Executive summary

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and policy actions aimed at halting its spread profoundly impacted societies and economies worldwide. Incorporating lessons from the pandemic in policy making is crucial not only to sustaining economic and social well-being in OECD countries in the short and medium term but also to building resilience to future shocks and securing just and inclusive economic growth in the long term.

Two areas in which investments in skills and skills policies can help societies anticipate rather than react to future adverse events are promoting environmental sustainability and ensuring human-centred digital technologies that effectively support communication and information exchange. Environmental degradation and untrustworthy information landscapes challenge economies and societies worldwide and are sources of considerable worry and anxiety among populations. On average, almost seven in ten adults across OECD countries perceive climate change as a threat, and six in ten worry about receiving false information on line.

Key to building system-level resilience to environmental challenges and technological transformations applied to information exchange is empowering individuals to develop a wide range of skills – including information-processing skills, socio-emotional skills and metacognitive skills – and ensuring that individuals can effectively apply these skills.

Projections suggest that between 2019 and 2030, the demand for skills related to interacting with computers, thinking creatively, analysing data and information, and communicating with persons outside an organisation will grow the most. Making the most of interconnected labour markets also requires proficiency in language skills. Four in ten vacancies posted on line in 2021 in non-English-speaking European countries required a knowledge of English. Among vacancies for technicians and associate professionals, this figure was one in two.

Yet many people worldwide do not have baseline levels of proficiency in the set of skills needed to ensure their own and societal economic and social well-being, and to effectively contribute to a greener future. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of health literacy, i.e. the ability to access, comprehend, assess, and apply information to make informed decisions regarding healthcare and disease prevention. Technology gave individuals the possibility to access up-to-date scientific information in real time, but at the same time exposed them to a huge amount of false and potentially harmful information on line. During the worst health crisis in a century, over four in ten adults reported that they would find it difficult or very difficult to judge the advantages and disadvantages of different treatment options, decide how to protect themselves from illness using information from the mass media, or find information on how to handle mental health problems.

Complicating matters, individuals acquire and lose proficiency in different skills over time depending on their usage and external constraints, and rapidly evolving environmental and social conditions change the set of skills and level of proficiency demanded. Lifelong learning systems that are responsive to changing circumstances can ensure that individuals are proficient in the range of skills needed to support economic growth and social cohesion. However, although proficiency in accessing,

comprehending, and evaluating texts, and critically reasoning with mathematical content are vital skills for navigating information-rich environments, 18% of adults in OECD countries do not reach baseline levels of proficiency in all these skills.

Attitudes and dispositions drive individuals' motivation to use their skills in ways that enhance personal and societal well-being. They also boost the effectiveness with which skills are deployed. For example, young people who agreed or strongly agreed that looking after the environment was important to them were 16 percentage points more likely to save energy for environmental reasons. Worryingly, inequalities in attitudes and dispositions mirror inequalities in skills proficiency. For example, socio-economically disadvantaged young people are 25 percentage points less likely to reach baseline levels of proficiency in science than their more advantaged peers.

Reducing the social cost of policy action by ensuring adequate upskilling and reskilling efforts, as well as providing assistance for populations negatively affected by climate change mitigation policies, is critical to ensure continued support of action to halt environmental degradation. For every 1% increase in unemployment, the percentage of adults who report prioritising the environment over the economy declines by 1.7%.

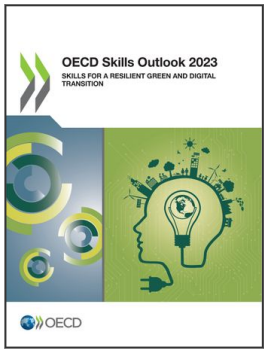
Whether individuals use their skills for positive or negative transformations of their environment depends on their attitudes and dispositions. Attitudes and dispositions are key enablers of skills investments. Skills do not translate into meaningful action without the will to act. For example, individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to be aware of the dangers associated with environmental degradation. Across OECD countries, 73% of individuals with a tertiary qualification, 66% with a secondary qualification and 63% of those without secondary qualifications report perceiving climate change as a threat. Similarly, individuals with tertiary-level qualifications are considerably more likely than those without tertiary-level qualifications to indicate that they would be willing to compromise their current lifestyle for the benefit of the environment.

Despite the importance of ensuring that individuals have both the skills and the will to act, as many as seven out of ten young people do not master the emotional, behavioural and cognitive dimensions of environmental sustainability. They are thus less likely to engage in actions aimed at promoting environmental sustainability as present consumers and future citizens of the world.

Moreover, despite the increasing awareness of the importance of considering ethical aspects in artificial intelligence (AI) development and the critical role AI professionals play in economies and societies, in 12 out of the 14 countries with available information, less than 1% of online vacancies seeking professionals with AI skills in 2022 mentioned aspects related to ethics in AI.

Whereas investing in skills is paramount to empowering communities to cope with adverse circumstances, it is equally important to put support systems in place to help communities overcome the stress and difficulties they may encounter as a result of the profound transformations unleashed by the green and digital transition. In the long term, successful adaptation requires careful consideration of the direct and indirect consequences of dealing with significant social and economic upheavals. Identifying populations that lack proficiency in skills that will grow in importance and developing effective policy responses to support them in building proficiency is critical to building system-level resilience since the outcomes of social, digital and environmental transformations will be defined by the actions and behaviours of all individuals, including individuals with lower levels of proficiency.

Individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to gain proficiency in a range of skills during formal education, develop attitudes and dispositions that can support the twin digital and green transition, and reduce their vulnerability to environmental and technological changes. Identifying vulnerability due to a lack of proficiency in skills key to a just, inclusive and sustainable twin transition and reducing it through adequate policy action is critical to improving both equity in outcomes and overall well-being.



From:

OECD Skills Outlook 2023

Skills for a Resilient Green and Digital Transition

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/27452f29-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2023), "Executive summary", in *OECD Skills Outlook 2023: Skills for a Resilient Green and Digital Transition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/d4d43816-en