Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the competence and skill development in a context of the dual green and digital transition
(exploratory opinion requested by the Swedish Presidency)
(2023/C 228/08)

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Exploratory opinion

Section responsible
Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) notes an increase in labour market inequality as a result of the digital transformation. In particular, and due to job automation, a reduction in the number of medium-skilled, medium-wage jobs can be observed in favour of an increase in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. Employment in higher-skilled, high-paid jobs is also expected and will increase skill intensity (1). The EESC also notes that labour and skills shortages are becoming increasingly evident in a wide range of sectors. The EESC considers that effective access to training is key in order to help businesses and workers meet this challenge and it is also vital in helping to prevent labour market inequality as a result of the digital transformation.

1.2. The EESC recognises that the transitions should not be achieved through dismissals or drastic labour market measures, and urges the European Commission and the Member States to put in place systems that favour internal rather than external transitions, whereby companies train their workers in the necessary skills, thereby avoiding dismissing workers who lack such skills.

1.3. Education is a human right throughout each individual’s life. In line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EESC therefore urges the Member States to establish rights to lifelong learning (taking into account national industrial relations systems and educational and training practices), which provide all citizens with learning opportunities for personal and professional development, making it the main principle guiding education and training policies.

1.4. The EESC calls for access to full qualification to face the challenges of the dual digital and green transition to be a real right for all, based on validated and certified training in digital and green skills and environmental sustainability. To this end, skills training needs to go hand in hand with paid training leave, taking into account national legislation and agreements.

1.5. The EESC considers that the initiatives the European Commission has taken to date on digital and green skills have been insufficient, and that the involvement of the social partners has been minimal. The Committee therefore calls for the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 to include effective strategies to improve training and adapt the skills of employed and unemployed workers in all sectors, regardless of the size of companies, and to involve the social partners in this connection. At national level, the national social partners should continue to implement the European Framework Agreement on Digitalisation (2). The EESC wishes to stress the role of collective bargaining as a tool for shaping and adapting training programmes.

1.6. The EESC calls for training on digital and green skills and competences to be certified by competent authorities, not merely validated.

1.7. The EESC urges the Commission to create an annual indicator of the number of adults and employees, particularly young people, who are participating in training in green skills, environmental awareness, and ecological and environmental responsibility by 2030, taking into account simple and tailored tools for SMEs.

1.8. The EESC calls for efforts to promote and facilitate the adjustment of existing learning programmes to include the skills needed as part of the dual digital and green transition.

1.9. The EESC considers it essential to begin strategically monitoring the capacity to anticipate future training needs for the Member States’ labour markets and societies in order to avoid green and digital gaps and to strengthen the EU’s competitiveness.

1.10. The EESC notes that there are wide disparities when it comes to basic levels of digital skills, with disadvantaged groups and a high number of adults, especially older people, being particularly affected. The digital divide exists, and digital skills programming should therefore be more sensitive to the training of older people and other disadvantaged groups, including by adapting training to their needs where necessary, in order to ensure that no one is left behind in the dual digital and green transition. Special attention should be paid to the inclusion of women in such training, in view of the gender gap that exists in terms of access to training, in order to help women adapt to the digital and green transitions.

1.11. The EESC recognises that a just transition means ensuring that everyone has access to opportunities to improve their basic digital skills relating to daily tasks, and to understand cybersecurity, digital communication, data security, personal data protection, privacy online and the dangers of disinformation.

2. General comments

2.1. We find ourselves in a period of change and transitions. Successive crises are coinciding with major challenges for businesses, the workforce and citizens, such as the rapid changes in the labour market brought about by the dual digital and green transition. In parallel, a range of new occupations is emerging linked to the dual digital and green transition, existing jobs are evolving, and new ones are being created. Workers must be given the tools to manage and cope with these changes, while enabling businesses to remain productive and competitive.

2.2. These challenges are evident at all levels and stages of working life. As such, there are challenges for both young people and adults, as well as for low-skilled, medium-skilled and highly skilled people alike. It is noted that some historically low-skilled jobs currently require digital training, as the way that these jobs are accessed is being transformed. Moreover, women are particularly affected by this, as the digital gender gap continues to widen. There is a move away from finding work through tradition channels, such as word of mouth, to offers that can only be accessed online or via dedicated digital platforms. This means that training in basic digital skills must reach the whole population.

(2) https://www.businesseurope.eu/sites/buseur/files/media/reports_and_studies/2020-06-22_agreement_on_digitalisation_-_with_-signatures.pdf
2.3. The EESC notes that one of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis has been an increase in inequality in the labour market, particularly as a result of the increase in teleworking (3). For example, those working in certain occupations, which can typically be associated with low-skilled and low-paid work, are usually unable to benefit from the option to telework. In contrast, people in certain higher-skilled occupations, particularly office work, that tend to enjoy higher wages, often have the possibility to telework. This is why teleworking must include the possibility of developing digital and environmental skills so as not to increase inequalities and allow those who cannot telework to also access this type of training for teleworking.

2.4. The EESC notes a growing imbalance in the labour market associated, in particular, with the ‘big digital divide’. This phenomenon has been identified as a reduction in the number of medium-skilled and medium-wage jobs, due to the automation of jobs, in favour of an increase in low-paid, low-skilled jobs and high-skilled, high-paid jobs. The EESC emphasises that rising inequalities put our welfare state at risk.

2.5. The EESC notes that Europe is facing a major demographic challenge and a shrinking working-age population. This is serving to fuel the pronounced labour and skills shortages across all sectors of the economy and at different skill levels. As a result, there is a need for people at all skill levels in order to address these gaps. In order to address these shortcomings, it is necessary to ensure that workers are up-skilled and re-skilled, and to promote the participation of inactive and unemployed people in the labour market through accompanying policies. In this respect, it is also necessary to consider the approach of migration policies.

2.6. The EESC recognises that the transitions should not be achieved through lay-offs or traumatic labour market measures. The system should reward internal rather than external transitions, i.e. transitions whereby companies train their workers in the necessary skills and avoid dismissing workers who lack such skills, which is particularly difficult for SMEs, which require the necessary financial support from the Member States for the transition.

2.7. The EESC notes that, with the increase in teleworking, the labour market is becoming more flexible globally. This means that it is impossible for European workers to compete on low costs, since the low cost of living and the weakness of the currencies of other countries compared to European currencies make our workers less competitive. As such, the only option will be to compete by ensuring that European workers offer higher and better skills and competences.

2.8. It is important that workers in different forms of contractual relationships have access to training to help them maintain their skills and employability in the face of these new labour market realities.

2.9. The EESC notes that the time period between a new skill emerging and it being in high demand on the labour market is becoming increasingly short. This requires strong adaptability, pro-activity and a necessary reduction in red tape when it comes to accessing training and capacity-building in public institutions. It also emphasises the importance of updating education and training curricula promptly and effectively in response to new and emerging skills needs, and as part of the need for stronger cooperation between governments, the social partners, education and training providers and civil society.

2.10. The EESC notes that, due to the large number of routine and non-complex jobs in European labour markets, 55% of adult workers in the EU do not make full use of their skills at work and 28% have higher qualifications than they need in order to do their job. It should be noted that the ‘waste’ of the potential of human capital results in significant wage penalties and reduces the well-being of those employed. Cedefop reports stress that recruitment difficulties or skills mismatches can, among other things, be a reflection of the poor quality of jobs (4).

2.11. The challenge of digitally transforming the economy should not only focus on how to increase basic digital skills for all workers, but also on digitalising existing skills and facilitating the acquisition of more advanced digital skills. Efforts need to be focused on transforming classic skills for use in the digital world. The concept of digitalised skills is cross-cutting in nature and refers to the ability to combine digital aspects with other skills. This requires sufficient skills and knowledge of the digital world, as well as sufficient training in specific professional skills.

2.12. The green transformation is no less of a challenge for the labour market and skill-related requirements. Whole industries will see their modus operandi change as a result of the need to decarbonise and the move to adapt business models to sustainability needs linked to the European Green Deal (5). This document stresses that the industrial strategy should pay attention to the impact on the labour force, as well as to training, re-skilling and up-skilling. These impacts should be analysed together with the social partners, always with a view to anticipating and avoiding unintended effects on employment and the economy.

2.13. The digital and environmental transitions constitute a ‘revolution’ comparable to the industrial revolution of the early 20th century. All professions and organisations are or will be impacted by digitalisation and the measures that will need to be taken to ensure that industrial, craft-based, agricultural, commercial and service production are as clean as possible. Special attention should be paid to SMEs and micro-enterprises, which should be supported in both human and financial terms.

2.14. The EESC believes that achieving a just green transition in all sectors of the industry concerned will require training and education on green skills. There are three main challenges:

— adapting existing skills to the needs of sectors as they decarbonise, as well as to the challenges of new energy sources;

— training in skills for all sustainable and green jobs;

— raising awareness in order to reduce the carbon footprint in the workplace.

2.15. In order to achieve a just transition, and in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, equal access to quality training and lifelong learning, both within and outside the workplace, should be ensured for all people when it comes to digital and green technologies for existing and future professions. In accordance with the Member States’ national and sectoral practices, effective support should be given to workers to help them improve their level of training in these skills (work-life balance, training leave, etc.); businesses should also receive financial support for this purpose.

3. Specific comments

3.1. The dual digital and green transition is changing existing jobs and creating new ones. The quality of jobs and fair working and wage conditions are a prerequisite for a just transition that allows for long-term digitalisation and decarbonisation, accompanied by sustainable growth of the economy, productivity and innovation. The value of skills as a factor in the competitiveness of companies is also crucial for framing re-training initiatives and for effective access to training for workers. The only way to achieve these objectives is through continuous lifelong learning on new digital and digitalised skills, as well as green skills.

3.2. Professional development for all ages plays an essential role in ensuring a just dual digital and green transition. In this regard, the EESC calls for the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 and the proposals for Council Recommendations on digital skills and digital training to include effective strategies for the training and up-skilling of

employed and unemployed workers across all sectors, regardless of company size. Training on digital skills should be adapted to the needs of each profession and sector, while at the same time respecting work-life balance.

3.3. The EESC recognises that learning new skills and adapting skills to new digital and green challenges is a shared responsibility of society as a whole. In this regard, the European Commission notes that 90% of on-the-job training is financed by companies (6). National states, civil society organisations, and businesses, both through their sectoral associations and individually, should design strategies for boosting digitalisation and tackling the green challenge that support up-skilling. Good examples of national funding mechanisms and strategies for training in collective agreements should be thoroughly analysed and shared as good practices (7).

3.4. The EESC welcomes the European framework agreement on digitalisation signed between ETUC, Business Europe, SGI Europe and SMEUnited (8), which states that ‘where an employer requests to a worker to participate in a job-related training that is directly linked to the digital transformation of the enterprise, the training is paid by the employer or in line with the collective agreement or national practice. This training can be in-house or off-site and takes place at an appropriate and agreed time for both the employer and the worker, and where possible during working hours. If the training takes place outside of working time, adequate compensation should be arranged’. The EESC calls for these principles to be taken into account when developing the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.

3.5. The EESC recognises that a just transition means ensuring that everyone has access to opportunities to improve their basic digital skills relating to daily tasks, and to understand cybersecurity, digital communication, data security, personal data protection, privacy online and the dangers of disinformation. In this connection, the EESC calls for training on digital skills and competences to be recognised and certified by the competent authorities.

3.6. The EESC shares the Council recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability (9) with regard to digital micro-credentials, but points to the need for these to be complementary to full diplomas and certifications. Furthermore, the EESC notes the need for their quality to be guaranteed and certified, not only validated, so that they can also play an important role in validating formal and non-formal learning.

3.7. The EESC recognises that, in order to ensure a just transition, skills training needs to be linked to paid training leave, in line with national legislation and national agreements. This should enable workers to participate in career development programmes and courses linked to new green and digital jobs, while allowing for a work-life balance for individuals.

3.8. With regard to the European Commission's European sustainability competence framework (10), which ‘responds to the growing need for people to improve and develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to live, work and act in a sustainable manner’, the EESC calls on the Commission to put in place specific solutions for jobseekers and workers to give them effective access to quality and inclusive vocational training to help them acquire the skills needed for the dual green and digital transition. In this connection, the Committee calls for the effectiveness and quality of training to be boosted in order to ensure high-quality, inclusive, equitable training for all.

3.9. The EESC calls on the Commission to create, by 2030, an annual indicator of the number of adults and employees, particularly young people, participating in training on green skills, environmental awareness, and ecological and environmental skills and responsibility, taking into account simple tools tailored to SMEs.

(7) For example, the financing of Scuola Edile in the construction sector in Italy through the collective agreement for the sector, or the Fondi Interprofessionali, specific funds to finance training activities for SMEs, as agreed by the social partners in the collective agreements.
3.10. Current training programmes need to be adapted to new challenges. The EESC therefore calls for efforts to promote and facilitate the adjustment of existing learning programmes in order to include the skills needed as part of the digital and green transitions, and for teaching staff to be trained on these subjects. Training on environmental responsibility and climate awareness should be included as part of vocational training. Evaluating and certifying training courses is crucial. The EESC invites the European Commission to encourage the Member States to put in place the necessary measures to ensure that jobseekers and workers have access to high-quality, evaluated and certified training.

3.11. Information and good visibility regarding all sectors of activity are required. Good practices could be identified on the basis of what already exists in Europe and in some EU countries in terms of information or jobs and skills observatories in order to assess future needs, raise awareness and involve workers and businesses with a view to jointly building future-oriented scenarios for action and attracting new talent.

3.12. The EESC considers it essential to start strategically monitoring skills needs in order to anticipate the future training needs of the labour market and the societies of the Member States, in order to avoid green and digital gaps and to strengthen the EU’s competitiveness. The social partners, civil society and public employment services should have a leading role in analysing and identifying demand. They should be involved in anticipating skills needs and should be aware of how the training on offer matches the skills required by companies, the labour market and trends, including at local and regional level.

4. Digital and green skills and competences

4.1. The EESC proposes including sustainable development in education and training policies and programmes, such as the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan, in line with target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, among other things. This means including sustainable development education and training in Erasmus+, the ESF+ and Horizon Europe, and creating synergies between these programmes.

4.2. The EESC stresses that investing in people and expanding access to lifelong learning opportunities is as important as investing in green and sustainable digital technologies.

4.3. The EESC calls on decision-makers to improve support for teachers and educators when it comes to introducing digital, green and sustainable technology in learning environments, by investing in their initial and ongoing professional development and in their own digital and green skills and competences.

4.4. The EESC calls for investment in interdisciplinary and impartial longitudinal research on the different aspects of digital technologies in education, linking the sciences of education, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, the neurosciences, engineering and computing sciences in order to continue exploring how children’s minds are developing in the digital world.

4.5. The EESC calls for a comprehensive approach to digital strategies that promote basic skills development as a cornerstone of social cohesion.

4.6. The EESC welcomes the European Year of Skills and draws attention to the approach that involves developing digital and green skills from a broader perspective. However, closing basic digital skills gaps is crucial, considering that only 54% of Europeans have such skills, while under Europe’s Digital Decade targets, the aim is that 80% of Europeans will have at least basic digital skills by 2030. The EESC recognises the need to support skills development in order to meet the needs associated with the deployment of new technologies, such as big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity.

4.7. The EESC believes that the development of digital citizenship is a prerequisite for ensuring the active participation of all learners in society. In the context of the dual transitions, particular attention should be paid to the gender gap in access to training for women. The majority of the population cannot be left behind due to the lack of a gender approach. To this end, the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp 2.0) should be promoted more effectively so that it is accepted by different learning providers and education and training stakeholders, in order to promote the wider set of competences needed to become a digital citizen.
4.8. The EESC notes that gaps in access to digital resources and the development of digital skills are linked to the socioeconomic environment. Regional and socioeconomic gaps should be closed by ensuring targeted support for the most disadvantaged groups and paying attention to rural areas.

4.9. The EESC calls for principles linked to interoperability and open protocols to be established in the digital tools used, in order to foster a more democratic online learning space as well as alternative digital tools, other than the long-standing and traditional ones, that allow for the co-creation of learning and content.

4.10. The development of digital skills should be monitored through the European Semester and the Recovery and Resilience Facility in order to ensure that any funding used to close digital infrastructure gaps is supported by appropriate learning policies to boost digital skills.

4.11. The EESC recognises the difficulties experienced by civil society organisations and SMEs in adapting to the digital transition owing to insufficient resources for digitalisation or inadequate training. More funding opportunities, peer learning activities and the exchange of digital resources in the sector should be facilitated, considering how civil society organisations serve as facilitators and providers of education and training for all. In addition, access to open-source software should be promoted in order to ensure free access, the co-creation of online spaces in a democratic way, and the promotion of alternative digital resources that open the online space up to all.

Brussels, 27 April 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver ROPKE