

## The EU Pact for Skills – Regional Skills Partnerships for the chemical industry

### The challenge

The chemical sector (including pharmaceuticals and rubber and plastics) is the second largest sector in Europe in terms of the number of direct jobs (3.4 million people). It contributes 11.9% of EU27 manufacturing employment. The sector generated an even greater number of indirect jobs – up to three times higher than through direct employment. More importantly, salaries are 45% higher and productivity is 67% higher compared to the average in the EU manufacturing sector. These figures clearly indicate that the chemical sector offers a high number of well-remunerated jobs, but it also needs highly trained and skilled workers to remain competitive globally.

The chemical industry is undergoing an unprecedented twin transition towards a digital and green economy, combined with a specific transition towards sustainable chemical production, distribution, and use of chemicals. Regions should play a significant role in this transition as they are dealing with the consequences of decisions on the ground, e.g. closures, employment reduction, the social cost of the decisions.

### The ambition

The main ambition of the Regional Skills Partnership is to highlight the role of skills and education and training in the green and digital transition of the chemical industry. Education and training and skills will make the industry more resilient to market disruptions and problems with the value chains that were exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The development of innovative skills and a better understanding of the safe use of chemicals can bring a tremendous benefit for society and the environment. We want to create a trusted platform for cooperation between education and training providers (higher education institutions, VET providers, and others), industry, policy and decision-makers on the regional and European level. That kind of cooperation needs to be enhanced and supported across the EU and across the whole ecosystem. It could evolve in the creation of the inter-regional learning communities that combine innovating, working, and learning to create a long-term impact and eliminate the differences that exist across Europe. The long-term goal for the partnership should be to become a starting point for in-depth interregional and cross-border cooperation and improve the understanding of the specific regional features and needs.

### The proposal

The first and main commitment of the Partnership will be **helping the regions to find the best and the most suitable solutions to tackle the challenges linked to the skills needed for the green and digital transition of the chemical industry**. This commitment will lead partners to concrete deliverables and milestones that can be measured and assessed.

Secondly, to properly understand the current and future challenges regarding upskilling and reskilling, and to have a full picture of the situation, the Partnership will work on facilitating **meaningful dialogue between social partners, education and training providers, R&D**

**institutions and industry.** This dialogue can be achieved by giving them a real platform where they can trustfully present their objectives and be listened to.

The green and digital transformation will have tremendous implications for regional development and employment. It will change skills requirements, redistribute jobs across locations, decrease jobs in some activities and raise them in others. While the transformation brings opportunities and challenges, a proper understanding of which regions and which areas of interest are the most vulnerable and why, will help policymakers identify the needs for a regional balanced and just transformation. **The Partnership will help to speed up the identification of the most vulnerable regions and areas of interest through bringing all relevant partners to the table and surveying their needs.**

The Regional Skills Partnership will facilitate the gathering and exchanging of information and best practices in the industry in terms of actions to facilitate a just regional transition. With the cumulative expertise from the European regions gathered under the European Chemical Regions Network and Ecorys, a productive cooperation can grow that would allow to address challenges caused by the transition.

In the framework of the Partnership, we want to **stimulate our partners to work on specific tasks** (mapping skills gaps, forecast of the future needed skills, demographics, existing skills sets, potential employment developments and corresponding skills developments, synergies with other sectors, etc.) **and create smaller and targeted working groups that can lead to the concrete project applications and EU-funded projects and/or to the preparation of the interregional strategies to tackle the common challenges**

The Partnership will support the regional authorities in their communication and promotional activities and help to raise awareness about the risks and opportunities associated with the green and digital transition. Some decisions undertaken by the industry or policy makers may face a lack of social acceptance. The role of the Partnership will be to **inform and present the long-distance perspective of the transitions.** At this point, the involvement of the social partners is essential.

One of the crucial aspects we also want to highlight is to **increase the digitalisation of the EU chemical industry** for its future competitiveness. Big data can improve manufacturing processes and lower the environmental impact of the sector through a more efficient management of resources, materials, and energy use. The Partnership will be a platform to present the most successful digital solutions that increase the productivity and efficiency of the sector, and how they were implemented.

We want to draw attention to the need to ensure continuity of staff in connection with the digital and green transitions, as well as with the transformation/redesign of the area. It is also important to provide the time for workers to be properly trained in chemical management. It is important to understand that the industry cannot expect a properly trained labour force immediately and the skills expectations should be worked out together with the education and training providers to prepare the proper training pathway. The same approach should be applied to the workers who are already on the market.

### **Activities**

- Extending the Partnership's reach and impact through a communication campaign (potentially involving all partners), networking events (online and offline) and sharing good practices

- Organising workshops and conferences to present the Partnership's objectives, facilitate exchange of the best practices and inform EU institutions/policy makers about the challenges regarding the skills transformation of the chemical industry,
- Organising study visits at the member regions to better understand the specific regional features and the similarities between regions, and to exchange best practices (by meeting regional officers competent on relevant matters or competent regional ministers through the visit)
- Undertaking consultations and surveys to identify the regional needs regarding reskilling and upskilling in the chemical sector and potential areas of cooperation between members of the partnerships
- Use the ECRN's and partners' social media to promote the Partnership's objectives and achievements
- Support the regions' participation in the EU-funded projects focused on skills by informing about the open calls, helping with partners search, and facilitating partners cooperation.
- Organising Partnership internal meetings to monitor the work done in the framework of the Partnership and discuss upcoming activities.
- Effectively support the creation of a trustful interregional platform focused on skills transformation in the chemical industry, together with our partners
- Mapping vulnerable areas and identifying vulnerable workers, this must be conducted by the regional authorities in coordination with industry and social and educational partners. In such cases, interregional and cross-border cooperation is essential to get a bigger picture of the threats and opportunities. The decisions will affect not only individual regions but also the neighbouring areas.

### Tracking our impact

- 10 new additional members within the first year of the Partnership
- Engagement of the following partners strongly relevant to the discussion on skills in the chemical industry in the Partnership, within the first year:
  - Brightlands Chemelot Campus that is an open innovation community in a global context and connects four campuses in the province of Limburg, the Netherlands. Joint focus is health and sustainability. Brightlands combines science, business and education in materials, health, food and smart services. The campuses offer entrepreneurs, scientists and students, state of the art facilities to support development, innovation and growth.
  - S3Chem Project (in consortium with participation among others of Lombardy, Limburg and Wallonia – the project is accomplished but the cooperation is continued)
  - Chemskills HE blueprint project (waiting for assessment)
  - Trilateral Strategy for the Chemical Industry (operated between the Netherlands, Flanders and North Rhine-Westphalia).
  - Polish Chamber of the Chemical Industry that covers 16 Polish regions.
- One survey of regional authorities, industry, education and training providers on specific regional needs and expectations per year
- One monitoring survey per year to analyse the progress made by partners.
- 3-4 events per year and associated social media publications through the ECRN communication channels.

### **Background information – current involvement of ECRN in EU projects:**

As a member of the Just Transition Platform Working Group Chemicals, ECRN contributed to the preparation of the implementation plan for regions in transition. One of the identified focused areas is the supporting labour market and employment in the chemical industry. We can easily engage the members of the WG to support our regional partnership.

Moreover, ECRN is one of the partners of the CHEMSKILLS ERASMUS+ project (the project is in the assessment phase). The project consortium is established to gather available known and foreseen trends on sectoral skills' needs, offer, and intelligence within the European chemical energy-intensive industry ecosystem, targeting multiple domains, such as: (1) plastics; (2) consumer chemicals; (3) fertilizers; (4) rubber; and (5) pharmaceuticals. This will be based on a deep research activity, intensive contact with the industry as well as education and training providers on different levels. The project is focusing on the significant part of the chemical value chain and covers the most important parts of the chemical sector.

ECRN is also aware of the importance of the action needed in the framework of the New Green Deal: the chemical industry is undergoing unprecedented transition towards digital and green economy, combined with a specific transition towards sustainable chemical production, distribution and use of chemicals. This results in a critical need for an overall sectoral transition strategy, leading to a need for a dedicated actions on skills and up-/re-skilling activities to support the transition. ECRN helps partner regions and project partners in this process. ECRN is also partner in two other projects focused on green transition, now in the assessment phase as well: ACE-EX (to foster the creation of skills and tools for 'Circular Economy processes in Agriculture' experts) and HYDROGEN SKILLS (to upskill and re-skill workers in new needed sectors and positions).

The main advantage of the Regional Partnership on Skills in the Chemical Industry will be its complementarity to the above-mentioned projects. The Partnership will be the platform where the partners from different projects will be able to exchange their achievements and experiences. Combining the EU-funded actions with the voluntary engagement of the regional and industrial partners may bring tremendous support to the stakeholders that are not directly involved in the projects and do not have access to the EU funds.

All the above-mentioned information clearly shows that ECRN has a solid background to establish a Regional Skills Partnership focused on skills in the chemical industry, and to gather different deliverables under one roof. We can guarantee involvement of not only regional authorities but also the partners representing the industry, education and training providers and social partners. Moreover, ECRN is currently involved in the works of the Just Transition Platform, closely following the WG on chemicals as one of its core members; proving that the network has a consistent experience and commitment in regional transitions towards a greener chemical sector. One of the identified challenges standing ahead of the chemical industry is strengthening the role of regions in the multilevel governance and supporting the labour market and employment in the chemical industry. Both challenges correspond well with the objectives of the regional partnerships on skills in the chemical sector.

ECRN has a broad experience in organizing conferences, workshops, or explanatory sessions. All these resources can be used to successfully conduct the regional partnership and ensure the added value for partners and also attract new partners that are dealing with the similar challenges.

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