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Fisheries

Careers in the Blue Economy: How to close the skills gap and make the marine and maritime sectors more attractive to young people

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POLICY

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Our coasts and seas have the potential to deliver growth and jobs in the coming years. In order to achieve Blue Growth, the European Commission's long term strategy to further harness the potential of Europe's oceans, seas and coasts, for sustainable growth in the marine and maritime sectors, highly qualified and skilled professionals are needed. Yet many Blue Economy sectors are experiencing difficulties in finding the right employees for highly qualified technical positions – and most sectors expect these difficulties to continue throughout the foreseeable future.

Why is this the case? Often, the knowledge and skills provided by educational establishments do not correspond to the Blue Economy's needs. As a result, companies find it difficult to fill the vacancies they have. Meanwhile, unemployment levels grow.



(https://ec.europa.eu/dgs/maritimeaffairs_fisheries/magazine/sites/mare-magaz/files/field/image/%C2%A9%20Nightman1965_shutterstock_223223959.jpg)

Growth in the Blue Economy is dependent on job creation in emerging sectors but also traditional lines of work such as shipbuilding. These require an appropriately skilled and specialist workforce.

As older employees in Europe's maritime industry retire, many are not being replaced. Reasons vary from sector to sector and across regions. However, the main causes are related to a poor image of the marine sector and a lack of knowledge among school leavers about the broad range of marine and maritime career opportunities. To address this skills shortage, the Blue Economy sectors need to be made more attractive and exciting for students.

Another hurdle is the gender imbalance that exists in most maritime sectors. Few women are attracted to working in what is traditionally seen as a man's world. Schemes such as the Generation BALT project are helping women like Eva Errestad, who has a degree in marine biology, to pursue careers in the Blue Economy. "At the time I had an unskilled, part-time job outside of my maritime field," she says. "I figured this was my last chance to do something with my degree. The course gave me a key to get back into the business and it gave me the confidence to apply for a job I wouldn't even have dared to apply for."

The European Commission has also recognised the problem. As its 2014 Communication on Innovation in the Blue Economy acknowledged, "Growth in the Blue Economy will require an appropriately skilled workforce, able to apply the latest technologies in engineering and a range of other disciplines. There is currently a skills gap that must be tackled."

The Communication was endorsed by the European Parliament, whose report noted a "growing disengagement and disinvestment by Member States in the spheres of science and education" and called on regional authorities to invest in "an ambitious social dimension of Blue Growth and maritime literacy in order to promote training and access for young people to maritime professions."

In short, it is high time for action. In recent years, the European Commission has launched several initiatives (e.g. the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, the Youth Employment Initiative and the Erasmus+ programme) to foster cooperation between schools and businesses and to help get young people into work. These were broad measures that did not target the Blue Economy alone. A more tailor-made approach for these sectors, taking into account regional differences, could provide added value.

The Commission has also organised more sector-specific initiatives, including a thematic session on maritime skills and blue careers, which took place at the European Maritime Day Conference in Piraeus, Athens in May this year. Discussions at the event found that the skills gap results from a lack of communication and collaboration between educational institutions and business. Studies carried out in Spain and the United Kingdom support this assessment. The academic world often finds it difficult to adapt curricula to innovation and technological developments, the increased use of foreign languages and the rising need for ICT skills. At the same time, companies today are looking for professionals who are not only able to apply technical knowledge and competences, but also to work in teams, communicate effectively, take decisions under pressure and adapt



quickly to new environments and technologies. In the words of Commissioner Karmenu Vella: "Ideas and money aren't enough if we don't have the skills to make them a reality."

Maritime clusters have been identified as the most suitable actors to respond to these concerns. Such clusters include both industry and educational bodies. Thanks to this varied make-up, they can act as facilitators and mediators of change. For instance, they can encourage businesses to take on leadership roles and see beyond immediate and individual company interests.

The Commission is looking to support such clusters and has announced that it shall launch a call for proposals on "Blue Careers in Europe" next year. The grants awarded would aim to set up local or regional platforms for dialogue between business and education, allowing them to jointly develop and carry out measures to close the skills gap, tackle unemployment and make "blue careers" more attractive to students.

In addition, the recently launched Erasmus+ programme for 2016[1] includes several initiatives of interest to Blue Economy stakeholders. For instance Sector Skills Alliances aim to create European partnerships between industry, vocational and educational training institutes and regulatory bodies to define skills needs in a specific sector and to design and implement new curricula accordingly. Other Knowledge Alliances target higher education and aim to boost the relationship between industry and universities. An info day is planned for 23 November in Brussels[2].

We've analysed the situation and set the objective – now it is time to take another step forward in developing the Blue Economy!

[1] For more information, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/discover/guide/index_en.htm
(http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/discover/guide/index_en.htm)

[2] To register for the event, please visit:

<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/news/registration-now-open-for-er...> (http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/news/registration-now-open-for-erasmus-plus-infoday-2015-knowledge-alliances-and-sector-skills-alliances_en?subweb=343&lang=en)

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