



▶ Policy Brief

March 2021

A human-centered approach to Skills and Lifelong Learning: The role of Trade Unions

▶ Introduction

Skills and Lifelong Learning (LLL) have always been of crucial importance for workers' organisations, both as actors (i.e. to shape the content of learning) and as stakeholders (i.e. as beneficiaries, along with trade union members). This is even more the case today as the world of work has been changing rapidly with the influence of global mega trends, such as technological advancement, demographic changes, climate change and environmental sustainability, and global economic integration. In the transformation of the world of work, labour markets will be disrupted and some categories of jobs will disappear, existing jobs may be reshaped, while new jobs will be created. Hence, in a world of work in constant transition, skills development and LLL are critical for all workers, either active or unemployed, in the formal and informal economy. In addition to this, COVID-19 is creating a situation where skills development and LLL are at the forefront of providing solutions to the many challenges faced by workers.

Skills and LLL systems have to be designed so that workers can acquire the skills of their choice to get jobs and to keep jobs, and to be equipped to face the transitions they will be confronted with over the working life. Skills and LLL are essential to enhance workers' capabilities to participate fully in decent work, to contribute to inclusive development and active citizenship, as well as to strengthen democracy and promote social justice.

In response to the challenges of the future of work and to mark 100 years since the International Labour Organization's (ILO) founding, the [Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#) was adopted in 2019. With its underlying aim of developing a human-centered approach to the future of work, the Centenary Declaration states that the ILO must direct its efforts to "*promoting the acquisition of skills, competencies and qualifications for all workers throughout their working lives as a joint responsibility of governments and social partners.*" It must do this in order to "*address existing and anticipated skills gaps*" and in particular, to "*enhance workers' capacity to make use of the opportunities available for decent work*".

In line with the [ILO's Constitution](#), and following the [Social Justice Declaration](#), the Centenary Declaration has once again placed skills development and LLL high on the agenda of the ILO and its constituents. The importance of skills and LLL is also reflected in the [2030 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).¹



Also for workers' organizations, skills development and LLL are, and should be, at the top of their agendas.

¹ Most specifically SDG 4 on Quality Education and SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth.

► What do International labour Standards say about skills and LLL?

Skills and LLL have been a priority for the ILO since its very inception. In fact, the 1919 [ILO Constitution](#) mentions “*the organization of vocational and technical education and other measures*” as one of the topics needing urgent action. Following this call for action, nine International Labour Standards (ILS) have been adopted in this field over the years, the first one as early as 1939. This in itself confirms the importance of the topic for constituents.

- The [Paid Educational Leave Convention, 1974 \(No. 140\)](#), the [Human Resources Development Convention \(C142\)](#) and the [Human Resources Development Recommendation \(C195\)](#) are now the **up-dated ILS** in this area.

C142 establishes the obligation to adopt and develop comprehensive and co-ordinated policies and programmes of vocational guidance and training that need to, amongst others, improve the ability of the individual to *influence, individually or collectively, the working and social environment*. It insists on the key role of public employment services. It also stresses that these policies and programmes need to encourage and enable people to develop their capabilities for work *in their own best interests and in accordance with their own aspirations*, taking into account the needs of society. It insists on the need for guidance to be all encompassing, including on rights and obligations under labour law. Finally, it has as a strong objective to *eliminate discrimination*.

R195 reaffirms the continued validity of the general principles of C142. Skills in the ILO are not about enterprises or profits only, and not only the business of employers: R195 recognizes, vitally, that “*education, training and lifelong learning contribute significantly to promoting the interests of individuals, enterprises, the economy and society as a whole, especially considering the critical challenge of attaining full employment, poverty eradication, social inclusion and sustained economic growth in the global economy*”.

 Furthermore, both C142 and R195 recognizes the right to education and to LLL for all.

R195 is a rich instrument. It provides guidance on, for example, the policy, governance and regulatory framework of training; the increased roles and responsibilities of the social partners, the private sector and civil society in policy formulation and implementation; the development of policies and mechanisms for targeting learning and training programmes at particular groups with special needs; the development and recognition of “competencies” and prior learning, which form elements of many countries’ emerging frameworks of national qualifications; and the importance of effective systems of labour market information and career guidance.² Importantly, R195 identifies numerous areas of **involvement for workers’ organisations and for social dialogue**.

- C142 creates legal obligations for its 68 ratifying States: workers organisations could demand its application or promote its ratification
- R195 provides guidelines to all member states: workers organisations could promote it and demand that it is taking into account

Finally, the [Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 \(No. 205\)](#) that deals with crisis situations stemming from conflicts and disasters (including such disasters as COVID-19) has a section on “*education, vocational training and guidance*”. The guidance provided by this section of R205 concerns both the prevention of crisis and the response to crisis. It includes, for example, the necessity to “*extend and adapt training and retraining programmes to meet the needs of all persons whose employment has been interrupted*”.

² See ILO, [General Survey 2010](#), para 99.

► Why is it important that trade unions are involved in these discussions?

It is important for trade unions to have skills development and LLL on their agendas, and even more so when confronted with the many challenges created by the pandemic. In fact, skills development and LLL that are human-centered, based on ILS and the engagement of social partners through social dialogue, are key to build a better normal in the post-COVID world and trade unions need to be part of this endeavour.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented huge difficulties for the economy and society as a whole, for workers and for workers' organizations. Access to skills development, LLL and quality education for all, have not only been affected by the crisis, it is also central in the response to the crisis.

Trade unions, as key actors in the governance of skills and LLL, have to, and have been, playing an important role in shaping and adapting training systems, and supporting teachers and education personnel, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through social dialogue, trade union support has focussed on assuring the continuation and adaptation of education and training during the covid-19 pandemic, including through an increased emphasis on innovation. This has highlighted the many challenges with regard to enhancing access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and online learning.

In line with ILS, trade unions have been calling for: the protection of working conditions during the crisis, for adequate training and support for teachers as they transition to distance learning, for adequate occupational safety and health protection, to allow a safe and healthy return to work, or for social dialogue, tripartism and collective bargaining between governments, trade unions and employers to design and implement immediate and post-pandemic responses.³

Box 1. Opportunities to enhance trade union involvement

In most cases, workers' organizations have embraced engagement to one extent or another in skills development, however, commitment may fluctuate or be uneven. For some trade union organizations other issues have a higher priority (e.g. union organizing, collective bargaining, etc.). Some trade unions consider skills development to be the responsibility of employers. An additional challenge is that involvement may be separate from collective bargaining. Whereas some workers' organizations are well supported by centres of expertise, many trade unions do not have easy access to often specialized expertise (e.g. for skills needs forecasting).

³ https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/publications/WCMS_742025/lang--en/index.htm

► The ILO's General Discussion for Skills and Lifelong Learning (2021) and the Standard-setting on Apprenticeships (2022-23)

Skills and LLL are on the agenda of the next International Labour Conferences. A [General Discussion on Skills and LLL will take place at the 2021 ILC](#), and discussions on [Standard-setting on Apprenticeships will take place at the 2022 and 2023 ILCs](#).

- The General Discussion on “Skills and LLL” at the 109th Session of the ILC (2021) aims at providing guidance on the ILO’s strategy to ensure that skills and LLL systems and policies are future-ready to address challenges and seize opportunities for a fair, inclusive and secure future of work. Its conclusions will guide future work of the Office.

- C140, C142 or R195 address the issue of skills development and LLL in the broader context of human resources development; these instruments do not, however, explicitly address apprenticeships and other forms of work based learning (such as internships). Consequently, the [ILO’s Standards Review Mechanism Tripartite Working Group](#) concluded that there was a normative gap on the issue of apprenticeships and the [Governing Body](#) of the ILO requested the Office to place a standard-setting item related to apprenticeships on the agenda of the ILC. As part of this process, the ILO has published a [White Report - A framework for quality apprenticeships](#) in 2019.

► What is the role of social dialogue and collective bargaining?

The ILO has advocated for the involvement of social partners in the development of vocational guidance and training and has spelt out in great detail the ways in which both employers’ and workers’ organizations can engage in formulating, applying and reviewing national human resources development, education training and LLL policies.

R195 provides guidance on social partner involvement in different areas ranging from defining skills strategies at different levels (national, regional, local, sectoral and enterprise levels); aligning policies which are consistent with economic, fiscal and social policies; assuring inclusiveness and access for all; identifying skills’ needs; recognizing and certifying skills; to assessing labour market needs.⁴

Box 2. Successful experiences of TU engagement in skills and LLL

Many successful experiences exist of workers’ organizations that are engaged in a variety of different activities at international, national, sectoral and enterprise levels to support policy design, implementation and follow-up, by means of contributing to national skills strategies, negotiating collective agreements at the sectoral or enterprise levels, by participating in sectoral skills bodies or through company level work councils or learning representatives.

There are many examples where trade unions worldwide participate in skills anticipation; in the development of training standards, curricula, training programmes and assessment procedures; in the negotiation of pay rates, paid time off and entitlement for training; in supporting links with local training providers, including trade unions training centers; or in supporting recruitment of workers for training.⁵

4 See box 1: https://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-policies-and-systems/WCMS_714830/lang--en/index.htm

5 See p. 5-13 of https://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-policies-and-systems/WCMS_714830/lang--en/index.htm

► What are the potential priority areas for trade unions?

In order to support their engagement in skills development, and **in line with R195**, workers' organizations could consider the following priority areas:

- i. **influencing State policy on education and training**, e.g. through lobbying government to introduce legislation to ensure social dialogue, the right to LLL for ALL, funding, paid educational leave, skills recognition, etc.;
- ii. **integrating the learning agenda with other union functions**, e.g. ensuring commitment at the union's political level, building capacity within the organization, etc.;
- iii. **focusing on the institutionalisation of learning with employers**, e.g. seeking out alliances with employers so that skills development becomes an integral part of collective bargaining, ensuring that young people, particularly apprentices, have access to quality training and good working conditions, etc.; and
- iv. **enhancing membership activity and representation**, e.g. building capacity within the own organizations so that trade union representatives are qualified to advocate for workers on the issue of skills, LLL and quality apprenticeships.

► References

Various materials have been developed that can support you:

- [Workers' organizations engaging in skills development](#)
- [Global and regional webinars on skills, LLL and quality apprenticeships](#)
- [Skills Development and Lifelong Learning: Resource Guide for Workers' Organizations](#)
- [A framework for quality apprenticeships](#)

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