

Europe's Untapped Resource for Recovery: IT Certification in European Policy

At a time when Europe is on the precipice of the deepest recession in EU history, the European Skills Agenda has failed to leverage an important tool: IT certification. IT certification facilitates employability, enhances job mobility, validates the return on investment in training and motivates learners to reskill and upskill. To tackle the many challenges of the unprecedented COVID crisis, it must be a key component of the European recovery plan and European Skills Agenda. This paper brings together the combined experience of the members of the European e-Skills Association (EeSA) who are amongst the largest global and European certification providers and offers our position to policy makers in response the European Skills Agenda at a time when the various funding instruments for the future of Europe are being finalised.

The European Skills Agenda is laudable and EeSA welcomes the recognition that Europe urgently needs a paradigm shift on digital skills. The recently published DESI has clearly shown that progress to date on digital skills is slow and incremental at best. With the backdrop of COVID and all that it implies for the economy, employment and society, we can no longer accept that 42% of the population lack basic digital skills when we know that most jobs require them¹. Nor can we expect to rebuild a strong competitive economy with a continued shortage of ICT specialists, when we recognise that ICT underpins all sectors. A study by the McKinsey Global Institute shows that if digitally lagging sectors—such as manufacturing, mining, healthcare, and education—double their use of digital assets and increase the digitization of labour, the EU-28 could add €2.5 trillion to its GDP by 2025, boosting GDP growth by 1 percent per year until then². McKinsey also estimates that the COVID crisis could put nearly 59 million jobs in Europe at risk of reductions in hours of pay, temporary furloughs, or permanent layoffs³. That is 26% of total employment. The recovery will likely require an unprecedented and multifaceted response from Member States and the European Institutions alike, and we commend the European Institutions for rising to this challenge.

Yet the European Skills Agenda, and many of the planned funding instruments have overlooked an important tool available to Europeans, one that is known to facilitate employability, enhance job mobility, validate the return on investment in training and motivate learners to reskill and upskill: **industry recognised IT certification**. The OECD's Skills Strategy 2019 advises that certification has multiple benefits "For individuals, it can lead to higher employability, skills use and job satisfaction. It can also be a bridge to re-engage with formal learning by limiting the amount of time and cost required to complete a credential. For employers, having a better understanding of the skills of their employees can help to avoid skills mismatches and lead to higher productivity and reduced staff turnover. For society at large, skills recognition can improve skills matches in the labour market, in turn leading to lower unemployment benefits and higher tax revenue."⁴

When faced with the enormous challenge of coping with and recovering from the crisis, the United States Federal Government has referenced industry certification exams as part of its Absolute Priorities in its Education Stabilization Fund. Focusing not only on enabling K-12 education to respond to the crisis, but also on reimagining the workforce and helping people find immediate pathways to return to the labour market, the US has designated industry certification as a key metric of investment

¹ European Commission's [Digital Economy and Society Index 2020 – Human Capital report](#)

² McKinsey, April 2020. [The Future is Now. Closing Europe's Public Sector Skills Gaps](#)

³ McKinsey, April 2020. [Safeguarding Europe's livelihoods: Mitigating the employment impact of COVID-19](#)

⁴ OECD [Skills Strategy 2019: Skills to Shape a Better Future](#)

in education and workforce retraining⁵. Europe, on the other hand, while rightly focusing on skilling for jobs and investing massively on reskilling and upskilling, has yet to recognise and leverage IT certifications and their role in improving employability, facilitating career transitions and providing a return on investment in training that is acknowledged by industry and employers.

The Value of IT Certification: Door Openers and Career Advancers

IT certification can be classified into two broad categories: ‘door openers’ – certifications that help individuals enter a field in the labour market, and ‘career advancers’ – those that provide experienced professionals with career advancement or even transition opportunities.

Certified applicants are more likely to get the job. With 90% of all jobs requiring at least basic IT skills, employers gravitate to those who have credentials proving they hold the knowledge and skills to get the job done. 91% of employers believe IT certifications play a key role in the hiring process and that IT certifications are a reliable predictor of a successful employee⁶. Once in the workplace, certified employees tend to perform better⁷, work with increased independence and lose less time to basic IT issues, and they are 50% more likely to be promoted.⁸ In a study of CEO’s facing disruptive change driven by digital technologies almost 80% believe that certification is a critical success factor⁹.

For career transition and advancement, certified staff are 50% more likely to get a promotion within one year of first being hired than “never certified” IT professionals¹⁰, they are given more opportunities for advancement and in many cases have higher salaries on average¹¹. Studies of certified employees show that it provides greater motivation for them to upskill. And certified staff believe that certification is more effective at preventing or reducing gaps in learning than training alone¹². Certification also helps employers understand the skill level of their employees, and focus their skills development efforts more effectively. In Europe, where 57% of companies claim they are unable to hire IT skilled staff¹³, IT certification presents a viable yet under-used solution to tackle the gaps and mismatches that we face.

The Policy Recommendations

While the value of IT certification and its benefits have been well-documented and provide easy-to-implement solutions to help address unemployment, skills gaps, and mismatches, it remains a vastly under-used resource in European policy and is rarely integrated into European initiatives. EeSA would like to call on the European Commission and Member States in Europe to ensure that industry IT certification is part of the recovery toolkit:

Pact for Skills: large-scale partnerships to upskill and reskill specific workforce sectors are welcome but should not stop at simply training. There is value for the employers and for the employee in certifying new skills. Bringing certification providers to the table for each industrial ecosystem can ensure that any funds invested are not spent reinventing the wheel where an existing programme can be tailored to meet the needs identified. We also encourage the Pact for Skills to link to existing

⁵ CARES Act, Education Stabilization Fund: [Rethink K-12 Grant and Reimagining Workforce Preparation Grants](#)

⁶ CompTIA, 2015 [HR Perception of IT Training and Certification Study](#)

⁷ Certification Magazine Survey: <http://certmag.com/salary-survey-2018-workplace-impact-certification/>

⁸ IDC White Paper, 2019: [Impact of Certifications and Training on Career Milestones](#)

⁹ IDC White Paper, 2019: [Impact of Certifications and Training on Career Milestones](#)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ IDC White Paper, 2015: [IT Certifications: Shorter Road to Valuable Positions](#)

¹² Pearson VUE 2018. [Value of IT Certification Study](#)

¹³ European Commission [Digital Economy and Society Index 2020 – Human Capital report](#)

standards such as European e-Competence Framework (e-CF)¹⁴ and the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)¹⁵ where appropriate. Ensuring the skills provided are validated and certified provides a return on investment; but for the employee, also an important credential that will not only help their performance but will provide them with a portable validation of the acquired skills to take to the job market in the future.

Strategic national upskilling strategies: In amending or creating national skills strategies, we believe that the European Commission has a role to play in ensuring that closing the digital skills gaps is undertaken in a manner that includes a short- and medium-term outlook. Plugging the digital gaps is essential and training to upskill complemented with certification provides a means to measure progress, track investment and provides the beneficiary with a tangible proof of competency. We ask the European Commission to highlight to Member States the benefits of using industry certification as part of the upskilling strategies.

Skills to Support the Twin Transitions – DEAP: The Digital Education Action Plan can play a critical role in continuing the modernisation of our education systems at all levels, preparing teachers and students with relevant digital skills for a resilient future. Education reform however is slow and uneven in Europe. The speed of revamping teacher training curricula, and implementing change is at odds with the ever-increasing pace of change in a digital world and Member States often seek evidence of return on investment. Such as how do I know that teachers have the right skills and are using them in their practice? How do I know that students are gaining relevant digital competence that equips them for the workplace and for life? Integrating industry-recognised certification into both teacher training and student learning provides a means of ensuring that relevant skills are acquired with a validation that assists student’s employability and mobility. It also provides a measurable result for Ministries and school leaders to gauge progress and investment. Making these skills visible in a manner that facilitates mobility is equally valid to ensure that education truly becomes the backbone of growth in the EU. The current Digital Education Action Plan has previously been a driver of digital and entrepreneurial skills as well as EU Code Week – using established certifications would provide a validated measure of the acquisition of skills, one far more objective than a post-training survey or self-assessment as is often the sole requirement.

Individual Learning Accounts: ILAs can remove barriers to training and certification for all and provide a backbone to make lifelong learning a reality in Europe. EESA members welcome the initiative on ILAs and in particular the inclusion of provisions for validation of learning therein. Ensuring that the training and validation available through ILAs is inclusive of industry-based certification will be key to their success as tool to promote job transition and employability. The Members of EESA remain available and eager to advise and consult on this topic.

A framework for micro-credentials: EESA welcomes this initiative and the initiative on including micro-credentials in Europass. Efforts to improve the quality, relevance, and comparability of credentials in Europe are much-needed. The EQF is an important mechanism to help navigate the patchwork of education systems and understand credentials across borders. The implementation of NQFs and their referencing to the EQF present a patchy picture, as does recognition of non-formal and informal learning in these systems. Certifications that offer valuable boosts to employability are, in many cases, not reflected in these systems. Efforts to support the transparency and comparability of qualifications should be extended to include international providers that provide education, training and certification across all Member States. Many providers of such certifications find it difficult and

¹⁴ <https://www.ecompetences.eu/>

¹⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1315&langId=en>

bureaucratic to navigate 27 different NQFs, while their offerings directly support the mobility aims of Europe. Introducing certification into NQFs is key, a further step to develop a mechanism enabling international certification providers to relate their offerings directly to the EQF and have this transposed into the NQFS would vastly simplify the process, facilitate portability of qualifications and increase transparency. The members of EeSA offer our collaboration and insights on this action.

New Europass Platform: The Europass platform has been greatly augmented by the inclusion of the digitally signed qualifications and ‘find a course’ functions. The use of the NQFs as the backend in its current form leaves the list of educational offerings limited to only those courses who are recognised on the NQFs. In many countries the NQFs currently exclude courses leading to certification and certification itself, leaving the Europass results presenting an incomplete picture that unfortunately omits credentials that provide a trusted, independent validations of skills and competencies that employers understand. The Digitally Signed Credentials initiative has great potential to be expanded to include certification providers many of whom already issue digital badges as well as certificates interoperable with social platforms but not yet Europass. Some members of EeSA were involved in the early planning stages of the digital signed credentials and we offer to share our thoughts on how the certification industry can support and scale this initiative.

A framework to unlock investment in skills: This is a time when the EU’s support is primordial to ensure that Europeans recovery quickly. The support and investment planned for developing human capital is formidable and needed. With Erasmus+, the ESF+ and the recovery plan, we believe that these instruments can provide a longer lasting benefit to European by simply including certification. A test to validate the skills acquired, capped by a recognised certification to valorise the hours spent in training and the significant investment in that training. Ensuring that every beneficiary of these funds, has the opportunity to earn a meaningful credential, recognised by employers, that bolsters employability as well as confidence.

Conclusion

Certification is vastly under-used resource in policy making but can provide the needed validation and measurement tools to support many policy aims. EeSA encourages policy makers to engage with certification providers and offers our support in developing further all of the initiatives referenced in this document. We are committed to ensuring that in this uncertain time, when skills and certification are needed more than even before, we play our role in supporting the recovery.

About the European E-Skills Association (EeSA)

The European e-Skills Association (EeSA) is an umbrella organisation that works in partnership with the European Commission, public authorities across Europe, SMEs and all relevant stakeholders to build upon the European Commission’s recommendations and other reference initiatives on digital skills. Transparency Register ID: 416562915447-63

This paper is supported by the members of European E-Skills Association’s sub-group on Certification:



