Abstract
We live in rapidly changing times, and education and training systems need to be more flexible and responsive to evolving skills demands than ever before. Yet, at present, education and training in most countries are not geared up to meet even today’s challenges, and data show that most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets relevant to skills are off-track and will not be achieved by 2030. In fact, the challenge of aligning effective skills supply with demand and the need for structural changes are expected to become even greater. Such changes in the labour market raise important questions about what is taught, how it is taught and to whom. Factors such as demographic changes and technology innovation, are altering the nature of the demand for skills, making this both more difficult to anticipate and more necessary. In the increasingly dynamic labour market of the next decade, high quality lifelong learning will be crucial for successful transitions from school to work and from workplace to workplace. Vocational education and training (VET) systems must be able to respond and adapt to this new environment with the required structural changes. Financing for developing skills is often a low priority for governments. Yet adequate public and private contributions in support of flexible education and training are needed to help ensure that people are able to access quality learning opportunities throughout their lives. Some countries (Bangladesh, Chile, Georgia, and Germany, for example) offer some policy and programme experiences that may be useful for other countries to consider.
Introduction

All countries, including developed economies, are facing the challenge of how best to equip learners with the skills required to meet society’s and the economy’s needs. Projections show the world is off-track to meet the 2030 SDG commitments. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) estimates that around 20% of youth and 30% of adults in low-income countries will be unable to read by then (UIS and Global Education Monitoring Report [GEMR] team, 2019). One fifth of young people globally are not enrolled in education, training or employed (ILO, 2017).

The challenge is already significant, but due to megatrends such as technological innovation, continued globalisation, ageing populations, climate change, and migration, it is set to become even greater.

This paper focuses on how education and training can address these challenges and become more flexible and responsive to labour market demands. It analyses drivers of change in skills and their overarching impact on economies and societies. The paper also stresses the importance of closing the gap between education and employment, facilitating smoother school-to-work and work-to-work transition.

Also highlighted are examples of countries that have implemented evidence-based policies to meet emerging demands for skills. These examples suggest that UNESCO Member States1 should heighten emphasis on the need to encourage and enable individuals to develop their skills so they can keep up with the changing needs of society and the economy. This reinforces the call for lifelong learning in SDG 4 that recognises that individuals must have the opportunity to learn throughout life and develop and improve relevant skills, including those that are foundational and occupation-specific, necessary to maintaining employability and social engagement, as well as high-level cognitive and non-cognitive/transferable skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills and conflict resolution.

This paper concludes that all Member States should be prepared to gear up and reconfigure their existing lifelong learning infrastructures in order to meet the challenges ahead with regard to skills for personal development as well as achievement of SDGs.

Presentation of the problem

Social and economic changes have made it more necessary than ever for people to continue learning as they pass through life. Forecasts predict that digitisation, artificial intelligence and automation will continue to replace or radically change many jobs, and the core competencies required to succeed in work are rapidly changing (OECD, 2018a). In the OECD countries alone, an average of 46% of jobs are expected to disappear or radically change due to automation over the next 10-15 years. With this change comes the growing risks that both what young people learn in schools, colleges and universities today, and the current skills of workers will become redundant in the future. With automation making knowledge more accessible, employers tend to demand softer skills and core academic competencies from their employees. For workers, increasing de facto self-employment means that they need a wider range of entrepreneurial skills than before (OECD, 2018b).

At present, the existing infrastructures for lifelong learning are not geared up for the significant changes already under way and expected in the future. In particular:

- general education needs to be more responsive;
- VET needs to be stronger; and
- lifelong learning/adult VET needs to be more accessible (Bengtsson, 2013).

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1 In coordination with all relevant stakeholders in skills development, including national and local authorities, education and training institutions, employers, professional associations, trade unions, researchers and civil society organizations.
SDG target 4.4 calls on countries to ‘substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship’. SDG targets 4.1, 4.3, 4.6, and 4.7 are also skills-related as are key elements of other SDGs.\(^2\) This means that skills needed for personal development and life should be given the same importance as sustainable development of society.

However, these goals and their associated targets are all seriously off-track. While the global literacy rate is expected to continue to grow steadily in countries in all income groups, 100% is unlikely to be achieved by 2030. In low-income countries, projections indicate that fewer than 70% of adults will have basic literacy skills by 2030 (UIS and GEMR team, 2019). While in nearly all OECD countries at least 70% of 25-64 year-olds have acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills, there are large discrepancies in results among them (OECD, 2018b). In addition, according to UIS and the GEMR team (2019), the average share of the adult population with computer programming skills is 7% in high-income countries but only 3% in middle-income countries. Clearly, the achievement of decent work and stable employment for all by 2030 will be an enormous challenge and will not be accomplished with a business as usual approach (Care and Luo, 2016).

Identification of key challenges

Skills demand and supply

In these rapidly changing times, many countries are experiencing a persistent gap or mismatch between the skills needed in the labour market and those offered by the workforce. Skill imbalances (shortages, surpluses and mismatch at work) have several negative effects on the aggregate economy as well as on individual firms and workers as they slow down the adoption of new technologies, delay production, increase labour turnover and reduce productivity and earnings potentials. Skill imbalances can also affect individuals in a very direct way. Over-qualified or over-skilled workers – those individuals employed in jobs for which they have higher qualifications than required – usually face a substantial wage penalty relative to workers with the same qualification level but well-matched to their jobs’ requirements. Job satisfaction is also reduced in over-qualified workers who may struggle in employment that does not realise their full potential.

Various factors are influencing the global evolution of skills demand and supply, and if left unaddressed, they are likely to contribute to further skills mismatches in the future (ILO, 2015). These factors include: (1) demographic changes, (2) the level of education attainment, (3) globalisation and extension of free trade, (4) the modification of work organization, (5) technology development and innovation, and (6) climate change. In addition, evidence shows that to thrive in a digital workplace, workers need a broad mix of skills – strong cognitive and interpersonal skills, as well as digital skills. The digital revolution has made the same kind of skills mix necessary also outside of work.

Skills anticipation is a strategic and systematic process through which labour market actors identify and prepare to meet future skills needs, thus helping to avoid potential gaps between skills demand and supply (ILO, 2015). Skills anticipation enables training providers, young people, policymakers, employers and workers to make better educational and training choices, thus leading to improved use of skills and human capital development. At the heart of such a transformation, education and training systems must confront new questions about who, what, and how they teach.

Who is taught. Trends point towards a greater emphasis in the future on finding effective and efficient ways to help older learners to reskill and upskill, as well as the young and the unemployed. Typical learners in the future may be in work, but needing support to develop skills profiles that enable their movement within the labour market. In some countries, demographic change can be expected to drive labour shortages, which in turn will lead to proactive measures that will help weaker learners to progress. A specific further challenge relates to ensuring that education systems, notably technical

\(^2\) SDG 1 (ending poverty), SDG 3 (health), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work), SDG 12 (responsible consumption), SDG 13 (action on climate change), and SDG 17 (peace, justice, strong institutions).
and vocational education and training (TVET) systems, are accessible to the growing proportion of populations with migrant backgrounds. Effective systems must be in place to recognise and deploy the skills of migrants wherever they eventually settle.

What learners are taught. Analysis of millions of historic US job advertisements by Deming and Kahn (2017) illustrates the trend of increasing employer demand for both higher cognitive skills and interpersonal skills, thus requiring TVET provision to go beyond narrow development of technical skills. The growth of self-employment within the gig economy presents similar new challenges for TVET. In both cases, provision needs to go beyond the delivery of technical skills and address how they are deployed within the labour market. While changes are occurring rapidly, there is considerable uncertainty about the technological capabilities that will be required in the future and the extent to which non-routine tasks could be automated (OECD, 2019c).

How learners are taught. Policies for flexible learning systems that can accommodate changing skills needs and manage the uncertainties surrounding these changes will become crucial. At the same time, structural changes will drive new interest in lifelong learning, allowing individuals to become more resilient to shifting labour markets. Linked to growing demand for more responsive curriculum development is a parallel interest in finding more efficient ways to recognise and certify qualifications. The use of modular approaches, micro-credentials, and recognition of prior learning could all enable learners to build on existing knowledge as they develop new skills.

How to better anticipate skills demands
The availability of up-to-date data and information on skills demand and supply is essential to anticipating future needs. Currently, education management information systems (EMIS) are the repository for administrative, pedagogic, financial, and all other levels of the education management data in most countries. Subosa and West (2018) say that for EMIS systems to inform policy effectively in identifying useful directions for curriculum development, it is important to have a data and information sharing protocol with the labour management information systems (LMIS). This ensures that data being produced by the LMIS have a strong focus on skills, employment and employability trends. Doing so ultimately strengthens monitoring of the effects of education and training on the labour market, which in turn leads to better data collection and proper insight.

More effective governance of education and training systems also plays an important role, especially when it provides strong apex bodies, efficient regulation, including the maintenance of national qualification frameworks (NQFs), and good interaction between different ministries and government agencies. These interactions are necessary at a national level, as well as between national, subnational and local structures and agencies.

Lifelong learning for school-to-work transition and work-to-work transition
While today’s young cohorts are better educated than their older counterparts, high youth unemployment still remains a serious problem in many countries, including high-income countries. The following problematic factors have been identified:

- the relatively high proportion of young people leaving school without a basic education qualification;
- skills acquired in initial education are not always well adapted to labour market requirements;
- career guidance and employment services are often inadequate; and
- poor labour market conditions and functioning.

The school-to-work transition is therefore a key challenge. In light of what has been outlined above, and the commitment to lifelong learning embedded in SDG 4, a successful education and skills strategy must emphasise the importance of school-to-work and work-to-work transitions. The desirable skills include problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills, conflict resolution and career management.
Lifelong learning is at the heart of successful school-to-work and work-to-work transitions. Any successful approach necessarily has to promote work-specific skills. However, beyond that, a much broader range of skills is also needed to capture the holistic vision of the Education 2030 agenda, which includes SDG target 4.7 and educational concepts such as global citizenship education and education for sustainable development. This broader scope must include linkages between education and training and social protection systems and safety nets.

International data on explicit lifelong learning participation rates are limited, and when available, are often low (UIL, 2018). Figures are available, however, for the European Union, where in 2017, only 11% of adults had engaged in a recent learning activity, with an even smaller proportion (4%) of adults coming from low-qualification backgrounds (European Commission, 2018). This aligns with other research that has found that lifelong learning and up-skilling and re-skilling activities are disproportionately undertaken by those who are more educated, younger, and from higher socioeconomic groups (WEF, 2018).

Research has linked lifelong learning to a variety of benefits for the individual, the economy, and society as a whole (Field, 2009; Jenkins, 2011). There are positive correlations between training, increased skill levels and wages, and these correspond to macroeconomic levels and medium- and long-term growth rates (Wiederhold, 2015). These benefits offer yet another reason why learners should be offered opportunities to update their skills constantly in a process of lifelong learning (UNESCO et al., 2016).

In this context, the role of learning outside the formal education and training system, in non-formal and informal settings, becomes more crucial. Such training can take place in the home or farm, in family businesses, or in the workplace as part of an on-the-job programme run by employers (Jimeno et al., 2016). Non-formal and informal education offer broad and flexible lifelong learning opportunities covering, for example, adult and youth literacy and education for out-of-school children and youth, as well as life skills, work skills, and social or cultural development.

Recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning are essential elements for developing a successful lifelong learning policy that supports both non-formal and informal learning (UNESCO and UIL, 2012). RVA make it possible to integrate the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning into qualifications frameworks at national, regional or global level. This integration into qualifications frameworks (QF) overseen by effective national legal infrastructures facilitates the access to education institutions as well as workplaces and underpins mobility within the labour market. Many countries have created such a national RVA system. In all of this, stakeholder buy-in is essential.

Financing education and training
While in several high-income countries public expenditure on education is adequate, in most low- and middle-income countries both public and private financial contributions to education and training need to increase. Greater national, regional, and international coordination and resource mobilisation could help ensure that individuals are able to access quality lifelong learning opportunities, while also supporting social stability and productivity (ILO and OECD, 2018; UIL, 2016; WEF, 2018). One way to support lifelong learning is through adult education and learning (ALE). However, ALE is often a low priority for governments, with more than 25% of low- and middle-income countries directing less than 0.4% of their public education budgets to it (UIL, 2016). In high-income countries, the investment still represents a small proportion of gross national product but is typically greater, with approximately 40% of countries allocating 4% or more of their education expenditure to ALE (UIL, 2016).

While considering job transitions, governments may need to evaluate the trade-off between the cost of (re)training and that of social protection systems such as unemployment insurance and pensions.

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3 UIL has developed a scheme for the presentation of RVA country profiles and RVA case studies (http://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/recognition-validation-accreditation).
They may also need to reflect on the importance of earmarking resources for investment in human capital when positive economic conditions allow for it, rather than waiting until there is a downturn.

Governments, employers, industries, educational institutions and individuals each have a role to play in addressing the reskilling and upskilling challenge, including its financial implications. Any scheme to split the costs of retraining would likely need to reflect the shared costs and benefits of greater mobility, whether in the form of wages, labour productivity, or in tax receipts. Clearly, there is also a need to strengthen the incentives for individuals and employers to participate in skills development.

Fiscal instruments may be used to levy resources to broaden the provision of training, or to simply support the provision of training (e.g. training subsidies or tax rebates for employers offering training), especially among firms which may lack congruous resources to be invested in human capital (e.g. Saraf, 2017). Employers, for instance, could be encouraged to invest in transferrable (rather than only firm-specific) skills, establish work-education partnerships with the education sector, or create training programmes that are better tailored to individual workers, such as individual training accounts linked to adult career guidance and quality assured programmes of learning.

Examples of policies and best practices
The best education and training systems are coherent, endowed with effective institutions and strategic bodies that plan and guide policy development on education and training, and champion VET within government. These successful systems integrate social partners (especially employers and professional associations) in the design and delivery of VET. They also engage trade unions in constructive dialogue that helps to balance the benefits of education and training among worker, employer and state. Countries that possess such systems are expanding and diversifying provision at post-secondary level and promoting pathways among various types of education and training, which is hugely important for making VET attractive.

Some examples of successful education and training systems from around the world are presented below.

**Bangladesh** developed a national technical and vocational qualifications framework (NTVQF) in 2008-2009, and is currently adding a NQF that will apply across all education and training sectors. New qualifications aligned with the NTVQF have been developed by Industry Sectors Skills Councils (ISCs) which bring together social partners to ensure that provision balances the interests of different stakeholders. While there were five ISCs initially, the number has since increased to 15. The ISCs worked to combine units of competency that correspond to meaningful job roles and occupations in order to form competency standards at the appropriate levels in the NTVQF. Following this step, training courses were developed for the new qualifications, and a competency-based qualification for TVET trainers was created in order to aid quality teaching and assessment of the new qualifications. As of 2018, it was found that:

- All ISCs have some competency standards, with 80% of the original five supporting competency-based TVET programmes;
- All government ministries had applied to their old programmes to the new competency-based courses;
- The new trainer qualification was being used in 60% of trainer courses, including in courses offered by private and industry providers; and
- 60% of providers were registered to deliver recognised competency-based training.

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4 ISCs are comprised of industry representatives including employers and workers. They have been established in priority industry sectors and have a range of tasks. These include the provision of labour market intelligence, technical input to the development of curriculum and qualifications, and providing leadership and promoting apprenticeships and industry-institute linkages.

5 E.g., Priority sectors include garments and textiles, leather, hospitality, tourism, ICT, food and beverage.
Since 2016, Chile has reinvigorated its efforts to develop TVET by focusing on improving capacity building. As part of its TVET reforms, teachers have been incorporated into the general continuing professional development system. A national Technical-Professional Training Strategy for upper secondary, post-compulsory and tertiary TVET teachers was also implemented. Postgraduate programmes for current teachers in secondary TVET institutions have been made available to ensure that they have the required industry knowledge as well as the skills needed for specialised teaching and assessment.

Georgia revised its TVET policies and programmes from 2015 to 2018. Obligatory partnerships between providers and employers for grants to develop new modular learning outcomes resulted in VET programmes becoming better attuned to labour market requirements. Generic skills for employment, such as communication, literacy, numeracy and entrepreneurship skills, are now obligatory parts of each modular programme, along with technical skills. Georgia also has undertaken significant work to assure quality in its TVET sector. The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE), working closely with international organizations, such as the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), has prepared a new quality assurance framework focused on internal quality assurance assessment and external verification of providers. In 2017-2018, the NCEQE activated monitoring of private and public TVET colleges through planned and non-scheduled visits.

In Germany, over 50% of the young Germans (16-24 years old) enter dual vocational and educational training programmes as a route into employment (Bergseng. B., Degler. E. and Luthi. S., 2019). Germans choose from more than 300 training occupations. The basic idea of duality in Germany’s system rests on the concept of using the workplace as the apprentices’ principal learning place rather than their respective vocational school. German dual vocational and educational training is holistic and encompasses professional, social and personal competence. Vocational training is more popular in Germany than in most other countries, and more young people follow VET programmes than enroll in university, even though many are qualified for further study. Apprenticeships are standardised across the country thus allowing national mobility and guaranteeing the same level of qualification everywhere. Most apprentices in Germany join their training company after three years of work and study, but it is important to note that 20% of upper secondary apprentices are graduates as well. One reason for VET’s success in Germany is its culture of apprenticeships that stretches back to the Middle Ages. The practical component of study is so pervasive in German education that many young people even opt for semi-vocational university courses, a particular strength of the system as it allows vocational education to be delivered at higher levels as well as at upper secondary. Germany’s system provides many lessons for other countries, but it has developed over a very long time and under very specific conditions. For successful transfer to someplace else, it therefore has to respect the specific policies, strategies and lessons of the respective country.

Conclusion

Key findings and messages

All Member States can maximise the development and usefulness of skills and get back on track for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals in this key area of the 2030 Agenda. This will require that they encourage and enable people to learn throughout life, developing valuable skills as they go. Each Member State will need to engage with relevant ministries, education and training institutions, industries, employers, trade unions, research institutes, youth organizations, NGOs, civil society and communities. These efforts should be combined with fostering international mobility of skilled people and the promotion of cross-border skills policies. It will also require Member States to encourage people to offer their skills in the labour market and then make the effort needed to retain skilled people in the labour market.

Moving forward, it will also be necessary to create a better match between people’s skills and the requirements of their current and future jobs, so that increasing demand for higher-level skills can be
met, easing the way for smooth transitions. In general, existing infrastructures for life-long learning need to be geared up for the significant challenges that lie ahead: demographic changes, globalisation and extension of free trade, and technology development and innovation. States, local authorities and the institutions that determine labour market conditions should all be concerned with/take part in the development of skills strategies. To be effective, these strategies should take into account the demands for skills in the labour market and the necessity to engage the economic community in the education and training system.

Finally, we should remind ourselves of the potential dangers of limiting our concept of education exclusively to its economic purpose. The SDGs clearly state that the skills acquired for jobs, personal development and life, as well as sustainable development, are of equal importance.

Responsive skills education and training in recent COVID-19 crisis
According to the ILO, the lockdown due to COVID-19 is affecting almost 2.7 billion workers, around 81% of the world’s workforce (ILO, 2020). Such sectors as tourism, culture, and transport have been brought almost to a standstill, while others — such as health and agriculture -- are facing shortages of skilled workers. In addition, temporary jobs and those in informal industries have rapidly declined because they lack the basic social protections that formal jobs usually provide (ILO, 2020). In the context of the current job crisis and expected recession, skills education and training are essential. Short courses may be one of the best responses to the pandemic in sectors that are struggling with shortages of skilled labour and needing to adapt to new working conditions (UNESCO, 2020a). Early response strategies for training and upgrading the skills of those who become unemployed due to the pandemic offer another means to mitigate the impacts of recession. Finally, since it is vulnerable workers, such as women, young people, the poor and the self-employed, who stand to lose the most in a difficult labour market, TVET providers and government need to set plans that focus on their specific skills needs (UNESCO, 2020b).

Meanwhile, schools across 191 countries were closed due to COVID-19, affecting 1.57 billion students. Governments have deployed distance learning solutions, using a blend of technologies. To ensure that effective and efficient distance learning is available from primary through tertiary education, there must be programmes in place that provide teachers, instructors, parents and caregivers with the digital skills they need (World Bank, 2020).

Skills development cuts across many SDGs, ranging from education to economic and human welfare. For this reason, adequate financing for TVET should be safeguarded as an essential component in the response to COVID-19 and in preparing for recovery.

Recommendations
The following are policy and programme related recommendations designed to ensure that learning is matched with skills relevance and demand, and that learners are well equipped to address new and emerging challenges:

● Improve basic education to ensure that all children and young people acquire at least minimum levels of proficiency in basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy.

● Go beyond the basics with curricula that facilitate the transfer of core competences, such as leadership, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, teamwork, empathy, decision-making, communication skills and conflict resolution.

● Equip and empower learners with the skills and knowledge they need to engage with the real world primarily through work-related learning and employer engagement, but also through improved career guidance that starts early (in primary school) and intensifies around key decision points; connects classroom learning with future economic lives; provides easy access to trustworthy labour market information and advice/guidance from well-trained and impartial professionals; addresses information asymmetries about specific professions and challenges stereotyping; broadens understanding of the labour market — focusing on
particular occupations which are poorly understood but of strategic importance; targets youth from disadvantaged backgrounds for the greatest levels of intervention; and is experiential with rich and plentiful engagement from the world of work.

- Ensure that all young people have multiple opportunities to take part in job fairs, job shadowing/workplace visits, sessions with career guidance counsellors, volunteering, internships and apprenticeships to support the school-to-work transition.

- Mainstream global citizenship education (GCE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) in formal and informal learning settings with respect to lifelong learning. The goal of education should include joyful learning and empowering students to become problem solvers who can successfully address ethical challenges they will face throughout their lives.

- Encourage capacity building training for teachers, especially young teachers and facilitators as change agents in the education sector, and in particular in underserved communities.

- Define the roles played by industry, employers and the private sector in designing the content and delivery of education and training.

- Mobilise additional resources (public and private) and use these to increase funding for training and lifelong learning.

- Ensure the availability of up-to-date data and information on skills demand and supply through strengthened education management information systems (EMIS) and labour management information systems (LMIS), and establish effective protocols for coordination between these.

**Potential areas for further analysis**

Further analysis and specific recommendations are required on the following key areas of the skills agenda: (1) youth literacy, (2) adult re-skilling, and (3) school transformation (Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018). It would be beneficial to have a greater understanding of these areas and thus be able to develop more specific recommendations on relevant policies and strategies.
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Making education and training flexible


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The SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee is the global multi-stakeholder consultation and coordination mechanism for education in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Its primary objective is to harmonize and strengthen support to countries and their partners for the realization of the global education goal and targets. The Steering Committee is composed of members representing a majority from countries, the World Education Forum 2015 convening agencies (UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women, ILO, the World Bank), the Global Partnership for Education, the OECD, regional organizations, teacher organizations, civil society networks, the private sector, foundations and youth organizations.

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