



PACT for SKILLS

Report from the roundtable

Pact for Skills Roundtable with Commissioners Schmit and Breton for the Agri-food Ecosystem

The high-level roundtable on skills with the agri-food ecosystem, chaired by both Commissioners on 18 February 2021, brought together executive representatives of industry, sectoral organisations, social partners, as well as educational and training organisations. The discussion aimed at identifying skills gaps and deficiencies whilst reflecting on ways to address them by mobilising relevant stakeholders to create skills partnerships under a dedicated framework.

It was clear from the discussion that it is urgent to address the skills needs of the agri-food ecosystem in order to successfully achieve and benefit from the green and digital transitions. The ecosystem's workforce is proving its essential role during the COVID-19 pandemic when, despite the unprecedented challenging situation, food supply is being secured across the EU. Upskilling and reskilling workers along the food supply chain will strengthen the resilience of this vital ecosystem. The current crisis also demonstrated that intra - sectoral skill transfers can be a tool to address skills supply and demand shortages.

In line with the Pact for Skills, industry representatives presented examples of existing initiatives on skills, and sectoral associations underlined the particularities of the ecosystem such as the high level of integration along the food supply chain and the seasonal employment in the agricultural sector. There was unanimous consensus among the

participants on the fact that the needs of farmers and food SMEs have to be addressed immediately. A crucial challenge for the agri-food ecosystem is to increase its attractiveness and master its ability to motivate people, in particular the young, to be part of this ecosystem, especially in rural areas, where SMEs are the mainstay of the economic and industrial fabric. Ensuring access to internet broadband, the availability of high quality education and training on digital skills can play a pivotal role in leading rural areas, and the whole ecosystem, towards a successful digital transition.

Higher education needs to meet the professional demands of the ecosystem by adapting academic programmes to equip the younger generation with the adequate skills. Students also need to be shown the opportunities offered by the sector through partnerships between learning institutions and companies, to better connect the theory with the practice. Attracting young talents to the sector can play an essential role in reskilling and upskilling the existing workforce. Europe cannot overcome the global challenges facing the ecosystem without ensuring the uptake of new skills, especially in the agricultural sector where the ageing of farmers is an issue.

Vocational and peer-to-peer training as well as best practices exchange and dissemination through the creation of a professional network at European level were identified as the most suitable ways to increase the attractiveness of the ecosystem and the number of food engineers, food scientists and workers equipped with the right STEM, environmental and digital skills.

The most important conclusion for the ecosystem was the need to provide the right means and support to SMEs along the food chain to encourage these actors to invest in skills. Appropriate support at European and National level is also essential for the whole ecosystem to address the current skills gap, strengthen its resilience and reach the Green Deal targets.

Overall, the participants, with clear commitments of involvement, could already embrace the proposed Pact for skills initiative with some having signed the Charter already. Both Commissioners underscored the importance of collaboration, especially given the integrated nature of the food supply chain, and committed to complementing the efforts made so far, by following up with the sector on next steps. Clear ideas and commitments would have to be agreed upon soon, in order to establish agri-food skills partnerships in the immediate future.