



BeWell.

Blueprint Alliance for a Future Health Workforce
Strategy on Digital and Green Skills

Position paper supporting the European Commission' proposal on the European Year of Skills 2023

The BeWell consortium members **wholeheartedly welcome** the proposal of the European Commission to designate 2023 as the European Year of Skills.

Supporting arguments

This position paper supports the upskilling and reskilling initiatives of the **health workforce**. Its supporting arguments are clustered in a way which highlights the **importance** and **relevance** of the 2023 European Year of Skills and the **urgency to act**. It outlines BeWell's own concrete plans for action in 2023 and beyond.

Importance

The health workforce represents a significant share of the European workforce. The latest figures by Eurostat (from end 2019) have identified almost **15 million people** who work in healthcare occupations, representing over 7% of all persons employed and almost 4% of the EU population.¹ However, this average percentage is not equally distributed across the countries in Europe. Among EU Member States, Sweden has the highest share of health professionals (12% of employees), followed by Finland and Denmark (both 10%) while Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia have the lowest shares, with their health workforce representing around 4% of employees.

A number of major trends impact significantly the demand for health services and determine the skill needs of health professionals. **Demographic changes** and the rising prevalence of **chronic conditions** and co-morbidities, the **burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** (such as cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory conditions and cancer), **antimicrobial resistance (AMR)**, and the consequences of sedentary lifestyles have created pressures on health systems and increased the demand to reconsider the most optimal skill-mix in the health workforce. This **increasing demand** for health services has not

¹ Eurostat, 2022. Majority of health jobs held by women <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20200409-2>

yet been counterbalanced by a similar increase in nurses, physicians, pharmacists, allied healthcare workers, health and hospital managers, informal carers and other professionals.²

Relevance

Digital technologies in healthcare provide new opportunities to the health workforce by enhancing internal and external processes and managing large amounts of information. Therefore, the digital revolution in healthcare can both create **new opportunities** and generate new integrated high-value care models to improve efficiencies and outcomes that matter most to patients. Digital technologies are increasingly deployed in a growing number of fields and by an increasing number of users. New digital technologies, if properly designed and implemented, contribute to improved quality of service delivery, patient safety and reduced costs.³ All healthcare professionals should be involved in the design of new technologies to guarantee their correct use and be adequately trained. Yet, training on digital technologies is often offered only as an **optional course**. Healthcare professionals also report that they do not have enough up-skilling opportunities in order to make full use of the available digital technologies.⁴ For instance, analysing data and using digital tools for collaboration were among the most requested skills in the health sector in 2020, with demand for these skills set to grow substantially by 2030.⁵

Whilst it is true that digital transformation is a major challenge for the health workforce, individuals' reskilling and upskilling should not be focussed solely on acquiring IT and data collection/data analysis, and related skills sets. **Communication, interdisciplinary and organisational skills** are equally essential in the shift towards more person-centred and personalised care approaches. In addition, digital transformation in the health and care sector should happen in a way that **respects natural resources** and the climate. According to studies, the health sector's climate footprint is equivalent to 4.4% of global net emissions; its carbon footprint is set to triple by 2050 even when a 'business as usual scenario' is considered.⁶

This expanding demand for green skills reflects equally growing global concerns on the impact of unsustainable activities in the workplace: in the case of the health and care sector, that means a focus on hospitals and formal healthcare institutions. Green skills - including sustainability, innovation, operations, management, communications, planning, and research skills - are needed to support a sustainable society.

² WHO Health workforce imbalances and shortages <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/fact-sheets/item/health-workforce-imbalances-and-shortages>

³ Digital Transformation: An Overview of the Current State of the Art of Research <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211047576>

⁴ CEDEFOP Skills intelligence https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-intelligence/skills-online-job-advertisements?country=EU27_2020&year=2020#3

⁵ EIT Health and McKinsey: 'Transforming healthcare with AI: The impact on the workforce and organisations'. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/transforming-healthcare-with-ai>

⁶ <https://www.arup.com/-/media/arup/files/publications/h/hcwh-road-map-for-health-care-decarbonization.pdf>

Urgency to act

A major challenge to solve is the shrinking and ageing workforce which is resulting in **decreasing supply** in the face of **increasing demand**. The health workforce itself is **ageing**. **Recruitment, retention** and improvement of working conditions have become a huge challenge in the EU and throughout the rest of Europe. All countries in the EU and Europe are experiencing **health workforce shortages**.⁷ Difficult working conditions and lack of career development have been among the greatest triggers of shortages, even before COVID-19. One could have expected that the number of health professionals would have grown substantially due to the increased care demand created by the COVID-19 pandemic, but that was not the case in most European countries. The demand for health professionals continues to increase.

WHO Europe issued a report in autumn 2022 which refers to the health workforce gaps a **“ticking timebomb”**.⁸ 40% of medical doctors are aged 55 or older. Concerns about the implications of an ageing health workforce are exacerbated by problems like severe burnout, mental health problems, long working hours, inadequate professionals support, and workforce shortages. This vicious circle will simply increase the number of professionals who decide to leave the health workforce because they cannot cope with the growing pressures which, in turn, will further amplify the pressures on those who are still in position. If these problems are not addressed, health systems risk imminent collapse, WHO Europe warns.

Continuing professional development opportunities can make the sector attractive for new members of the workforce and can improve the retention of already employed professionals. Training initiatives can help to establish a reputation for the health sector as a **healthy and person-centred work environment** where professionals can thrive. Thus, it will become **an agile and resilient sector** which is able to adapt fast to new emerging challenges, and procure the relevant knowledge sources that will **reduce the workload and stress levels** of the workforce.

⁷ Kuhlmann, E., Batenburg en al. A call for action to establish a research agenda for building a future health workforce in Europe

⁸ WHO Health and care workforce in Europe: time to act <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1464107/retrieve>

Implementation

The BeWell consortium members also welcome the coordinated measures which the European Commission's proposal on the European Year of Skills 2023 includes, namely the **concerted efforts** at local, regional, national and European levels to create **better synergies** between the already existing policy frameworks and financial instruments. BeWell is committed to contributing to the initiative's short-term and long-term objectives to **strengthen cooperation and increased awareness** among public and private actors and **promote increased opportunities** for upskilling and reskilling. It will do this by organising events, conferences, information campaigns; facilitating increased dialogue between already engaged stakeholders and reaching out to new stakeholders who are not yet involved in the movement; developing and implementing skills intelligence tools; and collaborating with other networks, actions, projects of relevance on challenges such as 'medical deserts', workforce planning, and other problems.

BeWell's concrete commitments

BeWell will produce an innovative **care and digital skills-monitor**, a web-based online tool to capture skill-mix innovations, which will be updated on a yearly basis to capture new developments. The first version of the tool will be made available on the BeWell website (bewell-project.eu) in June 2023, during the European Year of Skills.

BeWell's main mission is to coordinate, design and develop an **upskilling and reskilling strategy** for the health workforce to enable the sector to embrace the opportunities offered by both the green and digital transitions. The first version of the strategy will be presented during the annual European Health Management conference in Rome on 5, 6, and 7 June 2023. This launch event will benefit from the increased attention which the 2023 European Year of Skills will attract to the importance of providing an appropriately skilled workforce to the European economy, thus boosting Europe's competitiveness.

Last but not least, on 13 December 2022, BeWell launched a **health ecosystem large-scale partnership** under the Pact for Skills initiative. The partnership will consolidate its structure and roll out its services during the 2023 European Year of Skills, and over the years to come in order to attract local/regional and national ecosystems and organisations committed to similar upskilling and reskilling ambitions. The Pact for Skills initiative will enable organisations to leverage the visibility of their actions and utilise financial instruments in a more coordinated manner.

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