upskilling of their workforce, the Commissioner said workforce skills audits were necessary and that the right value should be attributed to skills such as creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving. He also stressed that investment in people should be seen as just as important as investment in equipment.

The Commissioner also noted that **employers, unions** and all **social partners**, have to work together to make skills count for the future labour market.

He concluded that *“we have to invest in people as, without investment in people, we cannot maintain [Europe’s] economy and social model.”*



3. Opening panel: Why do skills matter?



Purpose of the Panel

This panel looked at **how to create the best conditions in Europe for the development of skills and how best to deploy them**. It considered why skills matter.

With panellists from the Swedish Ministry of Education & Research – representing the Swedish Presidency – and representatives from both business and trade unions, the panel was well placed to consider this idea.

The Panel

State Secretary Erik SCHELLER (Ministry of Education and Research of Sweden) stressed the crucial role of cooperation between all stakeholders to ensure competitiveness; he stressed the need to match skills with the needs of the economy.

Only competitive companies and a skilled workforce could create sustainable business and achieve the twin green and digital transition.

Innovative ways of delivering training were needed, which should be **inclusive, leaving no one behind, and easy to access**. Similarly, he called for **teachers and trainers to undergo ongoing professional development**.

Maxime CERUTTI (BusinessEurope) called for an **Action Plan to address the labour and skills shortages in Europe.**

Modern technology was making it easier to analyse skills data that could then be used to **match skills to labour market demands.** Both non-formal upskilling initiatives and more traditional programmes and qualifications would continue to play an important role in workforce training.

The panel also considered the issue of **funding** for training. Maxime Cerutti highlighted that employers fund approximately 90% of adult training in Europe, demonstrating the clear commitment of the business community to play its part. However, he called on public authorities to make a greater financial contribution, providing **incentives for companies to do more training and upskilling work.**

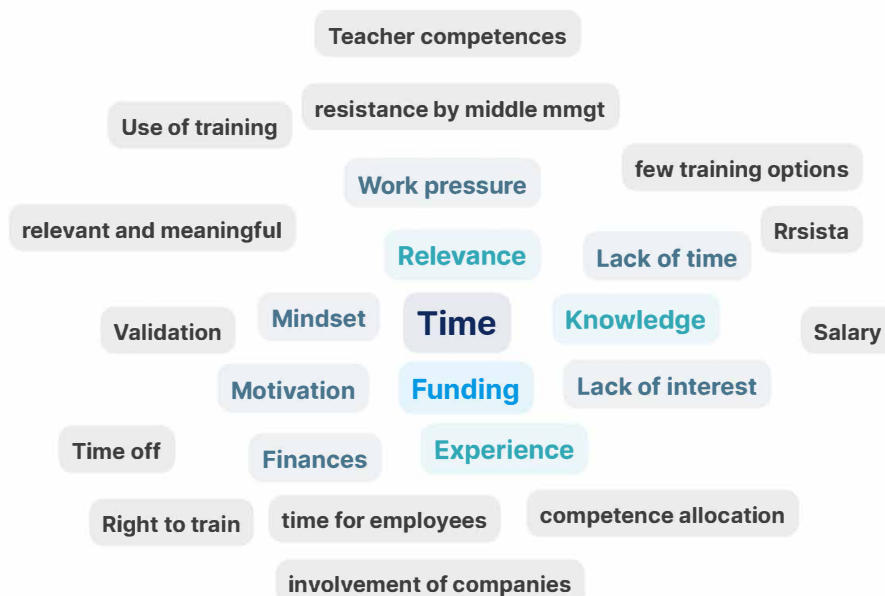
Ludovic VOET (ETUC) raised some concerns about cuts, saying this would have a negative impact on training and skills and lead to employee insecurity. Workers needed to be confident that the European Year of Skills would **improve their lives.**

Discussion about skills should not be de-coupled from real jobs and the European social model. The ETUC considered that there was often too much focus on the mismatch between workers' skills and the needs of companies, without enough emphasis on **employee training needs and working conditions,** such as work-life balance and pay, which can make it difficult for companies to find skilled workers.

SLI.DO

During this session, the audience was asked a Sli.do question:

“Please tell us what are the main challenges your organisation is facing when it comes to up- and reskilling?”





4. Keynote speech



Valeriya IONAN,
Deputy Minister of Digital Transformation of Ukraine

“We are building the most digital democracy in the world”

Purpose of this Keynote

Preparing for the digital transition is one of the key priorities of the European Year of Skills. After more than a year of war in Ukraine, it was inspiring to hear the testimony of how Ukraine has managed to press ahead with major digital transformation – and this despite the enormous political and social difficulties caused by the war.

Keynote

Deputy Minister **Valeriya IONAN** began with an audacious statement: **“We are building the most digital democracy in the world.”**

The Deputy Minister emphasized that all citizens need to be **digitally literate**, as digital literacy is now as important as the ability to read and write. This is why Ukraine created a digital ecosystem called **Diia**, with five different projects: an app, a portal, digital education, Diia City, and Diia Business. All public services are being digitalised and made accessible through the app. **Diia education** was launched in 2020 as the national programme on the development of digital literacy.

In the last years, Ukraine has faced a high rate of unemployment, due to the growing internal displacement. Ukraine is responding to this challenge with new functions on the **Diia** digital education platform. Users can create a personal learning trajectory and have access to career guidance.

Reflecting on a key message of the conference and the European Year of Skills, Deputy Minister Ionan said the main aim of **Diia** was to ensure that all Ukrainians have **access to education for life**. Ukraine is ready and open to sharing its knowledge and good practices on digital education, with other countries.



5. Panel 1: ‘Skills-first’ – what is it, what added value, and which way-forward?



Moderator:
Ali Al JABERI



Saadia ZAHIDI,
Managing Director, World
Economic Forum (WEF)



David BARNES,
Global Vice President,
Workforce and Social
Policy, IBM



Kate O'SULLIVAN,
Senior Director, EU Public
Policy and Economic
Graph, LinkedIn



Isabelle BARTHES,
Deputy General
Secretary, IndustriAll,
European Trade Union

Purpose of the Panel

This panel focused on the **‘Skills First’ approach**. ‘Skills First’ means giving priority attention to skills, rather than qualifications or job titles, when recruiting or managing staff. The European Union has been advocating such approaches for a number of years now through its skills policy agenda and support tools, including the European Qualifications Framework, Europass, and policy recommendations such as those relating to the validation of skills acquired outside the classroom. This approach is now gaining momentum in the business sector and companies are applying it in recruitment and talent management.

The panel presented **concrete examples of skills-first practices** and discussed the **benefits and potential risks**.

Kate O’SULLIVAN (LinkedIn) explained how LinkedIn users have been completing their profiles with a Skills First perspective, and how employers use it when filling specific roles. The Skills First approach **expands the talent pool** and gives under-represented groups **a greater chance** to enter the workforce and/or progress in their chosen careers.

Isabelle BARTHES (IndustriAll) called for better **access to high-quality and up-to-date training** and upskilling at all levels, including basic skills.

The panellists agreed on the vital importance for workers to be **guided and supported** through the transition so that they could either stay in their current industry with new skills or be helped to reskill and upskill for a new career in a new sector.

Replying to interventions from the audience, the panellists reflected that life-long learning means that the different career and skills-level starting points of workers become less relevant as time passes. LinkedIn is already noticing that recruiters are breaking down job roles into sets of skills, showing a strong Skills First approach.

‘A skills revolution is happening’, as Kate O’Sullivan put it. She also acknowledged that micro-credentials were being sought by jobseekers and recognised by employers.

David Barnes indicated that the Skills First approach did not undermine employees because achievements in the workplace were the determining factor when it came to job retention. The panellists also called for careers counsellors to be very agile and attentive to business needs and agreed that the Skills First approach should be seen as complementary to formal qualifications and not devaluing them.

Conclusions

The panel concluded that **bottom-up approaches** need to be given equal weight to those devised from above; that the Skills First approach is **expanding the talent pool**; that there needs to be **greater recognition of micro-credentials**; and that **following through on the Skills First approach, reskilling and upskilling** could help workers transition to a bright future.



6. Panel 2: Skills for the green and digital transition and for net-zero industry



Moderator:
Pilvi TORSTI,
Director, European Training Foundation (ETF)



Susan GILL,
Manager, Green Skills
Programme, Further
Education and Training
Authority (SOLAS) of
Ireland



Glenda QUINTINI,
Head of Skills
Analysis and Policy
Unit, Directorate for
Employment, Labour and
Social Affairs, OECD



Iñigo ARAIZTEGUI ARRAIZ,
Director of
Internationalisation,
Basque VET Applied
Research Centre (Tknika)



Ina TODOROVA,
Project Coordinator,
Cleantech Bulgaria

Purpose of the Panel

The Commission recently adopted various initiatives that focus on delivering the skills needed for the twin transition. The Green Deal Industrial Plan and the Net-Zero Industrial package highlight the **urgency of tackling skills gaps to achieve the climate targets and seize the opportunities of the green transition**. The Digital Education and Skills package puts emphasis on reinforcing education and training systems at all levels and aims to ensure Europe's workforce has both the general and specialised digital skills required by the labour market. This panel looked at **which technical skills – including green and digital skills – are most needed by the labour market**, in the EU and globally, to achieve the twin transition and how to deliver them effectively. The panel – which brought together representatives from an international organisation, a national public authority, an industry representative, and an education and training provider - discussed approaches that exist at local, national, European, and international levels.

Pilvi TORSTI (ETF), the moderator, opened the session by mentioning the various existing policies to facilitate the twin transition, but wondered whether the workforce has the skills to deliver the transition. Whilst unemployment is at historically low levels in Europe, employers face a dual problem: an insufficient number of appropriately skilled workers and an ageing workforce.

Susan GILL (SOLAS) highlighted the need for skills related to renewable energy in Ireland – especially in the offshore wind sector, which range from highly-skilled builders to scuba divers. There was a need for more training and skills development also in the agriculture, transport, and green construction sectors.

Glenda QUINTINI (OECD) remarked how the digital transition requires a higher level of upskilling than the green transition. There was a need for upskilling and training workers in cross-sectoral skills such as artificial intelligence, sustainability, creativity, and problem-solving. Some of the reasons why adults do not make use of upskilling and reskilling activities include: lack of time (44%), cost (16%), and inconvenience (12%). More flexible courses were needed to overcome these obstacles.

Iñigo ARAIZTEGUI ARRAIZ (Tknika) described the green and digital transitions as key drivers for upskilling. The reduction of CO₂ and the move to renewables will require more specialised training in the short term. A balance was needed between what he described as a job-based approach and a task-based approach to address the type of upskilling and reskilling needed by the labour market. The job-based approach would assess which jobs were being created and lost as a result of evolving technologies. The task-based approach would look closely at the evolution of certain existing 'dynamic'-job profiles as a result of technological developments. The SkillsOVATE tool was a useful way of forecasting skills requirements.

Ina TODOROVA (Cleantech Bulgaria) highlighted the need for reskilling and upskilling in sectors such as circular economy, sustainable practices, cyber security and artificial intelligence, with a focus given to the agriculture and construction sectors. There was a need for the development of education and training curricula that meet the training and educational needs of the labour market. Close collaboration between industry and the education and training sector was important. For example, her organisation, Cleantech, was at the forefront of such collaboration in Bulgaria. She concluded that *“the multi-stakeholder approach is the future.”*

SLI.DO

The audience was asked a Sli.do question:

“How familiar are you with the topic of skills for the twin transition?”

Approximately 60% of the audience felt they had either some knowledge of this or were reasonably well informed.



A broad audience discussion drew attention to various key points, including the **provision of sufficient education and training budgets; basic digital literacy** for all citizens; the need to encourage training in both **office-based** and **in-the-field areas of activity**; and support for **SMEs as innovators**.

Panellists reflected on striking a **balance between academic and vocational qualifications**; a call for **improved career guidance**; the role VET plays in **providing SMEs with a skilled workforce**; and **outreach programmes to schools** to ensure that young people are given a rounded understanding of the labour market.

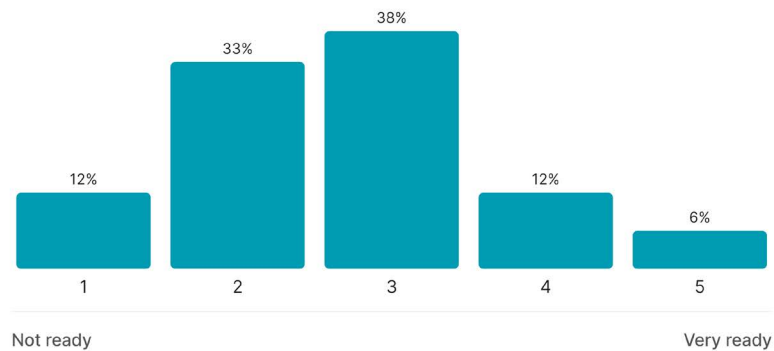
SLI.DO

The audience was posed a final Sli.do question at this point:

“From 1 to 5, how ready do you think your country is to cope with the twin transition?”

Only about 15% of respondents recorded a score of 4 or 5.

The largest response - 38% - was 3.



7. Panel 3: Skills make business cents: how upskilling enhances value and productivity in companies



Moderator:
Jürgen SIEBEL, Executive Director, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)



Marie-Christine LEVET,
Founding Partner,
Educapital



Vikas AGGARWAL,
Regional Head of Public
Affairs – Europe, Eurasia,
the Middle East and the
Americas, Association
of Chartered Certified
Accountants (ACCA)



Chiara del PRETE,
Chair of the
European Financial
Reporting Advisory
Group (EFRAG)
Sustainability Reporting
Technical Group



Romain LASSERRE,
Confederal Assistant,
French General
Confederation of
Labour - Worker's Force

Purpose of the Panel

Investing in people and their skills is one of the most productive investments we can make - as a society, as individuals, as organisations and as public authorities. However, investment in training is often invisible or not given due recognition and **is usually considered a “cost” rather than an investment.**

In recent decades, the value of intangible assets, such as reputation, human capital, and intellectual property, has increased. According to some estimates, these assets already account for as much as 85% of the total business value across industries.



This panel looked at how we can get better at valuing and incentivising training and its contribution to value creation in businesses and other organisations. It considered the question of how the reporting by companies on their activities and financial accounts can foster a culture change of viewing staff training as an investment – not a cost; and how boardrooms could better reflect training as part of strategic organisational management.

Panel

The moderator, Jürgen SIEBEL, began by citing a few pertinent findings from his own organisation's research, in particular that, while skills shortages are recognised, only 1 in 5 companies in the EU invests in the upskilling of its staff.

So how did panellists see the link between skills and a company's performance?

Ms. Marie-Christine LEVET (Educapital) remarked that training should be viewed as an **investment, not a cost**, similar to any other investment increasing productivity in the long term. Training is even more important in the context of technological change as new, cheaper, and more effective digital training opportunities arise. **Skills gaps were challenging, resulting in a major productivity gap globally, estimated at US\$11.5 trillion.** Appropriate and effective investment could help close this gap and realise untapped productivity gains for the benefit of everyone. Equitable access to training and recognising training as an investment is necessary to close the productivity gap and respond to technological change.

Mr. Vikas AGGARWAL (ACCA) highlighted that the accounting profession, like any other profession, needs to adapt to changing social, technological, and economic contexts and invest in upskilling and reskilling of its members. **Accounting is moving away from the exclusively financial focus** towards a more holistic view of organisational performance, including the “six” capitals – social, human, financial, environmental, intellectual, and emotional. A variety of stakeholders – investors, civil society, as well as regulators, are bringing pressure on companies to be more transparent in their reporting. Training is a good way to retain people and adequate training is needed to run a successful business.

Ms. Chiara del PRETE (EFRAG) suggested that from the accounting perspective, currently, there is no explicit link between investment in skills and enterprise value (as is also the case for many other types of intangibles), and that link should become more visible. However, **the best way forward is not to recognise the assets in the financial accounts but rather provide the information on investment in intangibles** (such as workforce training) as supplementary to the financial accounts, with more granular information on the costs incurred and the expected impact on the future performance of such investment. At the same time, a key game-changer could be the European Financial Sustainability Standards, with one of the standards focused specifically on providing information on workforce training. Ultimately, it is necessary to ensure the availability of this data in order to drive behavioural change.

Mr. Romain LASSERRE (French General Confederation of Labour)

highlighted how training is still considered as part of expenditures and not investments. Social dialogue is an important tool to help identify training opportunities and steer investment. It is critical to view training as a right of individuals (as proclaimed in the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights), leading to better employment opportunities and not only as an investment to benefit the operations of the company. **Ensuring equitable access to training for all is therefore a necessity for both companies as well as employees.**

Conclusions

Reflecting on what is needed to help increase investment in skills and jobs, the panellists suggested:

- **Equal and effective access to training and life-long learning** for all groups
- Availability of **high-quality data** from reporting, which will lead to greater transparency on how and to what extent companies are investing in training
- The need for a **culture and mindset shift** so that companies see **investment in new skills** as securing the long-term future of their business.
- **Ultimately, training must be considered an investment**, not a cost.





8. Closing remarks



MEP Dragos PÎSLARU,
Chair of Employment and Social Affairs Committee of
the European Parliament

“Continuous learning, reskilling, and upskilling are key features of how society is changing and preparing us all for the future”

Mr. Dragos Pîslaru, Chair of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee at the European Parliament, welcomed the European Year of Skills, which is providing excellent opportunities to cooperate, share ideas, and innovate. He invited all actors to give their perspectives since all levels need to be included to make the changes necessary for European society.

Training and acquiring new skills should become part of the daily lives of all Europeans: *“Continuous learning, reskilling, and upskilling are key features of how society is changing and preparing us all for the future.”* He insisted on the need for a change of mindset. He added that, to this scope, European leadership has a role to play in preparing society for tomorrow, also beyond numerical targets.

Both formal and non-formal education and training were important. The labour-market disruptions currently taking place - and those that are still to come - call for **transversal skills**. Additionally, all citizens needed to become **fully digitally literate**.

He challenged stakeholders to consider how to ensure that older workers do not feel left behind. **Skills are about competitiveness, but also inclusion; they are both a business issue and a social issue.** Mr. Pîslaru concluded that the topic of skills - reskilling, upskilling, and continuous training - is something that can unite people.

9. Skills for better jobs: why giving value to skills matters



Margaritis SCHINAS,
European Commission Vice-President for
Promoting our European Way of Life

***“Europe needs a skills revolution,
and it needs it now!”***

Vice-President Schinas introduced the second day of the conference. His speech was a call to action, to deal with the “endemic” skills shortages that Europe currently faces. Stakeholders were at the frontline of bucking this trend. There was a need to **move “from words to action”, and pass “from policy to reality”**.

Vice-President Schinas shared his perspective that skills are not only a social issue, but also an economic one. An issue which he maintained is having a negative impact on Europe’s economic growth, innovation, competitiveness and capacity to move forward with the twin transition. Given this context, skills were “the currency of our future job market.”

Recent relevant EU initiatives included Individual Learning Accounts, Micro-Credentials and the Pact for Skills.

Furthermore, during the current 7 year budgetary period, **the combined European and national investment in skills is significant, amounting to some €65 billion.**

The race for talent is global, alongside countries such as the USA, Japan and Canada. To compete, **Europe needs skilled workers**, and the key to ensuring the future success of Europe is to equip our own domestic workforce with the right skills, coupled with **attracting skilled talent from abroad.**

Projects supporting the skills revolution need to happen close to the ground, where people live, and move beyond policy discussions in Brussels. All stakeholders needed to be involved in this skills revolution. Cooperation between public authorities and private companies was crucial and ALL Europeans needed to be included, irrespective of age and occupational status.



10. Workshops

Four parallel skills workshops were held covering the **recognition of qualifications**; **new skills** needed by the economy; **digital credentials** in the field of learning; and **funding**. The workshops gave conference participants the opportunity to explore many of the conference themes in greater depth. The key messages from the workshops are set out below.



Workshop 1

Unlocking skills and recognising qualifications in a cross-border context

Validation of skills to make them visible and valued

The workshop explored existing approaches to the recognition of (vocational) qualifications across borders, including qualifications obtained in third countries, and discussed the validation of skills as a key tool for making skills visible. Speakers presented different approaches, challenges, and opportunities for recognition and validation, with a view to mobilising the European workforce and attracting skilled workers from third countries.

Anna KAHLSON (Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education) presented YH-Flex, a flexible validation pathway to higher vocational qualifications. It validates learners' skills acquired through work experience or a non-formal context, making the formal training programmes shorter, more flexible, and more efficient.

Yves MAGNAN (Le Forem) explained the process of skills assessment carried out by the Public Employment Services in Wallonia. It is an efficient tool to identify the professional skills of candidates, make skills visible to potential employers and facilitate recruitment.

Swinda KRAUSE (ProRecognition, German Chamber of Industry and Commerce DIHK) presented how recognition of foreign qualifications (for non-regulated/regulated professions) is organised in Germany. ProRecognition Projects with its offices in a number of countries worldwide, provides candidates with support services in terms of advice on the recognition procedures, language requirements/training, job search assistance, or preparation for visa applications.

Ise KORVING (Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market) explained the process for recognition of foreign qualifications in the Netherlands and focused more in detail on the credential evaluation done with a view to issuing a statement of comparability for foreign candidates. This helps in matching and recruitment by making the foreign diplomas understandable to Dutch employers in terms of Dutch training programmes and degrees.

Challenges identified

- Making skills validation flexible
- Integrating skills validation into the whole training system
- Funding validation and skills recognition systems
- Providing recognition services in the language of migrant applicants
- Including so-called 'soft skills' into validation and recognition tools
- Promoting greater use of Europass, EQF and ESCO



Strategies proposed

- Validation should be more integrated and linked to other tools within the 'skills' systems supported by appropriate funding mechanisms.
- Recognition of skills of third-country nationals needs appropriate funding and a common approach in the EU. Skills validation needs to be better linked to the education and training sector. It should be a service offered for free to workers and companies.

Key messages

- Skills validation needs to be flexible and robust
- Employers need to be confident that skills certification is reliable
- Workers - EU and third country nationals - need careful guidance through the entire validation and recognition processes
- Validation needs to be integrated into the overall labour-market system to make it effective
- Proper funding is key
- There is a need for:
 - Greater cooperation between EU Member State and between EU and non-EU countries
 - Greater awareness of the available skills validation and recognition tools
 - Greater integration of the Skills First approach into and with the qualification approach



Workshop 2

Building new skills the economy needs

How to motivate and support people to acquire the right skills (Individual Learning Accounts, Upskilling pathways, Micro-credentials, Pact for Skills, Guidance)

This workshop explored the systemic reforms that Member States need to put in place to address skills challenges. It also explored the elements of skills ecosystems that support the provision of a skilled labour force, based on the cooperation of national authorities and different stakeholders. The workshop showcased innovative models at a system level to empower individuals to participate in learning, such as Micro-credentials and Individual Learning Accounts. It also highlighted the key role of guidance provision in making substantial progress in the participation of adults in training activities and reaching the related EU headline targets.¹

Johnny SUNG (*The Centre for Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance, University of Oxford*) began by emphasising the role of public authorities in providing strong leadership for ensuring that upskilling and reskilling programmes are strengthened and adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of the labour market and society. He also stressed the need for employers to invest time and resources in up- and reskilling. The Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts could provide a suitable framework for policy reforms.

Dario BARON (*Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Croatia*) presented an example of a voucher scheme in Croatia. This scheme currently focuses on green and digital skills, but its scope is planned to be enlarged. With support from the European Social Fund+, this voucher scheme is planned to be further developed into an individual learning account.

Ann-Sofi SJÖBERG (*Improving Transitions AB*), a skills expert from Sweden, outlined some details of a major labour market reform introduced in cooperation with social partners and the public authorities. This new system establishes a new public transition study aid aimed at employees who are established in the labour market and a new collectively agreed financial study aid for both shorter and longer courses to develop skills, both while in employment and in-between jobs. Guidance and counselling are offered to all employees who fulfill the conditions and are connected to a registered Job Security Foundation.

Iñigo ARAIZTEGUI ARRAIZ (*Basque VET Applied Research Centre, Tknika*) outlined how their centre cooperates with employer organisations in a structured way and uses surveys to obtain reliable data on skills needs. He also called for greater recognition of both micro-credentials and experience already gained in the workplace.



Andy GENT (Abodoo) explained his organisation's Skills Passport, a tool to capture skills and recommend bespoke learning paths. Employers can indicate what skills they need in their company/organisation and whether they can fill these internally. This tool is learner-centric: it creates a strong motivation for defining learning needs to develop the identified skills needed and meets people in where and how they learn.

John EVERS (Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres - Volkshochschulen) highlighted that Adult Education Centres in Austria provide wide learning offers in order to enable everyone to learn, regardless of their background. They engage vulnerable groups by providing them with various accessible learning courses related to daily aspects of life and by tailoring the learning offer to their individual needs.

Challenges identified

- Time, motivation, cost of up- and reskilling, both for individuals and employers (especially SMEs)
- Outreach to vulnerable groups and engage them in training
- Skills assessment: it is not always easy for employers to assess the actual skills needs of their company/organisation

Strategies proposed

- Employees/employers need to be guided, also by a skills 'roadmap' to understand that upskilling is a necessity and, as such, time needs to be allocated to it
- Financial support is needed to enhance the use of up- and reskilling, together with other supporting measures, as guidance and counselling
- Reaching out to vulnerable groups by coming closer to their environments and tailoring the learning offer to their individual needs

Key messages

- From the different actors' perspectives, there seems to be a very strong consensus in making up- and reskilling more individualised (or personal needs focused).
- In order to strive for the skills revolution in the green and digital transitions, we need to boost participation in training through innovative systemic approaches. Individual Learning Accounts and micro-credentials appear to be very suitable tools to be considered by Member States.
- Meanwhile, we need to ensure that good quality training is accessible for all and that no one is left behind. Information and guidance are key to accessibility, with a mindful integration of digital tools. An integrated approach to training provision needs to be ensured to build a genuine lifelong learning culture.
- To ensure employees engage with skills programmes, skills acquisition needs to be deep-rooted in a company's culture

Workshop 3

Digital Credentials to support better recognition of skills and diplomas

European Digital Credentials for Learning. How can they provide more transparency of skills - for example, micro-credentials?

The workshop focused on the digital transformation of credentials in the field of learning and on how it can impact the recognition of skills and qualifications. Speakers examined the specific **benefits of digital credentials and how they can support recognition and improve the visibility of skills**, in particular micro-credentials.

The panel noted that the key aim of digital credentials is to unlock both training and employment opportunities. The audience heard how Germany is developing a national digital infrastructure for education, including digital credentials, following international and European standards.

Employers are calling for better ways to find talent and verify skills: digital credentials have an important role to play in making skills more visible across different organisational systems and countries within the labour market. Panellists emphasised that the significance of interoperability in Europe to unlock the data can lead to a simplification of processes and improvements of access to verified information and transparency. Digitalisation will also benefit the recognition of micro-credentials. The interoperability of digital credentials was described as ‘unlocking the data.’ Interoperability is a key element in the digitalisation of learning credentials.

The audience was shown a short film about the **European Learning Model** and the upcoming data model browser. The data model (launched in May 2023) promotes the free movement of workers and learners thanks to the comparability, portability, and transparency of data.

The audience heard that, from the point of view of credential evaluation bodies, **digital credentials are easier than paper ones to authenticate**. Digital credentials are also machine-readable, which will facilitate faster verification. The ultimate aim is to create an architecture where the credential evaluation centre is the custodian of a digital credentials statement, but holders of the statements have more control over their data, giving them a portable digital statement that they can use on any platform. Panellists also mentioned the development of individual digital wallets in Europe, that can hold information on digital credentials, micro-credentials, and other similar digitally signed credentials related to qualifications and skills.

Challenges for the adoption of digital credentials: accessibility, interoperability, data privacy, bureaucracy, trust, international recognition, changing mindset, awareness, common taxonomy, quality, acceptance, different levels of implementation in different countries



Benefits of digital credentials for the recognition of skills and qualifications: trust, paperless, common understanding, more opportunities, accessibility, transparency, easier and faster procedure, flexibility and interoperability, quality assurance, assessment, link to EQF and NQFs, increased inclusion and accessibility

Key messages

- A call for interoperable digital credentials to unlock opportunities on two main pathways: training & employability
- The technology is ready, so there is a call for education and training stakeholders to move towards the digitalisation of learning credentials
- Digital credentials increase objectivity when it comes to assessing skills
- Digital credentials empower learners, providing portability and control over their learning paths and learning credentials
- Standardisation, trust, and collaboration are key elements to making digital credentials work
- Trust in digital credentials will come through high-security standards
- Recognition and validation of skills need transparency, trust, and collaboration (common language)
- Digital credentials support recognition with technology and will connect both skills and people
- Call to make full use of the European Learning Model to ensure semantic interoperability



Workshop 4

Funding for Skills

Funding opportunities, challenges, and good practices from the perspective of business, practitioners, and managers

The workshop discussed **existing opportunities and challenges for supporting investment in skills by EU funds**, in particular in the business context, focusing on good practice. It also explored the challenges that persist in having access to such funding and required skills. Speakers from different Member States with different roles and perspectives shared their experiences in applying for, using, and managing EU funds for the development of training in and for companies, with specific attention to SMEs.

A distinction was made between 'lack of funds' for upskilling and reskilling and the 'lack of awareness of funds' for these activities. The panel called for greater promotion and awareness of the availability of training funds, in particular for SMEs

The panel also noted that many companies and employees say they do not have enough time to schedule training and upskilling. Panellists said it was important to have **flexible training options** to adjust the limited time of the workers, which is often a challenge. The panel also noted that there is often a lack of people sufficiently qualified to provide the skills training needed and that often, tailor-made, very specific training is necessary. This issue needs to be addressed. One example comes from Belgium where from next year (2024), Belgian employees would be paid for five days a year to take part in relevant training and upskilling.

Panellists drew attention to various EU funds, including Cohesion Funds and funding from the Rural Pact.

Workshop participants were asked about the biggest challenge when it comes to accessing EU funding for reskilling and upskilling. The overwhelming responses were that the systems are often too complex and that workers lack time for training.

Challenges identified

- Perceived lack and overcomplex nature of information regarding EU funds for upskilling and reskilling
- The adaptability of funding streams to meet the needs of different company types
- Employers - particularly SMEs - feel they don't have sufficient time to apply for relevant funding
- Lack of motivation of workers to attend training was also mentioned

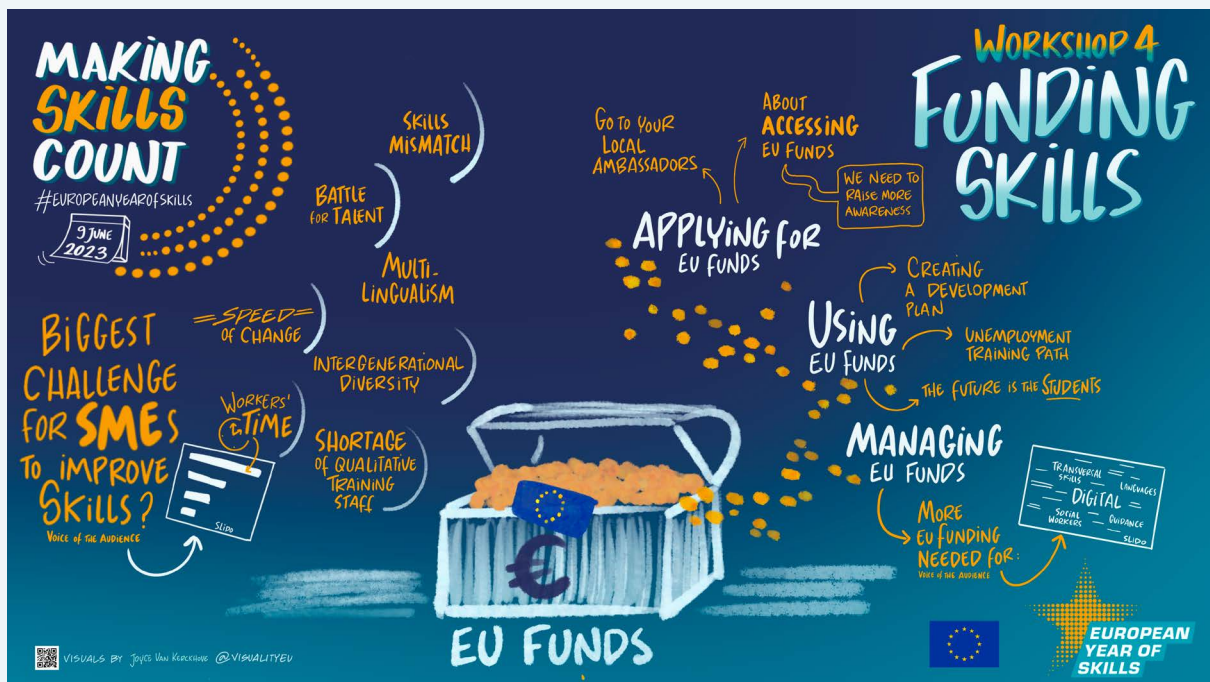


Strategies proposed

- More guidance for SMEs in particular on how to access and deploy EU and other skills funds, in particular for those in remote areas
- Flexible training options with regard to time and venue are necessary. Tailor-made training, focused on the very specific needs of individuals, is necessary, taking into account the need to address the specific social environment of the individuals

Key messages

- The workplace is the best place to learn a skill, particularly when all stakeholders have an input
- There needs to be more and easier access to funding for SMEs in particular to provide upskilling
- Upskilling employees is often more cost-effective than trying to recruit upskilled staff in a tight labour-market
- Training programmes need to be adapted to accommodate people's lives
- The message that skills are key to the success of the European economy needs to be more broadly disseminated
- Employee motivation to upskill is vital



11. Closing Remarks



Stefan OLSSON,
Deputy Director-General, Jobs, Skills and Social Policies

“The work we’re doing now and the work ahead to make skills count - to put skills first - is going to change a lot of lives.”

Deputy Director-General Stefan Olsson brought together some final thoughts to conclude the conference.

He shared that there is now a **common understanding** across the entire spectrum of stakeholders that there needs to be a shift in thinking when it comes to skills. In order to keep Europe’s economic growth and achieve the twin transition, the only solution is to put skills first and make skills count.

He further argued that there needs to be an **honest and open dialogue** on skills, to examine what is and what is not working when it comes to upskilling, reskilling, and training.

The conference had been a shining example of how all stakeholders are listening, sharing ideas, and learning from each other. He said in a complex EU, **“there will be no one-size fits all solution, but rather many solutions; we need to find them and then deploy those that work best.”**

This event has shown a common understanding of the importance of making skills count; a clear vision of how to work together to achieve the goals of the European Year of Skills; and provided us with the drive, motivation, and energy to move forward with the work.

He underlined the pivotal role of skills in the European economy. *“The work we’re doing now and the work ahead to make skills count - to put skills first - is going to change a lot of lives. If we don’t do it, a lot of those working lives could be changed for the worse; **we will not manage to achieve the economy we need and the twin transition without skills. So, what we’re doing here and now is really worthwhile.**”*

Mr. Olsson thanked all the conference participants - both in the room and online - for their enthusiasm and commitment to making skills count. He gave a special thanks to colleagues working, day-in and day-out, on the ground to push forward the shift towards a more **skills-focused economy** and to **make the twin transition a reality.**



Marketplace: twenty cutting-edge examples of work on skills from across Europe



The conference also featured twenty cutting-edge projects and initiatives on skills development from across Europe. Delegates had the chance to visit the projects' stands and speak to the experts running the projects.

1. **Lifelong Learning Platform / TRANSVAL- EU project**

The TRANSVAL-EU project shows how transversal skills, like critical thinking and teamworking, can be made more visible and comparable.

TRANSVAL-EU proposes innovative approaches focusing on skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning. These were successfully tested in five countries – Austria, Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, and Poland - by 78 practitioners and 256 validation and guidance end-users.

2. **European Training Foundation (ETF)**

The European Training Foundation gave conference participants the opportunity to vote for their Awards, to celebrate success stories about skills for the green transition. The stand concentrated on the skills needed for the twin transition, focusing on the European level but also showcasing the international practice of third countries in skills development.





3. **European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)**

The focus at this stand was on non-formal education for adults. The association presented gameplay sessions, animation videos, and quizzes. With SMALEI, participants learned about environmental and climate change challenges, and with MOTIV-ACTION, about digital skills. And for those passionate about sustainable regional development, Engage4BIO was the thing to try!

4. **PES Croatia**

The Croatian Employment Service had an interesting project to present: a voucher system for adults up- and reskilling, co-funded by the European Social Fund +. Visitors to the stand could try the IT application for this Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) pilot!

Through the voucher system, users can acquire digital and green skills aiming to improve employability, competitiveness in the labour market, and productivity. Users independently choose training programmes and education providers from the available programmes and skills catalogue. And in the end, they can acquire a micro-credential!

5. **SkillLab**

You could create your own skills profile at this stand. Conference participants tried out skill interviews and explored how they fit into the labour market. SkillLab works in over 35 countries, connecting people with jobs and educational opportunities and using artificial intelligence to create a profile of people's skills.

6. **CEDEFOP**

At this stand, participants were able to search specific country and sector information in CEDEFOP's databases and interactive tools: VET systems, National Qualifications Frameworks, Skills forecast, Skills demanded in online job advertisements, etc. CEDEFOP supports the development of European vocational education and training (VET) policies and contributes to their implementation. To this end, the Agency enhances and disseminates knowledge and provides evidence and services for policymaking, including analytical reports on skills policy but also country-specific briefs.

7. **EPALE**

EPALE is a European, multilingual, open membership community of adult learning professionals, including adult educators and trainers, guidance and support staff, researchers and academics, and policymakers. Launched in 2015, the platform is available in 32 languages. In the context of the European Year of Skills, EPALE aims to highlight the potential of Adult Learning and Education to engage citizens in society and democracy, empower people to successfully navigate labour market changes, and include everyone in learning.

8. **European Vocational Training Association (EVTA)**

The European Vocational Training Association aims to increase the knowledge and competencies of VET providers and of individuals working in training institutions. The stand demonstrated some fascinating tools: SOLITY (VET Social utility monitor) and GO INTERNATIONAL, and ENTRNET, the e-learning platform to support the development of entrepreneurial skills for adults.



9. **AONTAS - The National Adult Learning Organisation**

This stand showcased the ‘Learners as Leaders’ programme of the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation. Ireland is also a green land for the development of adult learning. ‘Learners as Leaders’ brings together adult learners from across Ireland, empowering them to share their stories and become advocates for the adult learning sector.

10. **Municipality of Milan – CENTRINNO Project**

At CENTRINNO’s stand, exhibitors showed visitors how providing traditional craftsmen with digital skills has improved workers’ employability and contributed to a more circular economy in nine European cities. The stand featured a digital embroidery machine and a vinyl cutter.



11. **European Chemical Employers Group (ECEG)**

Skills intelligence is of crucial relevance to identifying skills needed to succeed in the green and digital transitions. Climate neutrality cannot be achieved without the commitment and knowledge that EU social partners (employers and trade unions) gather in their sectors.

At the European Chemical Employers’ Group (ECEG) stand, visitors learned about newly emerging skills in the chemicals sector identified together with IndustriAll European Trade Union, thanks to an EU co-funded project.

The ECEG digital skills framework report showcases sector-specific digital skills curricula, including generic skills, such as the ability to detect cyber threats, as well as specific skills linked to the digital chemistry roadmaps.

12. **T-SHORE / Skilliant**

This project showcased the T-SHORE e-learning modules, which reveal innovative approaches for skills provision in the offshore renewable energy sector. The project brings together stakeholders from Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Norway to stimulate innovation and collaboration between VET providers in the sector.



13. **TSI / DG REFORM**

This stand invited Member State authorities looking for technical expertise to design and implement reforms on skills development to come and discover the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) and its 2024 Flagship initiative on Skills. Through the TSI, the Commission provides expertise to Member States (at national and regional levels) upon demand to help advance reforms. All Member States can benefit from a wide range of measures on a bilateral or multi-country basis.

14. **ALL DIGITAL**

This stand invited visitors to start their digital upskilling journey. The stand provided first-hand experience of learning materials on digital skills by discovering the ALL DIGITAL Weeks, a pan-European awareness-raising campaign on digital skills for inclusion, empowerment, and employment.

15. **PIMEC - Catalan SME Employers' Association**

This stand made a link between video games and skills for the green and digital transitions. At PIMEC's stand, visitors were able to test an interactive video game that furthers the twin transitions firsthand. PIMEC (micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises of Catalonia) works directly with businesses and training providers to promote skills in demand. Thanks to public funding, they also provide training in the field of collective negotiations and social dialogue. PIMEC is giving a voice to SMEs and the self-employed.

16. **EUA & Nuffic**

For this stand, two stakeholders joined forces to explain all there is to know about micro-credentials! Stand visitors started with a quiz from the European University Association (EUA) to get an idea of what they already knew. Guided by Nuffic, visitors were able to test the open digital tool "the Micro-evaluator". It allows recognition of micro-credentials among higher education institutes in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

17. **European Basic Skills Network (EBSN)**

The European Basic Skills Network stand provided an engaging and interactive experience. Stand visitors could use the mobile App CITO to assess their basic skills; learn more about the EDUPRIS project with an innovative approach of offering a life skills program based on game theory; dig into the 'Numeracy in Practice' initiative; play with the financial literacy game, Monetto, developed by DIE (the German Institute for Adult Education); and going through the interactive booklet on 'EBSN Capacity Building Series & EBSN Professional Development Series'.

18. **IQ NRW**

This was the stand of the IQ NRW Digital Recognition and Qualification Counselling (DAQ). Stand visitors could participate in a demonstration of how the exhibitor's work makes recognition of qualifications easier for people with foreign qualifications already living in the region or preparing for a labour mobility experience in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). Through a digital approach, the ESF-funded IQ NRW (part of the nationwide program, IQ Netzwerk) reaches people regardless of location, bridging the gap to access to recognition services, particularly in rural areas.

19. **CEZ Romania**

The CEZ Group - one of the largest Romanian energy companies - produces green energy delivered all over the European Energy Network. Stand visitors could *'get into the shoes of workers of the company'* who, thanks to European Social Fund+, benefit from innovative and fun training. Visitors could also put on the virtual reality glasses available at the stand and experience working in an electric station.

20. **Danske SOSU - Skoler**

This stand gave visitors the chance to try virtual reality with Danish Healthcare Colleges. Visitors could learn about new technologies and digital learning solutions and get inspired by innovative processes in vocational education and training. The Associations of Danish Healthcare Colleges stand presented a range of innovative welfare technologies, virtual reality solutions and simulation methods used in the education of social and healthcare staff in Denmark.



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

**DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
Directorate “Social Affairs”**

Unit B.2 “Skills Agenda”

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