Between 9 and 13 November, the European Commission is hosting the fifth edition of its European Vocational Skills Week, with a series of events and workshops taking place all across the continent, as well as the presentation of a New Pact for Skills.

The aim is to foster a broader interest in the uptake of skills and capacities that could aid the EU in pursuing its twin ambitions of the green and digital transition. In this special report, EURACTIV probes deeper into the wider implications of the initiative, and the future benefits that could be in store.
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This week, the European Commission is staging its Vocational Education and Training (VET) week as a means to foster the uptake of skills that can aid in the executive’s twin ambitions of the green and digital transition. EURACTIV caught up with the Commission’s Joao Santos to hear more just after the EU executive launched its Pact for Skills on 10 November.

Joao Santos is the deputy head of unit in the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion.

**What’s the main objective of the European Vocational Skills Week?**

The European Vocational Skills Week is an annual event where local, regional, or national organizations showcase the very best of vocational education and training (VET). VET is a path to a more fulfilling personal and professional life.

European Vocational Skills Week is a platform to make VET’s potential more widely known, and an opportunity to exchange information and good practice across Europe and beyond. This year’s theme is VET for Green and Digital Transitions, and it will take place between 9 and 13 November, with hundreds of events taking place all over Europe.

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What are the current labour market needs that the EU’s vocational education and training (VET) programme attempts to meet?

The rapid shift towards a climate-neutral Europe and digital transformation is changing the way we work, learn, take part in society and lead our everyday lives. Europe can only grasp these opportunities if its people develop the right skills. The Covid pandemic has also had a profound impact on millions of people in the EU have lost their job or experienced significant income loss. Many will need to acquire new skills and move to new jobs in a different sector of the economy. More will need to upskill to keep their job in a new work environment. For young people, entry in the labour market could be very challenging.

VET programmes offer a balanced mix of vocational including technical skills well aligned to all economic cycles, evolving jobs, and working methods and key competences, including solid basic skills, digital, transversal, green and other life skills which provide strong foundations for resilience, lifelong learning, lifelong employability, social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development. Thereby providing people with skills that help them get or create jobs in demand on the labour market.

The European Commission launched its Pact for Skills on 10 November. Could you tell us more about the importance of this initiative in the current context, amid the coronavirus crisis?

We live in times of change. With the twin digital and climate transitions, we are both witnessing and shaping one of the major transformations in history. Those transitions alongside demographic change affect our social market economy model and our societies in general. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis is accelerating a number of trends related to the future of work, from remote work to automation of highly repetitive tasks, while also putting a large number of people into unemployment or short-time work schemes.

This is why the Commission is launching a Pact for Skills — a shared engagement and approach to skills development. The Pact aims to mobilize and incentivise private and public stakeholders to take concrete action for the upskilling and reskilling of people of working age, and, when relevant, pool efforts in the partnerships.

Does the Pact prioritise any skills in particular? In your opinion, what are the skills that can help Europeans in the job market of the future?

The Pact will integrate and give a further boost to initiatives that support upskilling and reskilling of people of working age, with a strong focus on industrial ecosystems and regions, which are the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and critical for driving forward the European economic recovery and the digital and green transition. The aim of the Pact is not to concentrate on concrete types of skills but on people and their needs in line with the needs of the labor market.

Skills that can help Europeans in the job market of the future are skills connected with the ability to learn, adapt to the fast changes, being able to work with others, find information and connect facts.

What are the key performance indicators for ensuring that the Pact for Skills delivers for Europe in the long term? How will you observe the Pact’s success?

All stakeholders joining the Pact sign up to the Charter and its key principles, which they agree to respect and uphold. Signatories of the Pact are invited to translate their engagement into concrete commitments on upskilling and reskilling. Commitments must be in line with the key principles and can be built around a number of “enablers” that illustrate concrete ways of implementing the different principles.

Commitments are monitored by at least one key performance indicator, e.g. the number of people taking part in upskilling or reskilling. Through self-reporting, we will gather information on how the individuals’ initiatives under Pact for Skills are progressing.

The Commission published its Digital Education Action Plan earlier this year. What has the coronavirus crisis and new culture of widespread remote working taught us about the importance of rolling out key digital skills en masse?

2020 has been an unprecedented year of challenge and disruption for...
working, but also for education and training. With millions of workers and learners across the EU affected by the physical closure of workplaces and education institutions and venues, there has been a massive shift to remote working and learning. This has raised significant challenges in terms of quality, equity, connectivity, infrastructure and capacity for rolling out key digital skills on a huge scale.

The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) was published on 30 September and it outlines the European Commission’s vision for high-quality, inclusive, and accessible digital education in Europe. It is a call to action for stronger cooperation at the European level. Firstly, to learn from the COVID-19 crisis, during which technology is being used at an unprecedented scale in education and training, but secondly, also to make education and training systems fit for the digital age. It has two strategic priorities: 1. Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem, and 2. enhancing digital skills and competencies for the digital transformation, including of teachers and trainers, from basic to more advanced digital skills.

The pandemic is providing an opportunity to rethink how digital learning can be best integrated into VET curricula, including apprenticeships and traineeships. For instance by making greater use of immersive technologies like virtual and augmented reality linked to artificial intelligence or piloting tools like SELFIE for work-based learning, which is a free online self-reflection tool to help VET providers and companies embed digital technologies in work-based learning.

**Reskilling Europe’s citizens is not only about ensuring that young people have the right capabilities. What other demographics in Europe do you believe suffer from a deficit in key skills generally?**

The crisis has also highlighted the need for adults to have opportunities to build their skills after initial formal education and training. The European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience recognizes this and sets objectives for 2025 to encourage a step-change in adult participation in learning.

Inclusion of the lower qualified, who are most in need of up- and reskilling but typically less involved, is one priority reflected in these objectives. For example, 70% of adults to have at least basic digital skills (2019: 56%), 30% of low-qualified adults to participate in learning in a 12-month period (2020: 18%), 20% of unemployed adults to have a recent learning experience (2019: 11%).
The European Commission has outlined a series of ambitious commitments to bolster the uptake of next-generation skills in Europe, in a bid to assist in wider EU goals of the digital and green transitions.

As part of a new Pact for Skills launched by the EU executive on Tuesday (10 November), public and private organisations from across the continent have been invited to pull together their resources as a means of ensuring that the bloc’s citizens are able to make their skills fit for the 21st century.

Signatories to the Pact, who include private and public organisations, as well as regional authorities, have committed to a series of long-term goals, including anticipating future skills shortages and building training programs as appropriate as well as ensuring that retraining opportunities are offered indiscriminately to all employees.

“In the midst of the digital and green transitions, skills are a necessity,” the European Commissioner for Jobs, Nicolas Schmidt, said while presenting the New Pact for Skills on Tuesday.

“They are the best way into quality jobs,” he added, noting however that industry uptake of public resources to support skills development is currently too low, while only a small section of the private companies collaborate on cross-industry training programs.

“Under the pact, public and private actors will take concrete upskilling and reskilling commitments. They will be able to offer training programs to their
own employees, but also to workers in the value chain and ecosystem,” Schmidt continued.

“For its part, the Commission will provide the networking and knowledge support, as well as information on available EU funding.”

**VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) WEEK**

The Pact was launched as part of the European Vocational Education and Training (VET) week, which has been taking place all across Europe. Hundreds of online events and workshops have been staged in order to convey the bloc’s long-term commitment to fostering the uptake of next-generation skills.

As part of the agreement, a series of partnerships have been launched, targeting key industrial ecosystems that will help in the Commission’s twin ambitions in the green and digital arena.

“As the twin green and digital transitions are gathering speed, we want to equip all Europeans with the right skills,” the Commission’s Internal Market Chief Thierry Breton said. “Today, we are announcing first skills partnerships in three industrial ecosystems: automotive, microelectronics and aerospace and defence.”

In each of those sectors, the Commission has earmarked a series of objectives, with the goal of upskilling 5% and 6% of the automotive and aerospace and defence workforces respectively, as well as public and private investment of €2billion into the microelectronics industry, in order to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities.

**MORE SKILLED WOMEN**

For their part, members of the industry welcomed the plans laid out this week, but also pressed for granular objectives in the field of upskilling, highlighting the gender disparities at play.

Speaking as part of the launch event on Tuesday, CEO of the microelectronic and semiconductor producer Infineon Technologies Austria, Sabine Herlitschka, noted how her sector has become beset by a lack of gender equality.

“We should also think of increasing and motivating women in the microelectronics and semiconductors industries,” she said, adding that any future major ‘European electronics brand’ which could in the future rival global competitors, should have inclusivity at the core of its practice.

Fostering greater gender equality in the technology industries has long been one of the Commission’s objectives. The executive’s Digital strategy published earlier this year highlights the priority of ensuring that women have more ‘rewarding careers’ in the tech sector and that they are able to participate in the bloc’s digital transition.

“More women can and must have rewarding careers in tech, and European tech needs to benefit from women’s skills and competences,” the strategy states. “The digital transition must be fair and just and encourage women to fully take part.”

**CORONAVIRUS IMPACT**

More broadly, in terms of digital skills across the board, during the coronavirus pandemic, citizens from all walks of life have turned to technological tools as a means to maintain some sort of a sense of continuity as the crisis continues to wreak havoc across the continent.

In this climate, the uptake of digital skills in particular has never been more pressing for the EU.

In September, as part of the Commission’s Digital Education Action Plan, a broad series of initiatives were proposed, including putting forth recommendations for distance learning for primary and secondary education, developing guidelines on Artificial intelligence use in the classroom, promoting digital literacy, and creating a European Digital Skills Certificate.

“Education and training have faced huge disruption due to COVID-19 and a quick shift to distance and online learning. The mass use of technology has revealed gaps and exposed weaknesses,” Commission Vice-President for Digital Margarethe Vestager said at the time.

But the importance of developing digital skills shouldn’t just be concentrated on the technology industries, says Herlitschka.

“I think digitalization is not only relevant in terms of digital skills but applying methods of digitalization to foster an enthusiasm for technology, with gamification approaches and the like could really help with digital literacy generally,” she said on Tuesday.

“Strengthening the interest in technology I think is such an important element.”
Today, the green and digital transitions are reshaping our way of life, work and interactions – and the COVID-19 outbreak has dramatically accelerated most of these changes.

Nicolas Schmit is the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights.

The impact of the pandemic on the labour market prospects for millions of people in Europe has made it clear: we need to turn the green and digital transitions into opportunities for everyone, to ensure recovery from the crisis.

This can only be done if people in Europe have the skills to harness the transitions, which means unprecedented efforts to upskill and reskill the workforce. The right to lifelong learning is enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights. It allows adults to learn new skills and develop their careers throughout their lives, and it is at the core of Europe’s recovery efforts.

Vocational education and training (VET) can play a decisive role. VET has helped millions of people around the
world to ‘earn as they learn’. But it is so much more than that. It gives young learners the initial skills they need for a fulfilling career and provides adults with the means to continue learning and training throughout their working lives.

Vocational education and training will be an essential tool to help young people and adults acquire the skills needed in the labour market and find quality jobs, especially after the Coronavirus crisis. It is time to take a fresh approach to VET, making it more modern, attractive, flexible and fit for the digital age and green transition.

The European Skills Agenda from July 2020 proposes key actions to support upskilling – the improvement of existing skills – and reskilling, or training in new skills, thus empowering lifelong learning.

The ambitious agenda includes a first-ever comprehensive policy framework for VET at EU level. Whilst VET systems are diverse across Member States, our principles and objectives are aligned. VET should:

- cater to the skills needs of both young and adults,
- be reactive to the needs of the labour market and ensure active participation in society,
- be integrated into economic, industrial and innovation strategies,
- and at the same time VET programmes should embed social and environmental sustainability.

The time to act is now. The move towards digitalisation, sustainability and a greener future will impact all of our jobs.

The European Vocational Skills Week 2020, from 9 to 13 November is all about these challenges and how we can turn them into opportunities. This year’s Week theme is VET for Green and Digital Transitions. Organised in close cooperation with the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it will be fully digital and therefore widely accessible. I very much invite everyone to join in.