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Commentary on the Special Issue on AS2025: Education, Skills, and Development. New Frontiers in Learning, Innovation, and Inclusion

Dedicated to the Alliance Summit 2025 – Skillman, Ancona, 9-10 July 2025

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1. Introduction

Education and skills development have always been powerful engines of economic and social progress but rarely have they carried as much weight as they do today. The twin challenges of digital transformation and the transition toward more sustainable societies are reshaping how we learn, work, and live. The Skillman Alliance Summit 2025, held in Ancona, took this urgency seriously. It brought together educators, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from across Europe and beyond to ask how education and training systems can not only keep pace with change but actively drive a just and inclusive transition.

The discussions were as diverse as they were ambitious. How can skills policies support balanced regional development and strengthen cohesion, particularly in the Adriatic–Ionian area? What role can entrepreneurial education and competence-based learning play in cultivating adaptability and innovation? How can vocational training evolve to offer flexible, lifelong pathways that match the volatility of labour markets? And how will digital technologies, from artificial intelligence to immersive learning environments, transform both teaching practices and the very experience of acquiring knowledge?

This special issue of *Economia Marche – Journal of Applied Economics* builds directly on those conversations. It is designed as a platform for focused contributions that capture emerging evidence and push the

debate forward. While weaving together insights on sustainability, inclusion, entrepreneurship, TVET innovation, and digital learning, the issue aims to expand our understanding of how education and skills shape not just individuals' prospects, but the resilience and competitiveness of regions and societies.

This collection is crafted to carry forward the conversations sparked around the Skillman Alliance Summit while speaking to a wider community invested in advancing this agenda. Its purpose is to support a shared effort to rethink education and training systems as engines of transformation, capable of aligning human capital development with broader ambitions of sustainability, digitalization and territorial cohesion.

2. The Macro-Regional Lens: Why EUSAIR Now

The EU Strategy for the Adriatic–Ionian Region (EUSAIR) was conceived as a framework for countries that share geographical interdependence to work together on challenges no state can tackle alone. Since its adoption in 2014, it has grown into a laboratory of macro-regional cooperation that now spans four EU Member States, five EU candidate countries, and San Marino. The revised 2025 Action Plan reaffirms this purpose with sharper focus and broader scope. It casts the Adriatic–Ionian region as a space where governance, economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, connectivity, and social inclusion must advance together, and where integration is not only a political aspiration but a practical, daily exercise across sectors and borders.

The ambitions of the updated Action Plan reflect this shift. It aligns macro-regional cooperation with the EU's wider strategic agenda: green and digital transitions, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the “right to stay” and the renewed momentum behind EU enlargement. The five-pillar structure now includes a dedicated social cohesion pillar, signalling that human capital challenges are as strategically important as transport corridors or marine governance. Across all pillars runs the expectation that the region must build shared capabilities: interoperable data systems, coordinated planning, innovation ecosystems, and multilevel governance structures that move from consultation to co-creation. The Strategy Action Plan is designed as a rolling instrument, adaptable to emerging shocks yet anchored in the mid-term horizon of 2030, and it encourages participating countries to treat integration as a continuous process rather than a fixed endpoint.

Skills, education, talent mobility, attraction, and retention occupy an unusually prominent place in this vision. The Action Plan positions upskilling and reskilling as macro-regional imperatives, essential to navigating the green and digital transitions, sustaining competitiveness, and improving labour market access across an area marked by strong disparities. It emphasises youth engagement, equal opportunities, and the reduction of skills mismatches as prerequisites for social cohesion. In this sense, EUSAIR's ambition goes beyond coordinating sectoral policies: it seeks to build a macro-regional talent space where education, mobility, and labour market policies reinforce each other and where human capital becomes a driver of integration, not a casualty of uneven development.

EUSAIR's relevance at this juncture stems from the way structural trends are interacting across the Adriatic–Ionian region and producing interdependencies that exceed the capacity of national policy frameworks. The combination of intensified climate risks, fragmented innovation capacity, uneven institutional development, and demographic contraction is not simply a collection of parallel challenges; it is a networked system of pressures that reinforce one another. Coastal degradation, for example, reduces the resilience of tourism-dependent economies, which in turn accelerates labour outmigration

and weakens local skills ecosystems. Energy vulnerabilities heighten exposure to external shocks and limit the fiscal space available for social investment. These dynamics illustrate why a transnational, multi-level governance mechanism is not just beneficial but necessary. EUSAIR functions as a coordination device that can reduce policy incoherence, pool analytical capacity, and align interventions across environmental, economic, and social domains.

From a human capital perspective, the timing is equally consequential. The region is entering a phase where the green and digital transitions are reshaping labour demand faster than education and training systems can adjust. Countries face similar mismatches but differ markedly in their institutional ability to respond. This asymmetry risks producing divergent development trajectories within the macro-region. The revised Action Plan's emphasis on upskilling and reskilling reflects a recognition that skills formation has become a macro-regional competitiveness issue rather than a national one. EUSAIR provides the structure to coordinate anticipatory labour market intelligence and expand mobility schemes in a way that mitigates brain drain rather than amplifying it. In aggregate, the Strategy offers a scientifically grounded response to a shared developmental tipping point: it creates the policy coherence and critical mass required to manage transitions that are too complex and too interconnected for individual states to handle in isolation.

3. The Pulse of Ancona: Summit Highlights and Regional Stakes

At the heart of Ancona, on 9–10 July 2025, the Skillman TVET Alliance Summit (AS2025) captured practical urgency. It was not just another conference; it was a convening with real economic stakes. Its mission: to fuse the Skillman Network's global methods with the macro-regional priorities of EUSAIR, while spotlighting how trans-sectorial skills building and entrepreneurship can accelerate the socio-economic integration of the Western Balkans into the EU.

The Alliance Summit 2025 brought the EUSAIR's vision into sharp focus. The Summit's agenda blended vocational education, digital transformation, and entrepreneurial mindset within a strategic framework. It focused on three pivotal themes: i) the twin transition, how green and digital economies can reinforce each other, especially in economies undergoing structural reform. ii) Digital skills development, equipping workers, teachers, trainers with tools to thrive, not just survive, in a tech driven landscape. iii) Upskilling and reskilling strategies, tailored responses to rapidly shifting industry demands. These are not abstract priorities. They are lifelines for Western Balkans countries tackling skills gaps, youth unemployment, and economic catching-up.

The Summit did not just nod in the direction of the Western Balkans, it put them centre stage. It stressed their socio economic integration into the EU, signalling that vocational training and entrepreneurial skills are both enablers and barometers of progress.

The Summit pivoted real models, like the Skillman Teacher Academy (STA), a flagship initiative highlighting how teacher training can dovetail with macro regional priorities. It was presented as tangible evidence of what cooperation between EUSAIR and Skillman looks like in practice. Another example in the Region is the UNIADRION Alliance, which bring together Universities across the Adriatic-Ionian area, favouring exchange of best practices, competencies and talents.

The emphasis on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) also resonated. These are not luxury institutions, they are strategic alliances: education providers, employers, VET bodies, working together to anticipate future skills needs and to respond with agility. Especially for regions seeking to catch up, CoVEs embody the shift from passive learning to ecosystem driven excellence.

4. Skills, Mobility, and Entrepreneurship in the EUSAIR: Addressing Gaps and Unlocking Potential

The Summit culminated in the Ancona Declaration, a focused set of policy recommendations addressed to the incoming EUSAIR Presidency of North Macedonia. The document distils the core insights that emerged across panels and workshops and translates them into actionable proposals for the macro-regional agenda. Rather than offering broad principles, the Declaration lays out concrete mechanisms for strengthening skills governance, improving labour mobility, and building a more coherent human-capital strategy across the Adriatic–Ionian region. It provides the North Macedonian Presidency, the EUSAIR Governing Board, the Ministries of the Member States of the Strategy, and the European Commission with a clear, evidence-based mission statement document to advance the revised Action Plan’s social and economic ambitions and to embed skills, talent retention, and circular mobility at the centre of EUSAIR’s next phase. Specific recommendation points are touched by the Declaration and explored below.

Skills and the Future of Work in the Adriatic–Ionian Region

The EUSAIR strategy recognizes that human capital is the backbone of economic resilience and competitiveness. Skills development, including upskilling and reskilling, is not just an educational issue but a macro-regional priority, tied to innovation capacity, social inclusion, and balanced territorial growth. The 2025 Action Plan underlines that effective skills policies must anticipate sectoral transformations linked to the green and digital transitions, while aligning vocational and higher education systems with labour market needs.

The Western Balkans face specific structural challenges: high youth unemployment, outdated vocational systems, weak links between education and business, and persistent skills mismatches. At the same time, new opportunities are emerging in ICT, renewable energy, sustainable tourism, and advanced manufacturing, sectors that require adaptable and future-oriented skills ecosystems. Upskilling and reskilling are therefore indispensable tools to bridge these gaps, reduce structural unemployment, and accelerate EU convergence.

Brain Drain and Circular Mobility

The outflow of skilled workers and young people, commonly referred to as brain drain, remains a critical bottleneck in the Adriatic–Ionian region, especially in the Western Balkans. High emigration rates among young and educated individuals weaken local labour markets, reduce innovation potential, and deepen demographic decline. The Ancona Policy Recommendations propose a Macro-Regional Pact on Circular Mobility and Retention Policies, explicitly designed to transform brain drain into “brain circulation.” This involves developing talent retention programs in high-demand sectors (ICT, green economy, advanced manufacturing), sharing best practices on youth retention, and leveraging diaspora networks as investors and knowledge carriers.

The EUSAIR revised Action Plan complements this by highlighting the importance of smart specialization strategies, where skills retention is linked to targeted sectoral growth. Crucially, circular mobility mechanisms, such as joint internships, transnational apprenticeships, and mobility programs like Western Balkanship and MobiliseSME, can simultaneously offer mobility opportunities and reinforce local innovation ecosystems.

Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems

Entrepreneurship is both a response to and a driver of skills transformation. The revised Action Plan emphasizes the need for stronger entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly those supporting start-ups, SMEs, and innovation hubs. For the Western Balkans, fostering entrepreneurship is essential to counterbalance brain drain and create high-quality local opportunities.

The conference recommendations point to the importance of expanding regional mobility schemes for young entrepreneurs and SME staff, enabling knowledge transfer and transnational collaboration. Moreover, proposals to channel diaspora resources into entrepreneurship and innovation reflect an emerging recognition that talent retention and entrepreneurial development are two sides of the same coin. Evidence from similar macro-regions suggests that when entrepreneurs are supported with competence-based learning, access to finance, and international networks, they are more likely to anchor their ventures locally, contributing to sustainable development rather than migrating abroad.

Governance and Data for Smarter Decisions

One of the persistent weaknesses in regional skills strategies is fragmented governance and poor data. The recommendation to establish a permanent Adriatic–Ionian Skills Observatory, linked to the DO-air observatory¹ and EU-level intelligence systems such as CEDEFOP and ETF, is an important enabling measure. Such an Observatory could systematically map skills gaps, forecast future demand, and guide EUSAIR flagship projects. It would also enhance evidence-based policymaking that connects educational reforms with labour market and entrepreneurial dynamics.

This aligns with the Action Plan's call for evidence-based monitoring tools and the integration of skills indicators into macro-regional progress assessments. Without reliable, shared data, countries risk duplicating efforts or pursuing policies that fail to address real bottlenecks.

Strategic Implications

Together, these insights point to a necessary shift: from fragmented national skills policies to coordinated macro-regional approaches. Skills, upskilling, reskilling, entrepreneurship, and brain circulation cannot be treated as isolated challenges. They are deeply interconnected. Retention strategies depend on dynamic labor markets; entrepreneurship thrives only with skilled human capital; and upskilling becomes meaningful when tied to sectoral strategies that create good jobs.

For the Western Balkans, the stakes are especially high. Without bold interventions, the region risks falling further behind in EU convergence, losing its young talent base, and failing to capitalize on its

¹ The Data Observatory of the Adriatic and Ionian Region (DO-air) is a structured and permanent platform designed to monitor and analyse socio-economic and infrastructural data within the Adriatic-Ionian Region. The DO-air is an initiative created through the collaboration between Marche Region, Marche Chamber of Commerce, the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce, and the Marche Polytechnic University. It provides an integrated approach to collecting and interpreting key metrics, including trade flows, investments, demographics, maritime and air traffic, and environmental indicators. By offering comprehensive, reliable, and up-to-date data, the Observatory aims to guide policymakers, businesses, and institutions in making informed decisions that align with the objectives of the EUSAIR.

geographic and strategic position within the Adriatic–Ionian macro-region. The combination of the revised EUSAIR Action Plan and the Ancona Recommendations provides a roadmap to prevent this scenario.

What emerges is not just a skills agenda, but a developmental pact and regional scale partnerships under the Pact for Skills initiative that align education, labour mobility, and entrepreneurship with the broader goals of sustainable growth, convergence, cohesion, and integration into the European family.

5. Conclusion

The contributions in this Special Issue converge on a shared concern: how education, skills, and cooperation systems can respond to a landscape defined by transition, such as the Adriatic and Ionian Macro-region. Whether the focus is vocational training, higher education, digitalisation, or sustainability, the papers collectively underscore that institutions can no longer rely on stable occupational structures or predictable regional dynamics. Instead, they must cultivate broader capabilities and collaborations, support repeated career shifts, and navigate a socio-economic environment marked by fluidity and uneven development.

Across the different strands of research, several themes recur. First is the growing emphasis on adaptability as a core educational outcome, reflected in calls for more general knowledge, transferable skills, and learning models that prepare individuals for continuous movement rather than linear progression. Second is the recognition that cooperation is becoming an essential condition for resilience and lasting results. This ranges from macro-regional university networks to joint efforts between employers and higher education to close persistent skills gaps and attract talents, both within and from outside the macro-region. Third, digital transformation and sustainability emerge as transversal forces reshaping expectations: they introduce new tools and pressures, new inequalities, and new opportunities to reimagine how learning environments function.

Taken together, the papers illustrate how multiple transitions intersect and create both challenges and openings for renewal. The Special Issue positions these transitions not as temporary disruptions but as structural features of contemporary socio-economic systems. In doing so, it invites a reconsideration of how education, training, and cooperation strategies can be aligned to support inclusive development, strengthen cohesion, and equip people and regions to navigate an uncertain future.

This Special Issue extends the conversation sparked at the Alliance Summit and deepens the ongoing dialogue across the Adriatic–Ionian macro-region by showing how education, skills, and cooperation policies can function as shared levers of transformation. The collection demonstrates that macro-regional strategies and educational reforms are no longer parallel tracks, but increasingly intertwined agendas shaped by the same pressures of mobility, sustainability, and digitalisation. By bringing together evidence and reflections from different parts of the region, the Special Issue reinforces a collective commitment to building more coherent, future-oriented learning ecosystems, ones that support human capital development while strengthening cohesion and fostering a sense of common purpose.