



INTERREG ITALY-CROATIA
Programme 2021 – 2027

Smart and innovative blue skills for competitive blue economy MareSkill

D.1.3.2. Report from the round table with stakeholders



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Project identification

Project id: ITHR0200456

Name of the lead partner organization: Veleučilište u Šibeniku

Name of the lead partner organization in English: Polytechnic of Šibenik

Project title: Smart and Innovative Blue Skills for Competitive Blue Economy

Project acronym: MareSkill

Programme priority: Sustainable growth in the Blue Economy

Specific objective 1.2.: Developing skills for smart specialization, industrial transition and entrepreneurship

Project duration in months: 30

Work package: WP1 Entrepreneurial discovery process for discovering key blue skills lacking in sectors of the Blue Economy

Activity title: Activity 1.3 Open dialogue between policy makers, academia, the private sector and students for the enhancement of methods of education and credentials

Delivery period: Period 3, 13 - 18

Activity description: Organization of two round tables (VUŠ and OGS) with academia, private sector, students, and policymakers from Croatia and Italy, based on the analysis of blue skill gaps. The focus is on improving educational methods and credentials to support the digital/green transition, as well as student employability in sectors such as maritime tourism, aquaculture, and marine conservation. Outcomes will be documented and disseminated.

Partner responsible: PP4 - CCE

Dissemination level: Public

Status: Final

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1. Introduction

The MareSkill project (Smart and Innovative Blue Skills for Competitive Blue Economy) addresses the urgent issue of bridging the gap between labor market demands and the skills available in the blue economy sectors of the Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme 2021-2027. By promoting upskilling and reskilling in fields such as nautical tourism, aquaculture, maritime technologies, offshore energy, and environmental protection, the project supports sustainable growth in the blue economy and helps better align industry needs with training programs and curricula.

Within this framework, Work Package 1 (WP1) plays a vital role by establishing the foundation for identifying skill gaps and aligning educational strategies with real-world requirements. The primary goal of WP1 is to conduct an entrepreneurial discovery process (EDP) that actively involves stakeholders to identify essential blue skill shortages, prioritize innovation efforts, and develop recommendations for future educational approaches.

Activity 1.3 specifically aims to foster open dialogue among different stakeholder groups, including policymakers, academia, private sector representatives, and students. Its goal is to verify and expand on the insights gained from earlier activities, such as developing the EDP methodology (Activity 1.1) and conducting the stakeholder survey and interviews on blue skill gaps and educational needs (Activity 1.2). While Activities 1.1 and 1.2 laid the methodological and analytical groundwork, the roundtable discussions in Activity 1.3 are designed to ensure that diverse perspectives are heard, gather practical field experiences, and build a shared understanding of the skills and competencies needed for a more competitive and sustainable blue economy.

The main goal of this deliverable (D.1.3.2) is to document the outcomes of these stakeholder discussions. By summarizing key insights, highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement, and offering recommendations, the report aims to provide practical input to improve educational methods, training programs, and credentialing systems in the blue economy. This helps MareSkill identify current and future skill gaps and supports actionable solutions to enhance workforce employability and encourage cross-border collaboration in the Adriatic region.



2. Event Description

As part of Activity 1.3, three roundtable events were organized, with overall coordination overseen by the Croatian Chamber of Economy (CCE, PP4). These events served as key platforms for engaging stakeholders in open discussions about blue skills gaps, educational approaches, and future collaboration opportunities within the blue economy. Each roundtable included both in-person and online participation, ensuring greater accessibility and active involvement across Italy and Croatia. Participants were also asked to complete the survey to share their views systematically.

The first round table occurred in Šibenik, Croatia, on June 17, 2025, as part of the InnovaBlue – Sustainable Innovation Communities event, co-organized with the Lead Partner, Polytechnic of Šibenik. The event featured an introductory session followed by thematic discussions and project presentations. During the dedicated MareSkill segment, project partners shared their progress in WP1, particularly the methodology for the entrepreneurial discovery process and the findings from the stakeholder survey and analysis report. This established a foundation for organized discussions with stakeholders from policy, academia, business, and civil society, focusing on how to address identified skill gaps through innovative training methods.

A total of 15 participants were recorded outside the project consortium. This included 4 from Croatia, 1 from Italy, 3 from Slovenia, 2 from Montenegro, 3 from Serbia, 1 from Greece, and 1 from North Macedonia. They represented 11 different organizations, including SMEs, public authorities, academia, and NGOs. This diversity ensured that the dialogue on blue skills development reflected a wide range of perspectives and sectoral experiences.

The second round table was held in Zadar, Croatia, on July 2, 2025, during the international conference titled “Adriatic Ports in Transition – Collaboration for a Sustainable & Digital Future,” which brought together several Interreg projects and initiatives. The event was co-hosted with project partner UNIZD and organized by a broader group of port and maritime stakeholders, with MareSkill included as one of the participating projects. Our role was focused on validating the project’s findings with stakeholders and gathering feedback on skill gaps, especially related to digital and green competencies, technology transfer, and innovation management. To support the discussions, participants were asked to complete the stakeholder survey on blue skills gaps and education methods to ensure their perspectives were systematically collected.



The program featured keynote speeches, project showcases, and thematic roundtables. In the Project Showcase segment, MareSkill was presented by LP, who highlighted progress made in WP1 and shared key insights from the stakeholder survey and analysis report. MareSkill representatives were also actively involved throughout the event, contributing to discussions in the roundtables on Digital Transformation in Adriatic Ports and Sustainable Solutions for Ports and Maritime Transport.

A total of 43 participants were recorded outside the project consortium, including 29 from Croatia and 14 from Italy. They represented 23 different organizations, with 14 from Croatia and 9 from Italy, spanning port authorities, SMEs, regional development agencies, higher education institutions, and public administrations.

The final roundtable took place on September 29, 2025, in Trieste, Italy, hosted by OGS (PP7), under the title “Sustainable Blue Economy in a Climate-Changing World.” The event was held at the OGS facilities in partnership with the ICTP center. The agenda featured expert presentations by leading academics and practitioners, as well as an extensive roundtable discussion. The focus was on cross-border collaboration, technological innovation, and climate adaptation, directly linking these themes to the identified blue skills gaps. MareSkill partners presented the consolidated results of WP1, including highlights from the survey and interviews, and led a discussion on the most effective educational methods to meet sectoral needs.

A total of 12 participants were recorded outside the project consortium, including 7 from Croatia and 5 from Italy. They represented 5 different organizations across academia, the private sector, public administration, and NGOs. This fostered a balanced cross-border exchange of ideas, enhanced by the hybrid format that enabled broader participation.



3. Discussion Themes

At each of the three round tables, a shared presentation outlined the project's objectives, partner structure, and the key findings from the stakeholder survey and blue skills gap analysis. This served as a starting point for discussion, after which participants were encouraged to consider whether the findings aligned with the realities of their sectors and to share their priorities for future training and education.

The discussion centered on the key gaps in the blue economy, particularly around digital, green, and innovation skills. Participants were reminded of how these shortages impact organizational performance and competitiveness, with examples from sectors like aquaculture, nautical tourism, shipbuilding, and environmental protection. The conversation also examined how different training methods work, with workshops, mentoring, and blended learning generally viewed as the most effective, while online-only formats were seen as less impactful.

Although interaction levels varied across events, the exchanges confirmed the importance of the identified gaps and offered an opportunity to verify earlier WP1 findings. In each case, participants were asked to complete a brief survey, capturing their perspectives consistently and ensuring that both dialogue and data collection would inform the next stages of the project.



4. Survey Results

The stakeholder survey used in the round tables was based on the interviews conducted in Activity 1.2. These earlier interviews offered an initial overview of the key skills gaps and training needs in the blue economy. The survey was then designed to verify and confirm these findings with a larger group of stakeholders, while also collecting additional data on priority sectors, missing skills, and preferred learning methods. By sharing the questionnaire at the events, we allowed participants who had not been involved in the interviews to provide their perspectives and see if the results from the first phase aligned with their experiences.

By the time of reporting, a total of thirty-five completed surveys had been collected during round tables in Šibenik, Zadar, and Trieste. Respondents represented organizations of various sizes—large institutions like universities and public authorities, medium-sized organizations, and smaller companies and clusters. This diversity ensured the survey captured both the viewpoints of major institutions and the everyday experiences of smaller actors. The countries most represented were Croatia and Italy, but valuable input also came from neighboring and Mediterranean countries, helping to broaden the overall perspective. The survey also included all key stakeholder groups, such as businesses, education and training providers, public administrations, NGOs, and civil society organizations.

The responses highlighted the importance of various blue economy sectors for future skills development. Maritime transport, logistics, and aquaculture were the most frequently mentioned, followed closely by coastal and marine environmental protection and shipbuilding. Marine tourism and offshore renewable energy were also noted, though by fewer respondents. The main gaps identified by stakeholders closely aligned with earlier interviews. Focus areas included the digital and green transition, the need for practical experience, the challenge of adopting new technologies, and the demand for knowledge in environmental sustainability and climate adaptation. Some participants also stressed that entrepreneurship and communication skills should not be overlooked, as these abilities are becoming increasingly important for career growth.

Regarding preferred learning methods, respondents clearly expressed their preferences. They favor interactive and hands-on formats such as in-person training, workshops, and blended learning. Mentoring programs are also highly valued, while purely online or self-paced approaches are





considered less effective. This shows that stakeholders prioritize education that is practical and relevant to real work situations rather than just theoretical knowledge.



5. Key Messages from the Round Tables

The round table discussions confirmed that the blue economy across the Adriatic faces a set of common and urgent challenges. Sectoral agencies emphasized the need to align workforce skills with rapidly changing policy frameworks, especially in areas such as sustainability and port digitalization. They warned that without more targeted training programs, implementing regulations on climate adaptation and safety will remain difficult in practice. Cross-border legal authorities added that cooperation between Italy and Croatia requires not only harmonized rules but also comparable skills, highlighting the importance of joint approaches to training and certification.

Higher education and research organizations highlighted the gap between classroom teaching and practical skills. They stressed that students need more opportunities for internships, simulations, and real-world projects. They agreed that curricula must evolve more quickly to keep up with technological advancements. Education and training providers also pointed out that flexible pathways, such as micro-credentials, can help learners better meet new demands. They emphasized that blended formats and mentoring programs are more effective than online courses alone for developing practical skills.

From the perspective of SMEs, the challenges are substantial. Smaller businesses often lack staff with the necessary digital and green skills and cannot afford extensive internal training. They expressed strong interest in short, targeted modules that can quickly provide employees with practical knowledge. SMEs also emphasized the importance of closer collaboration with universities and training centers, as many of their skill needs could be met through co-designed curricula and structured internship programs.

Although there are various perspectives, the discussions concentrated on a few main recommendations. Stakeholders agreed that curricula at all levels should become more practical and interdisciplinary, with increased focus on sustainability, digitalization, and innovation. Micro-credentials and flexible formats were seen as effective tools for quick skill upgrades and for closing the gap between formal education and labor market needs. Closer collaboration between academia and industry was regarded as essential, with SMEs and sectoral agencies willing to share practical knowledge, while education and training providers could adjust their methods accordingly.



6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The round table discussions were crucial for the MareSkill project because they confirmed earlier findings and provided new insights directly from stakeholders. The main message is a widespread agreement on the urgency of developing digital and green skills, the need for hands-on training, and the significance of innovative teaching methods. These outcomes will directly influence the development of new educational activities and credentials under WP2, ensuring that future pilot courses and training modules meet real labor market needs.

Several clear recommendations emerged. Stakeholders stressed the importance of curricula that include more practical content, the development of flexible formats like micro-credentials, and testing blended and mentoring-based approaches in pilot courses. Ongoing discussions with stakeholders remain crucial, both to refine the content of new learning activities and to ensure their acceptance and adoption by companies and students alike.

Finally, the discussions highlighted the importance of cross-border collaboration. By bringing together stakeholders from Croatia, Italy, and nearby countries, MareSkill helps develop a shared strategy for skill building in the Adriatic. This teamwork enhances the competitiveness of the blue economy on both sides of the border and makes the project an effective tool for addressing common challenges.

