



[FOCUS ARTICLE] POLICY ANSWERS during the European Year of Skills 2023

- Capacity Building in the Western Balkans

The European Year of Skills

The year 2023 has been declared the [European Year of Skills](#) by the European Commission to foster lifelong learning and the skills development and empowerment of people to be fit and prepared for the green and digital transitions which open up new opportunities. But they also demand enhanced knowledge and skillsets. Having the relevant skills empowers people to successfully adjust to labour market changes and to fully engage in society and democracy.

More than three quarters of companies in the EU currently report difficulties in finding workers with the necessary skills with a growing demand for both high and low-skilled workers.

The key findings of the ETF's [recent study](#), "Embracing the digital age. The future of work in the Western Balkans. New forms of employment and platform work" shows that although digital strategies rank high on the agendas of Western Balkan governments, emphasizing economic development, education and digitalisation of the public sector citizens oftentimes lack the skills needed to compete in an integrated global economy and adapting quickly to shifting demands in the labour market. Shortages of skilled labour are also exacerbated by emigration. At the same time, atypical work is on the rise in the Western Balkans - often due to the lack of well paid, high-quality jobs. Two main categories are prevalent: non-standard employment including temporary, part-time and on-call work in which digitalisation is a driving force; and new forms of employment often relying on information and communication technologies (ICT), including remote and freelance portfolio work, co-working, casual labour, and platform work. These types of work seemingly provide more flexibility, but at the same time they present risks not yet adequately addressed by public policy. Young people and women, are more likely to work in atypical settings often because they have no choice.

The European Year of Skills aims to ensure that nobody is left behind and the economic recovery as well as the green and digital transitions are socially fair and just with a workforce able to contribute to sustainable growth, innovation and competitiveness.

In cooperation with governments, social, public and private partners as well as stakeholders in education, training and industry, the [Year seeks a fresh take onto lifelong learning](#) by:



- Promoting higher, more effective and more inclusive investments in training and upskilling, including to people changing jobs.
- Making sure that skills are relevant for labour markets, by cooperating with social partners and companies.
- Matching people's aspirations and skill sets with job opportunities, especially women and young people and those not in education, employment or training.
- And by attracting people from third countries with the skills needed by the EU, by strengthening learning opportunities and mobility and facilitating the recognition of their qualifications.

POLICY ANSWERS Capacity Building Schemes

In the light of the European Year of Skills POLICY ANSWERS also provides and coordinates targeted local capacity building and pilot actions in the Western Balkans to contribute to the region's EU integration process and to strengthen their innovation ecosystems. The project's capacity building programme is going to strengthen the local efforts in the region to support policy making and programme implementation of the WB Agenda through training activities on the ground.

Following a joint methodology, POLICY ANSWERS partner institutions in the region created their own work programmes identifying topics and actions and undertaking own needs assessments for each economy.

As a result of the consultative process, a total of 29 actions have been identified and will be implemented, classified into five broad topics. As most WB economies still face challenges in designing and effectively implementing research and innovation policies, most actions are related to capacity building and technical assistance in policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Other actions relate to the improvement of project writing skills in order to increase the participation of the WB in EU programmes, providing specific support to universities and the business sector, technology transfer as well as general training sessions for quadruple helix actors in the area of circular economy, blue growth and healthy society.

In autumn 2022 the Western Balkans economies have started implementing their planned actions and with many interesting events for stakeholders in the region coming up. The first capacity building implementation period will last until summer 2023, before a first review will take place and the WB economies will be able to adjust their needs and be able to develop additional actions.

Read more about the needs and challenges of the region as well as suggested actions our regional partners have identified to provide effective solutions through capacity building, in [an interview with the capacity building leaders](#).

What has been happening and what is yet to come?

Albania will also be focusing on five capacity building actions. The economy will dedicate its attention to trainings on the implementation of gender equality plans, proposal writing, EU funding and [innovation opportunities related to the Blue Economy](#) and the implementation of the WB Agenda and [Smart Specialization Strategy of the economy](#). One of the most distinctive and important features of the Smart Specialization Strategy, is the implementation of a bottom-up process, known as the "**Entrepreneurial Discovery Process**" the purpose of which is to use the collective intelligence of public and private entities, academia and civil society to identify the key challenges, opportunities, trends, and policy responses necessary to unleash the full economic, scientific and innovation



potential of the identified priority domains. In accordance with the calendar of activities prepared by the Albanian stakeholders, in [the first implementation phase of the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process](#), the focus lied on workshops in three priority domains namely Agriculture, Energy and Tourism.

The first activities that have entered into implementation have taken place in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, taking place in parallel in Sarajevo and Banja Luka. The [University of Banja Luka \(UNIBL\) organized a three-day workshop](#) (21 Oct- 9 Nov 2022) to **enhance the capacities of academic staff and advanced students in Research Management and Administration**. In the same process, the [University of Sarajevo \(UNSA\) Research department undertook a study visit to Copenhagen Business School](#) between 21-25 Nov 2022 to learn more about project management, effective organization of project support activities, and PhD support. Another focus of the WB economy lies on **support in the preparation of Horizon Europe partnerships and proposals**. The [UNSA has undertaken a workshop providing practical advice and proposal writing recommendations](#) with 30 participants between 15-16 December 2022, while UNIBL is in process to do the same. This spring the Bosnian stakeholders will dedicate to **strengthening their capacities in monitoring and evaluation**.

In **Kosovo*** six out of nine actions have started and are in their preparatory phases or in progress. Preparations are running for **workshops on project identification and preparation with focus on the EU Economic Investment Plan for the Western Balkans**, as well as on **preparation of project applications and implementation within the Horizon Europe programme**. **Technical Assistance** is in progress for the Implementation of the WB Green Agenda, as well as for institutions such as the National Research Council (NRC) and the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI). The Kosovar stakeholders have further joined **Working Groups** to cooperate with the Ministry of Health, as well as to monitor and support the implementation of the Digital Agenda.

Montenegro´s Capacity building activities are still in preparatory phase. Two trainings are planned for spring 2023, focusing on both, **preparing applications for, as well as implementing Horizon Europe projects**. The autumn period will be dedicated to **trainings on the implementation of circular economy principles in Montenegro**. More initiatives are planned for 2024.

The Capacity Building and Implementation in **North Macedonia** consists of three broad actions: **Analysis of Design and Implementation** which includes trainings on policy design, WB agenda implementation, coordination & collaboration, and formulation of specific indicators per thematic field. North Macedonia will also work on strengthening **organizational management and skills on fundraising for public institutions**. A workshop on the WB Agenda is planned in Skopje for February 17, 2023.

Finally, **Serbia** is preparing a number of trainings and workshops for spring 2023 on two major areas: **strengthening digital skills in the business sector** and **skills development to tackle the green transition**. In the second half of 2023, the stakeholders will enhance their capacities in **project proposal writing and training sessions on programme evaluation and evaluation practices**.

A Regional Innovation Academy for the Western Balkans

The Western Balkan Regional Innovation Academy (WB RIA) by POLICY ANSWERS is conceived as a dedicated part of the Western Balkans Info Hub that provides educational resources and materials on various topics related to four segments: Innovation-Basics, Innovation Management, Funding Innovations and Experience Section.



The platform compiles a range of the topics, starting from the material of the basic concepts in the field of innovation that everyone who works in this field should know and ending with the materials on the topic of innovation management, available sources of funding, including useful links as well as successful stories of innovative entrepreneurs and entities in the public and civil sectors that successfully promote innovation.

So far, the project has collected more than 50 educational resources from partners who provided relevant content in different formats such as pictures, text, power point presentations, audio and video etc. Diverse content will be presented in an engaging way, so that anyone will be able to find something that fits their interests and needs. The platform will over time be enriched with materials that will be result from activities and their outcomes within other parts of the project creating a synergy that adds additional value.

The WB Regional Innovation Academy is targeting representatives of public and civil sector, SMEs as well as academia. *The platform launch is planned for the end of 2023. Stay Tuned!*
What does the European Year of Skills have in store for the WB?

Besides the POLICY ANSWERS capacity building activities and the upcoming regional Innovation Academy, the European Year of Skills will have a variety of opportunities in store with major institutions setting up programmes and grant schemes for the Western Balkans. To make it a successful Year, [the European Commission is going to promote upskilling and reskilling opportunities](#), such as relevant EU initiatives and funding possibilities targeted for local implementation and weill organize a variety of events and awareness raising campaigns. The Year also aims to further developping skills intelligence tools for increased transparency and easier skills recognition.

Currently there a number of Calls open with deadlines approaching that provide funding for skills development and capacity building on different areas, ranging from Education ([Jean Monnet Actions for Schools](#), [EIT HEI Initiative Innovation Capacity Building for Higher Education](#)) to Research ([MSCA COFUND Call](#), [MSCA Call for Staff Exchanges](#)), SME Support ([Technical Assistance program for SMEs from the Western Balkans](#)) to capacity building for Youth ([European Solidarity Corps 2023](#), [Erasmus+ General Call](#)), and Cultural professionals ([Artist mobility](#), [cooperation projects](#)).

For more information on news around the European Year of Skills and capacity building opportunities, visit the Western Balkans Info Hub portal within the [Skills Development & Capacity Building Section](#)!