

DRIVES Project

7# Newsletter Interview

With João Santos, senior expert on Vocational Training, apprenticeships and Adult education, at the European Commission.

1. How has the current COVID crisis affected the European labour market, and in particular the education and training systems in Europe?

The EU economy is forecast to contract by 7.5% in 2020 and grow by around 6% in 2021¹. The coronavirus pandemic has severely affected consumer spending, industrial output, investment, trade, capital flows and supply chains. The expected progressive easing of containment measures should set the stage for a recovery. However, the EU economy is not expected to have fully made up for this year's losses by the end of 2021.

The social impact of the crisis is very strong. In the EU, the unemployment rate is forecast to rise from 6.7% in 2019 to 9% in 2020 and then fall to around 8% in 2021. These estimates can be significantly changed depending on the severity and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some Member States will see more significant increases in unemployment than others. Those with a high proportion of workers on short-term contracts and those where a large proportion of the workforce depend on certain sectors such as tourism, aviation and automotive are particularly vulnerable. Young people entering the workforce at this time will also find it harder to secure their first job.

Apart from the economic and social consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for education and training systems, hitting particularly hard all those learners involved in work-based-learning and apprenticeships. The first lessons learnt point to the direction of accelerating the digitalisation and increasing flexibility of skills provision with an even greater focus on vulnerable groups – for both young people and adults. Another consideration is how COVID-19 and in general periods of low economic activity can be better used as opportunities for training. Given the upskilling and reskilling challenges in the years ahead, training would often be an

¹ European Economic Forecast Spring 2020

optimal use of the time of those in short-time work, unemployment or underemployment.

2. With the fall in cars' demand due to the COVID-19 circumstances, thousands of employees were put on leave or lost job. How is the European Commission tackling impacts in the labour market, particularly in the UE automotive market?

The importance of preparing for the green and digital transitions outlined in a number of Commission documents, prior to the crisis, is still very relevant, if not reinforced by the current context. While the European Green Deal underlined the necessity of re-skilling and upskilling “to reap the benefits of the ecological transition”, the need for a skilled workforce to accompany the digital transition has been highlighted in both the new Industrial and Small and Medium Enterprise Strategies.

As an immediate action to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission proposed two Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII) directing EUR 37 billion under Cohesion Policy to support health care, SMEs and workers, including through skills development, but also providing maximum flexibility to Member States for deploying funding to address most urgent needs.

The Commission also launched SURE, which stands for ‘Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency’, to support short-time work schemes and related measures, which among other things will avoid skills loss and waste and may also concern apprentices.

Existing programmes are being modified to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic and the related crisis, often involving a skills dimension, e.g. within Horizon 2020 specific funding for targeted researchers’ skills development under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions or extra funds for research on Public Health Emergencies.

With a view to the recovery from the crisis generated by the COVID-19 outbreak, the Commission is proposing to harness the full potential of the EU budget to mobilise investment and frontload financial support in the crucial first years of recovery. These proposals are based on:

- *an emergency European Recovery Instrument (‘Next Generation EU’) amounting to EUR 750 billion. This will temporarily boost the EU budget with new financing raised on the financial markets. The funds raised will be channelled through EU programmes to underpin the immediate measures needed to protect livelihoods, get the economy back on its feet and foster sustainable*

and resilient growth.

- *a reinforced multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027. The Commission is proposing to create new tools and strengthen key programmes using Next Generation EU to direct investment quickly to where it is most needed, reinforce the single market, step up cooperation in areas such as health and crisis management, and equip the Union with a long-term budget to drive the green and digital transitions and build a fairer and more resilient economy.*

Together with the three important safety nets for workers, businesses and sovereigns endorsed by the European Council on 23 April and amounting to a package worth EUR 540 billion, these exceptional measures taken at the EU level would reach EUR 1 290 billion of targeted and front-loaded support to Europe's recovery.

3. The automotive industry has been undergoing an adaptation to mobility and environmental trends and tackling digital and green transitions. The pandemic crisis accentuated that path and the European Commission is ever more adamant in fulling this transition. What can be the impact in the Vocational Training sector? Are supranational and national approaches concurrent?

The Commission will come forward with a Skills Agenda for Europe and an updated Digital Education Action Plan. The updated Skills Agenda is expected to be adopted on 1 July and will focus on upskilling and reskilling the workforce to ensure a prompt and inclusive recovery in a social and economic context where the ecological and the digital transitions were already generating major changes.

One of the key actions of the updated Skills Agenda will be the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training. This proposal will build on the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training Opinion on the Future of VET, while also placing VET as a strategic sector in supporting resilience and economic recovery as well accompanying the green and digital transitions. The proposal will recommend actions to be taken at member state as well as EU levels, and also embed lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis, in particular the need to accelerate digitalisation and greening of the VET sector.

The update of the Digital Education Action Plan will draw the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis, in particular with regards to the digitalisation of education and training at all levels. Together with the Communication on the European Education Area, to be adopted later in the year, these documents

will have a holistic approach, covering all education and training sectors, institutions and learning content.

4. In this context, several European regions depend on the automotive industry and are concerned with future effects on the local workforce. How is the European Commission bridging with regional and local authorities to ease the impact in the automotive supply chain?

In addition to the funding instruments described above, the Skills Agenda and the VET recommendation will propose a set of new actions that aim exactly at addressing these challenges. They include better skills anticipation mechanisms, mobilising society to the challenges of upskilling and reskilling, empowering individuals with learning accounts for them to make their choices of training for future career development, increasing the transparency of qualifications, etc. The current initiative on Sectoral Blueprints (such as DRIVES) will be boosted to provide many other sectors with the means to address current and future skills challenges.

As regards the regional and local dimension, the initiative on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) will be fully rolled-out as from 2021, building on the success of pilot projects that were launched in 2019 and 2020. CoVEs define a bottom-up approach to excellence where vocational education and training institutions are capable of rapidly adapting skills provision to evolving economic and social needs. They bring together a wide range of local partners such as providers of vocational education and training, employers, research centres, development agencies, and employment services (among others), to co-create "skills ecosystems" that contribute to regional economic and social development, innovation, and smart specialisation strategies.

Centres of Vocational Excellence develop innovative learner-centred teaching and learning methodologies and establish business-education partnerships for apprenticeships, internships, and anticipation of future skills needs. This will help provide people with high-quality vocational skills that are in high demand. CoVEs also aim to provide learners with entrepreneurial skills and attitudes and support entrepreneurial initiatives through business incubators.

5. Regarding the Sector Skills Alliance, such as the DRIVES project, should the original strategy and goals be revised and steered to adjust the wide sense of the 'new normal'?

Sector Skills Alliances have been designed with a large margin of flexibility to ensure they can be responsive to changing economic and societal needs. When developing the concept of the Sectoral

Blueprints as well as the Centres of Vocational Excellence, one of our main concerns was not to be descriptive to a point that would limit the flexibility of the solutions being proposed by the project partners. Above all we wanted to design a conceptual framework to support skills development that are fit, for the present as well as changing future needs.

Obviously, we have to constantly be attentive to changing needs, and engage in a dialogue with experienced partners such as the partners in the DRIVES project, to see how we can adapt the design of our initiatives to ensure they respond to what those partners need. In that respect we invite you to share your experiences, and proposals with us.

6. Which are the few songs you must have in a long car journey?

While living in Italy, I used to drive quite often for more than 2.000km to go for holidays in my home country Portugal (by the way ... best food and beaches in the world 😊). When driving I like music that at the same time inspires both energy and tranquillity. It's a difficult compromise, but in this category I remember listening over and over to the Dire Straits, U2, Rolling Stones, Phil Collins, Rod Stewart and lots of Jazz and Blues (Louis Armstrong, B.B. King...).

Short Bio



João Santos is senior expert in the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion at the European Commission. The Unit is responsible for Vocational Training, apprenticeships and Adult education, as well as for the policy orientation of the Erasmus+ programme in these fields. From 2014 to 2019, he was the Deputy Head of this Unit.

He had previously worked at the Directorate general for Employment and Social Affairs. As the coordinator of a geographical desk, he was involved in the negotiations on the EU structural policies supported by the European Social Fund. His responsibilities included the Employment chapter of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs, and the Strategy on Social Protection and Social Inclusion.