

Blog: Skills Lab Network, Florence

The fourth edition of the European Training Foundation's (ETF) Skills Lab Network of Experts was held in Florence, Italy, on 25-26 March, entitled 'From Skills Anticipation to Policy Action'. It brought together members of the Network, as well as researchers and policymakers, to discuss the challenge of anticipating labour market skills needs amid digitalisation and geopolitical turbulence, methodologies that can be used for such research, and how to bridge the research and policymaking gap.

The [Skills Lab Network](#), established in 2021, has over 850 members from public, private or non-profit research institutions and universities and/or international organisations and networks in ETF partner countries. The Network is aimed at co-creating, exchanging and disseminating labour market research to foster the culture of skills anticipation and matching.

Spontaneous benchmarking

The Network's regional facilitator for the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEMED), Professor Najib Hamouti, Deputy Director of the Africa Initiative at UM6P, University Mohammed VI Polytechnic in Benguerir, Morocco, said the event enabled him to "discover some of the powerful initiatives that translate research into action" from the EU side, while also hearing from ETF partner countries. "It was an opportunity to discover ways of doing things and have a comprehensive understanding of the whole process of research to policy action at a high level, like at the European Commission," he said.

The event featured presentations from EU bodies [Eurofound](#), [Cedefop](#) and the [Joint Research Centre](#) on monitoring European labour markets and skills dynamics, using skills intelligence for economic competitiveness, and translating evidence into policy action.

Learning about international best practices prompted Hamouti to "do a spontaneous benchmark with what we've been hearing and one's own country". He said that "while not all countries are deserts when it comes to policy action, you may discover that in your country there are important issues not getting enough attention, and you ask yourself why - is it due to a lack of focus on this process, a lack understanding of decision makers, or the need to build bridges between researchers and the field of policymaking?"

In Hamouti's observation, the Skills Network is gaining momentum among SEMED members, often being "the first to mobilise experts to speak about current issues in the labour market and education, as well as have regional webinars from the four regions of the partner countries. This has enabled the network to be diverse, and inspires me personally as a regional facilitator to make connections in my region, but also experts in other regions to learn from each other. We've more similarities than differences, with the same anxieties and questions raised by people from different regions."

Discovering whether you are right or wrong

George Gamkrelidze, Head of Labour Market Analysis Division - Economic Policy Department, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, said the event was important to get information on the latest best practices that can then be reevaluated once he is back in his office. It also provided the possibility to benchmark what Georgia is doing vis a vis other countries. "It makes me happy to discover we are doing the same, and that your approach is widely used by international organisations. This is a good moment, as otherwise you don't know if you are right or wrong," he said.

Gamkrelidze said that the growth of the Network showed its importance to members. “It is a good opportunity for us to be a part of it and implement ideas. The policymaking process is complex and difficult, so it was very good to find out about the tools and instruments that exist, what you need to know, and how to do it,” he said.

A big menu

How labour markets can adapt to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and digitalisation, and how to anticipate what skills will be needed, was a key theme of the event. Branka Anđelković, regional facilitator of the ETF Skills Lab Network of experts for South East Europe and Turkiye (SEET), said such scenario planning was not very common in the region. “It has been a challenge, but it is changing. A good takeaway from the event is hearing that more countries rely on evidence, whatever it is – innovative or traditional – as they want to enrich their society. This is why the evidence informed policy topic has become so important now,” she said.

With South East Europe lagging behind in digitalisation, technological innovation, and the adoption of AI systems, Anđelković said these discussions could be beneficial. “We will be able to see how other countries deal with issues and what transformative change is needed. The ETF is not just pushing one model, but providing a broader picture like a big menu to choose what works best for each environment, and is not prescriptive,” she said.

Dr. Christa Larsen, Managing Director, Institute for Economics, Labour and Culture (IWAK) of Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Germany, said the Skills Network was “one of the best networks I know of, due to the quality of input, discussion and information exchanges”.

Larsen leads the [European Network on Regional Labour Market Monitoring](#), which has some 400 members, including the ETF. By having “such networks of collaboration, we can exchange best practices and get inspired by exchanges with others. If you want to push development, collaboration with others in similar situations is the best way to go, and this is what the Network does,” she said.