Meeting the need for green skills in Europe’s job market

For a new green economy to be successful, governments should support the development of green skills in the labour market, according to a new report. This could be achieved by improving or adding to the existing core skills of workers, whilst mainstreaming environmental awareness into education and training.

The EU has recognised the need to move towards a low-carbon and resource efficient economy and has responded with the new Europe 2020 strategy. A number of environmental and climate change strategies will also help achieve this goal, such as the Strategy for Sustainable Development. The EU has also recognised the critical role of green skills and jobs to support a low-carbon economy. However, there appear to be very few strategic responses that are specifically for developing green skills.

The new EU report explored green skills development at national, regional and local levels in six EU Member States: Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Spain and the UK. Both the EU and its Member States have launched economic stimulus packages for sustainable growth, which tend to focus on construction, the automotive sector, energy efficiency and renewable energy. However, there are no explicit national strategies targeting green skills in the six countries studied. Some are moving to rectify this, such as France, which has launched a mobilisation plan for green jobs.

The report identifies some large weaknesses in the EU skill base, mainly in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), which are highly relevant to the environmental sector. However, it suggests that workers do not necessarily need to be completely retrained to create a greener industry. Instead many workers could ‘top up’ their existing skills and adapt them by learning about new concepts and practices in low-carbon industries. For example, workers in shipbuilding and the oil sector have skills that are relevant to the wind turbine industry, such as welding, surface treatment and outfitting skills. As well as topping up skills it is important to teach more generic skills, such as improving resource efficiency in the workplace, understanding environmental legislation and green management and communication.

Approaches to identifying skills for a low-carbon and resource efficient economy varies across the six countries, but has occurred most prominently at the regional level, in cooperation with other partners, such as industry, universities and vocational institutions. For example, the UK central government has created several low carbon economic areas (LCEAs) that capitalise on their geographic and industrial assets for a low-carbon economy and focus on stimulating employer demand for green skills.

The report provides the following recommendations:

- A cross-sectoral approach to identifying skills is needed; some green skills are job-specific but others are transferrable.
- Greater stimulation of jobs by national and regional governments is needed through co-ordinated employment, skills upgrading and innovation policy. Regional governments should encourage public-private initiatives and create networks of regional training centres.
- Every job should be considered a ‘green’ job that contributes in some way to improving resource efficiency.
- Environmental issues in industry should be mainstreamed into education and training systems.
- There needs to be more initiatives for promoting STEM education.
- Greater investment in trainers and teachers to teach new environmental techniques and to develop awareness of environmental issues is needed, particularly in the agriculture and construction sectors.
- The image of occupations related to low-carbon industries and resource efficiency needs to be made more attractive.

1. See: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm
2. See: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/

Contact: Peter Szovics@cedefop.europa.eu
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