



Empowering SMEs for the digital transformation

#SMEsGoDigital

P.R.4: Sustainability Plan



Acknowledgments and Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

The sustainability report for #SMEsGoDigital is divided into two main parts: the Sustainability Plan and the Policy Recommendations Paper.

The Sustainability Plan outlines strategies to ensure the continuation and expansion of #SMEsGoDigital's impact beyond the grant funding period. It focuses on maintaining relationships between partners, sustaining the services offered by the #SMEsGoDigital tool, and proposing mechanisms for further development and implementation. The plan emphasizes internal engagement within consortium organizations and external involvement of third parties. Key objectives include extending platform use, proposing exploitation cases, and creating policy recommendations to support the ecosystem.

The Policy Recommendations Paper offers key policy options and recommendations for supporting the #SMEsGoDigital ecosystem at both EU and national levels. It specifies promising policy options, basic policy actions, and conditions needed for policy success. The paper targets legislative bodies and funding entities, providing guidelines for sustained support.

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About the project

While serving as the backbone of the EU economy and playing a crucial role in its growth and development, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are currently undergoing a global shift towards a digital and green economy. Despite their role, the socio-economic ecosystems often lag in harnessing the benefits and potential of this transition, particularly affecting micro and small enterprises. This discrepancy exacerbates inequalities and widens the inclusiveness gap within the economic landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impeded traditional business operations, exacerbating the vulnerability of SMEs and the need for a swift and adaptive response to the disruptions introduced by the transition to a remote and digital economy. Against this context, enabling SMEs' digitalisation with supportive strategies for their introduction and orientation has become a centrepiece for inclusive growth in EU.

Building on this challenge, the SMEsGoDigital project, funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, aims to develop a dedicated online tool tailored to the SMEs' requirements for guidance, skills and resources to fuel capitalisation on their digital business models and processes transformation. This tool provides a unified portal that integrates a platform with resources for enhancing knowledge, skills, and competences, fostering the gradual development of digital literacy culture within SMEs. Aligned with their daily operations and sector-specific roadmaps, the tool assesses the current state of readiness of the users for digital transition, strategically combining achievable short-term gains with sustainable innovations resulting from effective digital upskilling. The project is coordinated by [the Small Enterprises Institute of the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals Craftsmen and Merchants - IME GSEVEE](#) (Greece) with the collaboration of [ENAIP Veneto](#) (Italy), [PIMEC](#) (Spain), [Mathesis for Future Citizens](#) (Greece), [Fondazione ECIPA](#) (Italy) and the [European Vocational Training Association – EVTA](#) (Belgium).

Introduction

Exploitation refers to the use and dissemination of results at different levels both during and after the project implementation. Sustainability refers to the continuous use and exploitation of results beyond the project lifespan, in a long-term perspective.

The sustainability plan is developed as a roadmap for the achievement of long-term goals, such as:

- Extending and ensuring the use of the SMEsGoDigital platform and its tools beyond the project lifespan
- Propose commercial and non-commercial actions for the exploitation of the tools
- Suggest mechanisms and actions to improve the platform, tools and services.

Two dimensions have been preliminarily considered for the sustainability of the SMEsGoDigital project:

- **Internal dimension:** at the level of the project consortium e.g., sustainability of the relationships between the partners in the project consortium
- **External dimension:** attracting and engaging third parties and e.g., sustainability of the services offered by the SMEsGoDigital platform.

Definition of the sustainability framework and methodology

The sustainability framework of the SMEsGoDigital project builds on 9 key elements of strategy, capacity and action for the positioning of the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub's sustainability:

- **Strategic vision**
- **Collaboration**
- **Leadership**
- **Communication**
- **Evaluation and return on investment**
- **Capacity**
- **Efficiency & effectiveness**
- **Relevance and practicality**
- **Resource diversification**

All these elements were taken into consideration in the development of the **sustainability questionnaire** for the collection of inputs from each partner organisation regarding the ongoing and future exploitation of the project tangible and intangible results.

The questionnaire investigated the **employment of resources** from each partner organisation for the maintenance of the SMEsGoDigital platform and tools developed in the project, as well as on potential target groups and the added value of expanded relationships and network. Targeted questions aimed at investigating the way each partner organisation planned or will plan to make use of the tangible and intangible project results, taking into account potential target groups, promotional strategies and resources employment. Moreover, a set of wrap-up questions were embedded in the questionnaire in order to identify potential challenges and obstacles hindering the smooth sustainability of the project, stakeholders to be involved, and potential legislative and/or administrative burden for the sustainability and transferability of project results.

In particular, the questionnaire was structured as follows:

- **Tangible results**

- Literature review
- SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub
- Training courses (embedded in the Tech Hub as a pool of resources)
- Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire
- Policy Recommendations

The questions addressed in this section focused on the partners' intention to exploit the results during and after the funding period, their promotion on relevant platforms and the added value brought by the results to the activities of the single organisations, for both internal and external use.

- **Intangible results**

- Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)
- Educational approach (Micro-learning approach)
- Transferability of knowledge gained from the implementation of the SMEsGoDigital project
- Expanded relationships and network

The questions addressed in this section focused on the approach to be taken by each partner organisation to incorporate and replicate the methodologies acquired and implemented during the project in internal practices, for both internal and external use.

- **Exploitable resources, mainly financial e.g., new project funds, own funds, mainstream national funds**
- **Target groups to be addressed both during and after the project**
- **Potential challenges and obstacles**
- **Involvement of external stakeholders befitting the project**
- **Alignment of the project with internal initiatives to each organisation**
- **Positive contribution from each partner to the project's sustainability**
- **Necessity of legislative or administrative arrangements in partner's countries.**

All questions embedded in the questionnaire were open, allowing partners the freedom to elaborate on their responses and provide nuanced insights that capture the full spectrum of their perspectives and experiences. This approach not only fosters a deeper understanding of each partner's unique context but also promotes collaborative problem-solving and innovative thinking. The value of all inputs provided by each partner paved the way for more effective strategies that align with the consortium's shared sustainability goals and drive the meaningful impact of the project in the long term.

Key results

This chapter investigates the main results developed within the project, in order to understand key stakeholders and exploitable areas each partner organisation can target to ensure the sustainability of the outcomes. Specific aspects have been taken into consideration, namely resources required, funding strategy, intellectual property rights, milestones and indicators and so on. A conclusion has been drawn from success stories.

Tangible results

Literature Review

The #SMEsGoDigital online platform, arose through the literature review and existing good practices, in conjunction with focus groups' discussions. The aim of the literature review was to examine and evaluate research on digital transformation with a two-fold purpose: construct a conceptual foundation and investigate the project's research questions formulated upon it. In the context of the SMEsGoDigital project, the **semi-systematic approach** has been selected to be applied. The research questions investigated through the literature review were: (1)How is DT defined by Academia, Institutions and Business?, (2) How are the DTLs defined and distinguished?, (3)Which capabilities build upon DTC?, (4) How Digital Transformation Strategy (DTS) is related to DT? and (5) What support do SMEs (especially small & micro-ones) need for their DT?. Additionally to the literature review, The Quality Monitoring (QM) team of the SMEsGoDigital project evaluated the practices suggestions collected by the partners and indicated a number of best practices, based on an evaluation matrix.

The literature review, including the best practices collection resulted to the final state of the #SMEsGoDigital online platform, ensuring a qualitative tangible result. Moreover, the literature review could consist of a referral point for future research and further work in the field.



SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

Tech hubs for SMEs focus on micro and self-employed to access the best resources, guidance and orientation through their journey towards digital transformation. The supportive Tech hub of the project offers orientation, roadmaps and resources for digital awareness, competence, tools and solutions to support SMEs transfer online. The #SMEsGoDigital Tech hub as a learning resource pool consists of: (i) primary learning material developed by the consortium to build awareness on the growth opportunities digital scaling offers based on the developed roadmaps, targeting the "know-what" & "know-why" before tackling the "know-how", as one can only fully understand the functioning of a phenomenon, if one has reached some understanding of its meaning, of its "what?", and/or its finality, (ii) primary learning material to plug digital skills gap complementing with the "knowhow" part the previous content, (iii) aggregated developed secondary learning content from partners' past projects and finally, (iv) free available training programmes to enhance manpower's digital skills. This innovative procedure model can be transferable to sector-specific proposed instruments for digitalisation and innovation in SMEs and other idiosyncratic entities such as start-ups. This participatory process has built trust both between #SMEsGoDigital Tech hub and its users & stakeholders and among individuals involved. The services #SMEsGoDigital Tech hub provide a key advantage for micro & small companies to deal with both pre and post COVID-19 crisis.



Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

The SMEsGoDigital course aims to raise awareness on the benefits of digital transformation (DT) and empower SMEs manpower with relevant DT capacity building to perform professional services linked to the three-level roadmap towards digital transformation, providing incremental stepwise benchmarks for participants to follow. Specific objectives are developed for a holistic set of expectations, following Dee Fink's taxonomy of significant learning experiences. This methodology is guided by a learning-centred approach focusing on the learner's behaviour and identifying what is about to be learned and accomplished by the learners in an observable, measurable, and able-to-be demonstrated way either quantitatively or qualitatively whenever the objectives are not quantifiable, such as soft skills. The course design takes into consideration the situational factors that may impact the teaching-learning situation, including the specific context, expectations of external groups, nature of the subject, characteristics of the learners and teacher, and special pedagogical challenges.

The andragogical approach emphasises the explicit satisfaction of adult learners' need to know why they have to learn something new in order to undertake their own responsibility for learning it. The course aims to provide essential cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes, acting as a nexus to the previously defined three-level roadmaps towards DT. Participants can use this course as a tool to tailor their learning and development path along their DT journey, matching their missing knowledge, skills, and attitudes with the relevant DT stages they wish to advance.

The 4Es framework is a conceptual framework for determining course goals, activities, and assessment to ensure an aligned and integrated course design. It involves providing multiple means of engagement, representation, action, expression, and incremental adaptation to progressively continuous available information and competencies. The framework also includes the concept of learning domain, which includes the "WHY" of learning, "THAT" of



learning, "HOW" of learning, "THAT NEXT" of learning, and the goal of purposeful and motivated learners, resourceful and knowledgeable learners, strategic and goal-directed learners, and autonomous learning agents.

The learning content follows the concept of active learning, in line with the backward design model propositions. Active learning underpins the benefits of "doing things" and engaging learners for their knowledge acquisition and retention. The target group calls for an andragogical approach constituent of experiential learning with emphasis on interaction and self-discovery. Designing significant learning activities requires a holistic view of active learning. The Model of Holistic Learning proposes that learners need to acquire necessary information and ideas through readings or lectures, observe or do experientially providing a rich learning experience, such as case studies, role playing, problem-solving and decision-making activities, real experience stories, and reflecting on the meanings of concepts and experiences via reflective journals and/or learning portfolios.

The SMEsGoDigital course is designed to make going digital simple for SMEs, particularly the micro-ones and self-employed who are lagging behind the most. Literature suggests that these target groups lack light, simple, easy-to-use, agile, and practical tools and digital competences capacity to guide them through current trends and demonstrate their importance based on practical examples. The course is designed to be online and mobile-friendly, with a focus on micro-learning experiences. The learning units are short (less than 5 minutes) and easily searchable, providing practical guidance and orientation for the participants. The course also addresses potential resistance and fear towards DT, aiming to support learners in overcoming these challenges. The course design incorporates authentic performance assessment, forward-looking assessment, and self-assessment to ensure that learners are able to apply their knowledge and skills in real professional situations.

The course content is directly connected with the #SMEsGoDigital three-level roadmaps with its stepwise benchmarks delivered in Task 2.1. The content sequencing follows its three levels

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- Basic, Standard, and Advanced - focusing on core competencies derived from the defined benchmarks. The course content integrates lessons, tools, and resources classified by the given levels to maximise learners' capacity. The SMEsGoDigital course uses micro-modularity to create self-contained modules of learning content, allowing for flexible usage based on learners' pace and prior knowledge. The course consists of modules linked to the three-level roadmaps benchmarks for core cross-sectoral competences, each integrating micro-learning units based on the 4Es framework. The modules cover topics such as going digital, e-commerce, digital payments, cloud accounting, digitising small business accounting, digital tools to boost business, e-invoicing, staff management, choosing a payroll system, digital tools, and embracing digital tools. The course structure includes a welcome, course presentation, module presentation, enlightening, empowering, energize, and evolving sections. The course offers various micro-learning activities related to the module's topic, hands-on activities, and guidance on applying knowledge.

The overall aim of this SMEsGoDigital tool is to empower SMEs for their digital transformation by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and mindset. This project result targets professionals in micro and small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who are transforming their companies digitally and are ready to embrace orientation, support, and capacity building through the #SMEsGoDigital tool. These professionals were actively involved in the design, functionality, support, and orientation needed via roadmaps, e-courses, micro-learning experiences, and the hub's piloting and evaluation to identify common and mutually serving must-haves and nice-to-haves applicable to all contexts.

The expected impact of the SMEsGoDigital course is to provide professionals in micro and SMEs with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to successfully navigate the digital transformation process. By empowering these individuals with relevant DT capacity building, the course aims to support their professional development and enhance their ability to thrive in the digital economy. The course is expected to have a positive impact on the project activities by providing a comprehensive and effective training tool for the target groups.

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Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

The self-assessment test on the SMEsGoDigital platform is a comprehensive tool designed to offer users a seamless and personalised journey through the process of digitalization. To access materials on the SMEsGoDigital platform, users are required to complete a self-assessment questionnaire. This test evaluates the user's digitalization level and knowledge by examining various aspects of digital comprehension through a series of questions.

The questionnaire explores the user's business sector, the daily application of technology in the workplace, system integration, cybersecurity practices, and other relevant characteristics to identify the extent of digitalization. By understanding the nuances of users' digital understanding, the SMEsGoDigital platform can strategically offer resources and information that align with individual needs, such as the roadmaps, ultimately enhancing the overall user experience.

Additionally, by assessing individual levels of digitalization, the platform gains insights into the starting points of most participants on their digital journey. The self-assessment test has significantly impacted the SMEsGoDigital project by providing valuable information about platform users and helping and guiding them.

However, it is relevant to mention that on some occasions, users faced some challenges in their interaction with the self-assessment test, such as unclear language or answers that participants found less transparent or representative. Nonetheless, the positive feedback received, with 4 out of 5 ratings from most participants, underscores the value users place on the self-assessment tool. This endorsement validates its importance in delivering a personalized and enriching experience for SMEs navigating the digital landscape.



Policy Recommendations

A set of selected policy recommendations was developed as an attachment to the sustainability plan aimed at supporting the digital transition of the SMEs ecosystem within the European Union. This section offers actionable strategies to address key challenges identified, including the digital skill gap, promoting technical and social infrastructure, and workforce digital skills and upskilling. It also discusses current EU measures to support SMEs' digitalisation efforts and underscores the importance of VET in mitigating digital challenges. Furthermore, recommendations focus on upskilling initiatives, such as addressing digitalisation challenges, engaging the workforce in lifelong learning programmes, and integrating digital competencies into apprenticeships.



Intangible results

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

The methodology for the qualitative and the quantitative analysis followed the constructivism paradigm with a scaffolding development taking into consideration the situational contexts of the stakeholders' needs for the need analysis through the desk research and focus groups discussions. The innovation of this approach lies in putting the target group, the SMEs stakeholders, in the epicenter of attention and their feedback. As the foundation of the development of the #SMEsGoDigital tool, the methodology incurs high organisational impact. The innovative constructivist bottom-up approach for the stakeholders' needs to be fulfilled by the SMEsGoDigital tool, can serve as an exemplary approach for a paradigmatic organisational change. This approach clashes with the to date top-down approach impacting heavily on our target groups as the design of the tool is from them towards them, which has transferability potential for the design of similar tools of synergies for clusters.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

This project result focuses on the methodology for designing a competence-based course for SMEs professionals (management & employees) to continuously develop digital skills and awareness of current trends. The course design is based on the definitions of Digital Transformation (DT) and Digital Transformation Capacity (DTC) and the performance criteria for the three-level roadmaps -Basic, Standard, Advanced- towards digital transformation. The course design is a hybrid amalgamation of Fink's learning-centred design model, micro-learning concept, and Mezirow's transformative learning approach, which aligns with the target group's situational and contextual needs.

The methodology adopted is a hybrid fusion of competence-based backward course design for micro-learning experiences following a transformative learning approach embedded in

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the 4Es framework: Enlighten-Enable-Energise-Evolve. The competence-based course (CBC) is designed to allow learners to demonstrate their mastery of a task, activity, or subject well enough to be assessed as "competent." The online CBC format allows for individual learning paths and paces, providing focused training for individual professional goals.

The CBC design process begins with identifying the competencies in identified areas requiring performance improvement, tailoring the three-level roadmap towards digital transformation, and creating varied opportunities for SMEs manpower to demonstrate important skills in authentic contexts. These competences are organised in a level-oriented model following the three-level roadmaps, enabling a self-paced, personalised, and professionally goal-oriented learning model. This custom-designed training based on the target group's gaps and strengths allows training to become motivational and empowering.

The backward course design approach emphasises professional learning outcomes and a learning-centred approach, focusing on the learner as the central focus. This approach involves defining instruction goals, determining significant learning achievements, choosing a means of measuring these achievements, and deciding how to teach to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Dee Fink's Backward Design paradigm shift provides a scaffold for designing and delivering effective learning-centred courses, focusing on the learner's internal process and contextual negotiation.

The micro-learning approach is a new alternative approach to coping with information abundance and the constant need to learn, which characterises the current professional era. It posits that people can learn better, more effectively, and in an easier, more enjoyable manner if information is broken down into smaller units and learning takes the shape of small steps. The micro-learning approach is based on a preliminary framework of micro-learning dimensions that fit perfectly the situational context of SMEs manpower.

Transformative learning theory, developed by Jack Mezirow, is one of the most influential theories of andragogy. It is a type of experience that causes a shift in an individual's

perspective or attitude. Mezirow proposes that learning is "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference," which includes a student's habit of mind and personal point of view. Mezirow identified four processes of learning: elaborate on an existing point of view, establish new points of view, and adapt to new situations.

In the context of digital transformation capacity building, transformative learning theory is essential to address change resistance. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need to be agile and change drivers, but psychological barriers are natural and important to consider. Implementing transformative learning in professional environments nurtures perspective modelling on change, enhancing their capacity to adapt and become catalysts of digital transformation.

The 4Es framework is used to embed transformative learning principles in the backward design of significant microlearning experiences. The first step introduces digital-oriented concepts and potential growth opportunities, followed by emphasising the "know-what" and "know-why" aspects of digital scaling. The second part focuses on plugging the digital skills gap, complementing the "know-how" understanding and skills needed for action. The third step encourages learners to apply acquired skills and knowledge to task-based professional goals towards their business digital transformation. The final step ensures the circularity of the digital transformation journey, aligning with the needs analysis findings for constant advancement in a loop.

The aim of this project result is to design a competence-based course for SME professionals (management and employees) to continuously develop their digital skills and awareness of current trends, based on the definitions of Digital Transformation (DT) and Digital Transformation Capacity (DTC) and the performance criteria for the three-level roadmaps towards digital transformation.



The expected impact of this project result on the project activities is to provide a clear methodology and framework for designing the competence-based course. This guided the project team in developing the course content, activities, and assessments that align with the target group's situational and contextual needs. It ensured that the course is effective in addressing the digital skills gaps of SME professionals and helping them progress towards digital transformation.

The expected impact on the project target groups, SME professionals, is to enhance their digital skills and knowledge, enabling them to adapt to the digital transformation challenges faced by their organisations. The competence-based course provides them with the necessary training and resources to continuously develop their digital skills and stay updated with current trends. This empowers them to become catalysts of digital transformation within their organisations, driving innovation and growth. The course's personalised and self-paced nature allows individuals to focus on their specific professional goals, making the training more motivational and empowering.



Transferability of knowledge gained from the implementation of the project

The transferability of knowledge gained from the implementation of the project refers to the intangible outcome of the project wherein the knowledge gained, expertise, methodologies, and best practices developed throughout the project lifecycle, are systematically documented, disseminated, and made accessible to relevant stakeholders during and beyond the project's duration. This knowledge transfer aims to empower both project partners and stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, industry partners, and other interested parties, with valuable insights, tools, and strategies that can be adapted, replicated, and applied across various contexts, sectors, and geographical locations. By fostering the exchange of knowledge and fostering collaborative learning, this intangible result contributes to the long-term sustainability and scalability of project outcomes, driving continued innovation, impact, and positive change in addressing shared societal challenges.

Expanded relationships and network

The project cultivated an extensive network of collaboration among its partners and external stakeholders, facilitating robust knowledge exchange and fostering innovation. Within the consortium, partners established strong interpersonal relationships based on trust and mutual respect, leveraging their diverse expertise and resources to achieve shared goals. Simultaneously, the project served as a platform for forging new connections and strengthening existing relationships with external stakeholders, including industry players, government agencies, research institutions, and community groups. By actively engaging with these stakeholders, the project amplified its impact and reach, fostering a collaborative ecosystem that drives innovation and sustainability. This collaborative environment not only enhances the effectiveness and longevity of project outcomes but also sets the stage for future partnerships and initiatives aimed at addressing pressing societal challenge

SWOT Analysis of the SMEsGoDigital tool piloting

The SWOT analysis from the piloting of the SMEsGoDigital tool was developed to collect data and feedback in order to understand strengths and weaknesses of the SMEsGoDigital tool's usage. Regarding the methodology, the data collection in the SWOT analysis was based on the anonymous responses of the participants to the Google questionnaire¹, as well as on the personal experimentation of the SMEsGoDigital platform. For each section examined, reference is first made to the aspects that were more relevant and/or have generated some conflict, followed by a SWOT analysis and an overall assessment at the end.

Overall, the results of the pilot test have been very positive. Participants generally found the platform's performance recommendable, with high ratings for security, stability, and speed. Additionally, the majority of the content, including the self-assessment, roadmaps, and modules, received favourable reviews. The general evaluation has demonstrated that the platform has been very useful and that it has achieved the objective of providing training for small and medium-sized enterprises in digitalisation processes. The SMEsGoDigital tool possesses all the features to continue working after the end of the project. An online platform has been developed to support the digital transformation of SMEs and valuable content has been created and developed for them.

However, several challenges have been identified. Navigation issues, despite an overall positive score, indicated a need for further user guidance. The registration process proved confusing, leading to incomplete registrations and negatively impacting participant numbers during the piloting. Language emerged as a significant barrier, affecting both comprehension of content and overall satisfaction, thus demonstrating the importance of translating all content properly in order to ensure a good training process in different countries. Technical challenges, such as occasional browser compatibility issues, may pose potential threats to

¹ It can be found in the following link

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1p_LJ9FbgXf-E_fa-4NSiQS0X6kwWRIljjp3QLb3tQq1E/edit



user experience. That demonstrates the importance of maintaining a good level of practicality and effectiveness in the use of the site.

In general, the platform shows potentiality and the solution of the problems identified during the pilot test mean sustainability and achieve the project's objectives.



Challenges and obstacles

The consortium partners hold an optimistic view regarding the sustainability of the SMEsGoDigital project, and have meticulously planned efforts to ensure its long-term viability and effective promotion. However, potential challenges and obstacles were identified by the partners. Key recurring themes include financial sustainability, user engagement, technological evolution, and external factors such as SME awareness, resistance to change, technical skills, infrastructure, and government support. A common concern is the lack of adequate funding for maintenance, updates, and outreach activities, which is essential for the long-term viability of the platform. Moreover, maintaining user adoption and engagement poses a critical challenge, requiring continuous efforts to improve user experience and address feedback. Additionally, the rapid evolution of technology necessitates regular updates and adaptations to remain relevant and effective. External factors such as SME awareness, resistance to change, technical skills, and government support further complicate sustainability efforts. Overcoming these challenges requires strategic planning, collaboration, and proactive measures to ensure the enduring impact of the project.

Conclusions

Based on the contributions reported by the partners, the following key points have been identified for the exploitation and sustainability of the SMEsGoDigital project:

- **Integration of sustainability principles:** partners such as PIMEC, ENAIP, EVTA, and Mathesis recognise the importance of integrating sustainability principles into their practices, leveraging ongoing projects related to digital transformation. By actively promoting sustainability and fostering collaborations among stakeholders, they aim to reinforce the long-term impact of SMEsGoDigital.
- **Facilitating engagement:** particularly EVTA, IME GSEVEE and ECIPA emphasise the significance of engaging relevant stakeholders, including policy-making authorities and new users of the online hub. Through initiatives such as inviting stakeholders to participate in conferences, bilateral meetings, and filling out letters of willingness, they aim to facilitate broader engagement and ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of SMEsGoDigital beyond its current lifecycle.
- **Strategic support:** Mathesis4FC, with its expertise in learning and development, organisational development, and human resources, highlights its role in supporting SMEs in their digital transformation journey. By providing strategic guidance, tailored roadmaps, access to resources, and fostering a digital literacy culture, Mathesis aims to ensure the long-term viability and impact of the project. The same approach will be adopted by PIMEC, being a relevant confederation representing SMEs and the business sector.
- **Continuous improvement and innovation:** across all partners, there is a shared commitment to continuous improvement and innovation. By identifying emerging trends, adapting strategies, and evaluating outcomes, partners aim to address evolving challenges and contribute to the resilience and sustainability of SMEsGoDigital's outcomes, especially considering potential future EU funding for the continuation of SMEsGoDigital in a second phase.



This sustainability plan underscores the collective dedication of consortium partners in championing sustainability, enhancing engagement, offering strategic assistance to the target groups, while fostering ongoing innovation. Through these concerted efforts, the partners are committed to securing the long-term sustainability and dissemination and the impact of SMEsGoDigital, catalysing a positive transformation in digital practices for SMEs well beyond the project's timeline.

Despite the challenges identified, the consortium partners maintain an optimistic outlook regarding the sustainability of the project. They have meticulously planned ad hoc strategies to ensure its long-term viability and effective promotion. While acknowledging potential obstacles such as financial sustainability, user engagement, and technological evolution, the partners are prepared to navigate these obstacles with resilience and determination. Recurring themes including SME awareness, resistance to change, technical skills, infrastructure, and government support have been acknowledged as areas needing attention. Specifically, the partners have identified the need for adequate funding for maintenance and outreach activities, as well as continuous efforts to enhance user experience and address feedback for sustained user adoption. The rapid pace of technological evolution necessitates regular updates and adaptations to remain relevant, while external factors such as government support and SME awareness pose additional challenges. Despite these complexities, the partners remain committed to overcoming obstacles through strategic planning, collaboration, and proactive measures, ensuring the enduring impact of SMEsGoDigital.

CONTRIBUTION TO EXPLOITATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Partner's inputs from the sustainability & exploitation questionnaire

IME GSEVEE – Project Coordinator

IME GSEVEE is the Research Institute of GSEVEE (Hellenic Confederation of Craftsmen & Merchants). Its main activities are focused on I. supporting micro and small enterprises' adaption, digitalisation, expansion and qualitative growth II. planning, implementing and evaluating actions about consultancy, mentoring, innovative entrepreneurship, and clustering III. planning and implementing lifelong learning and vocational training courses, and IV. conducting studies on several SMEs' issues, such as entrepreneurship, innovation, clustering, and digitalisation.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – TANGIBLE

Literature Review

The literature review will be leveraged by IME GSEVEE both during and after the funding period. During the project, the literature review will serve as a foundational resource for research and decision-making processes, as it helps gain insights into existing knowledge, methodologies, and best practices relevant to project objectives. After the funding period, the literature review will remain a valuable asset for ongoing reference and continued research efforts. The findings can be applied and exploited by the IME GSEVEE's Innovation and Digital Transformation team, to provide an updated and more complete understanding of the digital environment and the relevant developments in the field.

The added value of the literature review will support informed decision-making and strategic planning, as well as:

- **research and development:** for organisations involved in research and development, the literature review serves as a foundation to identify gaps in existing knowledge and also areas for innovation.
- **training and skills development:** the literature review findings can be used in training programs to keep employees updated on the latest developments in their respective fields. For employees, this is of utmost importance, ensuring that the organisation’s workforce remains well-equipped with current knowledge and skills essential for the labour market.
- **collaboration and partnerships:** sharing the literature review with partners and stakeholders, can facilitate meaningful discussions and collaboration. More specifically, it can serve as a common reference point, fostering a shared understanding and facilitating more effective partnerships.
- **Grant proposals and funding opportunities:** the LR can be a valuable resource during the stage of proposal writing.
- **Knowledge transfer:** the findings of the literature review can be integrated into internal knowledge management systems, ensuring that knowledge is internally capitalised and transferred effectively, contributing to institutional memory.

SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

IME GSEVEE intends to actively make use of the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub both during and beyond the end of the project. In particular, for the duration of the project:

- **Guidance for digital transformation:** to access guidance and resources to support the organisation in digital transformation efforts.
- **Training for interested micro and SMEs:** the training platform will be instrumental in upskilling SMEs collaborating with IME.

Beyond the project lifespan:

- **continued guidance and support**
- **resource for SMEs outreach:** the platform can serve as a resource to guide and support businesses in their digital journeys.

Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

IME GSEVEE IME plans to use the SMEsGoDigital training courses during and after the project lifespan. For the duration of the project, IME GSEVEE will encourage micro-companies employees to acquire digital skills relevant to their goals. After the project, the courses will support continuous professional development, adapt to new projects, and foster knowledge sharing within the organisation. In a nutshell, the courses will address immediate needs and ensure long-term workforce development, staying agile in the evolving digital landscape. The platform is expected to be promoted to relevant stakeholders, collaborators, VET Institutes, start-ups & newly founded companies. More specifically, GSEVEE incorporates 88 federations (59 of which are local, 28 sectoral and 1 of pensioners) and 1.100 main associations with over 160.000 entrepreneurs registered. Furthermore, GSEVEE envisions two-way communication and cooperation with other key organisations for crafts and SMEs such as national and sectoral organisations of crafts and SMEs in Europe.



Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

IME GSEVEEE plans to use the Digital Transformation Self-Assessment Questionnaire during the project and after the end of the funding to enable GSEVEEE member companies and small enterprises to assess their digital maturity. The questionnaire could be made available through the platform and via social media as well as interlinked with relevant studies and surveys of the organisation on the topic of digital transformation.

Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations developed within the SMEsGoDigital project will be promoted and exploited by IME GSEVEE through:

- **Participation in conferences and events** related to the digital transformation of SMEs where it is possible to showcase the policy recommendations of the project.
- **Collaboration with external organisations** with other organizations, both national and international, to strengthen the influence and acceptance of the policy recommendations.

Furthermore, specific meetings with national policymaking authorities e.g., relevant ministries, national agencies, regional authorities, European Commission agencies.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – INTANGIBLE

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

IME GSEVEE foresees to leverage the best practices research & assessment methodology both during the project and after the project's life cycle ends. During the project, the methodology serves as a foundational resource to upgrade research and assessment processes and support partners in gaining insights into existing knowledge and best practices relevant to our project objectives. The methodology remains a valuable asset for ongoing similar reference and continued research efforts. It provides a comprehensive overview of the field, aiding the project consortium in staying informed about any advancements or changes on the research tools. Additionally, the methodology may be shared with stakeholders, collaborators, or the wider community to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and promote continued dialogue in the respective domain.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

The micro-learning educational approach is expected to be used by IME GSEVEE:

- In the framework of the project for SMEs Human Capital Training, employees will be encouraged to take advantage of the “micro-learning” educational approach to acquire specific digital skills relevant to the project), (b) **after the project ends, for Continuous Professional Development:** ex-post, the “micro-learning” educational approach will continue to be a valuable resource for ongoing professional development of the Human Capital in SMEs and for **New Project Initiatives**. In the case that IME GSEVEE will embark on new projects or initiatives, the “micro-learning” educational approach can be revisited and customised to meet the specific skill requirements of these new endeavours. This flexibility ensures that the workforce is always prepared for the challenges of digital projects. In summary, the “micro-learning” educational approach will be used as a dynamic and ongoing resource to address both immediate project needs and the long-term development of the workforce.



RESOURCES DEDICATED TO THE PROJECT

The Hub will be further promoted on IME GSEVEE's social media, press releases and publications, all dissemination events and the Annual General Assembly organised by GSEVEE and IME GSEVEE.

TARGET GROUPS

IME GSEVEE's target groups are SMEs and micro companies of GSEVEE, self-employers, social partners, federations members of GSEVEE, SMEUnited and its members.



PIMEC - Petita i Mitjiana Empresa de Catalunya

PIMEC is the most representative employers' confederation representing the interests of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the self-employed of Catalonia. PIMEC's main aim is to work for the economic policies to be designed as an engine to foster the development of SMEs and entrepreneurs.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – TANGIBLE

Literature Review

The literature review provided solid theoretical context for internal activities and future projects as well. It can potentially be exploited by the Innovation and Digitalisation Department in PIMEC, acting as an added value complementing other activities and projects.

SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

The SMEs Tech Hub will be used by PIMEC to analyse, advise and collaborate with partners on digital processes. PIMEC intends to incorporate the Tech Hub into training they offer to their members and partners. Moreover, the Hub will be widely promoted across their social media channels and website, as well as in seminars and meetings addressing the topic at stake. In particular, PIMEC aims to target Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed in Catalunya, as well as potential partners of employers' confederation. Being a public open resource, the Hub will be accessible to anyone interested in the topic and in enhancing their business-oriented digital skills.

Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

PIMEC intends to incorporate the training course of the SMEs Tech Hub into training courses organised and implemented by PIMEC. This will apply to the target groups above mentioned, namely SMEs and self-employed.



Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

The self-assessment questionnaire has proved to be a very valuable tool for PIMEC. For this reason, the organisation intends to continue using it to provide support to SMEs, the self-employed and PIMEC partners to identify their level of digitalisation whenever they have a need or a specific interest in the topic. Moreover, PIMEC expects to use it for internal studies and analyses related to digitalisation. The questionnaire can be useful for any external stakeholder who has needs or interests in digitalisation processes. In this way, it can be directly applied to the different stakeholders that PIMEC works with. An example of such a case would be a manager of a small company who comes to our employers' confederation for training in order to digitalise his or her working method. In this situation, the use of the questionnaire could be the first step in his or her learning process, as it can provide a clear idea of the situation of his or her company.

Policy Recommendations

PIMEC considers the policy recommendations a resource of great added value. In particular, they will be beneficial for PIMEC's policy activities, such as their involvement in the *Interprofessional Agreement of Catalunya*, where PIMEC actively participates through negotiation procedures in the realm of digitalisation processes.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – INTANGIBLE

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

PIMEC is open to the exploitation of methodology and tools for the conduction of qualitative and quantitative analysis.

PIMEC is open to transfer the knowledge gain in other activities, with some highlights on the lesson learnt. In particular, PIMEC underlined the importance of translating the materials and to have a quality and user-friendly website platform.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

PIMEC's main goal is to offer and implement training to SMEs and self-employed. The involvement in the SMEsGoDigital project served as a solid experience for the development of future courses in digitalisation.

RESOURCES DEDICATED TO THE PROJECT

PIMEC is open to transfer the knowledge gained in other activities, with some highlights on the lessons learnt. The connections established within the project consortium are valuable, as well as the expertise of partners and participants.

To ensure the sustainability of the project results, PIMEC can rely on their own means and resources e.g., technical equipment, human resources, to ensure the sustainability of the project results. They identified as potential challenges the smooth sustainability of project results, the **lack of maintenance** due to lack of public funds, and the **need to have the content in the platform constantly updated**.

TARGET GROUPS

PIMEC's target groups involve the business and industry sectors such as employers, companies and employees, as well as VET providers.



ECIPA - Fondazione ECIPA

ECIPA Foundation was born as an emanation body of the CNA, to develop and manage training interventions aimed at the development and qualification of the human capital of associated companies. ECIPA Foundation coordinates and organises a territorial network where information, skills and knowledge circulate, aimed at creating a national training development project for SMEs.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – TANGIBLE

Literature Review

ECIPA intends to use the literature as a basis for the development of country-based research on digital transformation of SMEs related to the European year of the skills, particularly within ECIPA's EU projects department and e-learning projects department. The literature review is considered by ECIPA a strategic tool to better understand the SME's digital transformation scenario. Moreover, this result will support ECIPA as a whole to gain more knowledge in the context of the national plans of Industry 4.0 related to the digital transformations of SMEs.

SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

ECIPA intends to use the SMEsGoDigital hub for services delivery to the associated SMEs, specifically targeting CNA Associated SMEs and CNA Unions.

Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

ECIPA has the intention to continue with the delivery of the e-learning courses to the associated SMEs particularly looking at the micro-SMEs involving the Union of CNA (the CNA unions coordinate each one specific SMEs sector). Furthermore, ECIPA intends to organise an internal meeting to showcase the unions all the offers of the platform to allow them to consider to insert in their programs.



Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

The self-assessment questionnaire is planned to be further used by ECIPA, as assessment is the key point to start the digital transformation process. The tool will be proposed to all the SMEs interested in a digital transformation path, given its potential to provide SMEs with an overview of their digital readiness level. We will use it as tool for the digital maturity assessment for the next learning/training activity as example the next course named “the digital transformation of CNA”.

Policy Recommendations

The Policy Recommendations will be used as a key instrument for all the initiatives of CNA and ECIPA to support policies of digital transformation at the national level. In particular, ECIPA will involve the CNA social dialogue Department and the CNA offices in Bruxelles.



USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – INTANGIBLE

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

ECIPA has not planned yet how to employ the methodology for future initiatives.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

ECIPA, with the platform “Formerete (www.formerete.it), is already implementing a micro-learning approach. In particular, ECIPA will employ the software used for the e-learning courses to add a new format of *learning pills* to the ongoing and/or future courses.

RESOURCES DEDICATED TO THE PROJECT

ECIPA intends to use new EU funds to ensure the sustainability of the project and its results.

TARGET GROUPS

ECIPA’s target groups are individuals such as employees, employers & entrepreneurs, and educators, and organisations such as employers, companies, and VET providers.



ENAIIP VENETO I.S.

Born in 1951, ENAIIP Veneto is a social enterprise operating in the vocational training field with the mission to enhance professional development and social integration through work, the growth of local economies and labour organisations. ENAIIP Veneto is furthermore involved in the international community by working in strict collaboration with [EVTA](#) (European Vocational Education and Training Association), [EVBB](#) (Europäische Verband Beruflicher Bildungsträger) and [EfVET](#) (European Forum for Vocational Education & Training). At a regional level, ENAIIP Veneto collaborates in the development and management of projects that aim at requalifying and integrating adults in disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – TANGIBLE

Literature Review

Being the literature review a complete and exhaustive product, ENAIIP Veneto suggested it to be used as a database for the collection of best practices for future projects, as well as for some in-depth lectures for trainers.

SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

Two main areas/departments were indicated by ENAIIP Veneto as entities exploiting the Tech Hub in the long term:

- the Business Areas Development Department, in charge of dealing with enterprises or with professionals who would undertake an upskilling and/or reskilling path.
- Labour Market Operators
- Tutors operating in adult learning.



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Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

ENAIP Veneto intends to exploit the training courses at their fullest, giving the opportunity to trainers, teachers and entrepreneurs involved in ENAIP training activities to enrol on the courses and to use the materials given. ENAIP will periodically promote the use of the platform and its courses through its online channels. Target groups include VET trainers and students, but also people involved in all activities dedicated to unemployed people or people in job transition.

Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

The questionnaire could become a part of the didactic material used daily by trainers in their i-VET and C-VET courses, as it is a good example for testing the readiness of a potential or already existing enterprise. Moreover, it can be integrated in some training programmes dedicated to SMEs and entrepreneurs, as additional learning material, or as a starting point for assessing the knowledge level of the class.

Policy Recommendations

ENAIP intends to promote the PR through social media at a general public level, being stored at the same time in the internal resource database of ENAIP Veneto, where VET trainers and colleagues working in funded projects can look up information or background materials on various matters.



USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – INTANGIBLE

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

The methodology suggested for revising and evaluating literature and other results, seems to be effective and well constructed. Therefore, ENAIP foresees to adapt it also to other similar activities in different EU-funded projects, as a best practice.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

The micro-learning approach is one of the most innovative approaches for developing new training courses, and it is actually being bolstered by the EU as well: ENAIP VENETO is currently working with this approach on several other Eu Projects for the drafting of courses on different subjects. The experience gained with the SMEsGO DIGITAL project will lay the foundation for the next replications

RESOURCES DEDICATED TO THE PROJECT

Sustainability of SMEsGO DIGITAL project results will be assured by using funds from newly approved projects (in which framework SMEs GO DIGITAL results can be promoted and disseminated), plus the human resources actually present in the International office of ENAIP VENETO.

TARGET GROUPS

ENAIP Veneto's target groups are employers, entrepreneurs, employees and educators, as well as companies and VET providers.



Mathesis 4 Future Citizens

Mathesis4FC specialises in L&D operations and organisational & HR development. It has invaluable expertise in course design and development of synchronous and asynchronous LMS. Its staff was involved in EU funded projects for educational packages, e-courses & certification schemes, giving Mathesis4FC a unique advantage in the field. It provides high-quality training and development solutions tailored to the specific needs of organisations.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – TANGIBLE

Literature Review

Mathesis4FC intends to create a summary of their literature review findings in the form of a white paper and/or a blog post. This will be shared on their website and social media channels with clients, partners, followers, and other interested parties to showcase their expertise and expand their business network. Additionally, they intend to present their findings at public conferences to widen their client base, gain exposure, and network. Furthermore, they plan to share the literature review with other researchers and professionals in the field through academic publications or collaboration opportunities, fostering knowledge exchange and contributing to the advancement of the field as a whole. By disseminating their research through various channels, they aim to establish themselves as thought leaders in the industry and attract potential collaborations and partnerships. Moreover, sharing their findings with other researchers and professionals will not only enhance their credibility but also facilitate the exchange of ideas and drive innovation in the field. The main areas/departments within Mathesis implementing the findings of the literature are:

- the L&D operations team, which could use the literature review to design and deliver effective and engaging learning solutions for their clients, based on the best practices and recommendations for digital transformation.
- The organisational & HR development team, which could use the literature review to advise and support their clients on how to align their organisational culture, structure, processes and policies with the digital transformation goals and strategies.

- The business development team, which could use the literature review to identify and attract new clients who are interested in or need digital transformation consultancy, as well as to showcase Mathesis4FC's expertise and value proposition in this area.
- The research and innovation team, which could use the literature review to inform and inspire their own research projects on digital transformation, as well as to collaborate with other researchers and stakeholders in the field.

The use of the Literature Review findings can bring added value to other activities within Mathesis4FC in several ways:

- understanding the current state of digital transformation in their sector and identifying the best practices and challenges that other micro and SMEs face
- informing their own digital transformation strategy and guiding them to select the most appropriate tools, methods and partners for our needs and goals
- enhancing L&D operations and organisational & HR development by providing relevant knowledge, skills and competencies that are essential for digital transformation
- offering better consultancy services to Mathesis' clients and partners by sharing insights, experiences and solutions on digital transformation.

In general, the findings of the Literature Review to locate areas that need further research and knowledge improvement. This improvement can lead to the development of advanced strategies, training material and solutions regarding Mathesis client's needs and enhance their expertise in the field in order to attract potential new clients.

SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

Mathesis intends to use intend to use the Tech Hub in the following ways:

- To access the latest knowledge, skills and competences on digital transformation, and to learn from best practices and success stories of other SMEs in Matheis' sector and beyond.
- To conduct a self-assessment of Mathesis' current digital maturity level, and to identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to their digital business model and processes. Moreover, the tool will be leveraged to create a personalised roadmap for digital upskilling, with clear and realistic objectives, milestones and indicators, aligned with M4FC strategic vision and goals.
- To access a variety of learning resources and support services, such as online courses, webinars, mentoring, coaching, peer-to-peer exchange, etc., that will help Mahesis to achieve its digital upskilling objectives and overcome any challenges or barriers along the way.
- To track and measure progress and impact of M4FC digital upskilling, and to adjust their roadmap as needed based on the feedback and results we obtain.
- To showcase achievements and share experiences with other SMEs, stakeholders and potential customers, and to network and collaborate with other like-minded organisations that are also committed to digital transformation. We also plan to provide appropriate training and support to these SMEs in order to use the hub efficiently and at the same time utilise the feedback for specific improvements and updates.



Yet, Mathesis4FC plans to further promote the online hub for its use, by:

- Creating and disseminating promotional materials such as flyers, brochures, videos and webinars that showcase the benefits and features of the online hub for SMEs.
- Establishing and maintaining partnerships with relevant stakeholders such as industry associations, chambers of commerce, innovation hubs and training providers that can help spread the word and encourage SMEs to join the online hub.
- Providing ongoing support and guidance to SMEs that use the online hub, such as answering their queries, collecting their feedback, offering customised solutions and facilitating peer learning and networking opportunities.
- Monitoring and evaluating the impact and outcomes of the online hub for SMEs, such as measuring their digital readiness, skills and competences, business performance and innovation potential, and sharing success stories and best practices.

The target groups of Mathesis4FC that will benefit from the use of this online hub are mainly self-employed, micro and small enterprises that operate in various sectors and need guidance, skills and resources to enhance their digital transformation and secondarily educational organisations and business associations. The online hub will provide valuable resources and support for SMEs and individual business professionals, helping them navigate the challenges of the digital landscape and enhance their business performance. These enterprises may face challenges such as lack of digital awareness, skills gaps, limited access to technology, or low competitiveness in the digital market. The online hub will provide them with a comprehensive and tailored platform that will help them assess their current digital readiness, identify their needs and goals, access relevant learning materials and tools, and monitor their progress and achievements. The online hub will also enable them to connect with other SMEs, experts, mentors, and stakeholders that can support their digital journey and share best practices and experiences.



Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

Mathesis intends to use the courses to enhance our own digital competencies as well as to support their clients in their digital journeys. The courses were considered relevant, practical and flexible for both our M4FC staff and their clients. The courses will be embedded into Mathesis' educational database adapting them to user needs and collecting feedback for present and future use. Furthermore, the courses will be promoted through various channels such as social media and online advertising.

The training courses are mainly targeted to Mathesis' present and future clients, self-employed, micro and small enterprises that operate in various sectors and face challenges in adapting to the digital transformation. These enterprises often lack the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to implement effective digital strategies and solutions that can enhance their competitiveness, productivity and innovation. Mathesis4FC aims to provide them with tailored guidance, support and training that can help them develop a digital literacy culture that aligns with their specific needs, goals and opportunities. By using the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub, these enterprises will be able to access a comprehensive online tool that offers a range of resources, such as self-assessment tools, learning modules, best practices, case studies, mentoring and networking opportunities. These resources will enable them to assess their current level of digital readiness, identify their strengths and weaknesses, learn new skills and competences, apply them to their daily activities and sectorial roadmaps, and achieve quick wins as well as sustainable innovations. The training courses will cover various topics related to digital transformation, such as digital marketing, e-commerce, data analytics, cybersecurity, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and more.

Furthermore, the target groups that will benefit from the use and contents in the training courses include independent learners seeking to enhance their digital skills, educational organisations looking to incorporate the tool into their curriculum, and departments of associations and chambers aiming to provide professional development opportunities for their members.

Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

Mathesis4FC intends to use the digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire both during and after the project. During the project, it will use the questionnaire to assess the needs and gaps of the SMEs that participate in the project and to provide them with customised solutions and recommendations based on their results. After the project, Mathesis4FC will continue to use the questionnaire as a tool for monitoring and evaluating the SMEs' digital performance and for identifying new opportunities and challenges for further digital development. Mathesis4FC believes that the digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire is a valuable instrument for supporting its clients, self-employed, micro & SMEs in their digital journey and for enhancing their competitiveness and innovation in the market.

The digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire is a tool that aims to help SMEs identify their strengths and weaknesses in terms of digital transformation, and to provide them with tailored recommendations and resources to improve their digital skills and competences. The questionnaire can be integrated in specific activities external to the SMEsGoDigital project, such as:

- Training and coaching sessions for SMEs, where the questionnaire can be used as a baseline to assess the current level of digital literacy and to design personalised learning paths and objectives for the participants.
- Networking and collaboration events for SMEs, where the questionnaire can be used as a way to facilitate the exchange of best practices and experiences among peers, and to foster the creation of partnerships and synergies for digital innovation.
- Evaluation and monitoring activities for SMEs, where the questionnaire can be used as a tool to measure the impact and outcomes of the digital transformation initiatives, and to identify the areas that need further improvement or support for providing consultancy.



Policy Recommendations

Mathesis4FC intends to promote the policy recommendations through various channels and activities, such as:

- disseminating the recommendations to its network of clients, partners and stakeholders, including public authorities, sectoral associations, education and training providers, and other relevant actors in the field of L&D and HR development.
- Organising webinars, workshops and events to present and discuss the recommendations with different target groups, such as SMEs, policy makers, experts and practitioners. Personal meetings with field and policy experts and conference participants will be scheduled.
- Integrating the recommendations into its consultancy services and training programmes, to help SMEs implement them in their digital strategies and practices.
- Participating in advocacy and lobbying initiatives at the national and European level, to raise awareness and influence the policy agenda on digitalisation for SMEs.
- Collaborating with other partners of the SMEsGoDigital project and the #SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub, to ensure a coherent and coordinated dissemination and exploitation of the project results. Promotion is already ongoing on social media and relevant web pages.



USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – INTANGIBLE

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

Mathesis4FC intends to further make use of the methodology employed in the project by:

- Sharing the best practices and lessons learned from the project with other stakeholders in the L&D and HR sectors, such as professional associations, training providers, policy makers, etc.
- Expanding the scope and reach of the project to other regions and sectors that can benefit from the methodology and the tool.
- Seeking new opportunities and partnerships to further develop and improve the methodology and the tool based on feedback and evaluation.

Mathesis believes that the methodology and the tool developed for the project are valuable assets that can enhance its competitiveness and reputation in the market. The lessons learned and best practices from the methodology will be used as a reference point for future endeavours, with the methodology being adjusted according to the different objectives, scope, target groups, resources and expected outcomes of each project and/or research. For example, Mathesis may use different data collection tools, sampling strategies, data analysis methods, validation procedures or ethical considerations depending on the nature and purpose of the project and/or research.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

Mathesis4FC plans to exploit and/or replicate the micro-learning educational approach into training courses to be developed in the future. This is because they believe that micro-learning is an effective and efficient way to deliver learning content to SMEs, especially in the context of digital transformation. Micro-learning can help SMEs to acquire new skills and knowledge in a flexible and convenient manner, without disrupting their daily operations or requiring too much time or resources. Micro-learning can also enhance the retention and transfer of learning, as well as the motivation and engagement of learners. Therefore, Mathesis4FC intends to use micro-learning as a core component of their training courses for



SMEs. As a consultant in educational issues, M4FC is fully incorporating the micro-learning educational approach as an advanced tool for present and future training services to be offered to our clients. Tailor-made microlearning training programmes development and replication of this approach in future projects is within our plans.

RESOURCES DEDICATED TO THE PROJECT

In order to assure sustainability, Mathesis organisation intends to leverage a combination of financial resources: this includes seeking new project funds and grants specifically targeted towards supporting initiatives like SMEsGoDigital. Additionally, they plan to allocate a portion of their own funds towards the ongoing maintenance and development of the project. Mathesis will also explore opportunities to tap into mainstream national funds that are available for promoting digital transformation and innovation within the SME sector. These funds will help us ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of SMEsGoDigital.

TARGET GROUPS

Mathesis' target groups refer to employers and companies, employees, educators, HR personnel and researchers, as well as VET institutions and schools, SMEs and startups, non-profit organisations, financial institutions and digital market agencies.



EVTA - European Vocational Training Association

The European Vocational Training Association (EVTA) is a European network in the field of Vocational Education and Training (VET), representing VET providers across Europe. It works to facilitate the relationship between stakeholders in the field of VET, and it is aimed at both promoting the VET quality and excellence in Europe, while supporting the internationalisation of VET providers and the entire ecosystem.

USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – TANGIBLE

Literature Review

EVTA has been actively using the literature review throughout the implementation of the SMEsGoDigital project and plans to continue using it after the funding period concludes. The literature review has proven to be a key resource, providing worthwhile knowledge about SMEs and their current situation in the digital field. It has been an essential element supporting decision-making processes and the development of methodologies. Beyond the project's duration, the literature review remains a valuable asset for EVTA. Serving as a reference for ongoing and future projects related to digitalisation, it will allow EVTA to contribute effectively to the work related to this matter. The insights from the literature review will continue to guide strategic approaches and foster a deeper understanding of the evolving digital needs within the SMEs sector. Although EVTA does not dispose of a department or team specifically focused on this topic, digitalisation is one of its primary focus areas when collaborating in the context of EU-funded projects and policy initiatives. In this regard, the literature review can bring added value to various activities within EVTA, with the aim to foster informed decision-making, shaping strategies, facilitating collaboration, and strengthening proposals.



SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub

Throughout the project lifespan, EVTA intends to leverage the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub for networking objectives, given its widespread adoption among stakeholders within the digital sector. The Tech Hub can be promoted by EVTA through the online hub dedicated to the network members, before actors of our other projects related to digitalisation, and in relevant events (e.g., workshops, conferences, strategic working groups at the EU level) with the aim to be promoted as a best practice for digital upskilling of businesses and their workforce. SMEs representatives and networks, VET Schools, EVTA members and EU policymakers will be the target groups for the dissemination and showcase of the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub.

Training courses (embedded in the SMEsGoDigital Tech Hub as a learning resource pool)

The SMEsGoDigital training courses can be leveraged by EVTA both throughout and beyond the project life span. As for the Tech Hub and the project as a whole, the training courses can be showcased and disseminated by EVTA on a wide variety of online and offline platforms, as well as during events, conferences and workshops. The aim is to promote the training courses as a best practice and as a significant tool for SMEs and VET teachers and trainers to upskill and reskill their workforce and as an effort to promote digital approaches to entrepreneurship.

Digital readiness self-assessment questionnaire

The questionnaire could be used to assess the level of digitalisation not only of SMEs, but also internally for EVTA's partners and members, should they wish to evaluate the digital readiness' level within their organisations. Furthermore, the questionnaire can be promoted by EVTA in relevant events (see sections above), and on EVTA's social media channels and online platforms. For instance, the questionnaire could be hyperlinked within EVTA's communications.



Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations developed under the SMEsGoDigital project can be promoted within and beyond the EVTA network, whenever feasible, in the framework of events, workshops, conferences and strategic working groups discussing digital transformation in the VET and business sector, digital upskilling and reskilling. Through the policy recommendations, EVTA strives to advocate before policymakers and public authorities on the importance of digital readiness, open and accessible for learners, workers and companies to thrive in the economy and the society.



USE OF PROJECT RESULTS – INTANGIBLE

Methodology (methods and tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis)

EVTA aims to utilise the best practices research & assessment methodology throughout and beyond the duration of the project. The methodology will support the EVTA team with research conduction and assessment processes in the framework of other EVTA activities, and helping in the selection of pertinent practices. In a nutshell, it will serve as a valuable ongoing reference, providing insights into advancements in research tools and fostering knowledge sharing within the EVTA staff.

Educational approach (micro-learning approach)

EVTA will consider the adoption of this approach for its subsequent application to future training courses development. EVTA acknowledges the potential benefits of the "micro-learning" educational approach, especially regarding the increasing relevance of micro-credentials in the European and International education and training landscape, as also acknowledged by European Institutions e.g., Council of the EU, European Commission. In alignment with this vision, the EVTA's ongoing project MIC4VET seeks to address the evolving demands of the labour market by innovating short training courses, namely micro-credentials. By leveraging the principles of micro-credentials, EVTA aims to advocate for the flexibility and relevance of the education & training offer, thus better meeting the needs of learners and workers in a rapidly changing landscape.



RESOURCES DEDICATED TO THE PROJECT

EVTA counts to use its own resources for the promotion and dissemination of the SMEsGoDigital project and the results as a best practice in a wide range of contexts.

TARGET GROUPS

EVTA's target groups are VET institutions together with teachers, trainers and learners, research institutes operating in the labour market and VET field, industry representatives, social partners, EU policymakers and European and International civil society organisations.



#SMEsGoDigital

Policy Recommendations Paper



Acknowledgments and Disclaimer

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1. Introduction

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are considered the backbone of economies worldwide, contributing significantly to employment and innovation. According to the European Commission, SMEs represent 99% of all businesses in the EU. They employ around 100 million people, account for more than half of Europe’s GDP, and play a key role in adding value in every sector of the economy (European Commission, 2024a). However, SMEs (particularly those not directly involved in the ICT sector) face several specific challenges that hamper their ability to benefit from the digital transition and maintain a competitive advantage (Godlovitch & Bodin, 2022). This has proved to be a hurdle, given that COVID-19 emphasised the importance of the digital transition to encourage business survival and resilience. Therefore, the following section will introduce a number of challenges and shortcomings that SMEs encounter daily concerning digital infrastructures, the digital preparedness of employers, and workforce digital skills, as well as upskilling initiatives.

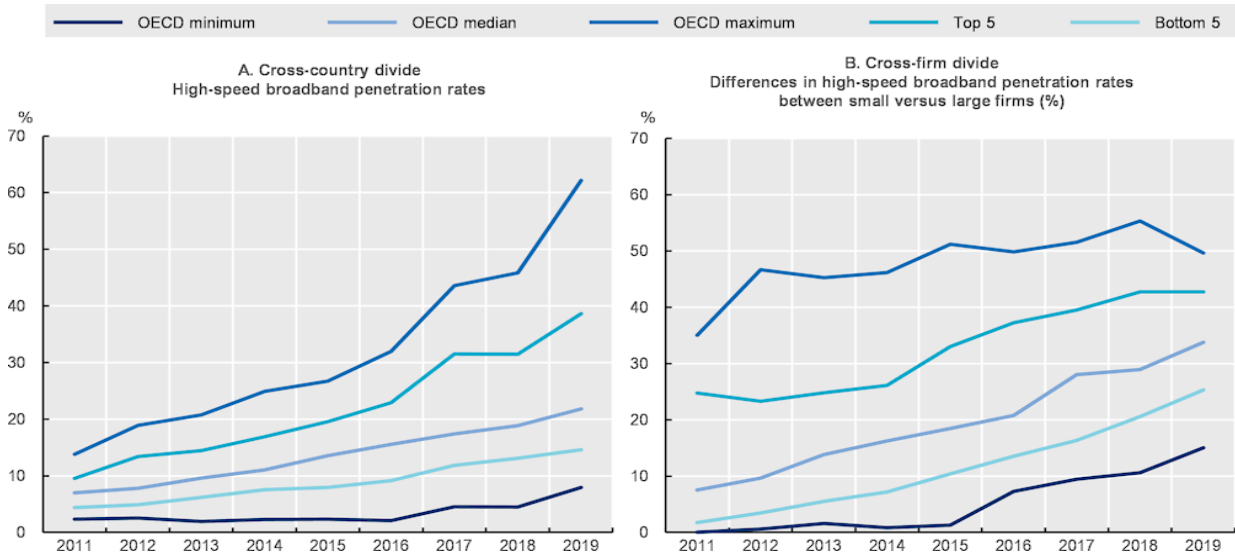
2. Overview of challenges faced by SMEs in the digitalisation ecosystem within the EU

2.1 Digital Skills gap

The documented lack of appropriate digital skills impeding SMEs is underscored by academic studies (e.g., González-Varona, 2020; Klein and Todosco, 2021; North et al., 2019) and practitioner reports, revealing significant skill gaps within SMEs and the broader workforce, which has a direct **impact on the recruitment process and consequently perpetuates the ongoing skill deficit**. While external knowledge or buy-in knowledge acquisition is feasible, SMEs often lack the resources, risking dependency on specific solutions and providers, potentially compromising autonomy and proactive digital initiatives, as emphasised by Sousa and Roche (2019). Despite initiatives that are later touched upon in the paper, which aim to bolster SMEs' digital capacities, there's a tendency to overlook foundational skills crucial for digital literacy, including critical thinking and problem-solving, underscoring the necessity of a holistic approach to digital upskilling.

2.2 Promoting Technical and Social Infrastructure

Businesses require access to suitable technical infrastructure to effectively implement digital transformation initiatives, a need that has been recognised and addressed through various European initiatives, such as the establishment of **Digital Innovations Hubs** by the European Commission (European Commission, 2023b). However, challenges persist as **accessibility** remains a concern, especially for businesses located outside urban centres, where inadequate broadband infrastructure hampers regional prosperity, as evidenced in areas like the Scottish Highlands (Davidson, 2018).

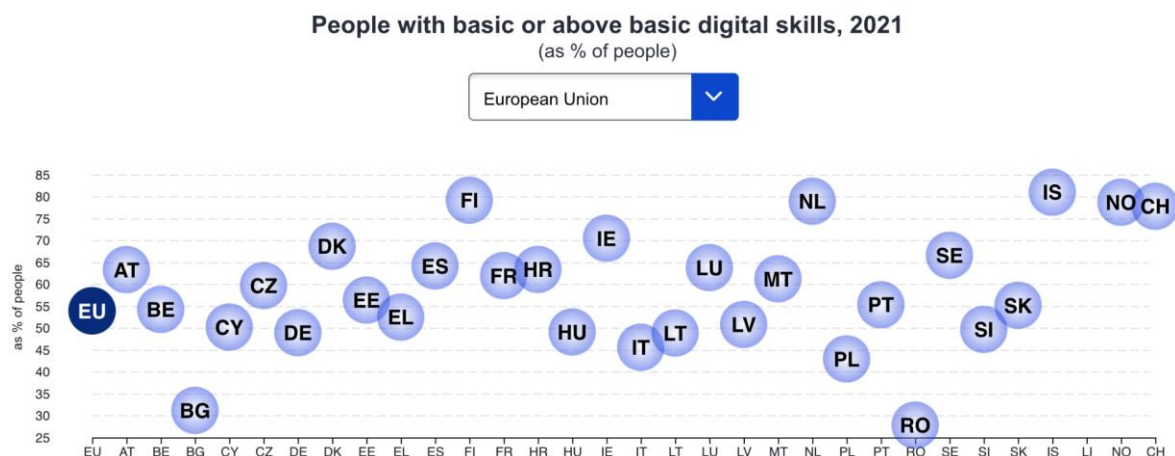


Source: OECD (2021[34]), Policy Highlights - The Digital Transformation of SMEs, <https://www.oecd.org/industry/smes/PH-SME-Digitalisation->

Moreover, while technical infrastructure may be available, SMEs may lack the necessary digital skills to leverage it effectively, which interplays with the challenge of **bolstering the value of social infrastructures** that would facilitate mentorship, idea exchange, and collaboration for promoting SME development in the digital era, as stated by Petrick and Maitland (2007).

2.3 Workforce Digital Skills and Upskilling

According to the Digital Economy and Society Index from Eurostat (2022), European SMEs grapple with the pressing challenge of including the workforce in upskilling digital skills. There are disparities that show that a staggering 70% of businesses across the EU identify a deficiency in staff possessing adequate digital skills as a significant barrier to investment. Moreover, nearly half of the EU populace lacks even basic digital skills, exacerbating the skills gap within SMEs. Advanced technologies such as big data and cybersecurity further compound these challenges, creating shortages and mismatches in digital skills that disproportionately affect SMEs.



3. Current Measures by the EU to support the digitalisation of SMEs

The European Union has laid out ambitious digital strategies and support schemes to propel its member states towards a digitally competitive future. These policies focus on directly targeting and thus supporting the industry, businesses, and workforce.

INITIATIVE	DESCRIPTION	LINK
European Digital Strategy - “Path to the Digital Decade”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sets ambitious targets for 2030. - Focuses on achieving a digitally skilled population. - Aims to establish secure digital infrastructures. - Seeks to drive the digital transformation of businesses and public services. - Ultimately, it aims to foster an environment where European businesses can thrive in the digital era. 	Path to the Digital Decade
E-commerce - Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aims to create a safer digital space for users - Ensures a level playing field for businesses in the European Single Market - Focuses on breaking down online barriers - Ends unjustified cross-border barriers - Enhances online shopping safety 	The Digital Services Act Package
New European Industrial Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintains Europe's global competitiveness - Achieves climate neutrality by 2050 - Shapes Europe's digital future - Implements dedicated measures to support SMEs - Appoints Sustainability Advisors - Establishes Digital Innovation Hubs 	New Industrial Strategy for Sustainable and Digital Europe
European Digital Innovation Hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Serve as one-stop shops for companies facing digital challenges 	European Digital Innovation Hubs

(EDIHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assist in improving business processes and products/services through digital technologies - Offer training, technical expertise, and skills development programmes - Aim to enhance competitiveness through comprehensive support 	
Funding for Digital in the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allocates significant funding for boosting digital technologies and aiding economic recovery post-pandemic - Key programmes include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital Europe Programme (DEP) - Connecting Europe Facility – CEF Digital - Horizon Europe - InvestEU - Supports research, infrastructure development, and digital transformation initiatives 	MFF 2021 - 2027
European Year of Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The European Commission launched in 2023 the European Year of Skills, focusing on reskilling and upskilling initiatives. - DIGITAL SME leads Skills Partnership, aiming to equip 80% with basic digital skills by 2030. - The EU faces digital skills shortages, hindering business investment and progress. - Half of the EU population lacks basic digital skills. - SMEs struggle to compete for digital talent. - Upskilling is crucial for SME productivity and competitiveness. 	European Year of Skills
DigComp Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The DigComp framework identifies the key components of digital competence in 5 areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Information and data literacy o Communication and collaboration o Digital content creation o Safety o Problem solving. - 21 competences are pertinent to the 5 areas. - The European Commission subsequently launched an updated version (DigComp 2.2), playing a central role in achieving the EU 	DigComp Framework and DigComp 2.2

	<p>objectives regarding the digital upskilling of the whole population.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The update takes account of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things and datafication or new phenomena such as the teleworking conditions that have led to new and increased digital competence requirements for citizens.- The DigComp 2.2 update will help to keep DigComp relevant for learning, working and participating in society, as well as for EU policymaking.	
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3.1 Relevant Policy Highlights

3.1.1 OECD Policy Highlights: The Digital Transformation of SMEs

According to an OECD report, SMEs face pressure to adapt. Governments worldwide are implementing strategies to support their digital transformation. The report explored the previously enacted activities.

Scaling Up SME Internal Capacity:

1. Providing Technology Support: Governments offer financial aid and technology extension programmes to equip SMEs with digital tools.
2. Enhancing Digital Skills: Initiatives include reduced training costs and workplace training programmes to upskill SMEs.
3. Building Data Culture: Governments disseminate information and offer assistance to enhance SMEs' data management and security.
4. Strengthening Digital Security: Awareness campaigns and training opportunities are provided to bolster SMEs' cybersecurity.

Easing SME Access to Strategic Resources:

1. Leveraging Fintech: Governments promote technologies like blockchain and AI to improve access to finance for SMEs.
2. Encouraging Business Innovation: Research grants and public procurement stimulate the supply of digital solutions.

Creating the Right Business Environment for SME Transformation:

1. Setting Supportive Regulations: Governments harmonise legislation on trade secrecy and data protection to facilitate SME digitalisation.
2. Promoting E-government: One-stop shops and e-services streamline administrative processes for SMEs.
3. Deploying High-Quality Digital Infrastructure: Investment in infrastructure prioritises high-speed broadband and connectivity.

Promoting a Whole-of-Government Approach:

1. Developing Long-Term Strategic Frameworks: Governments establish high-level objectives and national strategies for SME digital transformation.
2. Creating Governance Arrangements: Coordination bodies are established in emerging policy areas like AI and blockchain.
3. Setting Consultative Instances: Experts, entrepreneurs, and academia are involved in consultative instances to promote responsible digitalisation policies.

Government initiatives play a vital role in boosting SMEs' digital transformation. By providing support, enhancing access to resources, and promoting collaboration, governments empower SMEs to thrive in the digital age.



3.2 SMEs United Stance on Digitalisation

As highlighted in SMEsUnited's position paper (Hendrickx, 2021), the upcoming change in Europe's digital transformation is strongly emphasised, which was further emphasised by the COVID-19 pandemic. This catapulted the urgency for augmented investments in technologies with the aim of fortifying digital sovereignty and resilience. Thus, SMEsUnited advocates for a comprehensive strategy towards digital transformation, aligning with the European Commission's focal areas, encompassing the digitalisation of businesses, public services, workforce development, and infrastructure enhancements.

As stressed in the aforementioned paper (Hendrickx, 2021), recognising SMEs' diverse landscape entails the need for tailored measures to support their digital journey. This involves addressing challenges such as resource constraints and needing greater attention to SME-specific characteristics by research and investment sectors. Additionally, SMEsUnited advocates for a heightened focus on retail SMEs in urban areas and initiatives to enhance SMEs' capacity to assess digital requirements and make informed investments. To achieve these goals, efforts for the 2030 targets mandate public and private investments, concentrating on facilitating SME digital transformation through accessible upskilling, reskilling, and experimentation opportunities. Furthermore, SMEsUnited highlights the significance of initiatives like the European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) in establishing essential service networks for SMEs' digital progression. Moreover, SMEsUnited reiterates the importance of streamlining administrative processes, adopting customer-centric approaches, and leveraging AI-powered systems to cater to SMEs' needs in the digitalisation of public services. Bridging the digital divide between urban and rural areas is crucial for ensuring secure and sustainable digital infrastructures, a goal that SMEsUnited remains steadfast in advocating for.

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All in all, SMEsUnited further highlights the need for legislation by adhering to UEAPME's position paper (2018), which fosters innovation at the forefront and aligns with technological advancements while ensuring fairness, transparency, and a level playing field in the legal system. They stress the importance of equitable access to data across the value chain and address the challenges posed by new forms of work, such as platform-based employment.

Overall, SMEsUnited advocates for a holistic approach to digital transformation that considers SMEs' diverse needs and circumstances. They emphasise the role of legislation, funding opportunities, and collaborative efforts between the EU and Member States in driving effective digital transformation.

4. Importance of VET in addressing digital challenges

Focusing on VET excellence to upskill SMEs could prove beneficial for a number of key reasons. Given the significant economic presence of SMEs in the EU, it is safe to say they play a pivotal role in driving innovation and fostering sustainable growth across various sectors. Their adaptability to economic change and flexible working practices make them well-positioned to capitalise on opportunities presented by digitalisation. However, despite their inherent strengths, SMEs often lag in providing formal training to their workforce.

Cooperation between VET institutions and SMEs is crucial for bridging the skills gap and maximising the potential of both parties. By fostering dialogue and partnerships between education/training providers and employers, VET programmes can be tailored to meet the evolving needs of SMEs in the digital era. VET plays a vital role in preparing individuals for the workforce and equipping them with the skills and qualifications necessary to thrive in a digital economy.

In essence, collaboration between VET and SMEs is essential for enhancing the employability of individuals, fostering entrepreneurial potential, and driving innovation in the digital economy. By aligning VET programmes with the skills demanded by SMEs, both parties stand to benefit, ultimately contributing to the EU's twin transitions towards sustainability and digitalisation (European Training Foundation, 2024).

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Addressing Digitalisation Challenges for SMEs

- By adopting a sectoral approach to digitalisation initiatives, the unique requirements and challenges faced by SMEs should be recognised. Tailoring courses and schemes to specific industry needs, that involve both employers and employees in the process, ensures that the skills acquired directly address industry-specific demands.
- The NextGeneration EU funds and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) present a unique opportunity to invest in the future readiness of the overall industry and SMEs workforce. By engaging SMEs, their associations, and VET providers in a collaborative and co-creation process, it can be ensured that these funds are effectively used to address the pressing need for upskilling and reskilling.
- Develop more efficient and flexible training programmes for SMEs, scaling up successful initiatives. This can be done through collaboration and co-creation between VET institutions, counsellors, social partners and companies, bringing diversity and ensuring upskilling and reskilling programmes reflect the needs of the labour market, the small business sector and the workforce.

5.2 Engaging the workforce in Lifelong Learning Programmes

- Implement a subsidy programme where SMEs can receive financial assistance from government funds to allocate towards employee training expenses. In this regard, the NextGeneration EU can play a role as a potential financial aid resource to mitigate the challenges identified.
- Promote a lifelong learning mentality in the business and SMEs sector by providing a clear framework of incentives that might reward companies for investing in employees' development. In this regard, Continuing Vocational Education and Training (C-VET) can play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional growth within enterprises. C-VET programs offer employees opportunities to acquire new skills, enhance existing ones, and stay abreast of industry needs, ultimately contributing to improved job performance and organisational competitiveness.

5.3 Integration Into Apprenticeships

- Apprenticeship programs should offer practical training for the use of digital technologies, reflecting the current demand of the workforce. This can be achieved by the collaboration between industry experts and educational actors to identify key digital competences required in various sectors and integrate them into the curriculum.
- To further enhance the effectiveness of apprenticeship programs in fostering digital upskilling and reskilling, it is essential to establish a framework for continuous monitoring and evaluation. This framework would involve regular assessments of apprenticeship outcomes, including skill acquisition, job placement rates, and employer satisfaction. By systematically collecting and analysing data on the performance and impact of apprenticeship initiatives, policymakers can identify areas for improvement and allocate resources more effectively. Additionally, transparency in reporting apprenticeship outcomes can enhance accountability and facilitate informed decision-making by all stakeholders involved, ensuring that apprenticeship programs remain responsive to the evolving needs of both employers and employees in the digital age.

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