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Just Transition Policies, Power Plant Workers and Green Entrepreneurs in Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria: Can Education and Retraining Meet the Challenge?

Nikolaos Apostolopoulos [1], Alexandros Kakouris [1,*], Panagiotis Liargovas [1], Petar Borisov [2], Teodor Radev [2], Sotiris Apostolopoulos [3], Sofia Daskou [3] and Eleni E. Anastasopoulou [4]

[1] Department of Management Science and Technology, University of the Peloponnese, 22100 Tripoli, Greece; anikos@uop.gr (N.A.); liargova@uop.gr (P.L.)
[2] Department of Management and Marketing, Agricultural University of Plovdiv, 4000 Plovdiv, Bulgaria; peterborisov@gmail.com (P.B.); t_radev@au-plovdiv.bg (T.R.)
[3] Department of Economics and Business, Neapolis University Pafos, Pafos 8042, Cyprus; s.apostolopoulos@nup.ac.cy (S.A.); s.daskou@nup.ac.cy (S.D.)
[4] School of Agriculture and Food, University of Peloponnese, 22100 Tripoli, Greece; e.anastasopoulou@go.uop.gr
* Correspondence: a.kakouris@uop.gr

Abstract: This study seeks to shed light on the changes currently occurring in Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria on the energy transition process by examining the relevant consequences for power plant workers in the green energy market. The main aim of this paper is to explore the impacts of the implemented policies on the labour force of electricity generation stations and to identify learning needs for new skills and competences. Thus, it explores the possibility to achieve a just transition by employing workers from the high-carbon energy sector to the renewable energy sector. Qualitative research was carried out to explore the views and expectancies of the above-mentioned people as well as to trace the perceptions of the stakeholders of the green energy industry. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the previously mentioned three countries, which also investigated relevant training and upskilling programmes. The findings revealed various types of educational needs and techniques that can be applied by training providers in accordance to the power plant worker's views as well as the disciplines and specialities of the workforce that are suitable to receive the further fit for attending such programmes. Workers in Greece and Cyprus appeared more optimistic for this possibility compared to Bulgarian workers. Green entrepreneurs were also optimistic but worried for the rate of investments in the green sector. The current findings describe the backdrop that challenges future retraining programmes with regard to achieving just transition policies for this workforce.

Keywords: just transition; green energy policies; renewable energy sources; vocational training; upskilling; energy plant workforce; education

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1. Introduction

Climate change and its impacts on the environment, society and global economy have sparked intensive research interest [1–4]. Simultaneously, the transition to sustainable production and consumption is at the forefront of research interest [5–7]. With policy ambitions at an all-time high, the green transition is set to accelerate over the next decade and to trigger a significant structural change in the EU job market. While aggregate employment impacts of the green transition may remain constrained, shifts are likely to occur between sectors, firms, occupations and regions. EU countries, including Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria, are already on an energy transition path [8–11], but not without emerging concerns. Specifically, there is a strong worry in all EU countries about the possibility of

power plant workers losing their jobs [12,13]. Notably, EU member states engage in energy transitions at different speeds [14,15], thus broadening workers' concerns, especially for staff in countries that have committed to transition in the short run [16]. Despite extant studies exploring energy transitions [17] and relevant employment issues [18], there is lack of empirical evidence on how the workers experience this change. A common, widespread suggestion employs education and training as an essential tool to overcome any difficulty; however, this generic perspective needs to be narrowed down and include the views of stakeholders to be efficient. It is well known that stakeholders' beliefs are influenced by local cultures and traditions; hence, a one-size-fits-all solution may not be possible. It is also reasonable to expect that the problem and the solution are intertwined, so it makes sense to ask for them to be studied within the same sector. This means that the employability under a sectoral change (here, the energy sector) must be in the spotlight (contrasted to other, intersectoral expectations). Emerging research questions that motivate this research can be articulated as follows:

RQ1. *Is it possible to achieve a just transition by employing workers from the high-carbon energy sector to the renewable energy sector?*

RQ2. *What kinds of knowledge and skills are desired by the sectors' stakeholders and can be achieved through education?*

Apparently, these research questions mandate a consideration of the national conditions and culture to discuss potential answers. Countries appear to be in different energy production and transition tracks, with differences in their educational systems and particularities within their job markets. This study explores the cases of Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria. Despite their similarities, Greece, unlike Cyprus, has undergone a recent financial crisis that has impaired its economics and labour market. Hence, it is meaningful to examine these two countries apart as they rely on different energy production resources. This research also focuses on the power plant workforce, which will be forced to alter its knowledge and skills to gain employment in the green economy. It specifically explores the views, experiences and beliefs of power production workers in these three countries, as well as of green energy entrepreneurs, on the skills and competencies that need to be acquired for a successful and just transition to green energy production positions. It highlights the similarities and differences in the evolution of potential changes within the workforce, derived from the fact that the above countries significantly vary regarding their ways of electricity production.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. In Section 2, entitled 'Context', a description of the status is featured, in terms of the current knowledge and trends on the topic. Next, Section 3 reflects the relevant literature review. Subsequently, Section 4 presents the methods and materials that were used in this study. In this section, we initially outline the reasons for choosing an explorative qualitative approach, through a set of semi-structured interviews, to trace the opinions of certain persons involved in the energy sector—mostly about training and upskilling programmes in the context of a just transition process. In parallel, a specific description regarding the sampling strategy and data analysis is provided. In Section 5, the findings are presented in relation with the emerging themes, highlighting the views of interviewees in each country. The findings are discussed in Section 6, while Section 7 illustrates the conclusions and recommendations. Lastly, Section 8 refers to the certain limitations that emerged.

2. Context

It is well-known that Greece and Bulgaria rely on extracted sources to produce electric energy, such as lignite coal [19], while Cyprus' main source of energy is the burning of fossil fuels [20]. Notably, Bulgaria has the advantage of established nuclear stations, but at the same time shows no progress in the preparation of territorial plans for coal regions. The green energy production percentage is shown in Figure 1, where the recent decline in Bulgaria's progress indicates a reluctancy to scale up. The large number of workers can be

found in the lignite mining sector, where most problems related to the working conditions and the negative impacts on workers' health exist [21–23]. This case, in combination with the level of renewable energy sector's development per country, as well as the relevant policies—along with further initiatives—of addressing emerging training personnel issues, certainly play a pivotal role in employment creation and workers' integration [24]. On top of that, the late successive crises, which have impacted those countries, are considered to be another crucial challenge to achieving a smooth transition with regard the 'destiny' of power plant workers and the sustainability of the renewable energy enterprises [25,26].

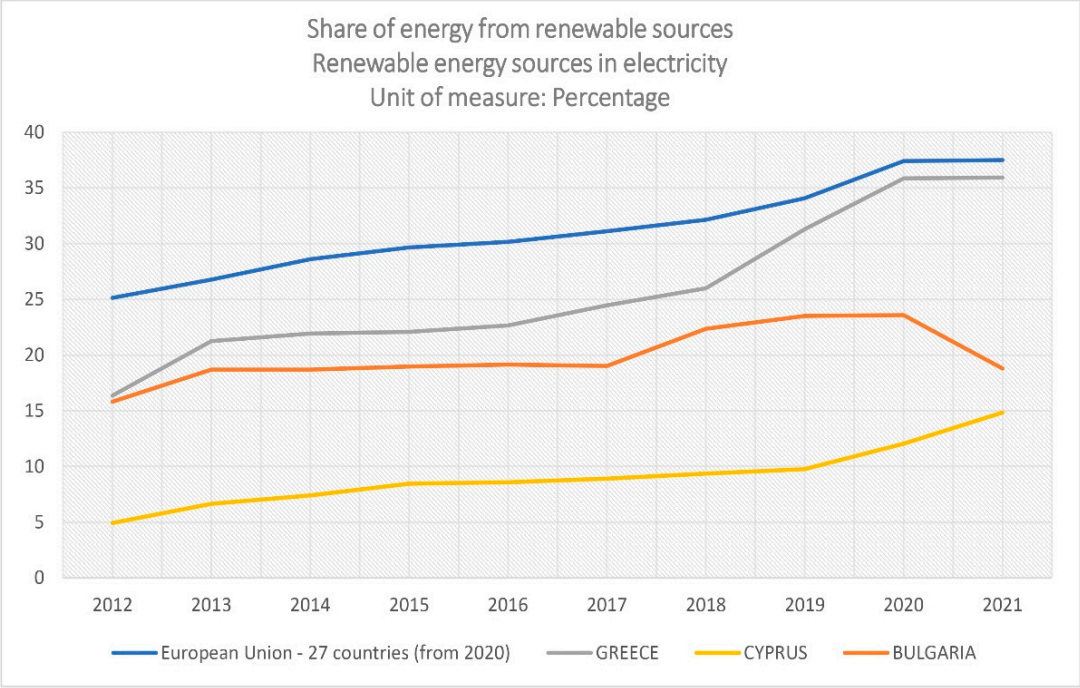

Figure 1. Share of energy from renewable sources to electricity (source: EUROSTAT).

In the context of the ongoing energy transition process, policy actions should focus on providing inclusive social protection, education and training, individualised re-employment support, temporary job subsidies and effective regional development policies. Acting in anticipation can certainly improve a policy's effectiveness. Therefore, lessons should be drawn from past structural transformations aimed at economic diversification, as well as previous examples featuring certain approaches towards vocational education and training (VET) and support mechanisms in the socio-economic field [27]. There is a need for further enhancement of analysing and assessing the whole context of skills' delivery and the participation of the workforce as trainees [28].

Thus, the importance of this study pertains to the workforce's new skills and competencies required for a successful green transition in the energy power sector by directly in-depth interviewing, for the first time in one study, the most relevant profile of people for this matter (i.e., those who are surely on the frontlines of all these radical changes): the power plant workers and the green entrepreneurs. Moreover, the cross-country perspective could comparatively capture the evolution of the energy transition policies in the electricity generation sector for the mentioned three countries of Southeastern Europe, all being official EU members, but with different economies and fuel dependencies as well as different shares of energy from renewable sources (see Figure 1, also utilized by Musiał et al. [11]). In this regard, through the views of non-policy makers or other government officials, it is of interest to discover to what level they are ultimately facing the same challenges in the field and how they have dealt with them so far.

The new challenges derived from the technological options are another considerable aspect that must be considered by the stakeholders as it certainly influences both the transition process and the training part of this issue. Policies should be visionary and focus strongly on innovation to further support and strengthen human resources, contributing to the transformation of systems and the improvement of citizens' quality of life. The multi-national approach employed in this research provides insights and shifts the research lens to a goal within the same industries (traditional/green energy sector).

3. Literature Review

For many years, migration to mining areas has been associated with the search for jobs, the provision of services and, by extension, economic development [29]. In the late 1970s, the term "Just Transition" emerged when labour unions in America demanded that the rights of workers in polluting industries whose jobs were threatened by the implementation of environmental regulations be secured [30]. Just transition has now become a recognised international norm, as reflected in the guidelines published in 2015 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), "*towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*", and embodied in the Paris Agreement [31]. Regarding the guidelines for governments, in summary, they should provide a coherent and stable policy framework for sustainable business development and decent work for all. They should also promote and engage in social dialogues at all stages, from policy design to implementation and evaluation and at all levels, from the national level to the enterprise. Wieliczko et al. [17] examined the decline of such policies and the need for a just transition to sustainability in rural areas facing challenges that they could overcome on their own. The role of the EU agricultural policy in the just transition of rural areas is vital. Effective assistance to rural communities is essential if the EU is to uphold its values and create sustainable governance that goes beyond sectoral policies.

In December 2019, the European Green Deal was published, which is Europe's development vision and includes in its four strategic pillars the policies of a just and green, inclusive transition [32]. With the main objective of achieving EU's climate neutrality by 2050, EU economies have committed to zero emissions and limiting the temperature increase by 2 °C. This requires universal decarbonisation of the global economy [33]. With a first target of 2030, 36 governments have phased out coal [31]. To facilitate this transition, in January 2020, the European Commission created the Just Transition Fund (JTF) with a budget of EUR 17.5 billion for the period 2021–2027 [32]. One of the key priority areas of the JTF is to directly support and promote employment for the workforce affected by the transition and at risk of losing jobs or being unemployed. It is estimated that by 2027, 1.6 million workers in the EU will lose their jobs and will need support [18]. The aim is to implement integrated employment promotion programmes, subsidise jobs and subsidise companies to invest in fossil fuel dependent regions and actions to upgrade skills and retrain human resources.

Various studies show that a large proportion of workers in lignite mines and power plants will need to upgrade their knowledge and skills to access and reintegrate into the active workforce and the labour market [34–38]. The restoration of mined soils requires skilled technicians for the application of chemical methods, such as the use of nanoparticles or biological methods for controlled natural vegetation [29]. In addition, among others, there will be a need for energy efficiency auditors and for filling positions in solar panel installations. Training programmes will help workers in lignite areas to gain access to quality and skilled jobs [39]. Therefore, maximising their skills is a key element in contributing to the economic and social upgrading of a region [40]. However, so far, the experience of workers in such programmes is not particularly positive, as there is no matching of these programmes with actual jobs [41]. Research by Bray et al. [28] has shown that a transition will widen regional disparities if there is no coordinated approach to upgrading workforce skills. Here, the role of government and VETs in adapting education and training to the needs of local economies and communities is crucial [42]. In particular, VETs combine

learning with the development of practical skills, in contrast to the hitherto traditional method of teaching in higher education [43]. Louie and Pearce [44] argued that coal industry workers who are appropriately retrained will be able to be enlisted into the renewable energy sector. In the UK, local business partnerships are incorporating energy-related teaching into schools' curricula. Promoting energy awareness at an early age can encourage more young people to pursue sustainable development in higher education [28]. These publications provide relevant information on training, retraining and upskilling, but do not provide a comprehensive overview of the issue of a just transition of workers from the coal energy sector to the renewable energy sector.

The EU's renewable energy policy was revised in 2021, and the target is now for 40% of the total EU energy consumption to come from renewables by 2030. The promotion of RES has a positive impact on both GDP and employment and contributes significantly to the decoupling of EU Member States from oil imports, thus ensuring energy security [45]. The transition to renewable energy sources allows the creation of local jobs in the energy production sectors, contributing to the stable economic development of the country [46]. As far as rural areas are concerned, they are distinguished for the development of renewable energy sources due to the availability of land. However, rural energy projects often face resistance, making local acceptance and participatory efforts crucial. Emancipatory energy democracy and justice initiatives aim to ensure sustainability and equity [47].

By greening our economies, we can create high-quality green jobs to tackle unemployment as well as fight climate change and environmental degradation. In the EU, the leading countries in renewable energy employment are Germany, Poland, France, the UK, Italy and Spain. The largest sector is bioenergy (392,400 jobs), followed by biofuels (239,000 jobs) and biogas (74,900). It is estimated that the wind energy sector in the EU will employ around 292,300 jobs, followed by photovoltaics with 127,300 jobs [45]. Overall, by 2050, the renewable energy sector is expected to account for around 75% of jobs, compared to 45% in 2020 [46]. The number of green jobs in Europe may be increasing. However, does everyone have the same opportunities to apply and claim such a job? Has a broad initiative been launched for education and training for green jobs at all skill levels? Thus, can education meet the challenge? Transition should offer equal opportunities for all, people of higher and lower skills, unemployed and employed. Is a skills delivery system in line with industry requirements? Policymaking for a just transition needs to consider all dimensions of equitable inclusion of societies in the transformation, minimising socio-economic risks.

The above review demonstrates that there is a gap in the literature which needs to be researched and discussed. Moreover, at the same time, energy transition demands a more focused analysis [17], and there is a need to investigate how to maintain employment [18] and shed light on the role of education and training [43].

4. Methodological Approach

As the interpretivist paradigm is primarily applicable to qualitative studies, we adopted a qualitative design [48], which better suits its investigative aims. Qualitative research is considered a suitable and effective way to explore human opinions, perceptions and experiences [49–52]. As such, we follow an interpretive outline which effectively captures the human experiences and expectations [53]. For the specific qualitative research, deductive coding was pursued [52], as will be discussed in the next section.

The population of this study referred to the entrepreneurs of green energy sectors and employees of electricity power plants in Cyprus, Bulgaria and Greece. As the purpose of this study was exploratory and the design was qualitative, the sampling decision did not deem the use of a probability sample to be necessary. Thus, convenience sampling was originally adopted based on the professional networks of the research teams in the three countries, which lead to the collection of data from 30 individuals via snowballing. The structure of the sample is presented in Table 1. Convenience sampling is a well-accepted qualitative sampling technique [54–56] as a cost-effective and time-efficient method through which selected individuals with the desired knowledge and interest are contacted.

Table 1. Description of the study sample.

Sample Size	Power Plant Workers	Specialisms of Power Plant Workers	Green Energy Entrepreneurs	Professional Roles of Green Energy Entrepreneurs
Greece	5	Power plant employees were mainly specialized technicians, i.e., electricians, electronic equipment -technicians as well as engineers	5	Business owners, chief operating officers (COOs) and general managers of private enterprises of electricity generation from renewable types of energy sources (i.e., solar/photovoltaic and wind energy/wind parks).
Cyprus	5		5	
Bulgaria	5		5	

The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide, originally developed in the English language and thereafter translated in Greek and Bulgarian. Semi-structured interviews are generally helpful for obtaining participants' experiences, opinions, thoughts, expectations, beliefs and feelings [57,58], especially in studies of multiple or diverse sub-samples. Predefined questions guide the narratives in association with specific coding (deductive method) and there is room for the free expression of other interviewees' views. Consistency of the interviewing process was better achieved by the application of semi-structured interviews (rather than full phenomenological in-depth interviews), as the research team wanted to ensure better control of the responses across the sub-samples in different countries. The interview guides included key questions for each theme of this study, but the interviewees were encouraged to express their views and experiences in their narratives via prompting.

To ensure reliability, the guide underwent two cycles of back-and-forth translation (from English to Greek and Bulgarian) by professional translators, and the final versions of the interview guides in Greek and Bulgarian were approved by teams of translators and researchers. The interviews were also held in the native language of the participants in this study to encourage reliable extraction of richer responses, and thus facilitating participants to express themselves freely.

Concerning the coding of data, a mixed deductive/inductive approach was adopted [52], which is in line with semi-structured interviews. The guiding questions were organized around four themes that illustrate 'codes' that are well documented in the extant literature [59]. The first theme referred to the *content of energy transition*. The second referred to *incentives of participation in relevant training programs*. The third referred to the *usefulness and effectiveness of training programs*. The fourth referred to possible *types, content and evaluation of training programs*. These comprise the primary predefined codes of the deductive method. Then, through the narratives, sub-codes were identified inductively within each primary theme. The total codification is summarized in Table 2.

Data collection was conducted between January and February 2023, and featured personal semi-structured interviews with 15 power plant workers and 15 entrepreneurs, the latter of whom are active in the field of green energy production—renewable sources (as illustrated in Table 1). Upon being initially informed about the purpose of this study and the intention to secure the anonymity of participants, interviewees provided their consent to take part in it. The length of interviews ranged between 45 and 95 min, and the data collection was conducted via face-to-face or online interviews at places selected by the participants. This decision contributed to ensuring a comfortable environment for them.

The data analysis process was multi-staged. In the first round, content and thematic analysis was applied on data synthesis from each interview. Individual interview results were examined separately and inductively before being compared with each other [60,61]. In the second round of analysis, codes were examined across interviews of individual countries (i.e., Greece) per sub-sample (i.e., power plant workers). In the final round of data analysis, codes were compared across countries (i.e., Bulgaria and Cyprus) per sub-sample (i.e., entrepreneurs). To reach validity, the narratives were examined by researchers from these three countries and the emergent meanings were mutually agreed upon.

Table 2. Identified themes and sub-themes through the interviews.

Theme/Code	Sub-Themes/Codes					
Content of energy transition	Necessity of energy transition	Renewable energy sources sector	Job creation	Retraining and upskilling issues	Green investments/quality of employment	Financial tools
Incentives for employees' upskilling	Upgrading ex-employees' skills	Retraining programmes	Training providers	Vocational Training	Incentives for workers	Incentives for enterprises
Usefulness and effectiveness of training and educational programmes	Training programmes and enterprises in the green economy	Technology and relevance of training programmes	Programme characteristics and effectiveness of programs/ Targeted groups			
Type, content and evaluation of training and educational programmes	Sectors of labour employment	Orientation of programmes	Staff/entrepreneurs/stakeholders participation in the design of retraining	Evaluation of programmes	Certification	

5. Findings

The content analysis exported certain results regarding the views of the power plant workers coming from the traditional energy sector as well as the active entrepreneurs from the renewable energy sector. Based on the four primary themes and the corresponding sub-themes, this section presents the findings that were identified through the data analysis. The codification is illustrated in Table 2, while further qualitative data are provided in the Supplementary Materials of this article. The findings are presented accordingly for the two groups (workers/entrepreneurs).

5.1. Content of Energy Transition

5.1.1. Necessity of Energy Transition

According to the narratives, power plant workers recognise the need for energy transitions in all countries, in Greece and Cyprus as a worldwide necessity due to climate change, and in Bulgaria as an imposed European policy. Indicative quotes are "Our environment comes first, we all agree on that" (Greece) and "This is a policy for the development of the sector that is being imposed by European and our politicians" (Bulgaria). Green entrepreneurs express similar viewpoints, e.g., "There is no doubt about the significance of transition to renewable energy…" (Cyprus) and "The state needs to stick to its time commitments…" (Bulgaria). A consensus appears between the two groups. At the same time, workers in three countries express concerns about the agreed timeframe for a complete transition, while entrepreneurs ask for further governmental clarifications relevant to this process.

5.1.2. Renewable Energy Sources (RES) Sector

The RES sector is mostly conceived as encompassing photovoltaic and wind parks. Entrepreneurs in this sector believe that "Renewable energy enterprises is the future" (Greece), "we are looking for workers in the field of electricians expertised in green energy but it's difficult to find them" (Cyprus), while the extent of workforce employment "will depend on two factors—the first is the size and number of these enterprises, and in the case of sufficiency under this first factor, the second is the availability of accessible and appropriate retraining and skills acquisition programs" (Bulgaria). Power plant workers think that "we work in the energy sector right now and we would like to continue to do so in the future. Employment in renewable energy industry is an option" (Greece) and "main vacancies will be in the renewable energy sector and also in trade with equipment

for solar plants" (Bulgaria), but "at the moment there aren't many photovoltaic parks that supposedly would integrate the former EAC workers" (Cyprus). Therefore, power plant workers think of RES as a natural replacement of their workplace but not presently sufficient to employ them without retraining. This finding is important towards resolving the issue within the energy sector.

5.1.3. Job Creation

Policies foresee the employment in the green sector of those who lose their jobs from the transition; however, concerns were expressed from both workers and entrepreneurs. More concerns were expressed in Bulgaria, e.g., "...these are regions where there is still no alternative employment for laid-off workers at this stage" (worker) and "I don't think there are enough large green energy or circular economy companies in the affected regions to employ all the people directly" (entrepreneur), and less in Cyprus, e.g., "... the renewable energy sources are definitely going to star more giving the ability to the relevant companies to employ easily all the workers who will lose their jobs" (worker) and "I'm sure new jobs will be created, even now we are looking for workforce with expertise in energy sources" (entrepreneur). Thus, there is need for experienced employees in the green sector with some new skills and knowledge relevant to the green sources.

5.1.4. Retraining and Upskilling

As expected, the need for retraining and upskilling for the workforce is clearly articulated in narratives. Indicatively, an entrepreneur in Greece says, "Some of the workers in the power generation sector could be employed in the renewable energy resources area. To accomplish this mission, it is necessary for the personnel to acquire knowledge and skills that are relevant to RES (renewable energy sources)". Similarly, a Bulgarian counterpart says, "It is essential to support affected workers through retraining and skills acquisition programmes to facilitate their transition to new roles in a green energy-based economy". Energy plant workers agree with this and they refer "Without training programmes, both in theoretical and practical level, aimed at the workforce, it is impossible to integrate them into new jobs in the region. We have pinned our hopes on the Just Transition Fund" (Greece).

5.1.5. Green Investments and Quality of Employment

The degree to which re-employability of the workforce that loses their jobs depends on the size of the renewable energy sector. Thus, relevant investments are crucial for the rate and the quality of employment in this new sector. In Cyprus, a worker says, "I observe good intentions by government on the crucial topic of attracting new investments. Moreover, they have to trace various solutions if this energy transition really going to happen" while in Bulgaria a counterpart says, "This sector is still not well developed and I think it will take quite a few years to take over the redundant staff from the current energy facilities. In the long term, perhaps 25% of those made redundant will be re-employed". Thus, the workers' views reveal the novelty of the green energy sector and its dependence on investments, while they vary in their optimism regarding the employment of the energy ex-staff. Entrepreneurs from the three countries agree in the presently small sector size, noting that "I believe that eventually investments in the area of photovoltaic and wind parks as well as bio-mass energy sector will be carried out" (Cyprus), "there aren't enough photovoltaic units around here to employ potential ex-power plant workers" (Greece) and "There are not enough plants by region to hire all the workers" (Bulgaria).

5.1.6. Financial Tools

Regarding financial tools, the interviewees appear unaware of the Just Transition Fund or know little about it. Workers admit that "The presence of financial instruments is very important" (Cyprus), and that their use will be helpful "to a large extend if employed correctly" (Bulgaria) but "...I'm very sceptical about the evolution because in Greece several times in the past we were left alone without any support" (Greece). Entrepreneurs

believe that "we need more support financially" (Cyprus), "In Greece the Fund should be involved more actively" (Greece) and "The effectiveness of this fund will depend heavily on its ability to direct resources to the right territories and workers" (Bulgaria). Thus, financial tools are essential for the just transition because "Only through them we can achieve the development of the renewable energy sector and the enhancement of ex-power plant worker" (entrepreneur, Cyprus).

5.2. Incentives for Employees' Upskilling

5.2.1. Upgrading Ex-Employees' Skills

Training programmes for skill acquisition are thought to be important from employees, e.g., "Training and education programs must be established to support the power plants workers, absolutely" (Cyprus) and "We have certain knowledge regarding energy production but skill upgrading is necessary" (Greece), but uncertainty about their effectiveness is also present, e.g., "The use of training programmes can create a basis, but not a guarantee, for finding a job" and "It won't be easy, especially for people who are pre-retirement" (Bulgaria). Entrepreneurs also exalt their importance, noting that "We have been establishing various programs of training for the newcomers for quite some time. That's a usual practice" (Cyprus) and that "Today's workers must upgrade their knowledge and skills so they can be compatible with the needs of RES in order to easily have access to jobs in the environment that the energy transition will shape. In this regard, theoretical and practical level dimensions are surely needed" (Greece) but "Training programmes should be run in consortium with host enterprises, which should be obliged to select and employ the best candidates" (Bulgaria). Thus, training programmes are considered a meaningful tool, but their scheduling and implementation will be crucial for their effectiveness.

5.2.2. Retraining Programmes

Retraining programmes for ex-employees are desirable: "Without training programmes, both in theoretical and practical level, aimed at the workforce, it is impossible to integrate them into new jobs in the region" (Greece) and "The workers in the power plants don't know what's the case regarding their luck, for real. We are hearing about possible movements and plants quitting their function in the future" (Cyprus), but "Most likely this process will demand time and in some cases workers could need special assistance. We need take into account that most of the currently employed labor is low and/or semi-skilled" (Bulgaria). Entrepreneurs stress the following: "I believe that a short term retraining it will be enough related to effective outcomes because those power plant worker are already familiar with the energy sector, especially electricians" (Cyprus), "Only through qualified entities can the retraining of the current power plant workers be achieved. An institution with the appropriate experienced teaching personnel in renewable energy field can deliver the expected results" (Greece) and "A lot depends on the training that will be offered. They must be practical and enable the learning of those skills that will be in demand in the region" (Bulgaria). Therefore, retraining appears essential yet barely schematized.

5.2.3. Training Providers

At the same time, training providers are yet unclear. Workers refer universities (Cyprus), vocational institutes (Greece) and state universities, EU-structures and schools (Bulgaria). Similarly, entrepreneurs suggest local universities (Cyprus), special education centres (Greece) and employment agencies (Bulgaria). As expected, once the content and the learning objectives for the specific training are not worked out, several educational agencies appear as candidates to undertake this type of instruction. These differences depend on the different educational systems in each country.

5.2.4. Vocational Training

Especially for vocational education, it appears suitable to workers. They say, "The implementation of the training programs though the Vocational and Education centres

is a good solution" (Cyprus), "As far as I know, the Vocational Training Centres have a lot of experience in employee training programmes" (Greece) and "These centres can play a big role if they partner with regional labour offices" (Bulgaria). Entrepreneurs note, "Various providers could handle the training programs such as vocational centres or even technical schools established in many areas" (Cyprus), "Especially for the development of soft skills, though specific training, those centres are quite fine" (Greece) and "...To maximize their impact, centres should seek collaboration with industry partners to ensure that their programmes are aligned with labour market needs" (Bulgaria). Hence, vocational training is appropriate and focuses mainly on hard skills (not soft ones, as referred to in Greece) when it is governmentally supported and associated with the interested industries.

5.2.5. Incentives for Workers

Both workers and entrepreneurs in the three countries appear unaware of specific incentives to the ex-workforce to attend training and upskilling to be employed to the RES sector. Workers remark that "I don't know about possible incentives provided by the state in terms of enhancing the whole situation" (Cyprus), "We do not know what form of incentives will be given so that we can attend the retraining programmes. The transition plans simply describe the necessity of retraining the workforce without providing any further information" (Greece) and "I am not aware of any such incentives" (Bulgaria). Entrepreneurs admit the importance of incentives, e.g., "They must be provided with certain incentives for participating to those upskilling programmes such as subsidies or even health insurance while they will be under unemployment conditions" (Cyprus), but they lack relevant information, e.g., "I am not aware of any direct incentives that are provided. I think the free training could be an incentive, or it could be a guarantee that you can get a job with the training" (Bulgaria) or "Definitely, the plans should feature that kinds of instruments to support workers, but honestly I'm not familiar what's happening right now" (Greece).

5.2.6. Incentives for Enterprises

Similar to the incentives for the workforce, incentives for enterprises are not clear to the interested beneficiaries. Indicatively, a Greek worker refers, "I do know that the announced transition plans feature certain measures, but I'm not familiar to that yet" and a Bulgarian states, "I'm sure there are some incentives, but I'm not sure what they are". On the other hand, entrepreneurs state, "Much has been heard from the government officials about these motives, but it's all in general principles. We need the specification of these incentives so that we can evaluate them and act accordingly" (Greece), "No, I have no such information. As far as I know, there is a government subsidy for the renovation of buildings, but it is given for carrying out the activity of renovating the buildings, not for hiring workers to carry out this activity" (Bulgaria) and "We will see what will the future bring and how all these issues will be dealt by the responsible entities. For now, there is only the financing part through certain tools for the establishment of new green enterprises in the renewable energy sector, if this considered as incentive" (Cyprus). Thus, incentives for enterprises are expected but need to be clarified more thoroughly by the authorities in the near future.

5.3. Usefulness and Effectiveness of Training and Educational Programmes

5.3.1. Training Programmes and Enterprises in the Green Economy

The training programmes are recognized as strictly joint to renewable energy enterprises. Workers denote, "Training and upskilling programs must aim to provide relevant knowledge and competencies to the trainees, it's obvious that they have to target in renewable energy sector" (Cyprus) and "Their presence is very important, everywhere exist new technologies that require new skills, especially in renewable energy sector" (Greece), "Training programs can create some skills. The important thing is to ensure a job in such an enterprise after completing the training programme" (Bulgaria). Entrepreneurs place

more stress on the connection with green enterprises, e.g., "Training programmes cannot be at odds with the requirements of RES enterprises" (Greece), "Training programmes should aim to the provision of knowledge regarding renewable energy practices" (Cyprus) and "A lot depends on the training themselves—they should be related to developing practical skills that are really needed in green energy businesses" (Bulgaria). As remarked, employers ask for practical education that is able to provide trainees with the required skills in the renewable energy sector.

5.3.2. Technology and Relevance of Training Programmes

Technology learning is thought as a vehicle not only for the specific hard skills demanded in RES enterprises but also for transferable skills to other industries. Several technologies were mentioned, from more general ones such as computer science, application systems and communications tools to more specific ones such as renewable energy technologies, digital technologies for green energy management, energy efficiency and green energy capacity management. Beyond a general willingness to learn, e.g., "I personally believe that all levels of workers regarding their specialities fit to attend the upskilling programs. Everyone needs to upgrade their skills while gaining new knowledge" (worker, Cyprus), training programmes need to be innovative and technology-assisted, e.g., "Those programmes cannot be built on traditional forms of learning. They cannot ignore the opportunities offered by technology. They must be based on blended learning" (worker, Greece). A key objective for them should be an alignment with the job market; a worker from Bulgaria refers, "To maximize their impact, centres should seek collaboration with industry partners to ensure that their programmes are aligned with labour market needs". An entrepreneur from Bulgaria also refers, "As a catalyst, training can only play a role when we see successful examples of workers finding high-wage jobs in other industries". In sum, the content and the relevance of the programmes can be conceived in different ways, either to promote trainees in the RES sector or to help them in industry transitions.

5.3.3. Programme Characteristics and Effectiveness of Programmes

A commonly accepted characteristic for these programmes should be the combination of the demanded (green energy) skills with the needs of the labour market. An entrepreneur (Cyprus) clearly refers that "There's must be a consistency with the job description of the position held" while another one (Greece) says, "The employee who upon upgrading the knowledge and skills that can meet RES needs will work in a quality environment with good salary and professional development". The training will be effective if it offers "More serious opportunities for finding new jobs, combined with greater job security relative to existing jobs threatened by the transition" (entrepreneur, Bulgaria). Nonetheless, some doubts underlie workers' narratives as indicated in a response from Bulgaria, "This depends on the willingness of the entrepreneurs to attract qualified personnel" and "Training can lead to higher pay if there is regulated national legislation to force businesses to increase wages on the provision of a relevant training certificate by the employee". The challenge for training programmes will be to ensure promising employability upon their successful completion.

5.4. Type, Content and Evaluation of Training and Educational Programmes

5.4.1. Sectors of Labour Employment

The need for electricians and electrical engineers is salient, accompanied by the need for mechanical engineers. However, the general need for human capital is not confined only to the previous two professions: "Some of the relevant disciplines are related to electrician-mechanics, mechanical -mechanics -engineers, electricians, electronic-technicians, installers, workers without any specialised technical expertise such as drivers, security staff" (worker, Cyprus). Related industry sectors can also be included, "Among those sectors are included the renewable energy industry, agricultural production, sustainable crafts and certain industries that will be established in the area, as well as tourism and the construction

sector" (worker, Greece). In Bulgaria, some other (rather unexpected) sectors were referred, "Knowledge of European and national renewable energy legislation; Brokering energy exchanges; Business planning Green electricity—generation and distribution" (worker, Bulgaria). However, entrepreneurs assert jobs closely related to RES, e.g., "We are now offering job positions to electricians and electronic-technicians. Believe me, it's hard to find that type of workforce in Cyprus" and "These are miners and workers in the mining industry, as well as experts and workers in power plants, for example. The list should also include specialists in electrical and mechanical engineering, plant operation and maintenance, environmental management and energy efficiency" (Bulgaria).

5.4.2. Orientation of Programmes

As expected, there is an articulated practical orientation for training programmes. Respondents say, "Those programmes must focus on solar and wind energy highlighting also the technology and equipment used in this field" (worker, Cyprus) and "Obviously there's a need for development of technical skills regarding the new practices in green energy area and equipment used in this field" (entrepreneur, Cyprus). However, responses from Bulgaria refer other skills regarding the development and growth of RES enterprises. As stated by entrepreneurs, "In terms of operational management, there is a need to create skills in operational control and knowledge of industrial control and safety standards; in terms of strategic management, there is a need to create critical thinking and visionary skills among candidates in terms of industry development" and "Employees at the senior management level need to have knowledge and skills in conflict management, business development, strategic planning and positioning". Thus, the orientation of programmes may not be strictly technical, it could also embrace the management and growth of green energy enterprises.

5.4.3. Staff/Entrepreneurs/Stakeholders' Participation in the Design of Retraining

In this regard, workers from the three countries state that they should be involved in the design of the training along with labour syndicates and employees' unions and that "It is good to motivate everyone to get involved in the process" (Bulgaria). In contrast, entrepreneurs recommend certain stakeholders, such as their states, associations related to entrepreneurs, trade unions and experts in the field, but while "giving priority to practitioners" under a general perspective, "It's important not to build programs in a vacuum, but to step into the real needs of the market and what competencies workers need to meet them" (Bulgaria). Thus, the design and the assessment of programmes are still open issues that have to be arranged among the interested individuals. At this point, a question arises for the role of universities, who were suggested as training providers.

5.4.4. Evaluation of Programmes

Conceptions for the evaluation of training programmes vary among respondents. In Cyprus, workers suggest that "The state has to be involved by assessing the quality of the offered services based on the goals and satisfaction of the trainees" and "The relevant Ministry for educational issues is the most appropriate choice along with the official labour associations", while in Greece workers declare, "In fact, we know exactly what we have learned and how useful is for our working life. So we should be the ones to evaluate the training providers". In Bulgaria the focus is on the content and learning processes suggesting the usual "examination and assessment", "the material is easily understood" and "Skills must have a practical application". Entrepreneurs contend, "The results must be evaluated in relations with the potential entrance of learners in the job market. A qualified authority set by the government is needed for this scope" (Cyprus), and they suggest specific evaluable aspects of training such as "the design of the subjects covered; teaching methodology; learning outcomes related to skills that trainees will have acquired upon the successful completion of a course; The ways of trainees' certification" (Bulgaria). In Greece, there is a general perspective that "the evaluation must take place according to the modern

protocols that are now being applied all over the world". It emerges that the recommended assessment practices depend on the educational system and agencies in each country.

5.4.5. Certification

This dimension appears crucial for training programmes. Workers in Cyprus highlight that "It's a crucial factor the existence of certificates for all participants. Let's see also the provision of professional licence", "The existence if it's possible of a professional licence along with the recognition of previous experience and level of education" (Greece) and "ECTS system/credits" (Bulgaria). Entrepreneurs refer "expertise and credibility in professional practices" (Cyprus), "certificate compatible with skills and competencies that would be developed" (Greece) and "professional certification in applicable skills" (Bulgaria). Hence, it appears essential to certify training programmes with an emphasis on practical skills that can be used for employment in the RES sector. It is also desirable for the certificates to operate as professional licences in the labour market.

5.5. Summary and Broader Results

Energy transition appears indispensable for all groups in all countries. However, the present inefficiency of the green sector to employ the ex-workforce is also acknowledged. Job creation in the green energy sector is doubted more by the Bulgarian workers compared to the other two countries. In addition, Bulgarian workers express their doubts for the availability of retaining programmes, unlike Greeks and Cypriots. The necessity for training and new skills is mostly expressed by entrepreneurs (future employers) who need a high-end workforce. The workers may agree, or "hope", in this at present; however, the whole framework is unclear. Bulgarian concerns are more intensive, hoping in a 25% re-employment at best. There are underlying differences between entrepreneurs and workers, the former emphasising on financial tools for which all groups are unaware and uncertain about. Therefore, the energy sector is a turbulent job market with plenty of uncertainty and hope.

Similar insights emerge when we delve into the suggested training. Bulgarians express more concerns about its effectiveness compared to the others. On the other hand, all entrepreneurs praise training, but in a way that it will provide them with the high-end workforce they will look for. The discrepancy becomes more apparent when the two groups describe the scope of training. VET is recognised as the appropriate educational setting, but, at the same time, there is a complete unawareness for incentives for both workers and enterprises. The narratives in the theme illustrate the present scepticism in this domain, making training the necessary but uncertain remedy. The situation becomes more complicated when the discussion revolves around the demanded technological knowledge. Entrepreneurs suggest significant technological upskilling in association with specific job descriptions and propose increased salaries in return in order training to be effective, unlike workers who seek re-employment. Unexpectantly, Bulgarian entrepreneurs propose managerial skills as well. Concerning the proposed skills, there must be a reconciliation between the two parties about the content of training that appears highly fragmented.

Remarkably, a large variety of potential trainees are referred by the workers with a prevalence of mechanical and electrical engineers. All agree that training programmes need to have a practical orientation and be co-created by various stakeholders. The latter has mostly been stated by Bulgarian workers. Notably, the participants from different countries propose different agencies and processes to evaluate training, reflecting the different educational structures in these countries, whilst Cypriot entrepreneurs propose evaluation through the monitoring of re-employment data. All appear to agree that certifications are indispensable. The responses from all groups and countries in this theme appear disparate, since the energy sector is under transition, includes turbulence and uncertainty, and, thus, makes it difficult to describe effective re-training at this time.

6. Discussion

The respondents' views of the three examined countries consist of the necessity of reducing carbon emissions—through the energy transition plans—while arguing that such a type of transition must be fair for everyone to be effective. There is a consensus amongst the sample that there will be many job losses, with participants recognizing the huge influence of the above process on power stations' workforce. In this regard, the market of renewable energy resources that is currently developing in these countries, creates a new environment in which there is a need for the development of new skills and competencies amongst the workforce that serves it.

The empirical findings of this study are generally consistent with the expectations within the literature. Taliotis et al. [8] claim energy transition to be a significant factor in reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Additionally, Chudy-Laskowska et al. [62] argue that renewable energy sources are beneficial to European countries' efforts to become independent from fossil fuel markets. According to previous works, energy transitions cause many job losses in Europe, the number of which varies clearly from place to place [30,45]. On the other hand, regarding scenarios of job gains versus job losses, compared to the other two countries, Cyprus is expected to create more job positions than to lose some [63]. This outcome emerges from the fact that the electricity production in Cyprus relies on fossil fuel products and not on extracted sources, such as on lignite or coal mines, as is the case in Greece and Bulgaria. The latter feature plenty of them. Also, the Cypriot National Plan [64] provides similar reports regarding the closure of power plants.

Concerns about the unrealistic timetable of being independent from the traditional power plants and reducing emission goals featured in transition plans were also expressed by the interviewees. The study findings detected a growing interest and increased activity in green investments and other relevant entrepreneurial initiatives despite the fact that participants considered them to be in their infancy. In this regard, relevant private investments have recently been made by utilizing European and national funds, mainly for the establishment of photovoltaic power stations [65]. However, participants stressed the fact that, currently, neither enough renewable energy parks nor solar or wind stations exist (even though the partial development of the above is observed). This fact is also demonstrated though various countries' national reports, and it indicates a negative impact on potential initiatives, which are aimed at the effective integration of power plant staff with the renewable energy sector.

The findings of this study also reveal the needs for the development of the skills necessary for the workforce to smoothly transfer their employment into the renewable resources sector. Study participants argue that training and upskilling programmes will enhance the above process and will secure a fair transition, tackling unemployment issues. The findings corroborate earlier published works (e.g., [28,31]). However, an effective policy framework is needed to better foster learning and retraining programmes [66]. Moreover, both groups of entrepreneurs and workers advocate the significance of retraining the workers that were released from their current jobs in the unreformed energy system, as well as highlight the increased demand for skilled workers who are qualified in the renewable energy sector. Several worldwide efforts are made to develop appropriate policies and strategies regarding such programmes [41]. Entrepreneurs reported that they have already established internal training procedures—usually shortly after hiring a workforce—to help meet their industry's needs. This is consistent with the findings of other studies which indicated training programmes to be valuable to firms and to unemployed individuals [67] coming from the traditional energy sector, who are trying to join the workforce of renewable energy firms [68–70].

This study's findings further revealed the urgent need for the provision of incentives by the state. All participants stressed the fact that those incentives must be made available in the future in the form of subsidies to power plants' ex-workers to participate in relevant training and education programmes, and in the form of further support and motivation to RES firms. This recommendation is highlighted in other studies which addressed

government actions necessary to support societal experience and the impact of the green deal [71–73]. The work of Popp et al. [74] concluded that 40% more jobs were created in communities with the highest prevalence of pre-existing green skills. Additionally, it indicated the necessity for workers to develop the skills needed for green jobs to achieve a smooth and effective policy implementation. Specifically, for low-carbon energy transition, the authors of the referred research argue that the skill gap between low-carbon energy and fossil fuel workers is modest; this is why green jobs require more training. In this respect, retraining programmes reinforcing and developing technical skills are essential to prepare the workforce to the low-carbon energy transition. At this point, it is worth noting the existence of a gap related to the establishment of the above-mentioned relevant programmes. For example, in Bulgaria, there are no strategies nor special programmes for the retraining of coal workers. On the other hand, Greece and Cyprus have already formed initial plans [64,75], but they have not yet been fully clarified. Finally, the above survey has also shown that communities whose economies are dependent on fossil fuels have a wide range of green skills, although a significant number of workers with green skills who appear well prepared for the low-carbon transition exists in some places.

Our study further revealed certain types of educational approaches and programmes necessary to reskill workers. Our results mostly highlighted the need for distance education (online courses) programmes by using asynchronous and synchronous deliveries, which are generally utilized within the international literature [70,76]. Ravikumar and Latimer [77] claim that asynchronous certificate programmes in new energy industry areas are useful tools for oil and gas (O&G) workers who can attend them while they are still employed in their current jobs. Another issue that the findings addressed was the significance of other relevant upskilling programmes adapting both theoretical and practical courses. Especially for the latter aspect, all respondents pointed out that skills must certainly have practical applications. These elements are also included in the existing literature [78]. In this regard, the acquisition of the expected knowledge/understanding should be achieved via learners' engagement with in-person (face-to-face, F2F) intensive trainings and online learning mechanisms. The adopted learning methods should be transferrable across modules. The learning methods should consist of F2F lectures and seminars, facilitated group discussions and oral presentations. Trainees will group in teams and develop and pitch a methodology for studying entrepreneurial problems. Feedback within the learning process will be provided to allow trainees to continuously check their understanding and progress. Finally, interactive events (TEDx talks, in-class quizzes, peer evaluation of group members), field activities and action research (meetings with local entrepreneurs, study visits) will strengthen the interaction between the trainees and their tutors. Some of the referred characteristics of skills development programmes that emerged from our study have also been identified in the international literature as good educational practices in effectively achieving new competences of unemployed individuals and power plant workers [42,43,79].

Additionally, our findings have shown that the recommended programmes should focus on all types of skilled personnel, including low-, medium- and high-skilled workers, respectively. Notably, the most representative disciplines that were mentioned with regard to the power plant workers, which are consistent with the human resources needs of the enterprises in the renewable energy sector, featured mechanics, mechanical engineers, electricians, electronic technicians, other photovoltaic specialists, renewable energies technicians (such as installers or energy calculators) and workers without any specialised technical skills (such as drivers and security staff). Similar findings were also identified in relevant studies [79]. Many of the medium- and high-level disciplines have been highly sought after for many years in photovoltaic power stations, as well as in technology companies [80]. Both power plant workers and entrepreneurs identified certain sectors (mostly concerning photovoltaic and wind parks) that could take in the new potential workforce. Hence, the findings identified certain roles that these workers could assume in the case of their new employment with RES firms. In this regard, the most relevant positions

(in terms of solar photovoltaic parks, based on the technology of renewable energy) are the fields of operations and maintenance (O&M), monitoring and controlling, servicing, manufacturing, delivery, construction and installation. Similar findings are featured in the literature in relation to energy developers, installers, commissioning supervisors and service technicians [81,82].

Finally, it was detected that the provision of professional certifications and licenses of the beneficiaries would be the appropriate strategy regarding the successful completion of training courses [83]. The study participants also appreciated the utility of achieving ECTS in the new learning system. The most appropriate entities to provide relevant training programmes are VET centres and universities. Finally, other findings of our study have identified common participants' concerns, views and perceptions—in all three countries—regarding the lack of effective communications/reactions between stakeholders in applying multi-actor approaches to the development of a number of retraining systems.

In sum, this country-specific research verified our theoretical expectations but also revealed different concerns regarding the evolution of the green energy sector in each country, its capacity to employ ex-workers and the possibilities of relevant education and training. For the first time, these views were expressed from both workers and entrepreneurs, which are the stakeholders of this process.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that the type of current power generation that existed in each of those three countries plays a significant role regarding the level of accelerating decarbonization, how many power plant workers are going to lose their jobs or the amount of potential establishing investments—on the renewable energy sector—needed for an effective transition to green practices. Moreover, the huge challenges across the previously mentioned countries appeared to be common for the VET programmes in terms of their characteristics, component elements and other features. Of course, to be absolutely precise, the latter aspect also has its own peculiarities per country. For instance, Greece and Cyprus are prepared much better compared to Bulgaria regarding the entire planning towards training and upskilling programmes. In any case, two major aspects were initially identified through this research: the energy transition will have an impact on current job positions and green skills are certainly on the frontlines. There is a possibility for employing ex-workers within the same (energy) sector (RQ1); however, the evolution of renewable energy sources is not considered capable for this at this point. Workers in lignite/coal -fired power generation or the fossil fuel facilities will have to upgrade their knowledge and skills to be able to re-enter the job market. As assumed in the beginning of this article, the most representative area for employing the former power plant workers in the future is the rapidly developing renewable energy sector that is being shaped right now. However, the relevant governments are expected to do more regarding the whole transition process as well as the supportiveness of skills development. It is also understood that the training programs must fit to all levels in the hierarchy related to employees' skill levels of the plants under question, regardless the generally available young-aged and high-skilled employees in training [67].

This study also concludes that the participation of representatives in the consultation for planning the education programmes plays a pivotal role for the "Just Transition" (RQ2). Furthermore, our results identified certain labour disciplines, such as electricians or electronic technicians, and traced the current needs in upgrading knowledge and competencies with regard to the future movements of this workforce as well as the possibility of successfully meeting the demands of the green industry. Additionally, research revealed specific job positions and duties in the green industry which are going to be suitable with the above-mentioned specialities and the new development of skills, such as monitoring and controlling, servicing, distribution and installation field. The matching of specialities existing in the traditional power plants and emerging tasks in the new renewable energy parks significantly contribute to the effective identification of new job positions for the

design of targeted education programmes. Upon the completion of such training and upskilling programs, the beneficiaries will be prepared to work effectively in the relevant enterprises of the energy power sector [42]. Moreover, by developing new skills they will surely be more familiar with the new emerging practices and technologies of renewable energy resources. Several potential types of education programs are presented regarding teaching and learning methods, material content, other modern teaching techniques, structure and accessibility issues. In this light, it is highly recommended to develop training and upskilling programs discussed in this article to implement innovative educational practices, such as real-life scenarios and problem-based learning, and to be flexible regarding their time for completion and effectiveness in terms of accessibility. For instance, it is suggested that the programs need to apply a multi-dimensional timetable as well as the facilities of training centres to be established in non-metropolitan areas and not only in large urban centres [28]. On top of that, optional side courses should be included in the learning process to support the core curriculum, such as seminars relating to computer and English language skills, research methods and field terminology, as the programs will be also intended for older adults. Moreover, central and local governments, along with school administrations of all levels, should strengthen the energy awareness through the promotion of a circular economy among students and ensure that it will be aligned with the above well-proved educational techniques that have also been identified by other studies [84–86]. Lastly, future research avenues could feature similar studies by including the primary data of other countries.

8. Limitations

The sample size used in this study (per country, but not overall) appeared to be small compared to the typical qualitative studies utilizing primary data. Future studies should include more participants. However, despite the number of conducted interviews, it is worth noting that the groups within this research study, especially the power plant workers, are considered a difficult case with regard to contacting them. This is because the existing power stations lie in remote areas, and their work conditions do not allow (at least not so easily) them to contact external individuals (e.g., inside the mines). With regard to the green entrepreneurs of RESs, it is evident that the sector is being developed, a fact which did not facilitate the collection of more interviews. Considering the above conditions at the time, and due to the nature of this multi-national study, the researchers eventually preferred to balance the sample size across the examined countries and shifted their focus on the respective homogeneity. The skill level of respondents also appeared to be a promising parameter to envisage different learning needs and schedule effective training. Nonetheless, the limited sample size did not allow this possibility. Future research, which can also be quantitative, will be able to waive this limitation towards understanding the underlying particularities for effective training programmes.

Another limitation worth mentioning concerns the manner in which the interviews were conducted. According to the international literature, individual interviews carried out using phone calls or video meeting applications appear to be as reliable as in-person data collection methods and are compatible with our chosen methodological approach. Contrarily, significant disadvantages certainly exist, especially towards telephone interviews; however, this depends on the relationship between the researcher and the potential participant, which is important to be established before the conduction of every telephone interview—an appropriate practice that, in our case, was implemented effectively.

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