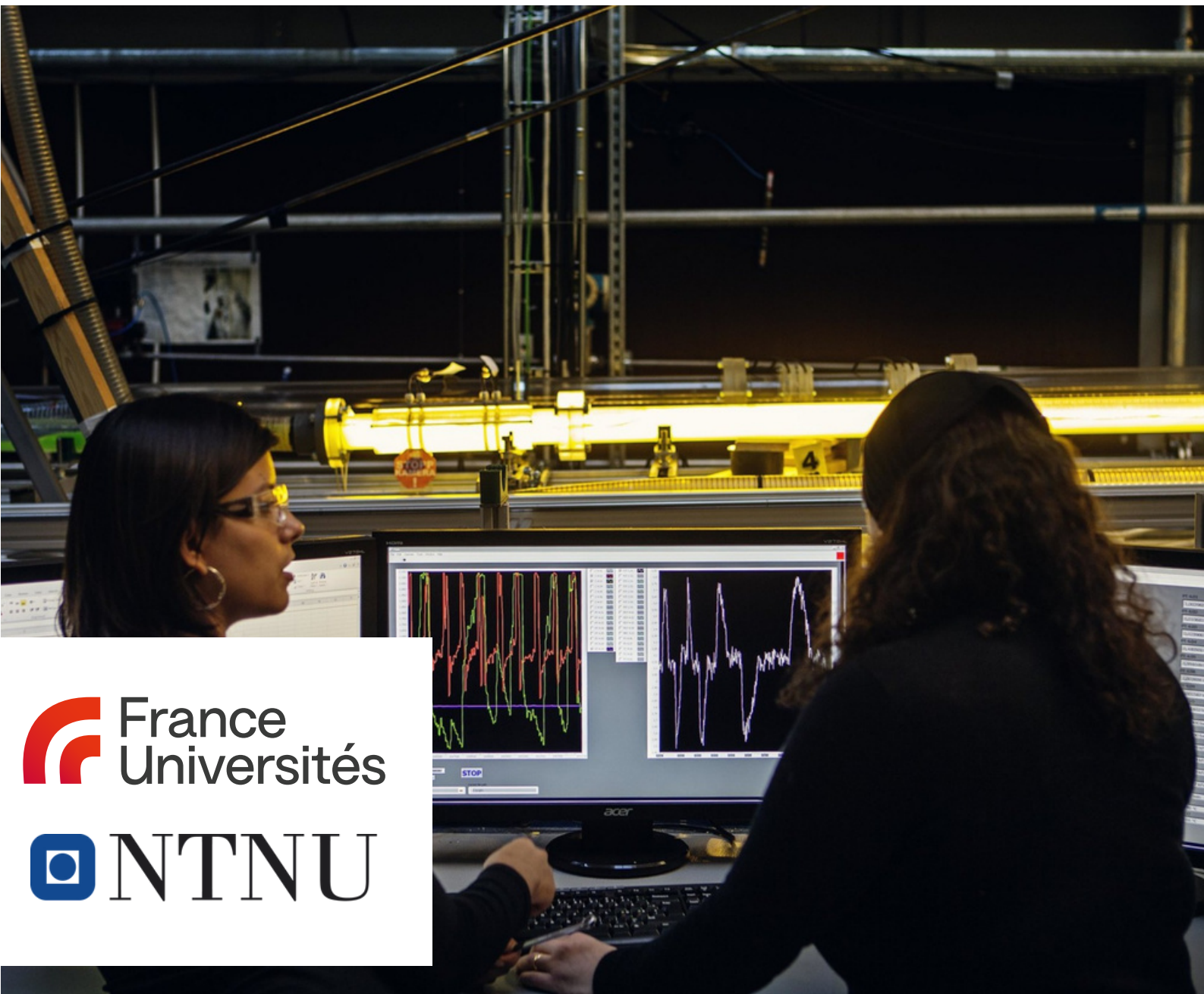


OPINION PAPER

TWIN TRANSITIONS CALL FOR SKILLS: ENHANCING EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES' ENGAGEMENT



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Introduction

On 9 May 2023, Europe Day, the European Union officially entered the Year of Skills. However, it is to be expected that the competition for skills will go on for several more years, as such diverse factors as the demographic pressure exerted on some sectors (the steel industry for instance), the need to reskill and upskill a large portion of the labour force so as to meet the targets of the newly-emerging net-zero industries, and the necessity of attracting world-wide talents in order to preserve Europe's sovereignty will continue to create a sense of urgency in the years to come.

At the same time, the European Innovation Agenda aims to position Europe at the forefront of the wave of high-tech innovation and start-ups to develop new technologies, address the most pressing societal challenges (including the need for new skills) and bring them to the market. Particularly important also are analytical skills, management, and creativity training to ensure that policy makers, and business strategists are prepared to appreciate and capitalise on green and digital transitions.

In response to these challenges, the Commission has set up strong ambitions, in particular to train one million jobs in Deep Tech. Similarly, the Green Deal targets in the field of industry show the need for, inter alia, 180,000 skilled workers in the hydrogen sector and 66,000 for solar PV by 2030.

In order to train the workforce and create the quality jobs needed by the new sectors, facilitate the recognition of skills and their transferability, and allow for smooth mobility patterns across internal market borders, the Commission has also devised a new instrument, skills academies, some of which have already emerged from alliances initiated by KICs (e.g. the European Battery Alliance managed by EIT InnoEnergy).

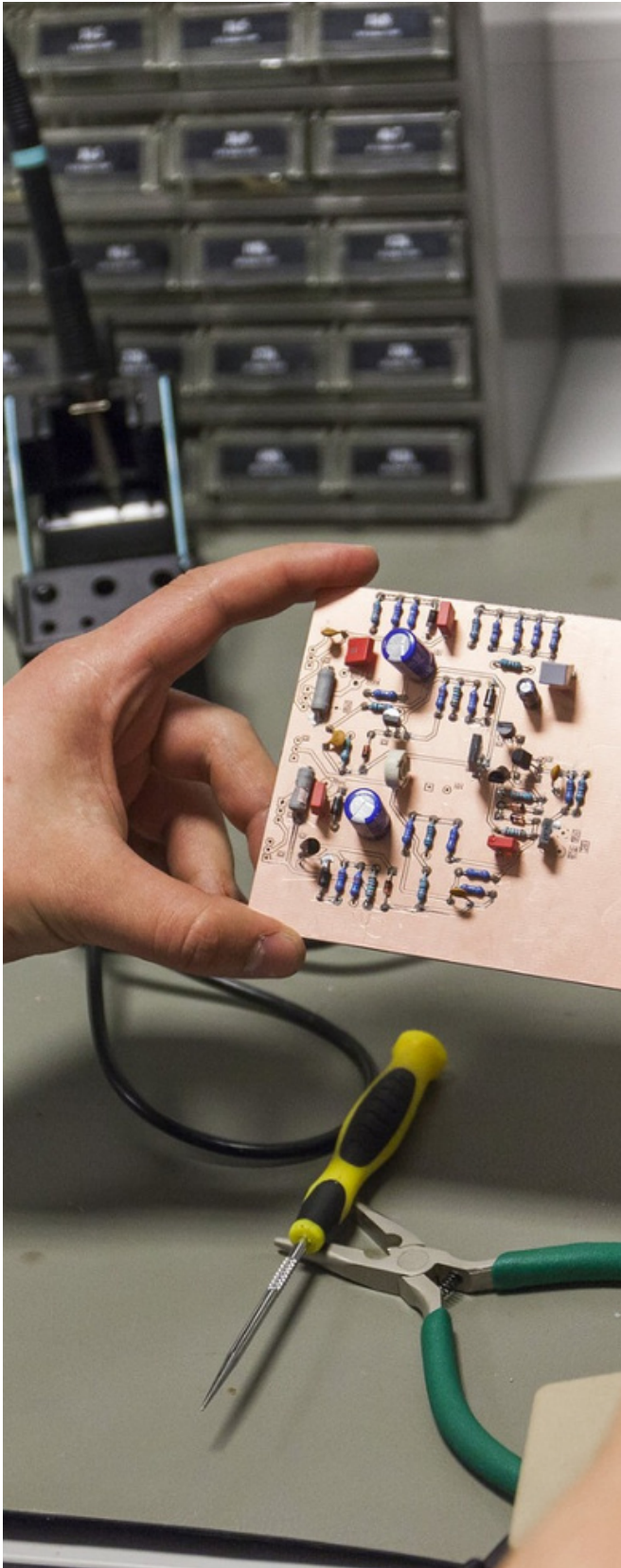
Skills for the Green and Digital Transitions



In its Communication of January 2022 on “a European Strategy for Universities”, the Commission pointed out the need for the academic sector to adapt, “as skills needs are rapidly evolving. [...] The green and digital transitions require future-proof education, research and innovation, in close cooperation with the related industries and stakeholders and the significant disparities in digital skills across the EU must be overcome.”

To face these challenges, the academic sector has multiple assets, including the role of universities as honest brokers in their regional innovation ecosystems, the quality and sustainability of education rooted in research and a scientific approach in handling complex questions, and their ability to gather under “one roof” the whole spectrum of disciplinary knowledge.

However, several reports indicate that companies may have limited confidence in academia for upskilling / reskilling their workforce. Although this may partly be explained by companies’ inclination for short-term return on investment, more than on sustainable skills and abilities to understand and deal with complex problems, universities may up to a point be responsible for this lack of confidence so long as they stay with disciplines organized in silos and not sufficiently interconnected for today’s complex challenges.



What makes it even more difficult for the academic sector to apprehend recent evolutions fully and develop a comprehensive approach to the question at the European level is the fact that the question of skills is managed in somewhat different ways by several DGs of the European Commission.

Such diversity and fragmentation, which is reflected in some EU policies and programmes, can be overcome if the different initiatives of the EC are consistent with each other, and if the Commission adopts a comprehensive and systemic approach to innovation, instead of treating independently and separately the questions of transfer of research and development, and the skills called for by innovative solutions.

Developing green skills not only means developing new programmes and enabling people to upskill several times in a lifetime, it also necessitates designing consortia involving higher education institutions alongside companies as well as trade associations and, where appropriate, local authorities and citizens.

Universities may play a leading role in the development and management of these projects by putting together a concerted training offer resulting from the identification of the gaps which must be bridged in order to strengthen the chain of competences, qualifications and occupations.

Opinion Points

As a consequence of the above, the following organizations:

- Ask for a clearer European strategy for skills based on a better alignment of policies and tools and a reduction of parallel initiatives. This would necessitate a steering mechanism to support and monitor skilling, upskilling and reskilling across the various DGs involved in the Commission's strategy. This objective would enable stakeholders in general and universities in particular to contribute to the need for reskilling and upskilling in a more efficient way.
- Recommend that the Commission sets up incentives so that universities can more easily adapt their training offer to the needs of socio-economic stakeholders in their regional environment. Cultural changes are currently on-going in the universities, partially thanks to the measures put in place by the EC (e.g. a number of European Universities alliances are focused on multidisciplinary, broad challenges, and not on specific disciplines), but this needs to be strengthened, especially for reskilling and upskilling.
- Call on the Commission to speed up the implementation of new training models for lifelong learning, in particular micro-credentials, in order to be able to face today's challenges and keep abreast of the fast-paced production and adoption of new technologies in Europe, and the opportunity the latter afford in terms of market growth. This would position universities as key stakeholders to design and provide impactful contents, including analytical skills and creativity training, given their capability to combine a short- and long-term vision.
- Advocate the development and promotion of forms of embedded mobility abroad, such as internship and apprenticeship, in net-zero industries and companies in order to allow students to grow on-site skills and receive on-the-job training; similarly urge universities to further engage with the private sector, chambers of commerce, employers' organizations and public agencies in order to support net-zero commitments through challenge-based skilling projects and continuity of training.

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- Invite university networks in Europe, including European universities alliances, to design common skill certificates and/or degrees based on complementary programmes delivered by several partners. This would guarantee workers a high-value occupational profile, helping them to cope in several countries at once with the sudden changes that the labor market is facing at an increasing speed. This would also represent a step forward in order to achieve a qualitative and flexible approach thanks to which the European strategy for universities is implemented on key points.
 - Expect education systems in Europe to reduce their response time by devising means to close the gap between the mapping of needs and the resulting programmes, notably through ex-post rather than ex-ante evaluations. Conversely, in order to limit the impact that “expired” competences can generate on the employment rate, universities should have a role in the identification of the possible “duration” of skills. In order to adapt the educational offer to the emerging needs of a given sector, a “Life Cycle Assessment,” aiming to keep competences “up-to-date” and allow for long-term monitoring of appropriate upskilling/reskilling activities in the corresponding EU workforce, should be put in place.

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