

Strategic Partnerships in Response to the COVID-19 Situation



Strategic Partnerships in Response to the COVID-19 Situation



COVID has shown us how urgent the need is for communities to become more resilient in responding to societal transitions. The six months following the initiation of the pandemic were a test of true ingenuity as millions of educators across Europe, from pre-K to graduate school, scrambled to continue fulfilling their teaching mandates when schools closed and social distancing was imposed, beginning with Italy and soon spreading across the continent. School systems were forced into a non-existent “Plan B” – warranting a desperate reboot of teaching and learning, and leaving teachers on their own to figure out how to continue teaching in light of the pandemic-induced school closures - no true teacher wants to see their students disengaged from learning or left behind. They started teaching from home via distance learning. They rushed to find what they could to compensate for lost time in school, many reaching into their own pockets when schools refused to allocate funds from their budget to pay for needed resources. Teacher trainers watched helplessly as the drama unfolded, despite the fact that many were unprepared for the minutiae of e-learning and they themselves were not digital ready or had not achieved optimal levels of technology literacy. Google shared data with the world to show the huge spike in the demand for digital learning resources triggered by COVID, affirming what we have seen coming for some time - teachers, parents and students themselves seeking out online resources. Nothing new here; for the past decade, recommendations from esteemed international organizations have come forth on the need to redesign learning for the 21st Century, a call for action that has now been stimulated by COVID.

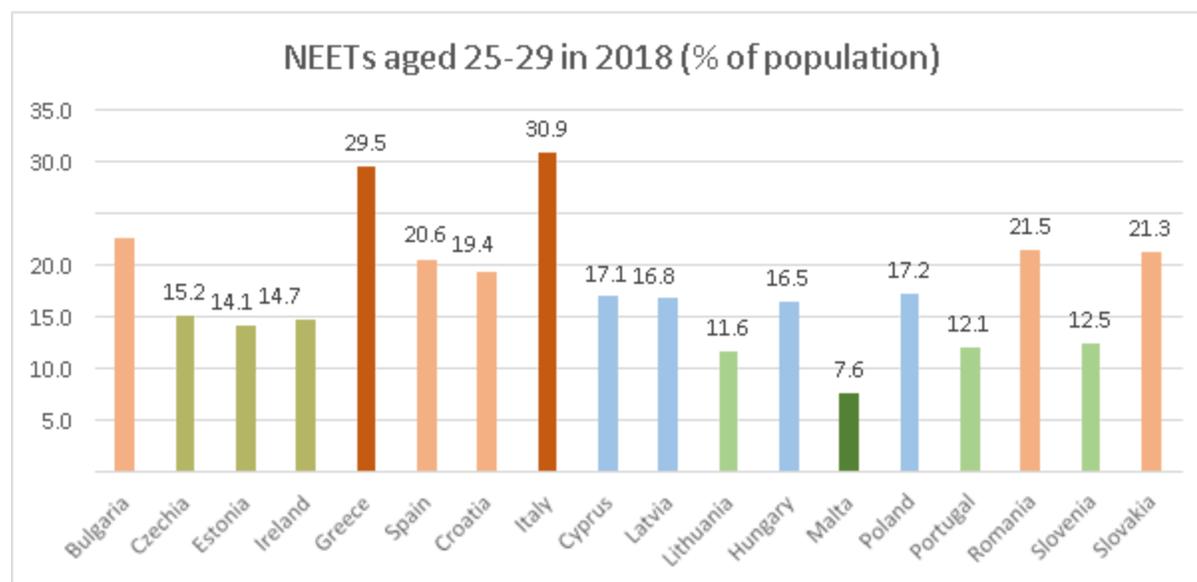
Societal Disruptors

Societal transitions that highlight the value of online teaching and learning have taken place since the dawn of the Knowledge Economy, particularly disruptive technologies that have ushered in goals toward sustainability, i.e. the “green” transition, and digital readiness, i.e. the “digital” transition. But distance learning itself is not the answer either. With the COVID pandemic accelerating a range of societal transitions, communities are vulnerable to being severely impacted, witnessing both immediate and long-term repercussions. The education sector is not an isolated victim of the pandemic - every sector of society has felt the impact of major shocks to the world's economies like COVID; and let’s not forget the widespread devastation caused by the 2008-13 economic collapse. Both disruptions to society have caused massive global economic stagnation, high unemployment, the shuttering of businesses small and large, the decimation of many sectors that are central to economic growth, a massive loss of jobs and a precipitous decrease in GNP. Both also brought to light how socio-economic shocks are negatively affecting people’s incomes, physical and mental wellbeing, and the social integrity of communities as a whole. Not only has COVID added pressure on the social service delivery systems, but the pandemic has also exacerbated labor market challenges. Like the Global Financial Crisis before it, COVID has brought to light a pervasive skills gap and skills mismatch between what is learned in educational and training

environments and those demanded by the 21st Century workforce. Continuous economic restructuring, innovation, and globalization have led to major transformations in labor markets, giving rise to the so-called “skills gaps” in the Knowledge Age, referring to skills and competences that are not normally taught in school at any level of education. Consequently, young people are unprepared to apply important transversal skills that are in demand by employers. Additionally, training organizations in both formal and non-formal learning environments tasked with preparing young people for the workforce are finding it difficult to prepare them for jobs that are emerging from or engendered by major shocks to the world's economies such as the GFC and COVID, or Knowledge Economy jobs in general where information is the driver of advancements not only in science and technology but toward making society and communities resilient.

Long-Term Impacts

The lingering effects of the Global Financial Crisis are still felt a decade later and have had a profound impact on entire regions. With its destruction of jobs across sectors, the financial crisis was associated with a sharp decline in employment, giving rise to a mass exodus of young professionals seeking jobs, especially prompting large-scale emigration from the southern, eastern and Baltic flanks of the EU. The GFC's domino effect also contributed to population loss that in turn has been detrimental to the economic development of our regions. The youth unemployment rate is only partially a reflection of the situation among young Europeans, as it is limited to people between 15 and 24 who are conventionally unemployed. To measure the share of young people who are not employed, and not taking part in education and training, the concept NEET (“Not in Employment, Education or Training”) has been developed. The various groups within the NEET category have different characteristics and needs, but all NEETs share the common feature of not accumulating human capital through the labor market or education and training. There are great variations between the EU Member States regarding NEET rates, with Italy having the highest rate among the youngest age group, followed by Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.



High unemployment and underemployment, where trained professionals are unable to utilize the skills gained in formal education and still has not been codified in employment statistics, led to long-term unemployment affecting employees at all levels. Now COVID has drastically reshaped the world for a

young person's future - work-from-home and online team work are now work-related common-place, virtual teaching is rendering campuses of lesser importance and entrepreneurship or platform employment "crowd work" in the so-called gig economy offers attractive alternatives to traditional jobs. COVID has forced the acceptance of e-learning, albeit under pressure of an immediate and often difficult transition for educators and students alike. Distance teaching in emergency situations such as those created by COVID involves many variables from infrastructural culture, varied technology uses, previous situations of socio-cultural disadvantage and/or learning difficulties, ministerial mandates and last, but certainly not least, the preparation of educators and trainers to learn and implement effective blended-learning teaching mechanisms that fulfill mandates for social distancing against the spread of contagions. Meanwhile, many jobs and skills that are in demand by employers have changed drastically as a progression and maturation of the Knowledge Economy, and will continue to evolve based on drivers of changing workforce responses to Industry 4.0 and its impacts on society.

Many of today's jobs did not exist a mere 10 years ago, new jobs are continuing to appear in the workforce and entrepreneurship is taking hold as a major job creator especially in supporting SMEs, responsible for much employment growth in the both non-business economies and social innovation. Educators are struggling to meet their responsibilities of training future workers with proficiency skills both new and existing domains require, and are the first to pose the question about preparing learners for the 21st Century workforce: how can their students acquire the skills they need for jobs we don't even know will be created, for technologies that have not yet been invented and solve disruptors like COVID that have not yet been anticipated.

Calls to Action



OECD "The Future of Education and Skills – 2030"



World Economic Forum "The Future of Jobs"



Partnership for 21st Century Skills "Skills Primer"



OECD "Schooling Redesigned Toward Innovation"



PWC "The Future of Work 2030 – A Wake-up Call"



"Workforce of the Future – Competing Forces in 2030"

A plethora of institutions and organizations issued clarion calls for action toward facilitating the acquisition of transversal skills that could complement technical skills offered in formal education - years before the GFC and pandemic made their mark as major societal disruptors. For the past 20+ years, several global education reform initiatives have appeared on the horizon to facilitate the acquisition of so-called "21st Century Skills" – those required for learners to master in preparation for success in a rapidly changing, digital society and global knowledge-based economies that focus primarily on critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and the fourth "C" of critical transversal skills: creativity. These educational reform initiatives morphed into strategies educators can employ to guide their students in solving authentic problems of real-life challenges from a multi-disciplinary approach:

>**UNESCO's ICT Competency Framework for Teachers** for technology literacy, knowledge deepening and knowledge creation addresses recent technological and pedagogical developments in the field of ICT and Education, incorporating inclusive principles in the delivery of education supported by technology <http://ht.ly/mMU730rf3N8>

>**EntreComp**, the EU framework for entrepreneurship education and training, imparts transversal and soft skills as well as open mindsets as competences needed to recognize and take advantage of opportunities to create value <http://ht.ly/o1Oa30rf3Ms>

>**DigiComp** promotes digital literacy among learners/EU citizens <http://ht.ly/PcjN30rf3Nk>

The foundational basis of training resides in **Knowledge-Building Pedagogy** (<http://ht.ly/5sAR30rf3NR>) that supports learning modules developed around EntreComp delivered via e-learning methodologies. The results: teacher training that utilizes tools to effectively advance knowledge while bridging the skills gap.

Paradigm Shifters

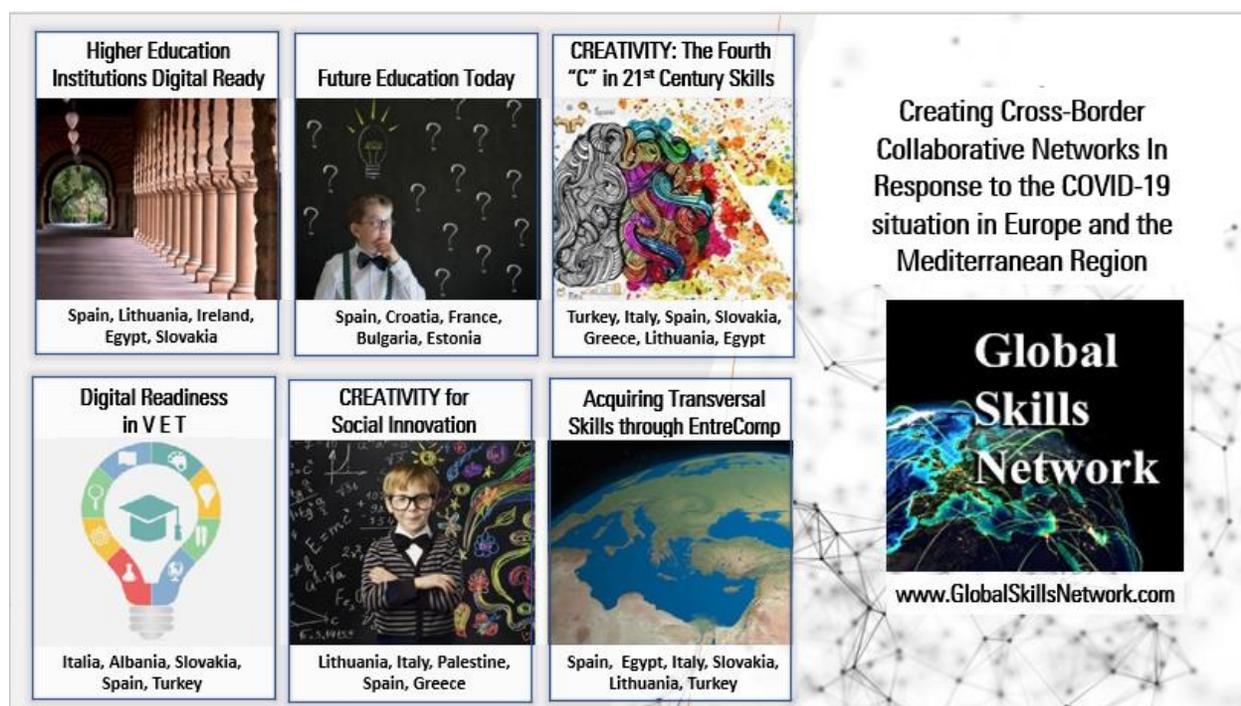
Educators are slowly becoming proficient at preparing young people for the Future of Work, and education systems are beginning to shift radically; outdated paradigms of teaching and learning, however, remain firmly in place. Furthermore, there exist business cultures that create a vicious circle for students, graduates and young professionals - companies often demand too much previous work experience for an entry level job, and do not provide recent graduates with the opportunity to enter the job market with the knowledge and skills acquired through higher education and vocational training because they lack work experience and the right kinds of skills – like working in teams, effective communication, being able to apply critical thinking to problems that arise in the workforce and digital readiness.

Trainers and other educators in both formal education and non-formal training programming alike were finding it difficult to prepare students for Knowledge Economy jobs pre-COVID – and even more challenging to prepare them for responding to the fallouts from major societal shocks like coronavirus. The pandemic has accentuated not only the digital skills gap, but also the limitations for digital preparedness of schools, as mentioned above, and of training organization that have also struggled over the past nine months to continue their educational mandates and learning objectives. The timing was optimal for triggering a best-practice training model based on the previously-mentioned education reform initiatives that aim to support innovative teaching and learning in improving student learning outcomes.

Strategic Partnerships

Multilateral funders saw the pandemic as a golden opportunity to prompt the formation of alliances that could respond to the COVID-19 situation, most notably the European Commission through Erasmus+ calls for digital readiness and promoting creativity, and the Union for the Mediterranean for employment promotion. Global Skills Network rallied its extensive network in Europe and the Mediterranean region to respond to the calls in six applications bringing together a cross-section of society – education, the Public, Private and Third Sectors, youth groups and volunteers – in applicant consortia of formal and non-formal learning environments. The six projects share a commonality: the ability to offer a best-practice training model that transforms educators and trainers into mentors and learning facilitators, able to plant seeds in their students to become problem-solvers while acquiring critical transversal skills in demand by employers as well as advancing innovation. The projects also prepare educators as “paradigm shifters” to instigate change in partner institutions to foment the implementation of the model in curricula across the disciplines to complement formal learning. Our partners have confronted emerging problems in teaching contexts related to the disruption of education

resulting from shocks like COVID and offer a best-practice model built on theoretical models of innovation in teaching and learning that can have immediate and long-term impacts on students at all levels of education – preK-12, higher education, vocational training, adult learning, etc. While the model’s primary focus is teacher training, its impact is felt long-term, when the model is brought back to the classroom for students to engage in problem-solving. It embraces interdisciplinary learning, working in small groups and co-learning taking place between faculty and students via knowledge-building pedagogy, project-based learning where learners acquire transversal “soft skills” that complement technical, job- and sector-specific skills gained in formal studies. By basing e-learning on EntreComp, students acquire skills that support their journey through the education trajectory and into the workforce and/or help them become successful entrepreneurs who will have acquired the mindset, thinking and competences that transform ideas into actions of value to others in a variety of settings. These endeavors aim to prepare students for a 21st Century workforce, including those envisioned in response to pandemics like COVID that will require a different way of seeing the world and meeting marketplace needs for products and services that add value.



Six projects responded to the diverse calls for action from multilateral funding agencies seeking responses to the COVID crisis’ impact on education:

- *“Creativity for Social Innovation in Formal and Non-Formal Education”*: Five countries coming together under the leadership of Asociacija Aktyvistai Youth Association (Lithuania) with teacher training (Spain), community-based learning and economic development (Italy), higher education (Palestine), and adult learning (Greece)
- *“Acquiring Transversal Skills through EntreComp”*: Six countries coming together under the leadership of the Universitat Ramon Llull, Spain (higher education/k-12) to include the public sector (Turkey), vocational education and training (Italy), research (Egypt), youth actions (Lithuania) and adult learning (Slovakia)

- *“Creativity: The Fourth “C” in 21st Century Skills”* Seven countries under the leadership of Dumlupinar University (Turkey), school-work connections (Italy), research (Egypt), digital technology (Slovakia), adult learning (Greece), community-based non-formal learning (Italy), youth programming (Lithuania), teacher training (Spain)
- *“Digital Readiness in Vocational Education”*: Five countries coming together under the leadership of the Istituto d'Insenanza Antonio Cecchi (VET compulsory education, Italy), economic development (Albania), public sector (Turkey) rural and peri-urban learning environments (Slovakia), urban/metropolitan learning environments (Spain)
- *“Future Education Today”*: Four countries coming together under the leadership of Global Skills Network (teacher training - Spain) K-12 public schools (Italy), K-12 private schools (Ireland), secondary compulsory education (Finland)
- *“Higher Education Digital Ready”*: Four countries coming together under the leadership of Universitat Blanquerna (Spain) for institutions of higher education: Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), Egypt-Japan University of Technology (Egypt), National University of Ireland Galway (Ireland)

The fallout from COVID will take a global village to put our communities on the road to recovery – a huge THANKS to our partners who will bring these projects to life!



Barcelona, Spain
October 29, 2020

Sandra Lund-Diaz is the Director of Strategic Partnerships and Instructional Design and a certified Erasmus+ Dialogue Facilitator at Global Skills Network, the umbrella organization for a group of action-oriented agents of change:

- ★ Entrepreneurship Education & Training Around EntreComp (www.EntreCompEd.eu)
- ★ Knowledge-Building Pedagogy supporting Problem Solving (www.KBinAction.com)
- ★ Beta digital platform for promoting the United Nations Sustainability Goals (www.OnePlan4OnePlanet.org)
- ★ Telecollaboration supporting cross-border dialogue around issues (www.Crisalus.com)

Global Skills Network

www.GlobalSkillsNetwork.com * Email: info@GlobalSkillsNetwork.com

Twitter: [@Global_Linkages](https://twitter.com/Global_Linkages) * Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/GlobalSkillsNetwork/>