

## **Skills use – governmental responsibility or (and) responsibility of the economy?**

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### **Abstract**

Identification of skills needs, along the provision and the acquisition of adequate skills should belong to strategic goals of the socially responsible society. The right skills are the precondition for a functioning labour market, good economic performance, productive and inclusive individuals throughout the whole life cycle. Relevant skills should respond to labour market needs as well as to the economy requirements. Additionally, digitalization and fast technological changes require permanent investments into skills.

Educational paths in Slovenia are not aligned with the economy requirements, skills do not correspond to actual industrial policy priorities. Only by matching skills needed within the industrial policy and forecasting of skills needs, the country can generate desirable goals of higher efficiency of human capital and higher productivity in the economy. Relevant skills could be better used in the working life, in the civil life and should enable social inclusiveness and well-being throughout the whole life cycle. Furthermore, ageing trends in Slovenia require up-skilling and increase in the productivity to mitigate negative effects of lower participation rates in the labour market and to sustain economic growth. Social partners, especially employers and chambers should have an important role in identification of skills needs and gaps.

The article describes the situation of the skills use in Slovenia in comparison with EU and OECD countries. It focuses on foreseen skills challenges and skills forecasting needs. The article offers solutions and policies for better skills matching and further reflections on more co-ordination between educational policies and the economy skills requirements.

**Key words:** Education, skills mismatches, skills gaps, industrial policy, forecasting

## **Uporaba veščin - odgovornost vlade ali odgovornost gospodarstva?**

### **Povzetek**

Oprelitev potreb po strokovni usposobljenosti ob zagotavljanju in pridobitvi ustreznih znanj bi morala pripadati k strateškim ciljem družbeno odgovorne družbe. Prave spretnosti so predpogoj za delujoč trg dela, dobro gospodarsko uspešnost, produktivne in vključujoče se



posameznike v celotnem življenjskem ciklusu. Ustrezne spretnosti se morajo odzivati na potrebe trga dela in zahteve gospodarstva. Poleg tega digitalizacija in hitre tehnološke spremembe zahtevajo trajna vlaganja v veščine.

Izobraževalne poti v Sloveniji niso usklajene z gospodarskimi zahtevami, veščine ne ustrezajo prednostnim nalogam industrijske politike. Le z ujemanjem spretnosti, potrebnih v okviru industrijske politike, in s predvidevanjem potreb po znanju lahko država ustvari želene cilje glede večje učinkovitosti človeškega kapitala in večje produktivnosti v gospodarstvu. Ustrezna znanja in spretnosti bi se lahko bolje uporabila v delovnem in civilnem življenju in bi morala omogočati socialno vključenost in blaginjo v celotnem življenjskem ciklusu. Poleg tega trendi staranja prebivalstva v Sloveniji zahtevajo visoko usposobljenost in povečanje produktivnosti za ublažitev negativnih učinkov nižjih stopenj udeležbe na trgu dela in za ohranjanje gospodarske rasti. Socialni partnerji, zlasti delodajalci in zbornice, bi morali imeti pomembno vlogo pri ugotavljanju potreb po spretnostih in vrzeli.

Članek opisuje stanje uporabe znanj in spretnosti v Sloveniji v primerjavi z državami EU in OECD. Osredotoča se na predvidene izzive na področju spretnosti in potrebe po napovedih. Članek ponuja rešitve in politike za boljše usklajevanje spretnosti in nadaljnje razmisleke o večji usklajenosti med izobraževalnimi politikami in zahtevami gospodarskega znanja.

**Ključne besede:** Izobraževanje, neuskklajenost spretnosti, pomanjkljivosti v znanju, industrijska politika, napovedovanje

## 1 Introduction

Skills are becoming the essential driver for productivity and competitiveness in companies. Employers demand qualified and flexible workers, which can cope with fast changes in the working environment, contribute to the company's success and face global pressures. To achieve these goals, adequate policies and effective cooperation among relevant bodies should lead from right educational pathways towards work efficiency and job matching.

The reality shows substantial mismatching and skills deficiencies in the Europe. According to the European Commission, 70 mio Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills, 40 % of European employers have difficulties finding people with the right skills (EC, 2016a). The situation varies across countries, but requirements for right skills in general are increasing. According to the OECD Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report (2017), many recent graduates lack strong cognitive and social-emotional skills, measures by the PIAAC<sup>1</sup> survey. Not only for young people, skills deficiencies are noticed by working force in general. One third of 16-to 65 years old in Slovenia, this is almost 400.000 adults, have low levels of literacy and/or numeracy and most of them are not interested in adult learning. For Slovenia data show that while only 13% of Slovenia's adult population has less than upper secondary school, they account for 40% of low-skilled adults (OECD, 2017). The knowledge society is still distant.

The awareness rising of skills investments needs should be intensified and pronounced more loudly. Active inclusion of all the relevant stakeholders, which can influence the skills challenges and offer educational guidelines, should become a norm. This fact demands closer cooperation and coordination among educational and labour market institutions on one side and the economy on the other side. One of important tools to increase productivity leads to more effectively allocating human talent to jobs (OECD, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup>Survey of Adult Skills( <http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>)



## **2 Recognition of the importance of skills**

Skills should be aligned with labour market requirements. Since 2015, Slovenia adopted many important strategic documents, among them the National Development Strategy, the Industrial Policy, Slovenia's Smart Specialisation Strategy and the Vision of Slovenia 2050. However, the mentioned documents are not synchronised and do not prioritise the need for policy synergies, linked to human capital as the important knowledge-based capital. The Resolution on the National Plan for Adult Education 2013-2020 and the National Higher Education programme 2011-2020 are additional documents, focused mostly on educational reforms. According to the OECD, the innovation performance of universities and public research institutions in Slovenia is mixed; despite the R&D expenditures are close to the OECD average, investments into research have not translated into tangible output. Further on, there is a concentration of business R&D spending in a small number of large firms, links among Slovenia's research institutes are not strong (OECD, 2017). The optimistic step forward presents the Research and Innovation Strategy of Slovenia (2011-2020), aimed at modernising the Slovene innovation system. OECD also stresses that the entrepreneurial culture in Slovenia is limited. The lack is visible also in the school curricula, causing sub-optimal entrepreneurship and innovation performances in companies. To sum up, there are a lot of fragmented strategic documents available, but no common minimum denominator or policy, pointing human capital as the strategic national asset.

In the contrary with most of the Western European countries, there are only limited adult learning programmes in Slovenia; only few are modular or credit-based. Experiences from the Slovene Public Employment Service (PES) confirm that work-based learning and on-the job training are far more popular and successful programmes for adult population. Motivation is another challenge. Tax deductions for investments into skills for individuals and firms are used in most advanced countries. Tax deductions for skills investments for individuals were abolished in Slovenia; the reconsidering of re-introduction would be welcome in the context for increased need for skills upgrading.

Public investments into education and life-long learning are essential to ensure that workers have the capacity to learn new skills and adapt to changing technologies (OECD, 2015). In general, Slovenia's public administration may lack the incentives and capacity to take a whole-of-government approach to skills policy (OECD, 2017). Local government, responsible also for the adult education, depends on individual municipality's ambitions and many times lacking the administrative capacity for sufficient skills policy implementation at local level. As the local environment knows the needs of the local economy, the significant ignorance and neglect of the skills base importance for the economy at the local level is worrisome.

### **2.1 Use of skills – benefit for individuals**

Lifelong learning and permanent investments into skills and competences are the right and the responsibility of every individual, capable to contribute to the labour market. Innovations and competitive advantage in technologies namely arise increasingly from excellency of skills. Slovenia needs a personal responsibility for identification of individual's skills gaps and skills upgrading through the whole life. Rejecting own skills progress is not a socially responsible act, neither should it be tolerated. Additionally, modern (e-) socialites require e-literacy, which will be soon the significant guarantee of the social inclusion into the working and civil



life. On the other side, employers seldom have deeper insight into validated or invisible skills of employees. Not all employers support own initiatives for skills up-grading, transparency of available skills at company level is often missing.

According to the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), about one-third of workers in OECD countries are over- or under-qualified for their job, causing inefficient allocation of resources (EC, 2016c). The 2012 Flash barometer (354) stresses that only half of the EU population above 15 agree that their school education helped them to develop a sense of initiative and a sort of entrepreneurial attitude (EC, 2012). Wrong or inadequate skills diminish multiplicative effects of schooling or training. According to the CEDEFOP study, adults in employment, who do not engage in substantial upskilling or reskilling for five or more years, run the risk of being locked into particular ways of working (CEDEFOP, 2014b). The PIAAC further reveals that the use of reading skills explains a considerable share (26%) of variation in labour productivity across the countries, participation in the programme (OECD, 2016a). Therefore, more attention, given to skills, should not be underappreciated.

The interesting research suggests that a 1% increase in skills is associated with a 0.3% increase in average labour productivity and with a 0.365 % increase when the model is extended to take account of the potential role of skills in assisting productivity follower countries catch up with countries on or near the frontier. One-year increase in average education is associated with a 3 to 6% increase in the level of GDP per capita and a 1% increase in school enrolment is associated to an increase in GDP per capita growth of between 1% and 3% (Sianesi, 2003).

Another factor, influencing productivity is ageing. Companies are often not aware that ageing of the population is hindering productivity growth by lower participation rate. Therefore, investing into available working age population is important. Taking into account the high share of the EU population, including low-skilled, inactive and old people into lifelong learning should be priority for companies.

Assessment and validation of existing skills and competences are important for use and rewarding of human capital in times of declining working age population through Europe. Only by recognising skills in employees, management can evaluate possible positive outcomes, arising from available human capital and recruit and retain people with adequate skills.

## **2.2 Use of skills - do companies appreciate skills investments?**

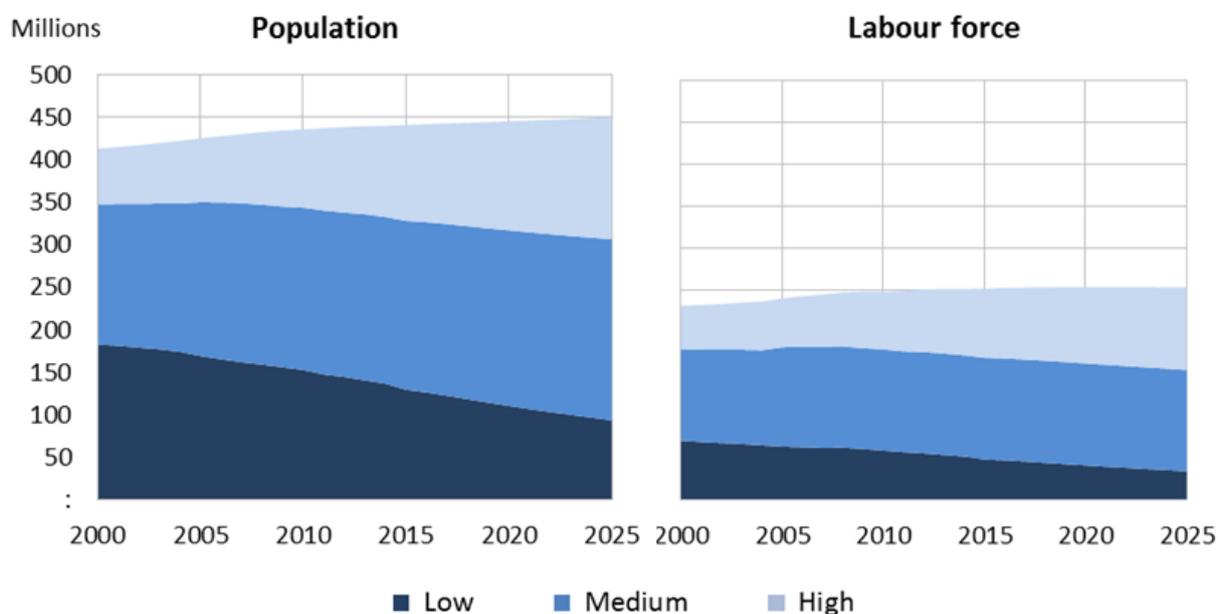
The persisting entrepreneurial conviction of skills investments as costs is not justified. Employers should recognise that the added value of the company depends on skills and competences of their employees. As 70 mio Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills (EC, 2016a), the number indicates also productivity loss due to inadequate investments into this group of workers. In the EU, 23,4% of the population in age bracket 25-64 do not have an upper secondary education, only 29,9 % hold a tertiary education (EC, 2016c). Fast technological changes require ICT skills; almost 50% of the EU population lacks digital skills and 20% of them do not have digital skill at all (EC, 2016a). Shift to service sectors is relying more and more on the ICT and e-trade, digital gaps is the mandatory tool for business success. That is why the Commission has launched an additional initiative in 2016, the Digital Skills



and Jobs Coalition. In the reality, a high share of employers does not have a long-term vision of investing into own employees, postponing any reflection of future skills gaps.

Fluctuations and migrations can indicate mismatches as undervalued and not recognised skills, which individuals possess. Informal and non-formal education are mostly not rewarded or used at work, contributing to “official” skills mismatches. In this context, one can include also transversal skills, which increase with experiences and work transitions. The “culture of lifelong learning”, as stated by the OECD (2017) should be promoted in a way to recognize human capital investments as the integral part of management plans by “putting skills into effective use». The reducing of mismatches in the OECD countries could increase the productivity between 2% and 10% (OECD, 2015). This is “the language”, employers understand better. The interesting trend of declining labour force in time is seen from the Picture 1.

Picture 1: Population (left) and labour force (right) by qualification in EU-28+



Source: Cedefop skills forecasts (2016).

Obviously, there is a need for more skilled people, also in the context of declining workforce. In Slovenia, more flexible forms of skills investments should be applied, tax deduction for skills investments for companies should be reintroduced. Modular education should be promoted more intensively. Last, but not the least, the high taxation and low returns from investments into the human capital deter highly skilled individuals from investing into skills and reduce motivation for more innovative and productive contribution to the working process. The problem of tax system and consequently “relative low earning potential of highly skilled people in Slovenia” is recognised also by the OECD (2017). Social partners should discuss these initiatives more often and more sincerely.



The High-performance Work Practices (HPWP), which includes organisational and management practices<sup>2</sup> in companies is rarely used in Slovenia and accounts only 23% of all jobs in Slovenia in comparison with other, mostly Scandinavian countries (OECD, 2017). The recent trend of emigration in Slovenia is partially due to the underestimation of the human capital and its rewarding. According to the OECD, of the 13.000 who emigrated from Slovenia in 2015, over 20% represented tertiary educated ones (OECD, 2017).

In general, companies often forget that “higher levels of cognitive skills area associated with a number of positive economic and social outcomes for individuals and society” (OECD, 2017). There is obviously room for significant productivity gains. It is interesting that companies recognise the importance of new technology for better performance, but do not recognise investments into skills for better productivity. As the Commission’s analytical paper states, the issue of polarisation could greatly affect the relationship between skills and economic growth (EC, 2016c).

### **2.3 Use of skills and national returns**

Quality of training and educating alone does not mean that it responds to the economy’s needs. Cooperation between education and business should be deepened, strategies and reforms should be adopted in consensus with all stakeholders, who are including into the skills formation and skills use process. National industrial policy shall play an important role as a framework for needed adaptations or revisions for educational and training programmes and modules. Additionally, programmes or reforms require systematic approach and should not change too quickly to enable reliable evaluation of implemented changes.

Skills quality matters, of course. Lack of the comprehensive educational outcomes visibility hinders quality ranking to guide individuals towards high quality educational and training institutions. Information on skills upgrading opportunities are fragmented, only 9% of adults with low educational attainment in Slovenia has searched for information on learning opportunities (14% in the EU-28) (EC, 2015). The mentioned fact is worrisome; half of Slovenia’s unemployed adults have been out of work for more than one year, which is one of the highest long-term unemployment rates in the OECD (OECD, 2016c).

Information on employability outcomes would enable higher competitiveness regarding educational and training choices. It would provide information on comparability and possible higher economic and social returns for individuals, for companies and at the national level. The coordination among relevant ministries and educational institutions in Slovenia is missing; the increase of “working in silos” phenomenon is visible in the weaker economy performance and lower productivity of workers. No coordinated approach towards skills anticipation and matching, financing and balanced taxing human capital outcomes is taking place in Slovenia. Regional level is often excluded from suggestions, which skills are needed at regional or local level, what is unacceptable, taking into account the fact that more than 90% of companies in Slovenia are SMEs.

Many EU documents highlight the importance of skills. The European Pillar of Social Rights (adopted in 2016) acknowledged the significance of investments into skills. The New Skills Agenda as the leading initiative in this context is stressing that one of Commission’s priorities

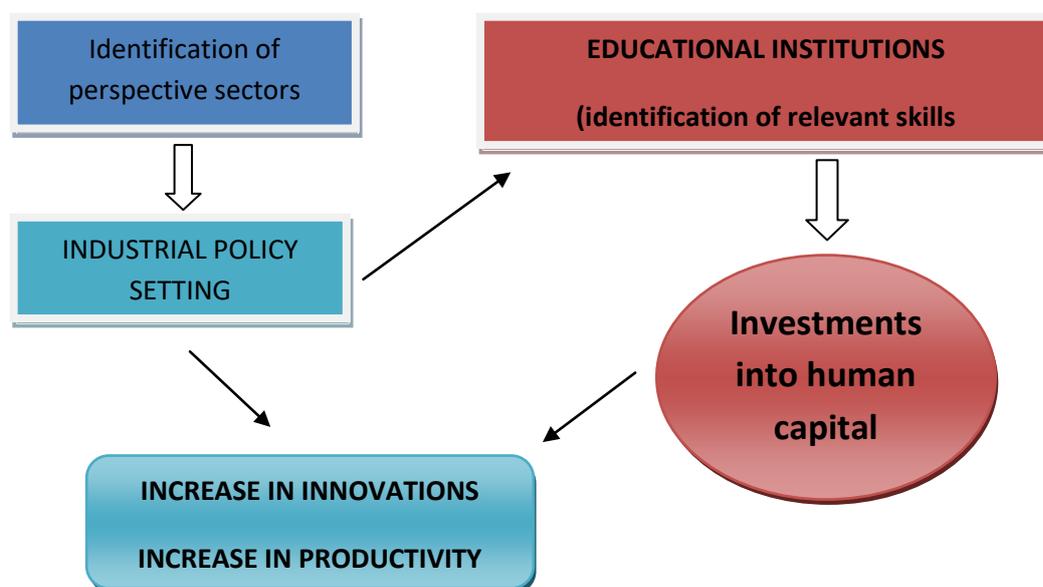
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<sup>2</sup>HPWP includes organisational factors (teamwork, autonomy, mentoring, job rotation...) and management practices (work flexibility, incentive pay, training practice...)



should be focused on i) improving the quality and relevance of skills formation, ii), making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable and iii) improving skills intelligence and information for better career choice. Skills development and relevant support are highlighted also in the “ET2020”<sup>3</sup> and “Key Competences”<sup>4</sup> Frameworks. However, the promotion of skills should be holistic; it should be promoted as the national and as the European priority. The first result of the Commission’s reflection in this context is a launch of the Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation and Skills, offering long-term vision on skills needs, along the CEDEFOP forecasting publications. To reach the goal of sustainability and right direction of skills investments, interrelations between skills and economy should be enforced, as seen from the Picture 2 below.

Picture 2: Interrelations between skills and economy



Source: Author

CEDEFOP states that about 85% of all jobs openings will arise from the need to replace workers leaving the occupation, with retirement or other reasons for moving into inactivity the most visible likely cause. Between now and 2025, even the share of those working in elementary occupations with low qualifications will reduce from 44% to 33% while the share of those with high qualifications working in occupation demanding typically lower levels of skills will grow from 8% to 14%. Employment of those highly qualified across Europe in all occupations in the next 10 years will increase from 32% to 38% (CEDEFOP, 2016). Research by Elliot S. (2018) shows, that almost 40% of the workforce in Slovenia is vulnerable to displacement by the computer technology (Elliot, 2018). On the others side, use of digital skills increase employment opportunities and opens new, including global markets, if used

<sup>3</sup>Strategic framework–Education&Training2020,

(<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Aef0016>, extracted August 8, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning

([https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST\\_9009\\_2018\\_INIT&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9009_2018_INIT&from=EN), extracted August 8, 2018).The European Reference Framework sets out eight key competences: Communication in the mother tongue; Communication in foreign languages; Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; Digital competence; Learning to learn; Social and civic competences and Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship.



properly. If Slovenia will not invest into the ICT and other emerging skills, it might lag behind and decrease productivity and market scope. Socially responsible spill over of knowledge is even more important to support R&D not only in leading firms but also in laggards

Business and educational institutions should follow the same goal-higher level of innovations, increase in productivity and general welfare for all. To achieve the mentioned goal at the national and European level, clear vision of the future economic development should be determined. Only then, right skills and gaps can be identified, policies revised and improved. On the other hand, if data on the specifics of available stock of human capital is given, the mentioned knowledge-based capital can determine economic future and the most competitive sectors. However, it is not possible to develop wise and reliable policies, taking into account only isolated economic or isolated educational policies.

### **3 The findings and conclusions**

Skills matter. More than ever in the past. It is socially responsible to share the burden of investments into skills among individuals, companies and the government. The reality is different. Business usually recognises only fast and visible results and consider any other investments as costs. Governments neglect skills as national assets. Business should become active actor in the skills formation and skills needs identification. Companies should collaborate hand in hand with other institutions and advice towards educational modernisation. Governments should become socially responsible and mature. There should be higher political level of commitments as regards the skills agenda in discussions of future national development. Skills development and direction of development should be agreed on the highest political level to serve defined socio-economic goals.

Skills belong to the invisible capital (assets) and as such should be appreciated, more visible and become part of the social responsible management practice at the company level. Skills are becoming the comparative advantage of individuals. Lower investments into skills of older people is in contradiction with prolonged working age worldwide. Monitoring skills and competences should spread through the whole life cycle due to inevitable penetration of e-society into everyone's day life. In this context, the inclusion of people over 65 years into the PIAAC Study might highlight the life-long functional literacy rate and participation in the life-long learning for people over 65. This category of people is namely excluded from the PIAAC Study), reducing the insight into the skills problem of elderly people.

Skills should pay off. There is a need for coordinated efforts to motivate individuals into skills formation. Skills policies should incorporate quality education programmes and adequate economic policies, which do not tax skills remuneration over-proportionally.

Bigger effect could be achieved by taxing neglected shared responsibility of investments into skills. No compulsory annual reporting on skills investments is requiring. Introduction of reporting on skills activities would be welcomed in annual reports within non-financial reporting. Higher contribution from the annual revenues might be directed towards so called "skills fund" for (re)-training, if reports would not prove investments into skills of own employees. Along this, tax exemptions for individuals shall be reintroduced in Slovenia, as is the practice of many developed and successful countries. Optionally, lending conditions to



businesses might include clauses on obligatory investments into skills as a condition for preferential rates.

It is clear that educational institutions have a significant role in determining adequate skills, but the end-user of skills outcomes are companies. Knowledge-based economies rely on individuals and their skills and competences, shaping companies' economic performance. Therefore, the role to stimulate skills formation should become a shared responsibility of the educational institutions as well as of the economy and of the government. More cooperation between educational institutions and businesses is necessary to design adequate educational pathways for the effective skills matching in companies. Neglecting fast changes of labour markets and economies does not allow fragmented and partial investments into the human capital.

Taking into account EU-wide skills mismatches, transparency and recognition of skills should be provided, also by raising awareness about the skills importance and added value it brings. Identification of relevant skills and the use of acquired skills is becoming an important task for every company as well as for the national context. The important element for better skills matching presents adequate information and access to skills providers. However, identification and provision of skills needed should become the responsibility and the priority of companies as well. The established Skills Council in the UK can serve as an interesting good practice.

EU funds should be used more efficiently. Europe is recognising the added value of skills and investments into the human capital, allocating significant share of EU funds for improving and developing skills, needed at the labour market. Especially the ESF Fund supports over 27 billion EUR for investments into skills, education, training and lifelong learning during the 2014-2020 programming period (EC, 2016c).

Skills forecasting is an essential tool to mirror the economy's potential in the individual country. As identified by OECD (2017), Slovenia lacks a comprehensive skills assessment and anticipation system. The mentioned is a precondition for identification of needs and for adequate future economic policies. The same analysis also confirmed that the actual tax system does not motivate highly skilled individuals to invest into (new) skills.

From the point of the social responsibility, innovations spill over effect is too modest to generate substantial impacts, also for companies, who are not technological leaders. Investments into knowledge-based capital on company level could generate much higher return at national level and in the international environment, leading towards progress and welfare for all. Global competition requires fast responses to actual market situations. Knowledge-based capital is becoming a prevailing source of competitive advantage for a company, if invested into individuals. Matching right people with right skills requires identification of perspective sectors with available skills. Industrial policy, focused on sustainable economic direction, should be aligned with appropriate skills strategy to reach best possible economic and social performance.

To conclude, the future of work is unpredictable due to global technological, economic and societal changes. Shift towards digitalisation and new skills is inevitable, leading into requirements for life-long investments into the human capital. Skills are crucial for individual employability, for life-long social inclusion and raised productivity. Europe's economic and



social success is namely largely based on the skills of its population (EC, 2016c). A waste of human resources is a mistake that should not happen.

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