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Commentaries

New Series

SKILLS FOR AN UNCERTAIN WORLD: WHY EUROPE NEEDS TO RETHINK THE FUTURE OF SKILLS SYSTEMS

The Torino Global Skills Summit, 23–25 November 2026

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The future of Europe's competitiveness, resilience and social cohesion will depend, to a considerable extent, on how effectively countries develop, mobilise and use the skills of their people. This is not a new proposition. For decades, education, vocational training and lifelong learning have featured prominently in policy debates about economic development and social progress. Yet the context in which skills systems operate has changed profoundly. Technological disruption, demographic ageing, the green transition, geopolitical uncertainty and shifting patterns of employment are transforming the relationship between people, work and economies. The question is no longer simply whether countries are investing sufficiently in skills. It is whether their skills systems are capable of anticipating change, responding at the necessary speed and ensuring that people and businesses can adapt.

This is the central challenge facing policymakers, employers, educators and communities as they prepare for the Torino Global Skills Summit, taking place on 23–25 November 2026. Convened by the European Training Foundation (ETF), the official European Union Agency founded in 1994 and headquartered in Torino that, in the context of the EU external relations policies, has the mission of helping transition countries harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training, and labour market systems, the Summit provides an opportunity to reconsider the role of skills in a world characterised by uncertainty and accelerating transformation. It also offers a platform to move beyond familiar policy declarations towards a more practical discussion about what needs to change, who needs to act and how progress can be measured.

The underlying message is clear: skills policies can no longer be treated as a relatively separate component of education and employment policy. They must become an integral part of economic strategy, industrial development, social inclusion and national resilience.

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The changing nature of work demands a different approach to skills

One of the most significant developments reshaping skills demand is the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies. Automation, machine learning and generative AI are changing how organisations operate, how services are delivered and how work is organised. Their implications extend well beyond technology-related occupations. Administrative functions, manufacturing, transport, financial services, healthcare, education and creative industries are all experiencing changes in the tasks workers perform and the capabilities employers require.

The challenge is not simply that some jobs will disappear while others

emerge. More fundamentally, the content of many existing jobs is changing. Workers increasingly need to combine technical knowledge with digital literacy, analytical thinking, creativity, communication and the ability to learn continuously. Even occupations that are not directly associated with advanced technology are becoming more dependent on digital tools and data. This creates a difficult question for traditional education and training systems. Many programmes are designed around relatively stable occupational profiles, established qualifications and lengthy development cycles. Yet technological developments can change workplace requirements within months. By the time a new qualification has been designed, approved and implemented, the skills it was intended to address may already have evolved.

The response cannot be to abandon formal qualifications or long-term educational planning. These remain essential foundations of individual development and economic productivity. Instead, countries need more flexible systems that combine strong initial education with accessible opportunities for continuous learning, shorter training pathways and mechanisms for recognising skills acquired through work and experience. Importantly, the debate about artificial intelligence must also address the distribution of its benefits and risks. Access to digital skills, advanced technologies and high-quality training is uneven across regions, sectors, businesses and population groups. Without deliberate efforts to address these differences, technological change could reinforce existing inequalities. The objective should therefore be not simply to prepare workers for an AI-enabled economy, but to ensure that they can participate in shaping it.

Labour shortages reveal a problem of alignment

Across Europe and its partner countries, labour shortages coexist with unemployment, inactivity and skills underutilisation. This apparent contradiction highlights a fundamental weakness in the relationship between education, training and labour markets. The problem is frequently described as a shortage of skills, but the issue is often more complex. Employers may struggle to recruit people with particular technical competencies, while individuals with relevant qualifications remain unemployed because their skills do not correspond to available opportunities. Geographical barriers, working conditions, wage levels, occupational segregation and inadequate career guidance can further complicate the picture.

This suggests that increasing the overall supply of qualifications will not necessarily resolve labour-market imbalances. What matters is the ability of skills systems to connect people with meaningful employment opportunities and help businesses access the capabilities they need. Achieving this requires stronger cooperation between employers, education and training providers, employment services and public authorities. Employers need to communicate changing skills requirements more effectively, while training institutions must be able to translate labour-market intelligence into relevant learning opportunities. Public employment services also have an important role in supporting career transitions, identifying transferable competencies and connecting individuals with training that leads to sustainable employment.

However, employers must be recognised as active participants in skills

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development rather than simply consumers of qualifications produced elsewhere. Workplace learning, apprenticeships, mentoring and continuing professional development should become more integral to business strategies. Small and medium-sized enterprises deserve particular attention. They account for a substantial share of employment across many European economies, yet often lack the financial resources, specialist staff and organisational capacity to develop structured training programmes. If skills policies are to support economic transformation, they must reach beyond large companies and ensure that smaller businesses can participate

Lifelong learning must become a reality, not an aspiration

Demographic change adds another dimension to the challenge. Population ageing, declining working-age populations in some countries, migration and changing patterns of economic participation are reshaping labour markets and public services. For many years, lifelong learning has been presented as an important policy objective. Yet participation remains uneven, and opportunities are frequently concentrated among those who already have higher levels of education, more secure employment and greater financial resources. This is a significant weakness. In an economy where occupational requirements are constantly changing, the capacity to learn throughout life is not an optional advantage. It is increasingly a condition for maintaining employability, productivity and social participation.

A genuine lifelong learning culture requires more than encouraging individuals to attend training courses. It demands an enabling environment in which learning is accessible, relevant, affordable and recognised by employers. People need opportunities to develop new competencies without having to interrupt their employment or assume disproportionate financial risks. This is particularly important for workers in occupations undergoing technological or environmental transformation, people returning to employment after periods of inactivity, older workers, migrants and individuals whose existing qualifications are not fully recognised.

It also requires a broader understanding of what counts as learning. Skills are developed not only in classrooms and training centres, but also through professional experience, community participation, volunteering and informal learning. Systems for validating and recognising these competencies can help individuals make their capabilities visible and improve their access to employment and further education. Ultimately, lifelong learning should not be understood merely as a mechanism for responding to labour-market shortages. It is also an investment in individual autonomy, confidence and the ability to navigate economic and social change.

The green transition is also a skills transition

The transformation towards climate neutrality and more sustainable economic models is another major driver of changing skills demand. Investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, circular production and modern infrastructure are creating new economic opportunities. Yet the pace and scale of these investments depend partly on whether the necessary workforce capabilities are available.

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The green transition is therefore not simply a technological or financial challenge. It is fundamentally a skills challenge. Installing renewable energy infrastructure, modernising buildings, developing sustainable mobility systems and transforming industrial processes require a combination of specialised technical competencies and broader transversal skills. Engineers, technicians, construction workers, electricians, logistics professionals and maintenance specialists all have important roles to play.

At the same time, existing occupations are being transformed. Many workers will not necessarily need to move into entirely new professions, but they will need to acquire additional competencies to perform their jobs in more sustainable ways. This has important implications for vocational education and training. Training provision must anticipate emerging occupational profiles while adapting existing programmes to incorporate environmental knowledge, resource efficiency and sustainable working practices.

The challenge is particularly significant in regions where economic activity remains dependent on carbon-intensive industries. Workers and communities in these areas may face substantial disruption if industrial transformation is not accompanied by credible pathways into new employment opportunities. A just transition must therefore include investment in people alongside investment in technology and infrastructure. Otherwise, the benefits of economic transformation may be unevenly distributed, while the costs are concentrated among workers and territories with fewer alternatives.

Skills are becoming a question of resilience

Perhaps the most important development in the current debate is the growing recognition that skills contribute not only to economic competitiveness but also to societal resilience. Recent years have demonstrated how rapidly external shocks can disrupt established economic and social arrangements. Pandemics, energy insecurity, geopolitical tensions, supply-chain disruptions and climate-related events have exposed vulnerabilities in national institutions and economic structures.

Resilience depends partly on the ability of societies to anticipate disruption, adapt to new circumstances and recover without leaving large groups of people behind. Skills are central to each of these capacities. A workforce with adaptable competencies can respond more effectively to changing production requirements and emerging economic opportunities. Public administrations equipped with digital, analytical and strategic capabilities can deliver services more effectively. Communities with access to relevant knowledge and learning opportunities are better positioned to participate in local development and respond to environmental and economic challenges.

This broader understanding also highlights the importance of skills beyond the workplace. Digital literacy, media literacy, critical thinking, civic competence and the ability to evaluate information are increasingly important for individuals navigating complex information environments. Resilient societies require citizens who can understand change, assess competing claims and participate constructively in public life. Skills policies therefore have implications that extend well beyond employment rates and

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productivity indicators. This is why skills should be recognised as a strategic component of national resilience planning, rather than treated exclusively as a responsibility of education or labour ministries.

Connecting skills policy with economic and industrial strategies

A recurring weakness in skills governance is the fragmentation of responsibilities. Education ministries oversee formal learning, labour ministries focus on employment and active labour-market policies, economic ministries develop industrial strategies, while regional and local authorities address specific territorial needs. These responsibilities are all legitimate, but they can result in policies that are insufficiently coordinated.

For example, a country may develop an ambitious strategy to expand renewable energy production without adequately considering the availability of technicians and engineers. It may attract investment in advanced manufacturing while failing to ensure that local training institutions can provide the necessary competencies. It may promote digital transformation without sufficiently addressing the digital capabilities of workers and smaller enterprises. Such gaps illustrate why skills planning must be integrated into broader economic decision-making.

Governments need mechanisms that bring together education and training providers, employers, social partners, financial institutions and regional authorities. These partnerships should identify emerging skills needs, translate investment priorities into workforce requirements and establish realistic pathways for developing the necessary capabilities.

The involvement of financial institutions is particularly important. Public and private investment decisions have significant consequences for labour markets and skills demand. Financial institutions can contribute by considering workforce development as part of investment planning, supporting training partnerships and helping businesses manage the costs of technological and organisational transformation.

Equally, regional and local actors must be involved. Skills needs are rarely distributed evenly across national territories. A major industrial region may face different challenges from a rural area, a metropolitan centre or a region experiencing population decline. Effective skills governance therefore requires a combination of national strategic direction and locally informed implementation.

Learning from international cooperation

The Torino Global Skills Summit also offers an opportunity to recognise that these challenges are not confined to the European Union. Countries across the ETF partner regions face many of the same pressures, although their economic structures, institutional capacities and development priorities differ. The exchange of experience between countries can help identify approaches that are adaptable to different contexts. It can also challenge assumptions about how skills systems should evolve.

Some countries may have developed effective models of employer engagement, apprenticeship provision or vocational training reform. Others may offer valuable experience in integrating skills development into

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industrial policy, supporting disadvantaged groups or recognising informal learning. International cooperation should not mean transferring institutional models without considering local conditions. Rather, it should facilitate mutual learning, comparative analysis and the development of solutions grounded in each country's economic and social realities. This is especially relevant at a time when technological change, demographic pressures and environmental transformation are creating interconnected challenges across borders.

The role of the European Training Foundation is significant in this respect. By connecting policymakers, practitioners and institutions across different countries and regions, the ETF can contribute to a shared understanding of how skills systems can respond to changing economic and social conditions. The Summit can help turn this cooperation into a more practical agenda, linking evidence and policy dialogue with institutional development and implementation.

From evidence to action: what needs to change?

The success of the Torino Global Skills Summit should not be measured simply by the quality of its discussions or the number of participants it attracts. Its real value will depend on whether it helps generate a clearer direction for action. Several priorities deserve particular attention.

First, countries need stronger skills intelligence systems. Reliable and timely information about labour-market trends, occupational change and emerging competencies is essential for effective planning. Traditional forecasting approaches should be complemented by employer intelligence, regional analysis and continuous monitoring of technological developments.

Second, education and training systems must become more responsive without sacrificing quality. Flexibility should mean the capacity to update programmes, develop modular learning opportunities and recognise competencies, while maintaining strong foundations in literacy, numeracy, technical knowledge and critical thinking.

Third, businesses must become more active partners in skills development. Training cannot remain the responsibility of public institutions alone. Employers need to invest in workforce development, create opportunities for workplace learning and support employees through technological and organisational transitions.

Fourth, access to learning must become more equitable. Financial barriers, geographical distance, caring responsibilities, disability and limited digital access can prevent individuals from benefiting from training opportunities. Policies must address these obstacles if lifelong learning is to become genuinely inclusive.

Fifth, skills strategies must be connected to investment decisions. Infrastructure, industrial development and environmental transformation require workforce planning from the beginning, rather than treating skills shortages as a problem to be addressed after investment projects have been launched.

Finally, governance must become more collaborative. No single institution

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can manage the complexity of contemporary skills challenges. Governments, employers, education providers, social partners, financial institutions and civil society need to share responsibility for identifying priorities and delivering solutions.

These priorities also require better evaluation. The number of training places created or qualifications awarded is not, by itself, a sufficient measure of success. Policymakers must examine whether learning leads to improved employment prospects, higher productivity, better wages, stronger business performance and greater opportunities for participation. They must also assess whether skills investments reduce inequalities or unintentionally reinforce them.

A new social contract around skills

Beneath the technical discussions about qualifications, training provision and labour-market forecasting lies a more fundamental question: what should individuals, businesses and governments expect from one another in a world where skills must continually evolve?

For individuals, the expectation to keep learning must be accompanied by genuine opportunities to do so. People cannot reasonably be asked to take responsibility for their employability if relevant training is inaccessible, unaffordable or disconnected from actual employment opportunities.

For businesses, the expectation to innovate and remain competitive must be matched by a willingness to invest in people. Employees should not be regarded as a fixed resource whose skills can be replaced whenever technology changes. They are central participants in organisational adaptation and innovation.

For governments, the responsibility extends beyond financing education and training. It includes creating the conditions for cooperation, ensuring quality and relevance, addressing inequalities and connecting skills policy with wider economic and social priorities.

This points towards a new social contract around skills: one based on shared responsibility, continuous investment and a recognition that the capacity to learn and adapt is a collective asset. Such a contract is particularly important for younger generations entering labour markets characterised by uncertainty. They need more than qualifications that provide access to a first job. They need the foundations to navigate multiple career transitions, participate in technological and environmental change and shape the societies in which they live. It is equally important for older generations, whose experience and knowledge remain valuable but whose opportunities to update their competencies must be supported. The challenge is to build skills systems that recognise the diversity of people's circumstances and provide meaningful opportunities throughout their working and personal lives.

Torino: an opportunity to move from ambition to implementation

The Torino Global Skills Summit comes at a moment when the relationship between skills, economic transformation and societal resilience requires renewed attention.

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Its three-day programme brings together actors who often approach these questions from different institutional perspectives. Policymakers consider national priorities and public investment. Businesses focus on productivity, innovation and recruitment. Educators and training providers are concerned with learning quality and relevance. Financial institutions consider investment and economic development. Civil society organisations and young people bring perspectives on inclusion, opportunity and the lived experience of change.

Bringing these voices together is important because the skills challenge cannot be resolved through isolated interventions. The Summit should therefore encourage participants to confront some difficult questions. Are current skills systems sufficiently agile to respond to technological change? Do businesses have the incentives and capacity to invest in workforce development? Are education and training opportunities reaching those who need them most? Are skills adequately integrated into industrial and environmental investment strategies? And are governments measuring the outcomes that matter for people, businesses and societies?

These questions do not have simple or universal answers. Nevertheless, they must be addressed if skills policies are to move beyond established assumptions and deliver tangible results. The ultimate objective should be to develop skills systems that are anticipatory rather than reactive, inclusive rather than selective, and connected rather than fragmented.

Conclusion: the future will be shaped by our capacity to learn

The central challenge facing Europe and its partner countries is not simply to produce more skills. It is to develop systems capable of helping people, businesses and institutions adapt continuously to a changing world. Artificial intelligence, demographic transformation, the green transition and geopolitical uncertainty are not separate policy issues. They are interconnected forces reshaping economies, societies and the future of work. Skills sit at the intersection of all of them.

This requires a shift in perspective. Skills must be understood not merely as an outcome of education and training, but as a strategic resource underpinning competitiveness, innovation, inclusion and resilience. Their development cannot be confined to the early stages of life, delegated exclusively to educational institutions or addressed only when labour shortages become visible.

Most importantly, at the international level, investing in skills development in third countries should be seen as a win-win strategy for both the European Union and its partner countries. For third countries, it strengthens human capital, improves employability, supports economic growth and innovation, and creates opportunities for decent work and sustainable livelihoods. For the EU, it contributes to more resilient economies, strengthens international partnerships and trade relations, and helps address skills shortages in key sectors. It can also foster more regular, safe and mutually beneficial labour mobility. By aligning skills development with labour market needs, the EU and partner countries can build shared prosperity, enhance competitiveness and create long-term benefits for all.

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The Torino Global Skills Summit provides an important opportunity to advance this broader understanding. Its significance will lie in the extent to which it can connect evidence with political commitment, institutional cooperation and practical implementation. Ultimately, the question is not whether the world will continue to change. It will. Nor is it whether skills will remain important. They will become even more so.

The real question is whether our institutions, policies and partnerships can evolve quickly enough to ensure that people are not simply exposed to change, but equipped to understand it, participate in it and benefit from it. The future of skills systems will be measured not by how many people they train, but by how effectively they enable people, businesses and societies to shape their own futures.

That is the challenge facing the Torino Global Skills Summit, and the opportunity it must help Europe and its partner countries seize.

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