



We announce the end of the first phase of the European funded project SKILLS + in which the University of Western Macedonia participates. The completion of the first phase of the project includes the completion of the Regional Action Plan for the structural funds of the Regional Operational Program of Western Macedonia. In particular, the Regional Action Plan includes proposals on Axis 3 [Improving the Competitiveness of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises] incorporating the good practice features of the SKILLS + project partners. The aim of incorporating these features is to promote public policies promoting information and communication technologies (ICT) among SMEs in rural areas, helping them to fully exploit the opportunities offered by a digital single market to benefit from the digital economy.

Strategies for the digitization of rural areas and small businesses by a panel of experts were carried out in each peer review, where each partner at the end of the review received a set of recommendations to take into account the preparation of the Action Plan, analyzing how results of learning policy will be capitalized. These recommendations were evaluated by local stakeholder support groups in the spring of 2018 to prepare for the preparation of the Action Plan.

Businesses in the rural area of the Western Macedonia Region are characterised by low exporting capacity. Maximising the use and impact of digital tools can help regional business to boost their activity and survive amid of turbulent economic times. In order to **upscale exports** in Western Macedonia the creation and support of a financial mechanism for upscaling ICT related services supported by local business incubators was proposed. About 3 M € to be spent in expert advice and purchase of equipment for increasing digital capacity, innovation and supporting exports using ICT tools.

Although the Western Macedonia Region is accepting a lower number of tourists every year, when compared to other regions in Greece, the Region has to offer a variety of alternative tourism activities and destinations. Building a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) shall gather in one pace the services/destinations offered thus maximising the impact of promotional efforts of SMEs in the Region. This requires the upscale of digital skills and services offered online by SMEs. The action plan proposes the **promotion and support of alternative tourism services**: Creation of a holistic DMS and digital tools for guiding tourists and visitors along cultural routes by using their own smartphones. About 3.7 M € to be spent in tools and mechanisms to promote WM as a friendly and alternative tourism destination.

The 2 good practices incorporating features that will be applied in the context of actions and measures to be launched by the Region of Western Macedonia are:

- ✓ **Digiboost** (Finland) reflecting digitization of SMEs for upgrading e-services with a focus on exports. The Digiboost is a policy tool which can help in practice the digitisation of SME in the area. A digital/innovation expert can work within businesses in order to: a) improve internationalisation and networking; b) development and innovation; c) investments and working capital; d) accessing financing solutions and/or securing the export receivables. The digital/innovation expert combined with the purchase of IT, shall lead to the production of digital products and products related to the preparation, provision and update of e-services with a focus on exports.
- ✓ **HalberStadt** app (Germany) promoting a complete mobile web- and app-based information portal for city /region focusing on tourism. The HalberStadt app (Germany), a complete mobile web- and app-based information portal for city /region focusing on tourism, enterprise and public services may address new target groups and attract visitors enhancing tourism activity.

On March 12, 2019, more than 70 stakeholders participated in the last meeting of peer partners in Magdeburg, Germany, in the first phase of the SKILLS + project, where the 11 Action Plans were presented by all participating Member States.

The end of the first phase also marked a new era for the promotion of public policies and the exchange of good practices between members with the aim of improving the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The project is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund and by Norwegian national funding through the INTERREG EUROPE program. The project involves twelve partners from Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Norway.

