

EUROPEAN TRAINING FOUNDATION

1994-2024



REFLECTING ON THE

PAST

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ENVISIONING THE

FUTURE



Pilvi Torsti, ETF Director

FOREWORD

In 1994, the European Training Foundation (ETF) began its remarkable journey, born from a vision of collaboration and transformation following the end of the Cold War. The optimism of that time—anchored in the belief that education and skills could drive progress—continues to resonate today, even as the world around us has grown more complex and unpredictable.

For three decades, the ETF has served as a lighthouse, shining light on pathways for vocational education, skills development, and lifelong learning in over 30 partner countries. Our mission has always been clear: to empower people through education and training, equipping them with the tools to build meaningful lives and find opportunities in an ever-changing world.

To achieve that, we have committed to work in a systemic and long-term way, being simultaneously strategic

and practical, always ensuring our work is meaningful in the context of the countries where we are active. This commitment has seen us working in fragile contexts, supporting education reforms in regions impacted by conflict, and responding creatively to global challenges like migration, climate change, and technological disruption.

When the ETF was founded, the world was a very different place. The Cold War had just ended, and Europe was reimagining its future, embracing

peace, stability, and partnership. The ETF emerged as a response to these transformative changes, with the job of supporting countries in their journey towards resilience and prosperity through education and training. Over the years, the ETF has grown into a global hub of knowledge and expertise, bridging the divide between the demands of modern economies and the aspirations of people and communities.

Today, as we reflect on 30 years of impact, we also look to the future with renewed determination. The world is changing at an unprecedented pace.

Digitalisation and the green transition are redefining economies, workplaces, and societies. Geopolitical tensions and demographic shifts demand resilience, preparedness, and cooperation. At the same time, the European Union remains the world's largest donor in education and skills, reaffirming the importance of our collective efforts in building a sustainable and inclusive future.

The ETF is proud to play its part in this landscape, bridging the past and future through innovation and evidence-based action. Our role is both strategic and hands-on: from conducting foresight exercises and data-driven policy analysis to promoting collaboration through networks and partnerships.

Education is not just about adapting to the future—it is about shaping it. This belief underpins everything we do, from supporting green and digital skills development to promoting Centres of

Vocational Excellence as models of global collaboration and innovation.


The importance of a historical consciousness—an understanding of how the past informs the present and future—cannot be overstated. Over the past 30 years, the ETF has accumulated a wealth of experience and knowledge, working with countries as they transitioned from emerging markets to EU membership and beyond using methods developed over decades of work. This institutional memory equips us to tackle today's challenges, from aligning national education systems with European and global frameworks to addressing urgent skills gaps in AI, green technology, and emerging industries.

As we celebrate this 30-year milestone, we also recognise the responsibility that comes with it. Education and skills development are long-term endeavours, often transcending

political and administrative cycles. They require determination, foresight, and a shared commitment to progress. With the ETF's unique expertise and the dedication of our staff and partners, we are well-positioned to navigate these challenges and opportunities, contributing to a better future for all.

Looking forward, the ETF's mandate remains as relevant as ever. Our work will continue to focus on promoting resilience, enhancing competitiveness, and ensuring that education systems empower individuals to thrive in a world of constant change. The next 30 years will undoubtedly bring new complexities and possibilities, but with collaboration and ambition, we can ensure that education and skills remain a powerful force for transformation, resilience, and hope.

And—very importantly—education and skills are universal priorities that unite diverse communities worldwide, even in complex times. This makes them ideally positioned to serve as a long-term guiding light—a lighthouse—for progress and shared future gains.



Thank you for being part
of the ETF journey. Let's
move forward together,
confident in our shared
vision and unwavering
in our commitment and
guided by a realistic yet
resolute optimism.



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CELEBRATING OUR
30TH ANNIVERSARY



TWO DIRECTORS-GENERAL

Mario Nava and Gert Jan Koopman, talk about the ETF:



Since 1 June 2024, **Mario Nava** has been Director-General at the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (EMPL). He was previously Director-General at Structural Reform Support (REFORM) and Director for Horizontal Policies at the Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union (FISMA). Among other former positions, he was a policy advisor to European Commission President, Romano Prodi, and a member of the cabinet of the Commissioner for Competition Policy, Mario Monti. As Director-General of DG EMPL, he chairs the ETF's Governing Board and oversees the ETF's strategic direction and governance, making sure that guidance is provided on its annual work programme and budget.



Since January 2023, **Gert Jan Koopman** has been Director-General of the Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR). He was, for over four years, Director-General of the Directorate General for Budget (BUDG) and for almost eight years the Deputy Director-General for State Aid. He was previously the Principal Advisor and Director for Industrial Policy and Economic Reforms at DG Enterprise and Industry, and Head of Cabinet to Vice-President Neil Kinnock.

THE ETF'S STORY OF ORIGIN

"Over the last 30 years," says Mario Nava, "the ETF has played a pivotal role in shaping learning and training policies in the EU neighbouring regions and helping EU candidate countries on their path to accession."

"In the 1990s and early 2000s," says Nava, "the ETF's focus was on helping candidate countries meet the EU accession requirements. It managed the Special Preparatory Programme for the European Social Fund, which was designed to help central and eastern European countries build the institutional structures required under EU law."

"I have been aware of the ETF and its work since very early on in my career," says Gert Jan Koopman, "when I was working in the Cabinet of then-Vice President Neil Kinnock. At that time, the ETF made an important contribution to the 2004 enlargement – an important milestone in the history of the EU."

Beyond the mechanics of accession, Nava recognises the fundamental role played by the ETF "in fragile areas, particularly in conflict-affected regions, by supporting education reforms that promote peace, stability, and resilience. In the Balkans and Ukraine, for example, the ETF has helped deliver education reforms, creating economic opportunities in very challenging environments."

Nava credits the agency with driving evidence-based policy making.

"The ETF excels in offering partner countries solid policy advice to drive systemic reforms."

"SOFT POWER"

The ETF is also a vital element of the EU's strategic "soft power": "investing in human capital," says Nava, "bringing economic, social, and political benefits to both the EU and its neighbouring countries. Stronger human capital makes these regions more attractive for EU investments, driving mutual economic growth and development, which in turn benefits trade."

The social and economic progress made by neighbouring countries thanks to improved education "also contributes to more regional stability, which is important for the EU's security. Promoting education and skills development supports democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law, all key principles of the EU." It's a point of view with which Koopman whole-heartedly agrees:

"it's vital to support education, skills and employment in our partner countries", he says, "in order to face the challenges of a rapidly changing global economy, and to harness the opportunities that stem from new technologies and emerging industries."

It is, he believes, a win-win opportunity. “The prosperity that a highly skilled, well-educated population can bring is good for our partners – delivering growth, rising living standards, and a competitive stake in world markets – and is good for the EU, with a stable neighbourhood of reliable partners that can trade with European companies.”

“Our neighbourhood is varied,” Koopman continues, “so we have different ways to engage. In our enlargement countries – those on the path towards future EU membership – **we want to accelerate reforms and bring forward some of the opportunities offered by the Single Market.**”

Our new instruments for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and soon Moldova aim to do this, on the basis of clear reform commitments with an important human development component.”

“The Mediterranean comes with specific challenges. That is why we have developed tailor-made Strategic and Comprehensive Partnerships, like those agreed with Egypt and Tunisia, accompanied by substantial support for investments and reforms, including in the vital fields of skills and employment. Investing in people will always bring rewards – for the economy, for society, as well as for citizens themselves.”

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ETF

It’s one of the ETF’s strengths that it has constantly evolved in order to meet the demands of contemporary challenges. “Today”, says Nava, “the ETF has grown into a knowledge hub, moving from implementing vocational education and training projects to supporting comprehensive human capital development. It has developed many important tools like Qualifications Platforms, SkillsLabs, Skills4Enterprise, and also supports Centres of Vocational Excellence in third countries, as well as implementing the Youth Guarantee in enlargement countries.”

This evolution is largely a reflection of the changes facing the European Union. “Right now”, says Nava, “the EU faces skills shortages in sectors essential not only for the EU but also for neighbouring countries to keep up with technological change and the need to decarbonise. The ETF has helped address this by developing tools for skills anticipation, qualifications comparisons, and boosting digital and green skills.”

“The speed and scale of the changes we face in the global economy”, agrees Koopman, “make it more important than ever to pursue policies that are fit for purpose and are designed alongside a wide range of stakeholders and expertise. The ‘rapid education

diagnoses’ being conducted with the ETF in Lebanon, the Western Balkans and more recently the Eastern Neighbourhood are an important example of how we can develop evidence-based reforms that respond to critical needs and realities.”

“Education systems that meet today’s challenges”, he continues, “must be met with a labour market that works for all. In this regard, the Youth Guarantee scheme we are implementing in the Western Balkans is an important next step, bringing employment and training opportunities to young people after they leave compulsory education.”

“Such opportunities, drawn up in partnership with industry and business, should reflect the direction of travel for our economies, both in terms of the skills developed and deployed – particularly in AI and emerging industries – as well as our ways of working (through distance learning, ed-tech solutions, and so on).”

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EDUCATION

The changing nature of education itself and the innovative ways in which training might be delivered in the future is also raised by Mario Nava. “Over the next 30 years,” he says, **“education will need to be dynamic, inclusive, and adaptable to the needs of the 21st century and beyond.”**

“Mario Draghi’s recent report on EU competitiveness highlighted the need to rethink our education systems, shifting away from a focus on formal qualifications. These goals also apply to our neighbouring countries, and the ETF will play a crucial role in supporting them to reform their education and training effectively.”

According to Nava, these educational developments are occurring because the global economy now demands more versatile and skilled workers: “technological advancements and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped labour markets, requiring both technical and soft skills. It is key to help people to be better prepared for the evolving job market, boosting their employability and adaptability.”

“A well-rounded human capital development strategy promotes economic growth by creating a skilled workforce, and international commitments, like the UN 2030 Agenda, emphasise the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as lifelong learning.”

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The ETF has always reflected the EU’s wider policy direction, and it’s clear that it will have a role to play in an evermore complex international setting.

“In an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape,” says Nava, “the EU must position itself as a strong global player, both in terms of security and economic foreign policy. The enlargement of the EU is a geopolitical priority also for the next mandate.”

“The ETF will be instrumental in this by enhancing human capital development in partner countries, particularly through education and vocational training. This fosters goodwill, strengthens the EU’s image as a global supporter of education, and contributes to stable and prosperous societies.”

“The EU is at its best when it innovates,” maintains Koopman. “Our response to the COVID crisis and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine challenged conventional wisdom, and in doing so, delivered a far stronger response to those challenges than long-established practices could ever have done. In this respect, innovation on the part of the EU, the Commission, and key stakeholders like the ETF is essential for advancing European prosperity and competitiveness.”

“The recent reports by Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi underline this and constitute a common thread throughout President von der Leyen’s Political Guidelines and mission letters. The ETF is now working with us on the next enlargement of the EU, for the next Commission. Greening and digitalisation will remain key priorities, but with a reinforced focus on competitiveness. In this regard, education, skills and innovation will play an essential role, including in our cooperation with neighbouring partner countries – supporting reforms which are critical to unlocking economic potential and driving prosperity and stability,” says Koopman. “In the context of an ageing population and brain drain, the latest PISA results [the OECD’s ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’] underline just some of the challenges both current and future EU Member States must address to build a Union that is fit for the future. The ETF’s work will be crucial to find ways to combat these issues, helping us to shape our priorities and actions on education and skills within the neighbourhood and enlargement regions.”



REFLECTING ON THE PAST

**A JOURNEY OVER
THREE DECADES
OF CHANGE**



R



DECADE ONE

The idea for a European Training Foundation was conceived at a Strasbourg summit in December 1989. European ministers asked the Council of European Communities “to adopt, at the beginning of 1990, the necessary decisions for the establishment of a European Training Foundation for Central and Eastern Europe”.

In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the map of Europe changed beyond all recognition. In the Western Balkans, the former Yugoslavia descended into civil wars, Czechoslovakia divided in two, the Baltic States regained independence, and, after the Maastricht Treaty, the European Community became the European Union. Austria, Finland and Sweden became EU candidate countries, but it was clear there would soon be others, with Poland and Hungary at the front of the queue.

Many of those new nations were facing immense challenges in their vocational education and training (VET) structures. The shift from the Communist bloc's centrally-planned economy to an unpredictable, market-based one created enormous difficulties. With the abandonment of central planning, the extant connections between industry and training were severed and a dialogue had to be created between sectors that had no history of direct communication. New skills were suddenly needed, but there were often no standards or recognised qualifications. There was invariably mass unemployment and a decimation of public funding.

The ETF began its full operations only in 1994 because of years of debate and negotiation over where the agency would be based. It eventually moved into Villa Gualino, in the hills outside Turin, after a €10 million restoration. Finally, its work could begin.

Bent Sorensen, ETF:

“To be able to work now in the ETF, bringing people together within and across borders, across the many issues that are out there, is a fantastic experience.”

As described in the original Council Regulation of 1990, the ETF was to be steered by a Governing Board and guided by an Advisory Forum. The Advisory Forum was to discuss and provide input for the ETF's annually-revised Work Programme. It was made up of vocational training experts – two from each partner country and EU Member State – and of representatives of the European Commission. Organisations such as the ILO, the OECD and the World Bank were also represented.

The ETF Advisory Forum's annual plenary became in some ways the agency's parliament: all programme proposals passed through the Forum's plenary for critical review before being presented to the Governing Board for approval. At the same time, the Advisory Forum's individual members became the ETF's de facto ambassadors.

At its first gathering in October 1994, the Advisory Forum established four thematic subgroups, each with ten members. At the outset these concentrated on: management of education in a decentralised structure, the role of the private sector in VET, standards in VET, and strategies for continuing training.

Jeroen Willems, European Commission:

“ETF involvement could also make a big difference when ministries all worked in their separate vertical pillars and would not sit around the same table to talk, for example, about labour market information systems, which is an area that does not just concern the ministry of labour. The ETF had convincing power by virtue of its ready access to international expertise and good practice from all over Europe.”

Borhene Chakroun, UNESCO:

“For three decades, the ETF has been an example of excellence in the field of TVET, consistently guiding policy learning and fostering robust inter-agency cooperation on TVET. Throughout its 30-year journey, the ETF has not only adapted to evolving educational landscapes but has also played a pivotal role in shaping them, benefiting experts and stakeholders alike.”

Pat Cox, former President of the European Parliament:

“Since its establishment in 1994 the European Training Foundation has made an important contribution to the development of training and education policies in the neighbouring countries of the EU by setting ambitious objectives based on trust and mutual respect, but also through genuinely trying to understand one another.”

Lawrence Meredith, European Commission

“It was less than 10 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and everybody was ‘discovering’ these countries, but the ETF, for me, was at the forefront of those changes. The main thing I remember was the 130 deeply engaged people working there, young and very committed, trying to drive the agenda and create space for themselves to work.”

Irena Topalli, Albania:

“More cooperation among civil society organisations across Europe, as well as sharing best practices and knowledge in skills development, means more power to advocate for common skills development initiatives. Collaboration initiatives that focus on skills development for young people should have great support internationally, and also nationally from governments. Not just the affirmative words ‘we support you’, but also proper economic packages to leverage meaningful support.”

Elena Carrero Pérez, ETF:

“We were perhaps three women in a workshop with 50 people; two ladies in black burkas, and me. I discovered that we were still able to help in such a different and ‘exotic’ environment; that our knowledge of VET, of how to handle complex issues, of how to support dialogue, consensus, analysis, was useful also for that country. This is the strength of the ETF.”

In the spring of 1995, the ETF was asked to manage the VET reform programmes for countries supported by the PHARE programme (PHARE was short for “Poland and Hungary: Assistance for the Restructuring the Economy). PHARE was later expanded to include other countries seeking accession: Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania.

In close collaboration with the ETF, PHARE’s VET programmes attempted to prime reform by focusing on a number of exemplary pilot schools. The focus was on curricula reform, in-service training of teachers, partnership developments across Europe and equipment upgrades. Programme management units were established in each of the PHARE countries. The ETF was tasked, too, with overseeing various other projects. The “Staff Development Programme” aimed to assist key individuals within the PHARE programme, with participants handpicked from the public and private sectors.

The agency was also given the responsibility for overseeing DELPHI, the acronym for the “Development of Educational Links and Professional and Higher Education Initiatives” within the TACIS programme. (TACIS was the abbreviation of “Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States”, a programme to help countries in their transition to democratic and market-oriented economies).

This meant that the ETF was now also active in 12 countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, as well as Mongolia. Its staff were working on policy and standards, teaching reform and the improvement of open and distance learning systems. Under the guidance of the ETF, DELPHI explored ways to re-establish dialogues between authorities, companies and training providers.

The problem was that, to begin with, information on the state of vocational education and training in the TACIS regions was so scarce that the ETF’s first activity was invariably a stock-taking exercise. Before even beginning work, ETF staff simply had to map the territory. This was a recurrent theme in the mid- to late-1990s. The lack of centrally-collected information on labour market developments in partner countries meant that planning was impossible.

The founding Director and Deputy-Directors of the ETF, Peter de Rooij, Ulrich Hillenkamp and Livio Pescia respectively, duly realised that the agency’s ability to collect, compile and disseminate information would be one of the fundamental factors determining the success of the European Training Foundation. That insight led to the creation of “intelligence units” that later became known as National Observatories.

Those Observatories were established in 24 of the partner countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the countries of the former Soviet Union and Mongolia. The ETF helped these units develop their capacity to gather, analyse and disseminate targeted information relevant to education and training reform.

The geographic scope of the ETF's operations was repeatedly extended. Operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina were started in 1996, and the other countries that had emerged from the rubble of the Balkan wars followed soon afterwards. This operation subsequently came under the umbrella of CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation) which aimed to bring investment and institution-building to the region.

In July 1998, the Council of Ministers amended the ETF's brief to extend its geographic scope to the non-EU Mediterranean countries within the framework of the EU's MEDA Programme. MEDA stands for "MEsures D'Accompagnement," or "accompanying measures," and provides financial support to further the Union's Mediterranean policy. It aims to support economic transition, to develop better socio-economic balance, to promote regional integration, dialogue and exchange and to gradually create a euro-Mediterranean free trade area to guarantee peace, stability and prosperity.

Goharik Grigoryan, Armenia:

"I got to know the ETF during my internship at the Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport and was fascinated by its activities. Some initiatives have promoted essential soft skills, such as critical thinking, analytical skills and media literacy. These skills are indispensable not only in the labour market, but also in academic pursuits and scientific endeavours."

Cooperation with Syria began after ETF Deputy Director Ulrich Hillenkamp visited Damascus in 1999. The ETF helped the Ministry of Vocational Education and Training to develop an apprenticeship scheme: a pilot was launched in 2001 and a widespread VET reform programme duly ensued.

In Algeria, too, the ETF followed a similar path, publishing a VET report for the country in 1999 and spearheading the establishment of an Observatory that ushered the way towards VET reform. This increase in operational theatres inevitably led to a growth in ETF personnel, with the original staff of 60 growing to a peak of 130.

Xavier Prats Monné, European Commission:

"From the moment I became professionally involved in employment, education and training, the ETF became a very important element of my work... the ETF has grown into a mature agent with the drive and the ideas we need in the field. ... It is a key contributor to policy development and implementation in areas critical for Europe and its partners, such as combatting social exclusion and poverty through education and training. And, by looking into the European Social Model, the ETF contributes to the noble task of proving that social protection is compatible with growth and competitiveness."

Rano Turdiboeva, Uzbekistan:

"DARYA [Dialogue and Action for Resourceful Youth in Central Asia managed by the ETF] is in line with our strategic programme [where] we would like to underline inclusivity and dialogue on skills at a regional and national level."

Agenda 2000, the strategic plan for the admission of new Member States, had first been presented in 1997 and thereafter preparations for accession had a strong impact on the work of the ETF in the candidate countries. Much of the work in Central and Eastern Europe focused on the development of lifelong learning systems, innovative teacher and trainer training, and the development of appropriate qualifications systems.

Each year, the European Commission's DG Enlargement drew up regular reports, detailing the current state of affairs in the future Member States. The ETF provided input into these through its annually published Reviews of Progress in Vocational Training Reforms.

As such, the ETF's work was constantly being reappraised in light of the wider context of the EU. In March 2000, in Lisbon, a special European Council embarked upon an ambitious strategy to make Europe the world's most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy. Over time, this would put investment in education, both within the EU and throughout its periphery, at the top of the political agenda.

Irina Tserodze, Georgia:

"In these last five or six years of fundamental transformation, the ETF has helped us to identify best practice from the EU and as such has been the first organisation to familiarise us with many of the innovations that we introduced. They inspired us but did not just give us one-off recommendations. They were with us all the way while we piloted, introduced, implemented and assessed."

On 30 November 2002, the European Commission adopted "the Copenhagen Declaration" on enhanced cooperation in European vocational education and training. A few months later, in March 2003, the European Commission's "Communication on Wider Europe" marked the genesis of what would soon become known as the "European Neighbourhood Policy", which aimed to "strengthen stability, security and wellbeing" in the EU and a "ring of countries sharing the EU's fundamental values and objectives" through "greater political, security, economic and cultural cooperation".

Lisbon cemented the priority of human resources development within the EU policy agenda, the Copenhagen Declaration promoted the role of VET within this, and the Neighbourhood Policy demanded increased cooperation with the ETF's partner countries. At the ETF Advisory Forum conference in November 2003, Nikolaus van der Pas, Director-General for Education and Culture captured this emerging spirit when he said: "Learning matters for economic and social development. Learning matters for social cohesion. Learning matters for social and political stability."

Goran Petkovski, North Macedonia:

"The support received from the ETF and the ILO in the past years of Youth Guarantee implementation has been of great value. The organisation of training, workshops and study visits on different phases of the programme has helped us to better understand the scheme, to implement the reforms and initiatives as well as the support for the process of strengthening institutional capacities."

Safet Gerxhaliu, Kosovo:

"I am in constant contact with companies and institutions in our region, and in its progress, I can recognise the footprint of the ETF almost everywhere."

In all the preparations for accession, information regarding reform progress, activities and stakeholder structures was mapped and compiled by the ETF and shared with the ETF's sister agency, Cedefop (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training). In 2003, the National Observatories of the acceding countries became members of Cedefop's Network of Reference and Expertise ("ReferNet").

On 1 May 2004, ten of the European Training Foundation's partner countries became full members of the European Union (this included Cyprus and Malta, where the ETF had been also providing some support activities). For the ETF, their accession marked the end of a long process of networking, piloting reform, brokering expertise and building the capacity to deal with European processes, policies and institutions.

Mounir Baati, ETF:

“Something we’ve been doing for the first time at the request of the EU Delegation and national stakeholders is preassessment. Instead of waiting to assess if the indicators have been achieved at the end of the year, we come during the year and look at how likely it is that the indicators and the targets will be achieved, and what the problems and challenges are.”

Vivianne Reding, former EU Commissioner for Education and Culture, European Commission:

“Since its establishment in 1994, the ETF has worked hard in spreading EU experience in vocational education and training into other neighbouring regions of the EU, initially by providing support to the implementation of programmes and projects in its partner countries and more recently by providing expert advice to these countries in their vocational training reform efforts.”

By then, the ETF had become a sensitive, respected antenna for picking up on current developments and political directions in its partner countries. It was becoming a renowned think tank in its own right, able to develop new projects and initiatives and offering advice on key areas of VET, from curricula and qualifications to networking, reforms and funding.

Its first decade closed with a crisp mission statement making clear what ETF stood for: “As a centre of expertise, we contribute to sustainable socio-economic development by enabling our partner countries to reform their vocational education and training systems mainly through the EC Phare, CARDS, Tacis and MEDA Programmes.”

Nigar Ismayilzada-Asgarova, Azerbaijan:

“I see our partnership as strategic and impactful. The partnership between the ETF and Azerbaijan, particularly in areas such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), lifelong career guidance, and Centres of Excellence, can be viewed as a fruitful collaboration aimed at enhancing the quality and scope of VET in Azerbaijan. For example, the adoption of the NQF has provided a structured framework for education, facilitating transparent qualifications that are recognised across Europe.”

Dita Traidis, Latvia:

“The ETF helped build the image of VET in this country and helped turn plans into policy implementation. In Latvia a lot of things never happened because they were inconvenient and too complex. Civil servants tend to avoid work that generates more work. It was a daunting task and no surprise people were scared to handle it. Take for example college level education. That was, and still is, a sensitive and hot topic for the higher education society. We would have never been able to open that field for debate without the backing of the ETF and ETF experts.”



DECADE TWO

By 2004, the ETF had become the go-to agency for expertise in vocational education and training in countries outside the EU. It had amassed vast labour market and training data from the countries on the fringes of the European Union and had years of experience of overseeing education reform in countries transitioning towards democracy and the free-market.

The Lisbon Strategy had already moved education and training, and human capital development, high up the policy making agenda within the EU. In the aftermath of the “Learning Matters” conference in 2003, the ETF now pioneered an innovative approach called “Policy Learning” that quickly became an integral element of the ETF’s portfolio of expertise, offering insights, resources and contacts to education policy makers.

The innovation of this widely-admired approach was not to impose education reforms, but to make the reform process collaborative, creative and two-way. Reform was a means to empower partner countries to make their own decisions about education and training, sharing with them guidance and precedents, but not imposing external norms and ideas. Policy learning was a dissemination of the concept that learning isn’t only an academic pursuit, but vital to individual wellbeing, social cohesion and economic growth.

In 2004, at the start of the agency’s second decade, Muriel Dunbar became the ETF’s Director. One of her explicit aspirations was to raise the profile of the ETF within Brussels and across the Directorates General that make up the European Commission. She also forged and deepened links with important organisations like the World Bank, UNESCO, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and with the ILO (International Labour Organisation of the United Nations).

In May 2004, eight Eastern European countries that had formerly been on the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain, plus Cyprus and Malta, joined the European Union. The accession of those ten nations to the EU was in part thanks to ETF’s work on reforming their education policies and training establishments. The agency had guided those countries in identifying skills needs, in the development of qualifications and curricula, and in the importance of understanding wider socio-economic settings.

Those ten countries now passed to the tutelage of ETF’s sister organisation Cedefop meaning that the theatre of ETF operations moved further East and South, with focus shifting towards Central Asia, the Balkans, the near Middle-East and north Africa.

The definition of the ETF’s work was also changing. A new, executive agency in Brussels had taken over the Tempus Programme that had previously been administered by the ETF. (Tempus was the “Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies” that aimed to promote structured cooperation through consortia).

Madlen Serban, ETF:

“The ETF is not capable of changing a country alone, but together with other EU support we can serve as a catalyst, as a platform for dialogue.”

Davide Sassoli, European Parliament:

“Developing human potential lies at the heart of the mission of this unique organisation. Knowledge and skills empower people to adapt to change and overcome challenges. They give opportunities for people to find or create employment and forge a decent life for themselves and their families. They foster social inclusion and build citizenship. For 25 years, the ETF has been the EU’s ambassador promoting this agenda in the countries of the wider neighbourhood, supporting them in developing their education and training systems to promote employability, growth, and inclusion.”

Sholpan Karinova, Kazakhstan:

“Right now, we need to think about resources – how to access skills and competences, how to verify those skills so that our future specialists study for the jobs that will be there.”

Slassi Sennou, Morocco:

“Morocco-EU cooperation in vocational training, led by the CSEFRS [Conseil Supérieur de l’Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique], provides a comprehensive overhaul for lifelong learning. The Council, with its status, plays a crucial role in the transformation of the national education system, and the ETF has been playing a key role. Harmonising efforts with national development agencies aligns with our reform objectives, ensures sustainability and long-lasting impact, and underlines our commitment to long-term development.”

David O’Sullivan, European Commission:

“...they [the countries of Central and Eastern Europe] needed something more than management training, to include vocational training. We were very conscious that they needed to rebuild their vocational education and training, that was just as important. So that became the Training Foundation. We put forward the two pieces of legislation very quickly – we more or less wrote them over Christmas – and I think at one point it held the record for quick adoption in the Council, because we proposed it in January and it was basically adopted in May, which at the time was very fast.”

Anastasia Fetsi, ETF:

“The collection and publication of this data proved to be very valuable for a number of reasons, for instance the strengthening of an evidence-based approach to strategic planning among national authorities who had, at times, shown significant blind spots in terms of what was already happening in their own economies and labour markets.”

Lah Nitaj, Kosovo:

“We plan to work very closely with ETF experts and other stakeholders in the near future. We have launched dual training in 12 profiles and in very close cooperation with the social partners. The high level of involvement of companies has ensured the success of the initiative and the employability of the candidates.”

Shorn of that role, the agency’s mandate was radically altered: it was now responsible for human capital development in partner countries. This new mandate was approved by the European Parliament in 2008 (EC 1339/2008), with ETF now required ‘to contribute, in the context of EU external relations policies, to improving human capital development by supporting countries to create lifelong learning systems’.

A year later, in 2009, Madlen Serban took over as the ETF’s Director. Her vision was of vocational education and training as a field that always involved multiple stakeholders with the ETF as an enabler and critical friend:

“If you want to make something sustainable you need a collaborative process. If you represent one of the participating institutions in this collaborative process, you are not the best trusted, regardless of whether you are a principal, a trade unionist, an employer or a politician. Thus, in very complex dialogues, there often was a role to play for a neutral external broker.”

In 2010, the ETF launched its iconic Torino Process. It was an analytical and evaluation tool that offered a two-yearly review of progress. The evidence-based process was based on the involvement of many stakeholders: governments, the private sector, civil society and educational providers. It used statistics and qualitative data to define both best practice and reform progress.

Comparable to the Copenhagen Process for Member States, the Torino Process quickly became the standard framework through which all ETF partner countries reported to the ETF on targets, budgets, qualifications and other key parameters. Each country provided a report, which the ETF used to prepare a regional report and a final, cross-country synthesis. It was an invaluable resource that encouraged comparison, self-assessment and peer learning.

The accumulation of those reports became a vital resource for policy makers in Brussels and beyond. In an era of globalisation, skills had become a currency in international labour markets and a degree of homogenisation was inevitable. Thanks to the ETF’s expertise, countries could increasingly compare and contrast their education and training provisions, analysing the degrees to which they created competitiveness in a global market.

Gerhard Schumann-Hitzler, European Commission:

“I was very impressed by the professionalism of the ETF, and their keen interest in giving real support to the enlargement countries, preparing them for membership.”

Another conceptual innovation was multi-level governance. This was an attempt to make the governance of VET both more inclusive and effective thanks to vertical and horizontal interactions between stakeholders. This was proven to increase the efficiency, coherence, transparency, accountability and performance of VET policies and systems.

In many ways, multi-level governance was a classic ETF initiative: already inclined towards collaboration and the discovery of synergies, the ETF now promoted a widening participation in VET in order to include different regions, agencies, departments, ministries, civil society and educational providers. This broader participation had been shown to help identify human capital needs, to stimulate economic growth, to enhance the matching of labour supply to market needs, to guide best practice and to create participatory policy initiatives.

It was a way of working that attempted to coalesce many moving parts and abstract notions: human capital, skills, democratisation and decentralisation. It led to various types of cooperation between, for example, the Assembly of Regions and Local Authorities of the Euro-Mediterranean and the Committee of the Regions Eastern Partnership. By bringing so many actors together, the ETF – playing the nuanced role of facilitator, mentor, broker or guide - consistently demonstrated that their collaboration produced results far greater than the sum of their individual contributions.

2011 saw the launch of the Qualifications Platform, but it was a year particularly remembered for the Arab Spring that took place across North Africa and parts of the Middle East. Like the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-90 that led, indirectly, to the creation of the ETF in the first place, the Arab Spring seemed an opportunity to reach new countries which were experimenting with new-found freedoms and educational aspirations.

The agency was already present in various countries caught up in the revolutions, and was perfectly placed to take a lead role in GEMM (“Governance for Employability in the Mediterranean”), a region-wide programme across eight countries in North Africa and the Middle East that ran from 2013 to 2016. The ETF brought together and coached national governments, regional authorities, training centres, the private sector and social services to establish pilot projects in order to investigate innovate ways to provide governance to education organisations.

In Tunisia, the ETF set up a careers fair involving 40 companies, 19 institutions and 15 training centres. In partnership with the European Group for Public Administration, the agency established a network across the Middle East of teachers, civil servants, charity managers, human rights activists and youth workers. As always, the agency was bringing people together to air ambitions and concerns and engage in constructive dialogue.

Ulrich Hillenkamp, former ETF Deputy Director:

“The ETF was established as the European expertise centre for human resources development in partner countries, for social and economic development.”

The ETF’s agility meant that it was able to take many of its cues from EU developments and offer iterations of EU policies to its partner countries. When, in 2013, the EU established the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, the ETF promoted the importance of work-based learning programmes in all sectors, from industry to services and agriculture. Learning “on-the-job” became increasingly vital in countries experiencing rapid structural changes and where the educational infrastructure wasn’t always sufficient to provide practical training, especially given rapid technological advances.

Lawrence Meredith, European Commission

“Our counterparts in eastern Europe hold the ETF in very high regard. The ETF is an established actor. After all, 25 years is a career for most of us! It has become part of the EU programming cycle in an established area: the links between skills and the economy –future-proofing the labour market. And human capital is an issue that has climbed so much higher up the political agenda than where it was 25 years ago.”



DECADE THREE

Our third decade saw the Torino Process really take off. Initially, the vision was to replicate the EU's Copenhagen Process and provide a platform around which people could gather to share objectives and advance VET reform.

But it evolved to become much more than that. It taught partner countries about monitoring, assessment and data collection. Its open method of coordination meant that a participatory approach to the policy cycle emerged. Thanks to the ETF's facilitation and mentoring, it wasn't only governments that were designing and implementing VET policy, but all sorts of social partners and stakeholders.

From hiring experts to analyse their systems and answer questions, countries began taking full ownership of the VET policy design, moving through the "process" in a participatory, collaborative way. In countries as far afield as Tunisia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, VET became about partnerships. The ETF had created a culture in which the Torino Process was no longer about "the report," but actually about the people who shaped the system. It was relational, which goes to the root of what all great education is.

Muriel Dunbar, ETF:

"[The ETF] is an incredible resource of TVET expertise. It's the largest resource of TVET expertise, globally – there isn't another institution like it. Other multi-lateral or bi-lateral agencies may have a few staff who specialise in TVET, but there isn't anywhere else where that is the core purpose. And the ETF has a lot of flexibility; it's given quite a large degree of freedom in how to spend the budget it receives and how to prioritise its work. So it has the room to shape itself and to grow."

Abdelaziz Lyamouri, Jordan:

"The ETF has offered very great and important work in the area of migration [providing] a very important view and perspective for the enhanced Mobility Partnership between the EU and Jordan."

In 2017, Cesare Onestini became the new ETF Director. Whilst retaining the original vision of the ETF – that the agency would always be at the centre of any discussion about skills – he also believed that the ETF would need to anticipate the huge changes that were coming into the VET sector and therefore accompany our partner countries in navigating them. It was a subtle pivot, but the ETF began to reposition itself as a player in policy discussions, so that the agency wasn't only implementing policy but actually influencing and informing it.

That meant an adaptation of working methods: expanding networks, working not only with ministries but also with all parts of the skills ecosystem. Because of the speed of converging changes – AI, digitalisation, the climate emergency, migration, the green transition and globalisation – the ETF began to work thematically as well as geographically: identifying overarching issues that applied to regions rather than working primarily on a country-by-country basis.

We recognised the need to shift away from focusing exclusively on VET to appreciate alternative skills pathways, especially for those who, for a variety of reasons, had been excluded from traditional training. As the ETF's 2021-2027 strategy document states, this represented "a paradigm shift towards lifelong learning, including more flexible pathways combining formal and informal learning, hard and soft skills". It was a change that brought complexity

and diversification as it became imperative to understand people in fragile situations and transitioning labour markets.

The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic radically altered many working and educational practices, and the ETF duly monitored and analysed these changes. There were double digit percentage drops in GDP in various countries. Exports plummeted and a variety of sectors – hospitality especially – were decimated. There was increased unemployment, growing poverty and inequality, and polarisation between rural and urban areas and between different economic groups. Public funds were diverted from investment in human capital into health and social protection, and many countries witnessed the rise of political radicalisation and conspiracy theories.

Serap Karabacak, Türkiye:

"We value the opinions of international organisations such as the ETF. In a global context, lifelong learning is not only related to the internal dynamics of countries, but also to international needs. Our partners, such as the ETF, share with us their experiences and good practices from the countries in which they work. This helps us to identify the aspects of our system that we need to strengthen."

But as well as analysing these developments, the ETF also recognised the opportunity afforded by the pandemic: the digital transition was accelerated worldwide and workplace and educational practices were radically altered. Much learning was suddenly being delivered remotely, affording access to rural communities which had often been hard to reach.

Li Andersson, European Parliament:

“There is no more powerful tool for social mobility than education.”

Stephan Dahlgren, Bosnia & Herzegovina:

“[The ETF’s] support in strengthening the country’s VET system, including information sessions with Bosnian authorities on various aspects of VET, has been an asset in the education sector.”

These changes offered the potential to be more inclusive towards younger and female employees, and to reduce emigration pressure driven by the old-fashioned requirement of physical presence. With global supply chains ruptured, the EU and its neighbouring countries began investigating reshoring and near-shoring solutions and there was an uptick in public-private cooperation to deliver education and training.

Anticipating this new world, and adapting to it, became part of the ETF’s mission in those difficult years. It was clearly imperative to work on strategic foresight as well as the “now” of contemporary monitoring. One vital component of the coming decade was the EU’s working-age population, projected to decline from 265 million in 2022 to 258 million in 2030. Already in the early 2020s there were acute labour shortages within the EU, with a lack of HGV drivers, plumbers, software engineers and medical staff. It was clear that these shortages were only going to become more pronounced due to demographic changes and an ever-ageing population.

Borhene Chakroun, UNESCO:

“There was this critical mass of expertise that the ETF had nurtured through investment and recruitment and years of work that put it in the best position to become an important player.”

At the same time, many of the ETF’s partner countries were confronting the opposite problem of labour surpluses leading to unemployment or under-employment. International job-matching was an obvious solution but is notoriously complex and costly: employers are uncertain if they can trust qualifications from third countries, and this can create a costly “brain waste” with immigrant employees’ skills remaining unrecognised.

The 2023 launch of EU’s Skills and Talent Mobility package was a response to this imbalance. As a critical interface between the EU and neighbouring countries, and because “Skills Development and Validation” was a key element of its strategic vision, the ETF became instrumental in facilitating the recognition of qualifications. It has provided advice to the vast majority of the EU’s neighbouring countries regarding the reform of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). Connecting those NQFs to Regional Qualification Frameworks (RQFs) like the European Qualifications Framework has greatly aided the comparability and transparency of certification and qualification across borders.

Ljiljana Pandžić, Bosnia & Herzegovina:

“[The ETF] has provided very valuable technical assistance and complemented the EU Delegation’s ongoing efforts in the employment sector to improve employment coordination and career development support system in Bosnia and Herzegovina...”

Nacira Mennadi Haddad, Algeria:

“Algeria has set itself the target of increasing the proportion of graduates with an apprenticeship to over 70%. A key area of focus remains the need to continue and strengthen the essential adaptation of training programmes to the development needs of the economic sector, in order to provide the necessary skills to support the economic diversification that the country is seeking.”

The ETF provided various NQF reports for partner countries, investigating and interrogating policies and practices. The agency organised regional events and published surveys of Qualification Recognition Centres (QRCs) and a compendium of recognition procedures for immigrants within EU Member States. It has also been active in the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL), conducting systems analysis and compiling inventories of national practices.

This approach, under the strategic heading of “Skills Relevance and Anticipation”, included the identification and development of smart specialisations in emerging and traditional economic sectors: pinpointing the emerging skills needs for the green and digital transitions and building capacity and capabilities. The ETF inaugurated and nurtured CoVEs, “centres of vocational excellence”, that model best practice and connect across regional and national borders to create an uplift in educational excellence.

Mirjana Kovacevic, Serbia:

“From the very first steps of this process, we had the support of the ETF to assess the skills and knowledge needs and find ways to match labour supply and demand. The ETF has also made a significant contribution to analysing the impact of new business trends on labour market trends (such as the digital transition), as well as the introduction of the fifth level of VET qualifications and many other issues.”

There has also been a nuanced shift in the ETF’s business model. Given its expertise, the ETF has often been invited by different European services to help the implementation of specific programmes in thematic areas and geographical regions where it is already active: so, for example, working with the African Union where there were converging objectives and targets. This has widened the scope of our operations, resulting in an increase in the financial resources that we manage.

It all means that the ETF is analysing skills in broadest terms, constantly enquiring about the surrounding economic context within which VET is required: looking at long-term changes and working on foresight. This research informs the national strategies of many countries: the ETF has helped the Albanian government define a “smart specialisation” vision so that its economic choices are coherent and deliverable.

As it has since its very inception, the ETF is aiding countries not only to train its future workforce, but to identify precisely what workforce they will require in order to reach their social and economic ambitions. The ETF is bringing VET closer to active labour market policies and placing skills at the very centre of strategic choices.

Nicolas Schmit, European Commission:

“Right from the beginning, the ETF has played a pivotal role in shaping learning and training policies in the EU neighbourhood and has been assisting EU candidate countries in their path towards accession. [...] The ETF’s resilience, flexibility, and ability to cope with a challenging environment [...] is remarkable.”



1994



2024

STRASBOURG SUMMIT

A European Training Foundation is proposed at the Strasbourg Summit by the European Council to support the newly independent countries next to the EU

1989



EU PHARE Programme



Fall of the Berlin Wall



Tempus Programme for higher education

1991



Collapse of the Soviet Union and war in Yugoslavia



EU TACIS Programme

1990

1994



ETF TURIN

Opening of the ETF in Turin, Italy, under the leadership of Peter de Rooij

1995

FORMER SOVIET UNION

The ETF starts working with the countries of the former Soviet Union



Barcelona PROCESS 1995-2015
the Mediterranean, our common future

Barcelona Process for the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean



WESTERN BALKANS

The ETF starts working in the Western Balkans



MEDITERRANEAN REGION

The ETF's geographical coverage expands southwards to the Mediterranean region

CENTRE OF EXPERTISE

The ETF begins to shift its role from project management towards becoming a centre of expertise

COPENHAGEN DECLARATION

The ETF starts working in the Western Balkans

1996



European Single Market comes into force

1997



Employment and training emphasised by EU presidences



EU membership discussions begin for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe

1998



2000



Lisbon Strategy

2001



EU CARDS Programme for the Western Balkans



The World Trade centre is attacked by terrorists

2002



The Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training



Introduction of the Euro

ETF ADVISORY FORUM

Members of the ETF Advisory Forum discuss the results of over 10 years' work in vocational training reform



10 NEW COUNTRIES JOIN THE EU

Muriel Dunbar becomes Director of the ETF

NEW EU INSTRUMENTS

The ETF changes its approach to match the new EU Instruments



2003



2004

2005

2007



EU guidelines on jobs and growth



New instruments supporting the EU's external assistance goals



Romania and Bulgaria join the EU



The Kyoto Protocol to limit global warming comes into force

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

The recast regulation redefines the ETF's area of activity as 'human capital development'

2008

LISBON TREATY

Madlen Serban becomes Director of the ETF



2009



TORINO PROCESS

Launch of the Torino Process

2010

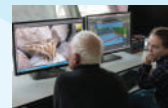
ONLINE COOPERATION STARTS

Launch of the Qualifications platform

2011



Signature of the Lisbon Treaty



New Skills for New Jobs report published by the European Commission



The Arab Spring shakes the Arab region



EQAVET

European Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and training

2012



Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the European Union



Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes

2013



European Alliance for Apprenticeships



Croatia joins the EU

2014



The ETF celebrates its 20th anniversary



EU Youth Guarantee for 2014

2015



Riga conclusions on vocational education and training



Sustainable Development Goals agreed by the United Nations

20TH ANNIVERSARY

SEVEN STRATEGIC PROJECTS

Global inventory of skills and migrant support measures

The ETF's work is based on seven strategic projects



NEW SKILLS AGENDA



Cesare Onestini becomes Director of the ETF

FUTURE OF WORK & SKILLS

ETF high-level conference on the future of work and skills

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

The ETF celebrates its 25th anniversary

2016

2017

2018

2019



New Skills Agenda for Europe



Signature of the Paris Agreement on climate change



The African Union-EU summit agrees on investment in youth and skills



Education, training and lifelong learning in the EU Pillar of Social Rights



Special focus on youth at the EU-Western Balkans summit



Launch of Open Space platform on the ETF 25th anniversary

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ETF conference on benefits for people



New ETF strategy 2020-27

2000



EU Green Deal adopted by the European Union



Osnabrück Declaration on vocational education and training

CLIMATE CHANGE BROKE 8 NEW RECORDS

Launch of ETF Green Skills Award



2021



New Mediterranean Agenda adopted

RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The EU launches the DARYA project, managed by the ETF to support youth in Central Asia.



2022



European Year of Youth

**ChatGPT HIT
100 MILLION
USERS**



Round six of the
Torino Process starts

Pilvi Torsti
becomes Director
of the ETF



2023



European Year of Skills
begins in May

**RENEWED VIOLENCE
BRINGS FURTHER
INSTABILITY TO THE
MIDDLE EAST**

Navigating the Future
fore sight events



2024



New growth plan for the
Western Balkans 2024-27

The ETF celebrates its
30th anniversary





```
int main() {  
    int n; cin >> n;  
    int arr[n];  
    for (int i = 0; i < n; i++) {  
        int x; cin >> x;  
        arr[i] = x;  
    }  
    int count = 0;  
    for (int i = 0; i < n; i++) {  
        if (arr[i] % 2 == 0) {  
            count++;  
        }  
    }  
    cout << count << endl;  
    return 0;  
}
```




FORESIGHT AND FUTURE

**“I’M VERY PROUD”, SAYS ETF
DIRECTOR PILVI TORSTI, “THAT AS
AN AGENCY WE’VE BEEN FRONT-
RUNNERS IN HAVING A SERIOUS
APPROACH TO FORESIGHT”.**

Goran Spasovski, North Macedonia:

“The new principles and practices have enabled a significant increase in cooperation between VET schools and the business community, chambers of commerce, chambers of trade and industry and other stakeholders. As a result, many company mentors have been trained to support the implementation of quality education for students involved in work-based learning in the company environment. The ETF’s policy advice is crucial due to the large volume of activities and the complexity of the expertise that needs to be provided in the process.”

Munther Masri, Jordan:

“The strength of ETF involvement in labour market information analysis in Jordan is in the way it goes beyond just collecting data. The ETF helps us develop not just the capacity to collect information, but also to manage and use it... the ETF helps us find the expertise to start utilising these data in a meaningful way. Contrary to common practice, we don't just get access to the limited expertise of an organisation or country. In fact, the ETF functions as a conduit to whatever expertise there is available in the European Union. The links established with peer organisations in, for example, Ireland and Spain are invaluable to us.”

The ETF, says Torsti, “is a leader in anticipating skills and job market developments, working closely with partner countries, EC services and the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) to identify emerging trends and future scenarios, making sense of their potential implications.”

That’s partly because educational policy is, by its very nature, a forward-looking pursuit. “The time span is more or less ten years,” says Torsti, “so when we’re looking at what we do now, those reforms will take effect in the 2030s, and will perhaps have an effect on society only in the 2040s.”

So, foresight exercises and comparing visions with other agencies “enhances the ETF’s agility and resilience, allowing it to quickly adapt to unforeseen challenges, to absorb unplanned requests and to support partner countries in reforming their education, training, and labour markets to meet geopolitical and socio-economic demands.”

Vincent McBride, ETF:

“The social purpose of education enables people to explore and realise their potential, and participate economically through their potential. It's not just about getting a job; it's about having a broader concept than that. Having worked with [ETF Directors] Peter de Rooij, Muriel Dunbar and Madlen Serban, I would say all of them, in different ways, have a commitment to education as having a social as well as an economic purpose.”

Abdelaziz Jaouani, ETF:

“Any kind of research must be linked to the main issues of this region. Namely, participation in the labour market, which is the lowest in the world, with only one in four women active, which doesn't mean employed. The second problem is the high level of informality in the region's economic system. The latter gives rise to issues such as tax evasion and lack of social protection in employment contracts, which need to be addressed by governments and donors.”

Halbibi Tachjanova, Turkmenistan:

“For Turkmenistan, the chance to create opportunities for young people is really important, and also meets the needs of employers. DARYA takes in account the demographic growth of our country.”

Dilbar Bakayeva, Tajikistan:

“We really hope that this [DARYA] initiative can help us improve our system of professional standards. And that it can help us improve the material base of our technical training offering. Interest in such training programmes among the adult population is growing.”

Silviu Gincu, Moldova:

“We appreciate the cooperation with the ETF regarding the digitalisation process of education, the exchange of experiences between the vocational education and training (VET) institutions and EU countries, the sharing of best practices according to the networking models of ENE [ETF Network for Excellence], EAfA [European Alliance for Apprenticeships] and others. We are honoured to be working with the ETF, especially because of the openness and opportunities to collaborate in the development and modernisation of VET.”

The importance of understanding the future of education, training and skills – and their role in wider society – has been recognised at the top of the EU in recent years. In her “Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029”, Ursula von der Leyen speaks of Europe needing “a radical step change in ambition and action for all skill levels and for all types of training and education.” This, writes von der Leyen, “is as important for people’s careers and prospects as it is for our competitiveness.”

Mario Draghi, too, has written about the imperative for the European Union to close skills gaps. “Competitiveness today”, he writes in “The Future of European Competitiveness”, “is less about relative labour costs and more about knowledge and skills embodied in the labour force.

His analysis suggests that “Europe is suffering from skills gaps across the economy, reinforced by a declining labour force. The European economy displays persistent skills shortages in several sectors and occupations, for both low- and high-skilled workers. Around one-quarter of European companies have faced difficulties in finding employees with the right skills, while another half report some difficulties. 77% of EU companies report that even newly recruited employees do not have the required skills. Skills are also lacking at the managerial level.”

Skills shortages, he writes, “are acting as a barrier to innovation and technology adoption and could potentially hinder decarbonisation as well... Projections to 2035 indicate that labour shortages will be most pronounced in high-skilled, non-manual occupations – i.e. those requiring high level of education – driven by replacement needs owing to retirements and the changing demands of the labour market.” The EU, he urges, “should overhaul its approach to skills, making it more strategic, future-oriented and focused on emerging skill shortages.”

“Improving basic skills and strengthening vocational education and training will be central”, says Mario Nava, Director General of the EU’s Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Directorate, “especially digital capabilities, because 42% of Europeans lack basic digital skills. That is why, in the next mandate, we will launch initiatives such as a European Strategy for VET, an Action Plan on basic skills, and a STEM education strategic plan.” Von der Leyen has spoken of her ambition to establish “a Union of Skills”, “focusing on investment, adult and lifelong learning, skill retention.”

This paramount need to understand the contours of society, education and the workplace in decades to come is the reason ETF organised, throughout 2024, four strategic foresight events focusing on the pivotal role of education in building more inclusive, resilient and future-ready societies.

Leading those events was Cristiano Cagnin, the ETF's foresight guru. "Nobody has been to the future," he smiles, "so we enter it as equals. In foresight exercises people lose their current agendas, and we create a space in which everyone hears one another and listens because participants think 'OK, I might be retired in 2040...'"

"Covid was the first big trigger that led to the realisation that our planning models do not work when the pace of change is difficult to cope with. We realised we all need to be better prepared for the future as it unfurls..."

"Foresight needs to be participatory," he says. "You have to bring in not only who makes decisions, but also the beneficiaries of those decisions. And it needs to be action-oriented: not just an exercise where people have fun, but an environment for dialogue and structured conversations that lead to some sort of action. We use the future more as a gadget to understand the present and see things we would often not see, to make connections we are often not aware of."

"So it's not about 'predicting the future,'" says Cagnin, "but about potential scenarios, alternative futures, and about understanding what those different futures might look like so that we can make our own evaluations, prioritise and create strategy."

Madlen Serban, ETF:

"The ETF helped us in developing this process of critical and forward thinking. Politicians all suffer from short-termism but the ETF outlived politicians. This became the greatest benefit of the ETF: it went beyond handing out fish. The ETF had the time and stamina to teach us how to fish."

Marko Vukašinovic, Montenegro:

"In the beginning, the ETF colleagues were messengers and mediators of expertise from the EU and from other countries in the EU neighbourhood. Through the years we developed our own capacity. The involvement of the ETF changed with our progress. They became co-designers and advisers. They also started helping us to tell our story. They were our lighthouse."

Emanuele Giaufret, Israel:

"What the ETF is doing in Israel is very much part of the relationship that EU and Israel have developed across the years, and it is right in the middle of a very strong bilateral cooperation."

Liliia Hrynevych, Ukraine:

"Soft skills are now becoming the new hard skills. Since 2017, the new Ukrainian School reform is being implemented in Ukraine with a strong focus on soft skills and with mandatory learning outcomes. And this reform was designed with the support of ETF expertise."

Cristiana Burzio, ETF:

"It's not very easy to explain to people outside the ETF what we are doing. I would say the ETF works to help the governments of non-EU member states make policies in the field of human resources development."

Honing strategies is part of a journey that the ETF has undertaken with partner DGs and the Joint Research Centre “so that we can reflect on what the potential scenarios for education and training are and better align Commission initiatives and navigate future events. You have different scenarios that connect to the present, so they give you a sort of roadmap, a pathway between the present and alternative futures...”

These curated conversations have revealed certain mega-trends that Cagnin thinks will radically affect the ETF’s work in coming years. “It’s very likely”, he says, “that AI and quantum computing will fundamentally change how knowledge is created and shared, and what kind of skills will be needed. Labour markets might not be what they are today, and all sorts of soft skills, those not easily replaceable by AI, might be re-evaluated.”

As AI takes over more epistemic tasks and as digital tools provide learners with immediate knowledge and expertise, it seems probable that soft and metacognitive skills will come to the fore: behavioural competences, emotional intelligence, teamwork, project management, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity and critical thinking.

Irina Tserodze, Georgia:

“The ETF represented someone who is neutrally credible and had a vast experience that was universally recognised. As such, the opinion of the ETF was very important to convince people – social partners in particular. If the ETF threw its weight in the ring there was a chance that we would stop talking and that things would get moving.”

There is understandable concern that technological advancement will accelerate inequalities. An imminent challenge for any agency involved in education is likely to be the bridging of economic, gender and digital divides in order to create inclusive and equitable societies that aren’t tempted towards political extremisms.

Another major theme to have emerged from foresight exercises is vulnerability and conflict. “We’re clearly witnessing”, says Cagnin, “different fragilities – political, environmental, social and economic – that lead to a number of conflicts. We need to be clear how we’re going to position ourselves as those fragilities become more prevalent. When there were conflicts in the past, we put aside working in that country and then went back to continue working with them afterwards. We don’t have the luxury of doing that anymore, so we have to ask, ‘how is the ETF going to add value in a situation of conflict?’ Eventually our partner countries will expand and we’ll have to deal with different fragilities.”

Olena Bekh, ETF:

“This year the ETF is supporting the development of new teaching standards, teacher certification and the professional development of educators through the New Ukrainian School reform programme, using a new innovative tool for teachers – Scaffold – a deck of cards developed under the ETF’s Creating New Learning initiative together with the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission.”

The shifting arena of ETF operations is also an emerging issue. “It’s probable that many of the neighbouring countries we work with now,” Cagnin asserts, “will soon become member states, so it then becomes a question of what other countries we will work with. Africa is becoming very important, economically and politically, and it seems likely the ETF will play a larger role there. We know it has the biggest labour market but also suffers from a lack of education. Europe needs a workforce and so do we have the luxury of not investing in that labour force in Africa?”

The demographic crisis within the European Union, with an ever-ageing population, means that millions are leaving the workforce every decade. “If you can’t replace them all with AI, there’s a window of opportunity there”, says Cagnin. “Africa has the youngest population but is also where education is missing the most. If we want to have a win-win solution in terms of migration, perhaps we should be doing more in terms of education and training in Africa.”

Lea Orro, Estonia:

“The ETF added the broader picture. As education is deeply embedded in every country’s cultural and socio-economic situation, you can never copy education solutions from other countries; but rather you can learn and rationalise the different needs and opportunities, and that’s where the expertise and the support of the ETF was crucial.”

Migration is likely to remain high on the political agenda because as well as the “pull” factor of the EU’s “demographic winter” there are clear “push” factors: climate degradation, drought, warfare and so on. Displacements and migration flows will compound fragilities, and possibly accentuate political extremisms within the EU. From a workforce point of view, an international recognition of accreditations and qualifications becomes ever more pressing. Von der Leyen has written of her ambition to create a “European Degree” and a “Skills Portability Initiative” so that skills acquired in one country are recognised in another, and it’s possible that the ETF could play a role in the internationalised skills accreditation system demanded by migration.

But as well as internationalisation, an era of reduced multilateralism means that the EU is likely to need to rely more on its own resources. “Strategic autonomy has become a big issue for a variety of reasons,” says Cagnin: “Covid 19, the disruption of supply chains, resource conflicts like the war in chips between Europe, China and the US, misinformation, hybrid warfare and cyber threats. The question of how can we be less dependent on external allies and build resilience and autonomy is being posed with urgency.”

Mokhtar Jwaili, Libya:

“Although the relationship with the ETF has been somewhat delayed from our side, there are continuous efforts to rejoin cooperation with the ETF, which we hope to resume in 2024–25. The start in 2012 was really good and there were many cooperation activities with the ETF, including the assessment of the Libyan TVET system, which led to the EU-funded TVET development programme. Joining the Torino Process was another positive mark, as it led to a more professional assessment of the Libyan TVET system, and the comparison with other countries.”

Samuel Cavanagh, ETF:

“The ETF has been at the forefront of skills development within a regional perspective. From around 2006, the ETF introduced the concept of national qualifications frameworks to the region, while from 2008 its Central Asian team worked on the development of vocational schools for lifelong learning. When the Central Asian Education Platform was established in 2012, the ETF actively contributed to it, for example by facilitating its working group on evidence-based policy making.”

Nadica Kostoska, North Macedonia:

“The country began participating in the EU monitoring process of its VET policies almost ten years ago. This process has become an inspiration for more effective planning of VET modernisation in line with Europe’s strategic goals and objectives. We believe that cooperation with the ETF will be crucial in providing equal opportunities for the employability and personal development of VET students.”

Mario Nava, European Commission:

“The Draghi report is clear: to achieve a true European Education Area and a Union of Skills, we must be visionary. Skills cannot be viewed solely through a national lens—mobility, both within and beyond the EU, is a given.”

Many voices within foresight events have suggested that collaboration and partnerships will be critical to address evolving challenges in education. Those partnerships will include increasing public-private arrangements, so that education institutions and businesses develop curricula and training programmes together to equip students and workers with the skills demanded by the labour market. Employers will offer work-based apprenticeships so that learners can gain practical, hands-on experience.

But collaborations and partnerships might also imply a “decolonisation” of education, moving away from the “imposition” of EU tools, frameworks and pathways and towards supporting partner countries to develop their own approaches that reflect their cultures, values and aspirations. It’s a vision of collaboration that, through drawing on different roots and providing alternative fruits, could enhance resilience, stability, inclusivity, and adaptability through diversity and difference.

Lluís Prats, European Commission:

“The ETF has proven to be an enormous value-added. As the responsibilities of the European Commission increased, but not the number of staff, we lost specific expertise. We became an administration of generalists that require the input of others. The beauty of the ETF is that since its inception 25 years ago, it has become a source of knowledge. This is precious for this administration because people like us, we don’t know anymore. Just as an example, when we visit the ministry in Montenegro to discuss necessary education and training reforms, we are met with respect. They take the reforms seriously and they listen to us because we know. And we know because the ETF knows. We know the issues, who are the actors and what needs to be done because the ETF has developed such excellent working relationships. This is totally precious for us.”

Muriel Dunbar, ETF:

“Naturally there is a lot of emphasis in the ETF’s work on the role of skills development for economic growth, but there is also a huge emphasis on skills development as a means of raising people out of poverty, of bringing greater equality to disadvantaged groups, including women.”

Pondering these possible scenarios also raises profound questions about what the foundational purpose of education is. “How can we deepen our understanding of education and skills?” asks Cagnin. In conversations and recent foresight conferences there has been “a realisation that education systems are the privilege of OECD countries, as opposed to indigenous knowledge. There has been a lot of discussion about justice, about global education and inclusion, and we’re trying to understand what it means to have an education with a global perspective: how we can bring in students to give them an active role, how we might embed one’s individual journey in education beyond just curricula, compliance and qualifications?”

Reham Rizk, Egypt:

“I like the efforts that the ETF is putting into Egypt...When you tailor the employment training to market needs, you’re going to have a positive impact.”

That might imply a redefinition of lifelong learning, shifting from a linear education system to a circular one that also includes non-formal and informal learning, as well as re/upskilling. It would consider lifelong learning an essential element of global citizenship and of individual and societal wellbeing. It would value human development above human capital development through allowing bespoke learning pathways rather than cookie-cutter education. That more humanistic framing of education would place emphasis on personal, as much as national, growth and development, and cherish individuals as participants and co-creators rather than as economic automatons.

That more holistic approach of human development would reflect a deeper understanding of education, one that creates networks that nurture individuals’ abilities to contribute meaningfully to society. That conception of learning sees it not as a tool for a country’s competitive edge that risks exacerbating existing disparities and inequalities, but as a mutual and open sharing that benefits all, leading to peace and prosperity. It’s a vision of learning that is interdisciplinary and multi-centred, taking place not only in schools and colleges, but in all theatres of life. It’s a vision that sees lifelong learning as flexible, accessible and modular.

“STRENGTHENING THE ETF’S FORESIGHT CULTURE”

says ETF Director, Pilvi Torsti, “ensures the agency, strongly committed to its public service role, remains future-ready, continually adapting its positioning, and business model. This fosters synergies with other EU services and agencies, and expands the ETF’s services to partners, the EC, international donors, and broader stakeholders. This approach enhances the ETF’s resilience, responsiveness, preparedness, and agility, allowing us to embrace change, navigate uncertainties and leverage opportunities.”



CELEBRATING OUR 30TH ANNIVERSARY!

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