

EIT Food – Response to the open consultation on the proposal of 2023 as the European Year of Skills

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1. Introduction

EIT Food is Europe’s leading food innovation initiative, and one of the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). Funded by Horizon Europe, it runs projects in the areas of food innovation, education, entrepreneurship, and public engagement, bringing together the three sides of the ‘knowledge triangle’: business (companies and SMEs), education institutions and research centres.

EIT Food’s vision is a world where everybody can access and enjoy sustainable, safe and healthy food – with trust and fairness from farm to fork. To accelerate the transition to a sustainable food system, EIT Food’s mission is to transform how food is produced, distributed, and consumed and to increase its value to European society. We will achieve this by solving the biggest innovation challenges through trusted industry, education and research partners working together with informed and engaged citizens.

EIT Food welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the proposal to designate 2023 as the European Year of Skills (EYS). Skills are pivotal for innovation to be able to accelerate the transformation of the food system. To such regard, we appreciate the proposal’s explanatory memorandum mentioning the clear link between addressing the skills gap and innovation power. However, we note that the proposal itself lacks substantial recognition of the skills-innovation nexus.

2. Innovation is a major enabler for the transition and requires skills, especially in agrifood

Our food systems are currently unsustainable. The EU Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy seek to promote a deep transformation of the way we produce and consume food. This will require the adoption of new solutions, technologies and business models to innovate our food systems. Innovation can be a key driver and enabler of sustainable food systems, if it is supported by robust public policy addressing and involving all actors in the food system. Skills are needed to lead and support this transformation.

The agrifood sector is faced with many sector-specific skill and education challenges that require tailored efforts. More than 40 million professionals work in the European food system, ranging from agriculture, manufacturing and retail to Horeca. Nevertheless, most segments of the value chain face skill shortages, leaving them unequipped to meet technical, digital and entrepreneurial demands and thus create solutions for societal challenges. The skill shortage constitutes a major barrier to innovation, in a sector that is characterised by low levels of innovation and generally risk-averse behaviour. This is particularly true for agricultural SMEs, where innovation tends to be disregarded, often due to skill gaps in the workforce. Other emerging innovative sectors, such as the blue bioeconomy, likewise have great growth potential, but the lack of the right skill sets to fully harness the opportunities offered by innovative solutions could prevent those sectors from unleashing such potential.

From mitigating climate change, to combatting food fraud, to sustainably feeding a growing population, facing the biggest challenges of our food system will require skilled professionals with the correct blend of technical, digital and entrepreneurial skills.

Addressing the skills gap is thus key for the EU to remain a competitive player on the global market. Innovation, adding value to agricultural produce whilst enabling more sustainable production, is essential to keep up with international competition and ensure our agrifood sector continues to generate excellent products at sustained volumes.

3. EIT Food works to promote skills and accelerate the transition

Recognising the central need to tackle this skill gap to enable the transformation of the food system in line with the twin green and digital transitions, EIT Food already deploys a vast array of [education activities](#). This portfolio is aimed at cultivating the crucial blend of innovation and entrepreneurial skills needed for the transition, fully in line with the objectives stated in Article 2 of the EYS proposal.

- Our flagship [Master's Degree in Food Systems](#), wherein students from the EU and beyond undertake a 2-year path tailored to their desired specialisation, benefiting from the specialised expertise of multiple excellent European universities and enterprises. Over 70 students have graduated with the systemic skillset to drive the transformation of the food system.
- Our professional leadership training programmes, including [WE Lead Food](#), for female leaders in the food system; [the ROOT](#), a collaboration to develop collective leadership approaches to food systems challenges, and [ACT>NOW](#), a programme aimed to support organisations to identify and reduce their Scope-3 emissions.
- Our [Innovator Fellowship](#) aims to identify postgraduate talents worldwide with creative and innovative potential, wishing to expand their skill repertoire, and provide them with advanced training for the development of an innovative idea with significant impact in the food system.
- Many other activities, including: a portfolio of 25 **Massive Online Open Courses** (MOOCs – attended by over 150 000 consumers to date); our [Inspire Programmes](#), providing entrepreneurship and technical training with a thematic focus; the [Youth Mission](#), facilitating food education already in secondary schools; our **Grow Workshops for farmers** and [more](#).

EIT Food is also tackling the current lack of recognition and understanding of what skills are needed for the transformation to a more sustainable food system, through the development of a **Competency Framework**. By recognising eight priority areas (from food system thinking, to entrepreneurship, technology management, leadership and more), the framework sets the standard for developing and enhancing specific competencies. This underpins our newly launched [Learning Services for Employers](#), which offers a first-of-its-kind pan-European assessment process for professional training programmes and certification for learners where it explicitly recognises non-formal and informal learning pathways. The Learning Services help employers assess skill gaps and provide an internationally recognised mark of excellence in professional education for the food system.

Moreover, EIT Food cooperates and engages with other like-minded actors to tackle the skills gap:

- As a **signatory to the Pact for Skills**, EIT Food cooperates with several other agrifood stakeholders as a core member in the **Skills Partnership for the Agri-Food Ecosystem**, to upskill and reskill the current workforce and make the agri-food ecosystem more attractive to young professionals, while providing a career and life-long learning perspective to both employers and workers.
- EIT Food also carries out education activities in cooperation with other Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) of the EIT, such as the [Higher Education Institution \(HEI\) Initiative](#), and the new [Deep Tech Talent Initiative \(DTTI\)](#), a new initiative mandated in the New European Innovation Agenda, aiming to train one million talents in deep tech skills by 2025.
- Finally, EIT Food provides a number of key assets to help employers, employees and job seekers to articulate their skills and to verify their suitability for job roles through an Artificial Intelligence engine ([SkillCharge](#)).

Finally, our **Entrepreneurship** programmes also feature an education component, as the support offered to startups in our pipeline includes tailored training and mentoring. This includes programmes aimed at specific beneficiaries, such as our [Empowering Women in Agrifood \(EWA\)](#) programme, which mentored over 250 female entrepreneurs in 2020-2022, resulting in the registration of 20 new female-led businesses.

4. EIT Food urges greater recognition of entrepreneurial and innovation skills in the EYS proposal

As outlined above, several EIT Food initiatives aim to promote the reskilling and upskilling of the agrifood workforce, thus contributing to enhance the competitiveness of the European agrifood sector, in line with the objectives set out in Article 2 of the Proposal on a European Year of Skills 2023. Nonetheless, with a view to further advancing innovation to accelerate the green and digital transitions envisaged by the EU, the skills-innovation nexus deserves more attention in the Proposal. Putting its innovation firepower to work against the sustainable transition is a key priority for EIT Food. It is in this spirit that we call for placing a greater emphasis on the following elements, as part of the EYS proposal:

- **Promote entrepreneurial and innovation skills as essential tools** for the workforce to tackle the challenges ahead in the transition to a green and digital EU industry. In the agrifood sector, where a conservative mindset prevails, promoting innovation skills is crucial if we want to meet growing and changing food demand.
- **Enhance funding opportunities to deploy upskilling and reskilling** initiatives/programmes and thus develop a skilled and innovative workforce that can lead the way in the sustainable transition.
- **Increase synergies between stakeholders striving to boost innovation and related skills**, to achieve the systemic approach that is needed for a modern, sustainable, and thriving European industry.



Annex

EIT KICs – Joint Responseⁱ

The EIT (European Institute of Innovation and Technology) KICs (Knowledge and Innovation Communities) welcome 2023 as the European Year of Skills. The EIT KICs appreciate the European Union’s intention to invest and catalyse efforts in education and lifelong learning. As EU partnerships invested in the creation of a European knowledge economy, EIT KICs are ready to contribute to a successful outcome of this initiative. They call for a greater, explicit recognition of the direct link between education, innovation and Europe’s competitiveness and for the acknowledgement of EIT’s role in achieving this endeavour. EIT KICs also caution about the need to earmark budget to fund dedicated action towards upskilling and reskilling for a successful outcome.

Education and skills are essential steppingstones for Europe to flourish economically while growing sustainably. Regrettably, the European Union (EU) lags behind in the global race for talent with already existing shortages due to brain drain and shrinking demographics. The situation will worsen as needs for skilled workers are projected to increase.ⁱⁱ

This context seriously challenges the EU’s capacity to be resilient and competitive, including by achieving the green and digital transitions. As EU partnerships invested in the creation of a European knowledge economy, EIT KICs are uniquely positioned to respond to such challenge and ready to contribute to a successful outcome of the 2023 European Year of Skills. They call for (1) a greater, explicit recognition of the direct link between education, innovation and Europe’s competitiveness, and for the acknowledgement of EIT’s role in accomplishing this endeavour. EIT KICs also (2) caution about the need to earmark budget to fund dedicated action towards upskilling and reskilling in strategic value chains for a successful outcome.

(1) EDUCATION AND INNOVATION FOR A FUTURE-PROOF EUROPE: EIT KICs’ ROLE IN DELIVERING ON THE GOALS OF THE 2023 EUROPEAN YEAR OF SKILLS

The *new European Innovation Agenda (NEIA)* emphasises that tackling Europe’s education and talent gap is a true necessity to boost innovation and keep innovative companies in Europeⁱⁱⁱ. Indeed, **education and skills are key levers for boosted innovation power and for a competitive, future-proof Europe**. The 2030 European Year of Skills thus comes as a necessary milestone: by prioritising skills and bringing together existing EU actions and instruments, it has the potential to leverage capacity and lessons learned, and to accelerate solutions to pressing challenges. **EIT is a pivotal instrument to boost education and skills development, foster innovation and boost competitiveness** - it should be acknowledged as such in the 2023 initiative.

For over a decade, EIT KICs have connected innovators across disciplines, borders and sectors to shape and deliver collaborative pan-EU projects across *education, innovation and business creation*. These activities have developed into a portfolio of educational programmes which underpin EIT’s EU mandate to develop a leading knowledge economy for Europe to flourish economically while growing sustainably. Moreover, EIT offers the EIT Label quality mark for degree programmes as well as lifelong learning activities. Importantly, developed educational activities represent a testament to EIT KICs track record in

skilling and reskilling the European workforce. Outstanding examples in the respective fields of EIT KICs competence include: EIT Climate-KIC's "Climate Leadership Journey" programme, EIT Digital's planned "dAcademy", EIT Food's "Competency Framework" for the Pact for Skills in Agrifood, EIT Health's "WorkInHealth Foundation", EIT InnoEnergy's "European Battery Alliance Academy", EIT Manufacturing's "Skills.move", EIT Raw Materials' "European Raw Materials Academy" and EIT Urban Mobility's "Academy and Competence Hub".^{iv} What is more, collaboration between EIT KICs has allowed for the creation of cross-sectoral educational programmes such as the Higher Education Initiative (HEI).^v The value of such interconnectedness has already been recognised as instrumental in the NEIA, which calls upon EIT to train 1 million deep tech talents over 3 years across all Member States and to bridge the gender gap in STEM, entrepreneurship and innovation.^{vi}

EIT KICs are keen to put their extensive experience and knowledge base to contribution for a successful outcome of the European Year of Skills. In line with Art.3 of the 2023 European Year of Skills legislative proposal, further contributions may include the organisation of dedicated conferences and events, developing and hosting trainings as well as dissemination to/with a multi-stakeholder audience.

(2) EARMARK BUDGET TO FUND THE SKILLS GAP IN STRATEGIC VALUE CHAINS

While EIT KICs remain open to exchanging about their involvement in the initiative and providing their support to increase the education and skills levels in Europe for a resilient and sustainable future, they also wish to caution about the **need to earmark budget to fund dedicated action towards upskilling and reskilling across the strategic value chains.**

The availability of skilled workers remains a bottleneck for key EU industries tackling the green and digital transition. The European Commission has identified this as a priority, but has not taken corresponding funding decisions. A strong signal from the EU is needed to retain and attract a skilled workforce. The announcement of the "European Year of Skills" needs to be flagged with concrete, implementable actions. **EIT KICs therefore propose to earmark a set percentage of ESF+ allocations for skills development** in KICs' relevant sectors so that decisive progress can be made towards the green and digital transition in these fields.^{vii}

About EIT and EIT KICs

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is an EU body created by the European Union in 2008 to strengthen Europe's ability to innovate. The EIT is an integral part of Horizon Europe, the EU's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. EIT Knowledge Innovation Communities (KICs) are EU institutionalised partnerships under Horizon Europe's Pillar III – Innovative Europe. Bringing together more than 2900 partners, EIT is Europe's largest innovation ecosystem in Europe. For more information see www.eit.europa.eu

ⁱ European Year of Skills 2023 [request for feedback](#)

ⁱⁱ For example, as the EU population grows older and disease incidence increases, over the period 2020-2030 a +12% employment growth average is estimated (+2.5M workers) in the health & social care sectors with a corresponding 10% projected increase in skills demand. [Source: Cedefop] New skills and competences will also be required to meet the needs of an increasingly urban and interconnected EU population requiring sustainable mobility services, as well as digital solutions and improved digital literacy. Regrettably the current trajectory indicates that Europe is running short from the target: there is currently an estimated shortage of ~1M health workers in Europe, and by 2030 only 13.3 million digital specialists will be employed (short 6.7M from the EU Digital Compass target).

ⁱⁱⁱ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS “A New European Innovation Agenda”, COM(2022) 332 final

^{iv}

- EIT Climate-KIC’s [“Climate Leadership Journey” programme](#)
- EIT Food’s [“Competency Framework”](#) provides a harmonised scheme for skill certification, guiding learners and employers towards the professional profiles needed for the transition; it has become an essential component of the Pact for Skills in Agrifood and provided the model upon which the extension of the EIT Label for non-degree education and training
- The EIT Health [WorkInHealth Foundation](#) sets to federate collective action to address the skills gap, attract talent to the HealthTech industry, support the acceleration of upskilling and reskilling of talent by linking industry & academia and boost the growth, autonomy and competitiveness of the European health industry.
- EIT InnoEnergy’s “European Battery Academy”
- EIT Manufacturing’s “Skills.move”, EIT (skillsmove.eu) equipped with more than 100 learning paths continuously increasing is the learning platform co-created with the industry to address the needs of 16 millions of manufacturing employees, students and long-life learners.
- The Raw Materials Academy managed by EIT Raw Materials supports Europe to transit from brown to green jobs. The raw materials sector supports already more than 30 million jobs in downstream manufacturing industries in Europe.
- EIT Urban Mobility’s “Academy and Competence Hub” <https://www.eiturbanmobility.eu/academy/>

^v The EIT’s [HEI Initiative: Innovation Capacity Building for Higher Education](#) is a joint EIT Community activity coordinated by EIT RawMaterials. The initiative is a key objective for the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) as part of its new strategy, the EIT Strategic Innovation Agenda 2021–2027. The initiative aims to support higher education institutions with expertise and coaching, access to the EIT innovation ecosystem, and funding, enabling them to develop innovation action plans complementing the needs of individual higher education institutions.

^{vi} In addition, the [“Girls Go Circular”](#) Project coordinated by EIT RawMaterials, aims to equip 40,000 schoolgirls aged 14-19 across Europe with digital and entrepreneurial skills by 2024.

^{vii} For instance, earmarking and frontloading 2% of ESF+ in the next 3 years for the training, upskilling and reskilling in the battery value chain would be required to bridge the skills gap in that sector. Overall, earmarking dedicated funding would contribute to reaching the objective to spend 30% of the MFF 2021-2027 for climate action the EU has set for itself. The European Court of Auditors noted that the EU has overstated on spending 20% of its 2014-2020 budget on climate action and recommended to better link the EU expenditures to the climate and energy objectives. Re-allocating and earmarking money from the ESF+ to skills is hence vital to fund climate priorities that are fully supported by Member States.