



OUTCOME REPORT

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ITU Regional Forum for Europe on Digital Skills Development

16 March 2021
Online meeting

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Organized within the framework of the ITU Regional Initiative for Europe on accessibility, affordability and skills development for all, to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development.



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ITU Regional Forum for Europe on Digital Skills Development 16th March 2021

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EVENT SUMMARY

The [ITU Regional Forum for Europe on Digital Skills Development](#) was organized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). This event took place virtually on 16 March 2021 from 10:00 – 16:00 CET and was held within the framework of ITU European Regional Initiative on “Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development”, adopted by the ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference 2017 (WTDC-17).

The special session was held virtually with over 370 who viewed the event and it was supported by captioning and live streaming on both YouTube and Twitter platforms. The full agenda for this special session can be accessed [here](#), and presentations can be accessed [here](#). The full event webpage can be accessed [here](#), and the recorded livestream is available [here](#).

This event launched the [Executive Summary](#) on “Digital Skills in South-Eastern Europe: Regional Assessment of the National Approaches Fostering Digital Skills Development”, which investigated approaches in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine.

It was identified that there are significant digital skills divides between and within member states of Europe region, and while COVID-19 did not cause inequalities in digital skills levels, it has served to exacerbate them. For example, individuals with higher levels of digital skills were better equipped to continue activity in the transition to tele-work and distanced education necessitated by the pandemic. It has now become urgent for governments, NGOs, multilateral agencies and private sector partners to work in unison towards the advancement of digital skills development, thus harnessing the digital transformation and the enabling power of ICTs toward a more equal, just, and secure future for all.

Concrete initiatives and best practices were shared in developing digital skills for individuals, schools, private-sector enterprises and public-sector administrations. Speakers called for establishing multi-stakeholder strategies that are translated into action and the creation of long-term, sustainable solutions to achieve an advancement of digital skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ITU Regional Forum for Europe on Digital Skills Development was held online on 16th March 2021. The conference was organised by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

The Regional Forum for Europe was conducted by the ITU Office for Europe, organized within the framework of the ITU European Regional Initiative on “Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development”, adopted by the ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference 2017 (WTDC-17).

The event provided a unique opportunity for all stakeholders to actively exchange their approaches related to fostering digital skills development, with the objective to strengthen regional and national mechanisms. It also offered an opportunity to the countries participating to present progress made so far and exchange their national practices. The forum acted as an opportunity to reach out to other stakeholders and inspire them to undertake concrete actions on fostering digital skills development, thereby contributing to social and economic development and accelerating the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The discussions were guided by the [Executive Summary: Digital Skills in South-Eastern Europe](#). Key topics covered by the forum included:

- *Strategies and Policies* Session 1: Digital skills development in Europe
- *Strategies and Policies* Session 2: Country approaches to foster digital skills development
- *Implementation Laboratory* In Focus: Country assessment framework presentation
- *Implementation Laboratory* Breakout sessions: Deep dive on digital skills development and wishlist for next steps

The Regional Forum’s main outcomes are outlined in this report, which structures the key points emerged during each session.

2. PARTICIPATION AND DOCUMENTATION

The Forum was viewed by over 370 participants. Participants included representatives of administrations from Member States from the ITU Europe region, including private sector and academia.

The Regional Forum was held virtually. Relevant documentation was made available in electronic form on the event [webpage here](#). The forum was supported with **captioning** and the edited caption text was made available on the event page. **Video recordings** of the workshop, as well as this outcome report, are also made available on the website. The event has also been livestreamed on [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#). Details about the [agenda](#) and [speakers](#), as well as all [presentations](#) delivered, can be found on the event’s [website](#).



Figure 1 - Virtual Group Photo

3. OPENING SEGMENT AND SETTING THE CONTEXT

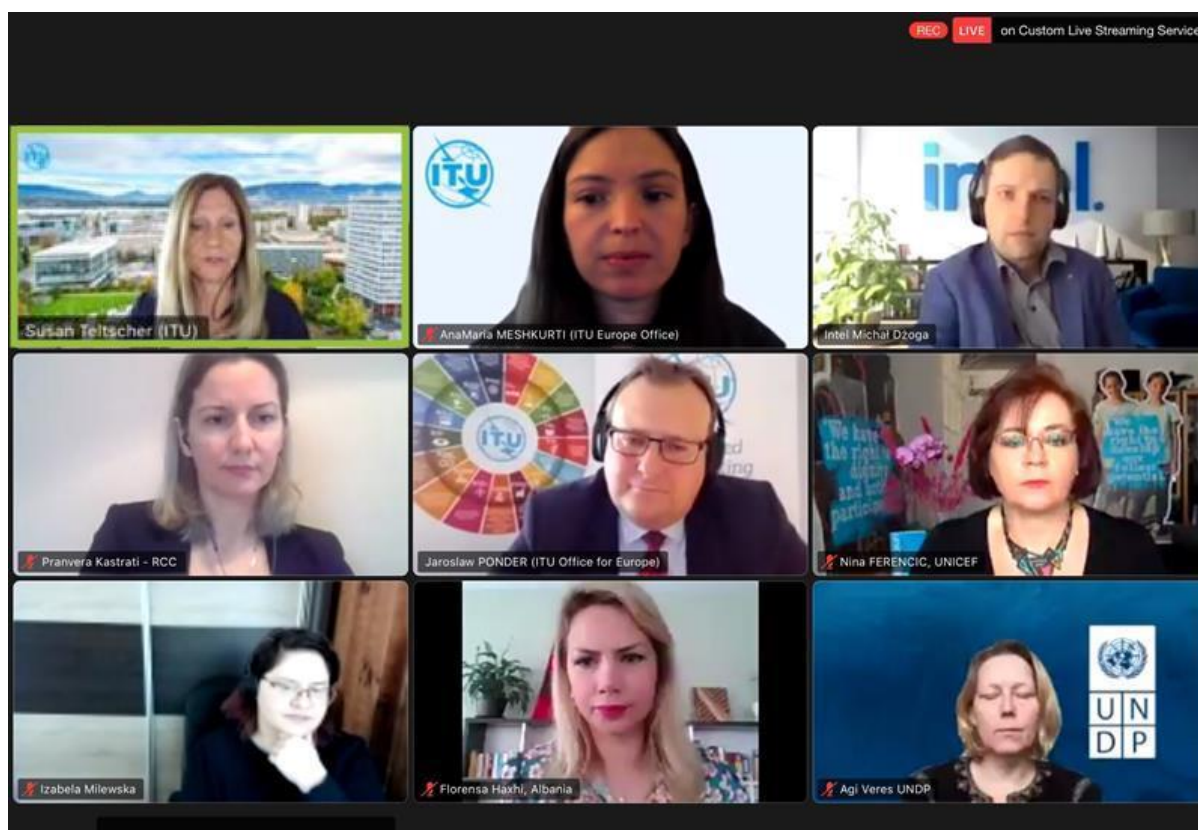


Figure 2 – Photo of Opening Segment

Mr Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe

To inaugurate the event, **Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder**, Head of the ITU Office for Europe and Chair of the event, delivered a short [presentation](#) setting the context for the Forum. In his presentation, Mr. Ponder stated that one of the primary objectives in the context of the ITU Regional Initiatives for Europe is for the Office for Europe to support countries and facilitate their efforts in developing digital skills. Mr. Ponder reiterated that the efforts in delivering products and services to the countries are supported by the Telecommunication Development Bureau undertaken at the global level and through the ITU-D Study Groups.

Mr. Ponder emphasized that, while digitization is nothing new for the ITU, the COVID-19 pandemic nevertheless provides an opportunity to accelerate digital transformation and the acquisition of digital skills. Such skills are increasingly vital as interaction in the digital world became the modus operandi for schools, governments, and companies during the pandemic. In addition, Mr. Ponder highlighted the large demand for digital skills at country levels, where the private sector is currently experiencing shortages of young professionals educated and properly deployable in digital skills. He urged participants to continue working on digital upskilling programs and emphasized that such digital skills gaps should be addressed through a harmonized, multi-stakeholder approach throughout the region. Finally, as digital skills are inherently embedded in the larger context of ICT development context, digital skills development programs should be integrated into digital agendas focusing on ICT infrastructure, digital education policies, and e-Government priorities.

Concerning digital skills development in the region, beyond drawing stakeholders' attention towards the many activities of the ITU in Europe, Mr. Ponder focused on one recent deliverable which has been prepared at the regional level to provide technical assistance in assessing and developing national digital skills strategies: *Digital Skills in South-Eastern Europe: Regional Assessment of the National Approaches Fostering Digital Skills Development*, for which an [Executive Summary](#) was made available for this Forum. Conducted in the framework of the regional initiative for Europe on “Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development”, the report analysed dynamics of different skills levels in non 9-EU countries, identifying national approaches in fostering digital skills development, as well as macroeconomic conditions and digital skills gaps. Mr. Ponder highlighted the great potential for growth in these 9 non-EU countries, where digital skills show great opportunity for scaling up. He also noted the importance of closer analysis focusing on youth opportunities and youth unemployment.

Finally, Mr. Ponder also drew attention to a series of other deliverables elaborated by the ITU which relate to digital skills development. These include the “[Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook](#)”, and the [ITU Digital Skills Toolkit](#).

4. CONFERENCE SESSIONS

STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

SESSION 1: DIGITAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN EUROPE

Focus: The regional context for digital skills development in Europe.

Moderator: Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, ITU

Speakers: [Presentation 1](#): **Ms. Susan Teltscher**, Capacity and Skills Development Division, ITU; [Presentation 2](#): **Ms. Agi Veres**, Deputy Regional Director for the Europe and CIS region, UNDP; [Presentation 3](#): **Ms. Nina Ferencic**, Senior Regional Adviser on Adolescent Health, Development and Participation, UNICEF; [Presentation 4](#): **Ms. Izabela Milewska**, Chair, Digital Skills Working Group, DIGITALEUROPE; [Presentation 5](#): **Ms. Pranvera Kastrati**, Senior Expert on Economic and Digital Connectivity, RCC; Presentation 6: **Mr. Michal Dzoga**, EMEA Director, Global Partnerships and Initiatives, Intel.

Key points

- ITU and UNICEF estimate that 2/3 of school children worldwide do not have internet access at home, and ILO estimates that 93% of the global workforce was affected by workplace closure. Those with the privilege to tele-work—with both good connectivity and sufficient digital skills to do so—fared better. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance of good internet connectivity, as well as the disadvantages that are exacerbated when people do not have effective internet connections and remote learning/working capabilities.
- A lack of digital skills is one of the main barriers to internet usage, and in developing countries, 65% of people lack the skills to use and access the Internet. In the EU, 40% of the population still lacks basic digital skills, and only one in six IT specialists are females.

However, strong growth in employment in ICT-related industries indicates a shortage of IT specialists in the labour market.

- ITU's [Digital Skills Toolkit](#) reveals that digital gaps exist at all levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. Therefore, ITU engages in capacity building for the digital economy through training courses, research and policy guidelines, and partnerships. These include the [ITU Academy](#) platform, [Centres of Excellence](#), [Digital Transformation Centres](#), and knowledge resources such as the [Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook](#) and annual [Digital Skills Insights](#).
- Digital is common thread throughout almost every Sustainable Development Goal. It is also a precondition for achieving a lot of the SDGs. Partners must therefore focus on empowering economies, governments, and individuals to take part in digital transformation toward the achievement of the SDGs. A great first step is recognizing the importance of data mapping and data dissemination in policymaking.
- The private sector is suffering due to the significant gap between the technical capacities of people and the digital skills demanded by private sector, academia, and governance jobs. To address such a gap in Europe and Central Asia, the UNDP supports digital skills development to better match market demand, following the key principles of inclusion, equity and partnerships. In Kazakhstan, for example, the UNDP increased the digital literacy of citizens to enable participation in eGovernance services. In the medium term, UNDP prioritizes ecosystem support to create an enabling environment for inclusive, innovative and productive connectivity use.
- Out of necessity, COVID accelerated digital skills development, condensing into one year what was formerly expected in five. Development partners must capitalize on that “leapfrog” response, expanding its effect and ensuring the digital transformation is deliberately inclusive—lest it exacerbate inequalities within and across countries.
- Young people are often referred to as “the connected generation” or “digital natives”. But youth does not automatically endow digital skills upon young people. This lack of digital skills came to the forefront of policymaking during the switch to digital education necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, children with parental support performed better in the digital landscape, and lack of parental support serves as a main contributor to the equity gap in digital skills.
- UNICEF works on equipping students, teachers and parents with relevant digital competencies. For example, UNICEF's [UPSHIFT program](#)—which combines a set of modules, bootcamps, and mentoring—teaches entrepreneurship, teamwork, and networking to youth to solve community problems. The transfer of this initiative online during COVID-19 indicates that such leadership problems can “go digital” without losing quality, enabling a much wider reach than when activities were conducted in person.
- Most digital skill building occurs outside of the classroom setting, and there remains an imbalanced focus on equipment and digital infrastructure as opposed to developing digital competencies in schools. This contributes to demand-side connectivity problems with uptake. Much more investment and curricular reforms to include digital skills is necessary, as schools have thus far made only a negligible contribution to digital skills development.
- Some political authorities perceive internet access, particularly for children, as something that must be limited. In the name of protection, therefore, Internet access is often lacking. Such mindsets can be addressed through youth engagement in policymaking. Youth should be key partners in ensuring that skills are shared with others and can also devise better solutions if engaged by international partners. [ITU's Generation Connect](#) is an example of the mutual benefits of youth engagement.

- Stakeholders must focus on developing the right level of digital skills within the future workforce, including children and students; however, DIGITALEUROPE estimated that 52% of European workers are in need of upskilling. Such advances, therefore, cannot abandon the current workforce, where reskilling and upskilling is not only a possibility, but a necessity to prepare for both the digital jobs of tomorrow and resilience in current positions.
- In developing digital skills in schools, the availability of broadband connectivity, the availability of devices, and hybrid learning models are key. But that should not be disassociated from the need to prepare teachers for the digital transformation. COVID-19 revealed the consequences for younger generations, who struggle to benefit from online courses partly because teachers are unprepared to deliver quality education remotely.
- Digital literacy cannot be considered sufficient when only basic skills are met. Programming, coding, and computational thinking needs to be included in conceptions of both digital literacy and critical thinking skills, which inevitably requires the use of digital tools.
- Supporting SMEs in digital skills development should be prioritized. While large enterprises often have sufficient resources to upskill their employees independently, SMEs can lag behind unless the public sector intervenes by forging meaningful partnerships with industry and training providers. The [STRONGER DIGITAL EUROPE 2025](#) action plan provides a framework for producing talent that is ready to innovate in the digital industry.
- The responsibility in developing digital skills policy is shared between government and the private sector. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)'s [Balkan Barometer 2020](#) revealed for the third consecutive year that businesses in the Western Balkans require a workforce better equipped with digital skills.
- Western Balkans economies vary in terms of their general development levels, as well as their stage in the EU accession process. Thus, while it remains important to make supply chains exchangeable across economies in the region, it is vital to have flexibility between regional approaches and those tailored to national contexts. Specifically, providing tailor-made support for the digital transformation of public administrations is important, since such ministries are responsible for developing national-level digital strategies programming.
- Intel provides an exemplary case of private sector partnerships tailored at digital skills development. For example, the [Intel Teach Program](#) has trained over 15 million teachers worldwide, providing professional development for teachers in the digital landscape.
- Advanced digital skills should not all be amalgamated into the same category, as it is difficult to equate cloud computing and Artificial Intelligence. Regarding the development of advanced digital skills, AI is uniquely vital, as being able to understand AI technology and program specific algorithms will become a prerequisite for success in the future economy. AI is no longer science fiction, but the present reality, and companies that are slow to adopt AI will eventually suffer in the market: performing more expensively, more slowly and less accurately. In order to accelerate the achievement of such skills levels, Intel has pledged big pledge to equip 30 million young people around the world with digital skills focusing on AI through its [RISE 2030 Strategy](#).
- Intel's digital skills programs are active across Europe and CIS regions, from Russia to Poland, Germany, Spain, Portugal, France, Italy and the UK. There is a great openness and readiness of governments to work toward building the skills into the education system. While national curricula are far from incorporating the endowment of advanced digital skills into compulsory education, there is wide interest among students in Intel's extracurricular activities—with notable gender parity in participant interest.

SESSION 2: COUNTRY APPROACHES TO FOSTER DIGITAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Focus: Countries present in depth their national approach to fostering digital skills development.

Moderator: Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of ITU Office for Europe, ITU

Speakers: [Presentation 1](#): **Ms. Florensa Haxhi**, Director for Development Programs in Prime Minister Office, Albania; [Presentation 2](#): **Ms. Manana Ratiani**, Deputy Director, National Center for Teacher Professional Development, Georgia; [Presentation 3](#): **Ms. Liesbeth Ruoff-van Welzen**, Chairman of the Dutch Interest Group (IG) Digital Skills of the KNVI, the Netherlands; [Presentation 4](#): **Ms. Nevena Praizovic**, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia; [Presentation 5](#): **Ms. Gulsanna Mamediieva**, Director General of the Directorate for European Integration, Ministry of Digital Transformation, Ukraine.

Key points

- Policymaking in the space of digital skills development should focus on three perspectives: digitizing the private sector, digitizing the public administration through eGovernment services, and providing digital skills to individuals.
- Albania has six national strategic documents which focus on digital skills development. The documents are: [Digital Agenda for Albania](#) (2015-2020); The [National Employment and Skills Strategy](#) (2019-2022); National Strategy for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation (NSSTI) (2017-2022); National Strategy for Education (currently being drafted); [National Strategy for Development and Integration](#) (2014-2020) and National Program on Innovation and Start-ups (currently being drafted). In accordance with the principles outlined in these documents, Albania has implemented myriad initiatives to develop digital skills, including: [Techspace](#) (a government start-up to digitally train youth); [TUMO](#) (a space for young people to develop their digital skills); and a pilot training program in partnership with the World Bank to support young Albanian women find employment online.
- Through enabling legislative frameworks, policymakers in Albania have started developing pro-innovation, pro-youth, and pro-digitalisation initiatives. However, similarly to other countries in the Western Balkans region, Albania faces significant infrastructure gaps, particularly in rural areas. Thus, innovative funding mechanisms and partnerships must be developed to ensure connectivity, which is a prerequisite to developing digital skills.
- ICT skills development is a priority in Georgia, particularly as the educational system was not well prepared for the digitized education spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than abandoning the digital platforms that emerged during the pandemic, it is vital to permanently adopt the advancements of the education system necessitated by distanced learning.
- ICT-based learning is not possible without proper levels of infrastructure in place. In rural areas, teachers and students may not have access to internet connectivity or devices that enables distance learning. For example, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 20% of students don't have access to the internet at home, compared to only 14% lacking access in Western Europe and North America. The digital divide, therefore, exacerbates existing inequalities.
- Many children and adolescents are considered “digital natives”, but they oftentimes lack levels of digital skills commensurate with active participation in digitized learning environments and independent content creation. In its response to the COVID-19 pandemic,

Georgia thus embedded digital skills development into its strategy for distanced education, with more than 150 Webinars created for students, teachers, and parents; a chat bot integrated into the Microsoft Office 365 platform to receive and respond to questions; and lessons broadcasted on national public TV networks for all grade levels and school subjects.

- The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine (MDTU) has four primary goals: [1] 100% of public services accessible online; [2] 6 million Ukrainians achieving basic digital skills levels, [3] ICT sector comprising 10% of Ukrainian GDP; and [4] 90% of Ukrainian-controlled territory covered by broadband coverage.
- MDTU has spearheaded a number of online and offline initiatives to enhance the digital skills levels of its population. These include a publicly available, national digital skills certificate available to those who pass a 30- to 40-minute online assessment; Ukrainian television celebrities teaching social entrepreneurship, blogging, financial competencies for entrepreneurs, cybersecurity, AI for students, and 30 more courses; digital skills development trainings in public libraries; the European Digital Skills Week, to be held 22-28 March 2021; and the development of a National Strategy aimed at developing digital competencies for certain sectors of the labour market, such as educators and medical professionals.
- At fourth place in the rankings of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), the Netherlands is at the forefront of what can be done in the digital world. However, despite being a global leader in connectivity, 2 million Dutch still do not have sufficient levels of digital literacy to effectively participate online. In addressing said gap, it is vital to adapt digital skills programming to the target group—i.e., consumers, citizens, professionals in general and ICT professionals—as programs often not often tailored toward a particular audience.
- The final edition of [Working in a Digital World](#), the annual Dutch framework first published in 1982, was released in 2017. In order to modernise their digitalization strategy, the Netherlands decided against a myopic view—within their borders and in the Dutch language—but instead, chose to work across borders in the EU context to capture the opportunities of the rapidly advancing digital world.
- The European Committee for Standardization has developed [CEN/TC 428 on ICT Professionalism and Digital Competences](#), which aims to develop standards useable across Europe and across the world. It does so by focusing on four building blocks: competences, education and training, professional ethics and bodies of knowledge.
- Trust in the digital world is vital, especially in emerging fields like AI. Thus, ethical codes to govern conduct online—such as the [IFIP Code of Ethics](#)—must be created to avoid abuse in digital space.
- Last year, Serbia adopted its [Strategy of Digital Skills Development for 2020 – 2024](#), which includes four priority areas: education, citizens, labour market and ICT professionals. The overall objective of this strategy is to improve digital knowledge and skills for all citizens, including members of vulnerable groups, to enable the monitoring of developments of ICT technology in all fields, and to meet the needs of the economy and the labour market.
- The role of partnerships is vital in developing national strategies. For example, Serbia’s action plans involve three Serbian government ministries along with USAID (CFG) and UNICEF/OEBS—a testament to the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach.
- Research indicates that millions of new jobs will be created that demand advanced digital skills, such as a deep knowledge of algorithms and AI. Combined with the digitalization process

which has already occurred in all sectors of the economy, meeting the needs of the labour market for digital skills and promoting opportunities in the ICT sector is vital.

IMPLEMENTATION LABORATORY

IN FOCUS: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK PRESENTATION

Focus: Presentation of the Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook while highlighting challenges on its rollout.

Moderators: Ms. Annemijn Perrin, ITU Consultant, ITU and Mr. John Glassey, ITU Consultant, ITU

Speaker: [Presentation](#): Ms. Halima Letamo, Capacity and Skills Development Officer, ITU

Key points

- The [Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook](#) was developed to help nations develop digital skill assessments strategies. It is designed to provide as much flexibility as possible for each country to choose an approach that fits its specific resource availability and unique goals, as each country has different digital skills requirements based on levels of technological development and present economic sectors.
- Digital Skills assessment is not a one-sector job; a multistakeholder approach is essential to achieving a meaningful assessment. The Guidebook is thus aimed at policymakers, private sector partners, academia and national government. Although it is intended to aid national governments develop strategies at the national level, there is also work occurring at the international level regarding digital skills assessments, such as the OECD's PIAAC-TRE, IEA's ICILS, and OCED's PISA.
- There are four main content chapters of the Digital Skills Assessment Guidebook: a review of existing skills assessment frameworks and approaches, a guide to assessing current national skills levels (supply), a guide to assessing needs and gaps (demand), and a guide to forecasting future skills requirements. In general, there are three existing assessment approaches: knowledge-based assessments, self-assessments (whereby participants rate their own level of knowledge, confidence, and usage); and performance-based assessments.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS: DEEP DIVE ON DIGITAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND WISHLIST FOR NEXT STEPS

The breakout sessions lasted one hour, with the purpose of hearing the voice of stakeholders. Mr. John Glassey reminded participants of the main points from the morning session, including the importance of gender equality in digital skills; the effect of COVID on accelerating the digital transformation; the idea that young people may be digitally native, but are not necessarily digitally literate; and the necessity of reskilling for the existing workforce.

Breakout room 1: Digital skills in Government

Moderation: Mr. John Glassey, ITU Consultant, ITU

Key points

- Partnerships with the private sector must be leveraged to provide connectivity and foster digital skills. For example, Albania's agreement with Vodafone and the Ministry of Education deployed tablets to Albanian schoolchildren. Other ISPs in Albania have also sent antennas for private internet and use satellite-connectivity to provide internet access to remote, rural areas. Similarly, in Moldova, Orange is very active in social responsibility activities, supporting the "Future Classroom" projects and offering devices to top teachers as well as scholarships for students. Finally, Portugal's MyMagellan project spearheaded by the Portuguese Ministry of Communications incentivized mobile phone companies to provide devices for 1.5 million Portuguese students. Fiscal incentives can help spur private sector innovation in ICTs, with Moldova's ITPark members flat, 7% corporate tax rate and Albania's lower taxes for ICT companies also providing examples of incentives to foster ICT entrepreneurship.
- There is an urgent need to combat the stereotype that the ICT sector is exclusively for men and to economically empower women across the globe. Some best practices can be seen from initiatives in Moldova and Albania. Albania has developed pilot projects focusing on empowering women in ICT, particularly by involving civil society at both the policymaking and project-implementation levels. One such example is the Network of Albanian Women in STEM, which provides women with the skills to work completely online and search for employment online. Another such example was a 2019 leadership seminar, which brought together 600 girls and female ICT specialists to hear how they overcame gender barriers to become leaders in the Albanian ICT sector. In Moldova, only 19% of the ICT workforce are women, and less than 5% of middle and top management positions are held by women. Thus, the National ICT program for girls and women helps develop digital skills for women so that they can either advance in the workplace or start their careers in ICT. Finally, Moldova's "Girls Go IT" Program involves workshops and educational programs, which travel around the country to reach girls about the gender digital divide.
- People in remote areas need digital infrastructure. Feasibility studies recently finalized with World Bank in Albania indicate a steep final cost to eliminate "black holes" in internet connectivity in Albania, denoting a need for innovative financing mechanisms
- ICT as a sector can be harnessed to enable economic recovery, but without conducting proper needs assessment in each sector to uncover what digital skills are needed, it is difficult to prioritize and advance. Thus, it is vital to develop sound indicators, collect data and disseminate it.

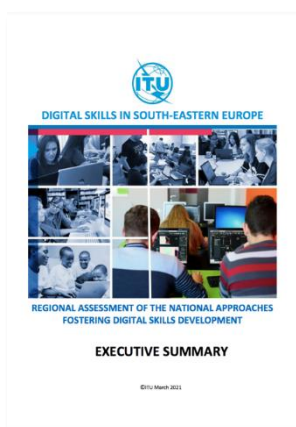
Breakout room 2: Digital skills in the Private Sector, Academia, IGOs, NGOs and Multilateral Agencies

Moderation: Ms. Annemijn Perrin, ITU Consultant, ITU

Key points

- Challenges in advancing digital skills are similar across many countries across developmental and geographical contexts.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has been a revelatory factor regarding the digital transformation. On one hand, uptake has accelerated to unprecedented levels; uptake advancements that had previously taken 10 years in North Macedonia and Montenegro were achieved in one month. On the other hand, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities. For example, many children may have—rather than a laptop or a tablet—a phone on which they are required to conduct all distanced education activities. Learning, completing homework, and interacting with peers exclusively on a phone is a very difficult task, and mental health and wellbeing must be central to future approaches to emergency response and digital skills development.
- Europe region is facing unrest spurred primarily by a lack of economic opportunity. Therefore, stakeholders across the private sector, academia, NGOs and multilateral agencies must work together to create opportunities for young people and ensure that their skills match industry’s demand. Although a large portion of such opportunity will come from digital skills, partners must not exclusively focus on digital skills at the expense of other skills development.
- Countries need a holistic approach to digital skills development, i.e., government alignment with industry needs and questioning *to what ends* digital skills trainings are conducted. Education for the sake of education—without aligning skills to ensure that students have a job and future prospects—is a downfall of current pedagogical models.

5. BACKGROUND PAPERS & REPORTS



As mentioned throughout this report, the ITU completed a regional assessment of the national approaches fostering digital skills development in South-Eastern Europe, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. The link to the executive summary is made available [here](#).

Figure 2 – Executive Summary: Digital Skills in South-Eastern Europe: Regional Assessment of the National Approaches Fostering Digital Skills Development

CLOSING REMARKS

Mr. Jaroslaw Ponder, Head of Regional Office for Europe, ITU, and Chair of the event, thanked participants and panellists and briefly summarized the excellent content emerged through the various

sessions. In his closing remarks, Mr. Ponder echoed the discussions of the day by reaffirming the importance of advancing each country's digital skills development strategies and programs, and by making an open call for partners to join forces to ensure an advancement of digital skills in Europe region. He also encouraged participants to interact with ITU activities in the realm of digital skills, notably the [Executive Summary of Digital Skills in South-Eastern Europe: Regional Assessment of the National Approaches Fostering Digital Skills Development](#), as well as the direct assistance which the ITU provides to countries in the field of digital skills.

He emphasized the importance of continuing the discussion in other meetings taking place in Europe in March and April, such as the [ITU – European Commission Accessible Europe 2021 Forum](#), and the [GSR+ Regional Regulatory Roundtable for Europe and Africa](#). Mr. Ponder also encouraged stakeholder involvement in the process in preparation for the [World Telecommunication Development Conference 2021 \(WTDC-21\)](#), to be held in November 2021 in Addis Abeba, which will establish ITU priorities for the next four years. He noted that Europe and Asia-Pacific regions are paving the way, having already placed digital competencies at the top of their regional priorities.

Finally, Mr. Ponder thanked colleagues for the event, organised by the ITU Office for Europe as implementation of Regional Initiative 3 on “Accessibility, affordability and skills development for all to ensure digital inclusion and sustainable development”.