



109<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Labour Conference (Nov. - Dec. 2021)

## Agenda Item VI

### Briefing Note for Workers' Delegates

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## Shaping skills and lifelong learning for the future of work

### General Discussion

#### Context

The importance of skills and lifelong learning is deeply embedded in the mission of the ILO, which in its Constitution recognises the significance of “the organisation of vocational and technical education”. The 2019 report of the ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work set a number of expectations for workers about the way lifelong learning would operate in the future in its report [Work for a brighter future](#). These laid the foundations for establishing the importance of lifelong learning in the [ILO Centenary Declaration](#) which, while being sound on many fronts did not take up some of the opportunities offered by the Commission’s report, such as providing a lifelong learning guarantee. Lifelong learning, along with freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, are integral to achieving the ILO objective of full, productive and freely-chosen employment, and it must be at the heart of national plans to create decent jobs.

The right to education and training is established in the ILO [Human Resources Development Convention \(C142\)](#) and the [Human Resources Development Recommendation \(R195\)](#). The [Paid Educational Leave Convention \(C 140\)](#) is also relevant. For more information, see:

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms\\_776513.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_776513.pdf)

and

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_714830.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_714830.pdf)

The ILO prepared a report for the discussion, which has been updated due to the impact of COVID 19 in the world of work<sup>1</sup>. The report makes clear that skills, quality education, lifelong learning and the future of work are intrinsically interlinked. Since the founding of the ILO in 1919, workers’ organisations have continuously emphasised the need for education and vocational training, including to manage transitions arising from new technologies in the world of work. While the ILO report includes, on page 16, estimates of the potential effects of technological change on jobs in some (OECD) countries, these will vary greatly between countries due to a range of factors, not least the fact that the digital divide continues to deprive almost half of the world’s population of internet access.

Along with the implications of the rapidly accelerating technological change, this year’s discussion needs to pay particular attention to the skills agenda in light of:

- the Covid-19 pandemic’s impacts, with over 200 million jobs lost and many millions more still at risk with a heavily disproportionate impact on women; and,
- the need for economic and industrial transformation, with Just Transition, to address the catastrophic and worsening effects of climate change.

The Working Party on skills and life long-learning will have to adopt conclusions that will guide future ILO work. To that end, in addition to the above-mentioned report, the ILO has also produced proposed points for discussion<sup>2</sup>, setting out four main points for consideration, which provide a useful basis on which to structure the work of the Working Party. After completing the discussion of the questions, a small

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/109/committees/skills-and-lifelong-learning/lang--en/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/109/reports/reports-to-the-conference/WCMS\\_819708/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/109/reports/reports-to-the-conference/WCMS_819708/lang--en/index.htm)

tripartite drafting committee will prepare draft conclusions. The full Committee will then have a chance to modify the draft conclusions through a procedure of amendments.

While there are specific issues related to each of the four points, which are addressed below, there are some key over-arching issues which should inform the framing of the discussion, including:

- The crucial importance of quality, public education;
- The need for lifelong learning processes to be guided by social dialogue and collective bargaining;
- The need for adequate funding for public education in particular, including vocational education and training systems and means to ensure that employers invest in lifelong learning;
- The need for paid educational leave;
- The role of lifelong learning in closing existing gender gaps in relation to incomes, with the global gender pay gap still in excess of 20%; the labour force participation gap of 27% globally; and gender segregation in access to learning and in occupations;
- Equal access to training, without any discrimination, including concerning the nature of a workers' employment relationship;
- Ensuring that education and training are centred on the needs of people and contribute to decent work, rather than being purely driven by employers; and,
- Eliminating child labour and ensuring that all children have access to free basic education with the opportunity to continue studies.

### Suggested points for discussion

Some initial suggestions for each question are provided here below in addition to the above over-arching issues. Worker members of the Committee will be invited to enrich the discussion by bringing their own national experiences.

1. ***What are the key challenges and opportunities for skills and lifelong learning in a changing world of work, further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, to: (a) foster the creation of decent work and productive employment for all; (b) enhance workers' capacity to make use of the opportunities available for decent work and improve productivity of enterprises (including with a focus on SMEs); and (c) promote inclusive, gender-sensitive, and sustainable development while contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals?***

This specific discussion will need to cover the background to the skills debate as well as broader economic and technological influences on lifelong learning in a changing world of work. With the Covid-19 pandemic destroying tens of millions of jobs, on top of already high global unemployment and underemployment, the role of lifelong learning in ensuring full employment, as an integral part of national jobs plans, should be emphasised.

While employers can be expected to focus on productivity, the Workers' Group may wish to press hard for the interests of workers to expand and deepen their skills and capabilities to be the primary focus. This requires investment in high-quality training, with broad skills development to enable workers to continuously improve their prospects in employment, rather than narrow-focused training which may suit the immediate needs of enterprises but restricts the possibilities for workers to develop their potential. It is also vital that workers employed in SMEs have access to opportunities for skills development, including accredited courses provided outside the enterprise.

Promotion of inclusive, gender-sensitive and sustainable development requires the removal of any discriminatory barriers to accessing learning, overcoming gender segmentation in participation in education and training, and unlocking potential contributions of women in work through investment in skills development and recognition of qualifications in the care sector. Similarly, other discriminatory

barriers to access must be removed and where needed, positive measures implemented to overcome the effects of discrimination.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals provide a comprehensive and normative framework for inclusion and sustainability, with Goal 4 in particular stressing the need to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, and Goal 9 with its focus on ensuring connectivity and for ICT skills. While investment in closing the digital divide within and between countries is essential, so too is ensuring that workers can acquire the necessary skills. A further fundamental need is for expanding and deepening skills and capacities for workers in reaching net-zero CO2 emissions, with learning integrated into Just Transition frameworks for climate action in all countries.

The Paid Educational Leave Convention, 1974 (C140), the Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (C142), the Human Resources Development Recommendation, 2004 (R195) and the Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (R 205) provide a good foundation to enhance workers’ capacities to make use of the opportunities for decent work. Key in that regard is also respect for freedom of association and collective bargaining and policies aimed at fighting discrimination.

This must all be done within Just Transition frameworks that support industrial transition with richer countries supporting poorer countries with both knowledge and expertise as well as financing, including measures that create fiscal space for less wealthy countries to invest in education, and support through development cooperation programmes. Multinational companies must also provide training in their host countries and in their international operations.

- 2. How can key elements of skills systems including policies, governance, skill needs anticipation, financing and delivery be shaped and, where needed, modernized, while addressing the changes and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to: (a) ensure more equitable and effective access to high-quality lifelong learning for developing productive capabilities and providing access to productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all; (b) reduce skills mismatches, underutilization, and gender segregation; (c) enable more effective engagement by key actors (including teachers, trainers, TVET centers and tripartite constituents); (d) capitalize on the potential of new technologies to foster digital learning and digitization of skills systems accessible to all; (e) recognize all forms of formal, and where appropriate, informal and non-formal learning; (f) promote the development of core skills (including human and social skills); and (g) foster supporting culture and mindset to facilitate this transformative process.**

These points cover important ground for workers and provide a basis for inclusion of the issues outlined in the conclusions of the meeting. The involvement of unions in particular in policy and governance, through social dialogue and tripartite structures is an objective that the Workers’ Group should pursue. Social dialogue should take place at all levels, consistent with R195. Financing is currently inadequate in most countries and the outcomes of this meeting need to contribute to a global push for investment in education and training at all levels in public institutions and within enterprises. Workers should not be expected to carry the financial burden of ensuring lifelong learning. In addition, unions should be afforded the possibility to be involved in delivery of training as is currently the case in various sectors in a number of countries. Comprehensive engagement of unions in delivery, through systems such as “unionlearn” in the United Kingdom, should also be promoted.

Tackling skills mismatches, underutilization and gender segregation requires the collection and maintenance of aggregate information on the availability of skilled workers alongside information on current needs and emerging trends in the demand for skills with the involvement of the social partners and through social dialogue. Government employment services have the primary role to play in this, where appropriate working with others including developing the potential of machine learning systems to contribute to better knowledge of existing situations and anticipated needs. Identifying and remedying

gaps in foundational knowledge, including literacy and numeracy, should also be integrated into lifelong learning systems.

Informal learning at work has an important role to play, building on recognised qualifications and through recognition of acquired skills, contributing to new qualifications. “Informal apprenticeships” taking place in the informal economy, need to be formalised including through training of trainers by Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions and recognition of qualifications on completion of courses. Common skills taxonomies also need to be established where they do not exist, to ensure that qualifications are recognised and portable throughout working life. “Microcredentials”, while they can have a place in learning systems, must be complementary to and not substitute for, formal qualifications.

Other key issues include:

- Establishing lifelong learning as an entitlement for every worker, thus realising this right as set out in relevant ILO standards;
- The importance of decent wages, conditions and qualifications for teachers and trainers;
- The centrality of skills development to effective industry policies;
- Ensuring that incomes are commensurate with the skills required to do the job;
- Universal social protection, to ensure workers undertaking training to improve their employment prospects;
- Promotion of learning culture by governments and within enterprises, including statutory entitlements, paid educational leave, skills vouchers and universal social protection to enable participation in lifelong learning;
- Measures to ensure gender equity and the elimination of other forms of discrimination in access to learning where segregation exists;
- Ensuring that employment services and career guidance and support systems are fully connected with lifelong learning systems; and,
- Inclusion of human, social and other core skills across curricula.

**3. *What are the roles and responsibilities of governments and social partners for realizing the transformative potential of skills, lifelong learning, training and education for all, including for the empowerment of women? How can governments and social partners develop and introduce more effective and sustainable governance and financial models? What are the most effective ways to strengthen social dialogue and tripartite governance in skills development and lifelong learning?***

Tripartite social dialogue must be at the centre of governance of lifelong learning, including the setting of policies and objectives, identifying skills gaps, monitoring of progress and evaluation of outcomes. This needs to be supplemented by recognition of the unique and invaluable role of union representatives in promoting acquisition of skills, negotiating learning frameworks in collective agreements and monitoring results. Women must be fully represented in the governance structures, and governance needs to include the development of overall gender-sensitive approaches and specific actions where progress on overcoming gender segmentation is insufficient. Governments have a particular responsibility to ensure that there are no shortages of qualified teachers/trainers.

While adequate government funding for public TVET is essential, governments should ensure that employers and in particular larger employers also contribute to the financing of quality learning, and that workers must not be expected to meet the costs themselves. Social dialogue should include identifying systems through which employer contributions should be delivered.

Strengthening of social dialogue and tripartite governance requires governments to establish and implement policies that clearly establish the role of the social partners. This requires an enabling environment for respect of freedom of association and collective bargaining. With that in place, capacity

building for the social partners should be provided, to enable them to make the most effective inputs. Government support should also extend to provision of earmarked funding for workers' organisations that need and seek such support.

4. ***In line with the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work and to strengthen ILO's global leadership on skills and lifelong learning, what should be the core elements of an ILO skills and lifelong learning strategy that makes use of all means of action including research, standards, technical assistance and development cooperation? What would enable the Office to provide enhanced support to constituents to facilitate the adaptation to changes, move beyond the crisis and build back better through skills and lifelong learning, foster policy coherence and coordination and ensure decent work and productive employment for all? How can such a strategy take into account the diversity of countries and regions, gender equality, and the needs of all workers including disadvantaged groups? How can the ILO provide support to constituents on the potential impacts of digital and other technologies on skills and lifelong learning? How can the ILO improve investments to implement this strategy?***

*Regulatory approaches:*

Promotion of the ratification and implementation of relevant ILO standards, including C140, C142, R195, C138 (Minimum Age for Employment) and C182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour), C87, C98, C111 and C100; Recognition of the right for every worker to access lifelong learning as set out in ILO standards; The right to paid educational leave for all workers; Regulations that ensure equal access for all to lifelong learning, and that ensure that the costs of lifelong learning are not borne by the individual worker;

*ILO research into, and policy advice concerning lifelong learning on:*

- Successful strategies adopted by governments to promote and ensure lifelong learning;
- Good practice in social dialogue at the various levels needed to ensure quality and access;
- Good practice in overcoming discriminatory barriers to participation;
- Mechanisms deployed by governments to ensure a holistic approach – that qualifications are portable and enable transition between technical, vocational and tertiary education;
- Effective use of lifelong learning in support of industrial policy, including the use of technology and Just Transitions;
- Connections between learning systems and career guidance and employment services;
- Examples of how informal apprenticeships and other learning have been formalised, and policy advice on achieving this;
- Development of coherent learning pathways and the identification of approaches that help workers develop flexible and resilient capabilities for a changing world;
- Funding mechanisms and the contributions of employers;
- Information concerning the use of vouchers or other entitlements;
- The potential for scaling up machine learning and other approaches to help identify skills gaps, emerging trends and needs;
- Successful incorporation of lifelong learning into Just Transition and other industrial policy approaches.

Capacity-building for trade unions for skills development and life-long learning.