

SustainX

D1.2 Capability Mapping Report

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Lead partner:	KEARNEY IMP ³ ROVE		
Author(s):	Hanna Kim (IMP ³ ROVE)		
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Executive Summary

The aim of this deliverable is to provide all necessary information related to the management of the project and the quality plan. These include the governance of the project with all related roles and responsibilities, the means, and processes to execute the day-to-day activities, the communication within the consortium as well as with external stakeholders and Digital Transformation Accelerator DTA, the quality assurance plan and risk management.



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1. Executive Summary

The SustainX Capability Mapping Report delivers an in-depth analysis of innovation-management strengths and gaps across five less-developed EU regions in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Latvia and the Canary Islands. Drawing on a comprehensive, train-the-trainer questionnaire completed by each consortium partner, we examined both the advisors' own skill sets and the prevailing practices among their SMEs. Respondents consistently rated project management and digitalization as their SMEs' strongest competencies, yet they also highlighted deficiencies in formal innovation processes, risk management and rapid commercialization. At the same time, advisors expressed only moderate confidence in guiding SMEs through data-driven strategy design, structured decision-making and partner matchmaking, all of which they identified as critical to closing the innovation loop and which we will strive to support in throughout the project through various activities.

Our stakeholder analysis revealed that associations, chambers of commerce and universities dominate SMEs' collaboration networks, while specialized intermediaries such as innovation agencies and EU-fund consultants remain under-utilized. Frequent weekly or monthly interactions with core stakeholders nonetheless underscore the centrality of these institutions in regional ecosystems. When aligning with Smart Specialisation (S3) priorities, respondents pinpointed digital transformation, sustainable innovation, Industry 4.0 and health-tech as top areas of strategic focus. Yet full alignment hinges on two enabling conditions: robust funding channels and deeper ecosystem partnerships. Nearly 100% of partners called for stronger access to grants and subsidies, while 100% also emphasized the need to reinforce stakeholder collaboration across the public, private and academic sectors.

Guided by these findings, we have designed a series of two-day, region-specific consortium trainings scheduled between April and June 2025. Each program directly addresses the highest-priority gaps ranging from advanced strategy development and open innovation methods to action plan formulation and sustainability integration while leveraging our IMP³ROVE assessment tools. These sessions will equip consortium members to cascade best practices in early 2026 through SME-focused workshops, thereby ensuring that every company benefits from tailored capacity building. In this way, the mapping exercise lays a solid foundation for SustainX's overarching goal: to empower SMEs throughout less-developed regions to participate confidently in interregional innovation investments and to drive the Green and Digital Transition at scale.

2. Introduction

The SustainX project is strategically oriented towards fostering sustainable digital innovation investment, particularly focusing on enhancing innovation capacities in less-developed European regions, including Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Latvia, and the Canary Islands. Recognizing the critical role of SMEs in these regions, SustainX aims to accelerate their integration into the broader European innovation ecosystem, thus actively contributing to the EU's Green and Digital Transition. The objective of this Competence Mapping Report (Deliverable 1.3) is to systematically assess and document the innovation management competencies and capacity-building needs within the SustainX consortium. Through comprehensive benchmarking and analysis, this report aims to identify regional strengths, existing competencies, as well as gaps that could potentially hinder the successful implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3).

Specifically, this report will:

- 1. Conduct an extensive evaluation of current innovation management capabilities of consortium members, utilizing structured assessment methodologies.*
- 2. Highlight regional competencies and pinpoint gaps to enable targeted activities, ensuring a customized and region-specific approach to capacity building.*
- 3. Provide details on tailored training contents aimed at enhancing interregional collaboration and fostering innovation-driven growth through the consortium partners*

Ultimately, this deliverable will provide a basis for subsequent capacity-building actions, thus empowering SMEs and regional stakeholders to effectively participate in and benefit from interregional innovation investments, aligning closely with the broader strategic goals of SustainX.

3. Methodology of Capability Mapping

We firmly believe in the endless opportunities that innovation brings to all regions by accelerating companies' competitiveness and by equipping them in overcoming challenges derived from market changes and any other external factors. As such, we introduced the train-the-trainer approach as part of this project and thus establish the baseline in Work Package 1 Project Set-Up under Task 1.2 Mapping of Competences, which will later be turned into action in Work Package 2 Skills Development as we conduct the trainings themselves. The objective of Task 1.2 Mapping of Competences is to identify the consortium's training needs with regards to their regions' needs, but also their own competences. Following the initial training program, consortium members will then move on to train SMEs themselves, true to the train-the-trainer methodology. IMP³ROVE has a



wide array of innovation training topics available and will cater each consortium partner's training needs and accumulate them into one comprehensive training program. Our approach is comprised of 3 major steps:

1. Conducting Capability Assessment
2. Analysing training needs
3. Developing customized training programs

Based on this process, each consortium partner organisation received a training program tailored to their needs and capabilities and trainings are already starting to take place with the earliest on April 29-30, 2025 in Iasi, Romania with the two partners Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) and the Technical University of Iasi (TUIASI). Training contents are being adapted for the partners and will be subject to further adaptation for the SME trainings to be held in 2026 respectively. In this effort of accelerating capabilities, we want to offer a comprehensive approach. This means, we do not limit ourselves to certain timeframes as to when our support services can be requested (of course always in line with set deliverables and milestones), nor do we limit the support to the training courses themselves. We want the consortium partners as well as the SMEs feel well taken care of and prepared to the best of our abilities. Therefore, on top of the training courses, we will offer a webinar series specifically for onboarding the consortium partners on the differences, usage and benefits of the IMP³ROVE assessment tools and how to guide SMEs through them. These webinars will be scheduled periodically to ensure that all partners can join at least one of them. Furthermore, we will also offer one-on-one coaching sessions, if need be. These coaching sessions can be utilized for questions around the training material, matters regarding their work with SMEs, they can be also used to review analyses or get feedback on other material prepared for the SMEs. All in all, we want to offer a whole package to the consortium to foster long-term results.

3.1 Conducting Capability Assessment

The primary objective of the Competence Mapping Questionnaire is to systematically assess and document the innovation management competencies and capacity-building needs within the SustainX consortium. This assessment aims to:

1. Identify existing competencies: Determine the current innovation management capabilities of consortium members and their SMEs
2. Highlight regional strengths and gaps: Pinpoint regional competencies and identify gaps that may hinder the successful implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3).



3. Gain insights into capacity-building opportunities: Provide actionable insights to develop tailored training formats and strategic support activities aimed at enhancing interregional collaboration and fostering innovation-driven growth.

For conducting the capability assessment, we used a multi-pronged approach as the basis for the questionnaire. We looked at the business advisor skills, i.e. the consortium members' skills as an advisor in their daily work with SMEs and on the other hand, we looked at what kind of innovation management skills the regional SMEs on average already have. Since the consortium partners originate from less-developed regions, we wanted to shed light on both the partners themselves, but also what the regions look like and how skilled they are on average. All of our consortium partners have extensive experience in working closely with SMEs, therefore they are the ideal representations of the regionally available skills and focus topics. We built the questions in a way that addresses the skills, relevant and needed from these two parties and then evaluated the gap identified. For example, if certain innovation management skills are simply not that important for the regional SMEs or are not prioritized, then a potential lack of that exact skill on the business advisor side would not be as impactful or alarming as innovation management skills that are tremendously important to the SMEs. On the flip side, if there are certain innovation management skills that are very important to the SMEs and the business advisor is well skilled to address those needs in their day-to-day work, then there would not be any need for additional training. If however, SMEs attach significance to certain skills, which the business advisor cannot sufficiently address themselves yet, that indeed would be our signal for a training need. Therefore, majority of the questionnaire is following these two parties to identify the significance of each skill and to identify potential gaps. In order to address all relevant areas of innovation management, we split the questionnaire into the following major parts focussing on innovation management-related skills:

- *Working with clients – Your skills*: This is where the consortium partners specifically were addressed to identify their skill sets and the skills needed when working with their SMEs. This includes approaching new potential clients, leveraging quantitative data to assess their SME's innovation management capabilities, and drawing conclusions and recommendations for them.
- *Innovation Strategy*: This section identifies if SMEs are acquainted with building innovation strategies, if they are documented and their level of ambition to drive innovation forward
- *Organisation*: Here we review if there are interdisciplinary teams that collaborate on innovation and if there are any formal processes
- *External Collaboration*: Many SMEs are lacking resources, therefore collaborating with external partners may be a good way to even out that shortage and gain additional expertise. This is what is reviewed in this section.



- *Innovation Life-Cycle Processes*: the processes within an SME are just as important as the given structures. Therefore, we review how adaptable SMEs are in their development processes, and if they can sufficiently commercialize
- *Business Model Innovation*: In this section we are looking into the SMEs' knowledge of developing and implementing promising changes into their existing business models
- *Stakeholders*: This is to identify the relevant stakeholders in the SMEs' environment as well as the frequency of interaction and impact
- *Competence*: Here we reviewed the SMEs' competences in different fields, such as market shifts, sustainability, digitalization, project management, financial acumen, etc.

Once we had the innovation management part of the questionnaire set up, we aligned also with the consortium members for their input as the analysis of the questionnaire would deliver additional insights that are also important in other tasks, such as Task 1.3 Action Plans. Therefore, we worked together with ARC FUND to implement separate sections all revolving around the regional strengths and weaknesses, the SMEs' challenges and their S3 priorities, which will also feed into the Deliverable 1.3 Action Plans (M4). Thus, together we decided on implementing the following sections:

- *Challenges in the Innovation Environment*: This section looks at the biggest challenges that SMEs face in fostering innovation and technological advancements, which could derive from lack of funds or collaboration partners, limited access to technologies and R&D infrastructures, regulatory barriers, etc.
- *Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) Priorities*: Here, we looked at which are the most relevant priorities for the specific regions and also in which areas specifically the SMEs need the most support in and what kind of resources in order to align with the chosen priorities.

We believe that comprising the questionnaire in this manner allows for multiple goals to be achieved: We were able to detect the consortium partners' current skill sets, identify gaps in accordance with the skill sets present in their SMEs, review the SMEs' skills in the different regions, get insights into their ecosystems, and their S3 priorities and preparedness to align with those priorities. The finalized questionnaire was set up in Microsoft Forms for easy access and usability and shared among the consortium partners with a set deadline of 2 weeks to fill out. The idea was to have one response per organisation so that we have one representative per region (albeit that DIZ and TUIASI are in the same region). For some of the organisations we received two responses, which were then averaged for the sake of analysis, same goes for the consortium partners residing in the same region. Below you can find some excerpts of the questionnaire, while the full questionnaire can be found online [here](#).



SustainX stakeholder & competence mapping

* Erforderlich

Working with clients - Your skills

3. Please review these statements with regards to your work as a business advisor. Please note one Q (e.g. 1a) relates to the importance to your daily work and the second Q (e.g.1b) relates to your skill level addressing that importance

*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
1a) Identifying the right clients is important for my advisory services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1b) I can identify the right clients for my advisory services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2a) Approaching and convincing potential clients is important for my advisory services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2b) I can approach and convince potential clients for my advisory services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3a) Leveraging quantitative data to assess the innovation management capabilities of my clients is important for my advisory services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3b) I can leverage quantitative data to assess the innovation management capabilities of clients	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4a) Comparing clients' innovation capabilities against those from peers is important for my advisory services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1 Questionnaire Excerpt: Working with your clients- Your skills

Innovation Strategy

4. Please review these statements with regards to your clients' innovation strategy. Please note one Q (e.g. 1a) relates to your clients' competencies and the second Q (e.g.1b) relates to your skill level in supporting them *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not applicable
1a) The majority of my clients base their innovation strategy on a proper analysis of their trends, customers, competitors and technologies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1b) I can help my clients to base their innovation strategy on a proper analysis of their trends, customers, competitors and technologies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2a) The majority of my clients base their innovation strategy on their ambition, innovation lifecycle and competency assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2b) I can help my clients to base their innovation strategy on their ambition, innovation lifecycle, and competency assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 2 Questionnaire Excerpt: Innovation Strategy

Stakeholders

9. Which Stakeholder groups does your client interact with? *

- Universities / Research institutes
- Banks / other funding bodies
- Chamber of commerce and industry
- Chamber of crafts
- Development agencies
- Innovation agencies
- Cluster organisations
- Associations / foundations
- Government bodies
- SMEs
- Large enterprises

Figure 3 Questionnaire Excerpt Stakeholders

Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) Priorities

19. Which Smart Specialization Priorities (S3) are the most relevant to your clients? (Select all that apply) *

- Digital transformation (e.g. adoption of digital tools, AI, automation)
- Sustainable innovation (e.g., green technologies, circular economy, energy efficiency)
- Smart manufacturing and Industry 4.0 (e.g., robotics, IoT, advanced materials)
- Deep tech innovation (e.g., AI, blockchain, quantum computing, biotech)
- Social innovation and community engagement (e.g., inclusive business models, social enterprises)
- Agri-food and bioeconomy (e.g., precision agriculture, sustainable food systems)
- Health and well-being (e.g., med-tech, digital health solutions, biotech innovation)
- Creative industries and cultural innovation (e.g., digital media, creative entrepreneurship)

Figure 4 Questionnaire Excerpt: S3 Priorities

3.2 Analysing training needs

When asking the consortium partners to fill in the questionnaire, the idea was to have one response representative per organization. However, we received two responses from ARC FUND, which were then averaged to one 'voice' in order to not lose important data. We also received two responses from our partner DIZ. As DIZ and TUIASI are even in the same city, we also averaged the input of those three colleagues (2 from DIZ and 1 from TUIASI) into one 'voice' once more. Therefore, we leveraged the different inputs in order to create a comprehensive view of the regional strengths and weaknesses as well as of the consortium partners' excellent skills, shedding light on the areas for improvement. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed several key insights, critical to understanding and enhancing innovation management capabilities among SMEs within the given regions. Majority of SMEs demonstrated significant potential for improvement in their innovation strategies, yet many lacked structured decision-making processes and faced considerable challenges in effectively commercializing innovations. SMEs commonly encountered difficulties related to funding accessibility, technology integration, and scaling innovations, indicating major gaps in their innovation support ecosystems. Looking into the stakeholders showed the diverse groups SMEs interact with, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. Strong stakeholder interactions were found to positively influence innovation activities. Particularly impactful were initiatives driven directly by SMEs, underscoring the importance of fostering robust, SME-centric innovation ecosystems. Alignment with Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) priorities emerged as vital, with SMEs notably needing greater support in funding and collaborative engagements to effectively align with these regional innovation strategies. These insights serve as foundational knowledge for targeted activities within the SustainX project, guiding future capacity-building and innovation support measures to address identified gaps and leverage existing strengths effectively. In order to assess everyone's training background effectively, we started out by asking the respondents to state their training experiences specifically with IMP³ROVE trainings in order to avoid any overlaps or repetitions. Most partners have engaged in multiple IMP³ROVE trainings due to cross-overs from other past projects, reflecting a high baseline awareness of structured innovation practices already. We are confident that the partners who already have extensive training experience can act as internal mentors and bring forth the train-the-trainer mindset even more to also share best practices within and outside of the consortium.

Organisational IMP training experiences

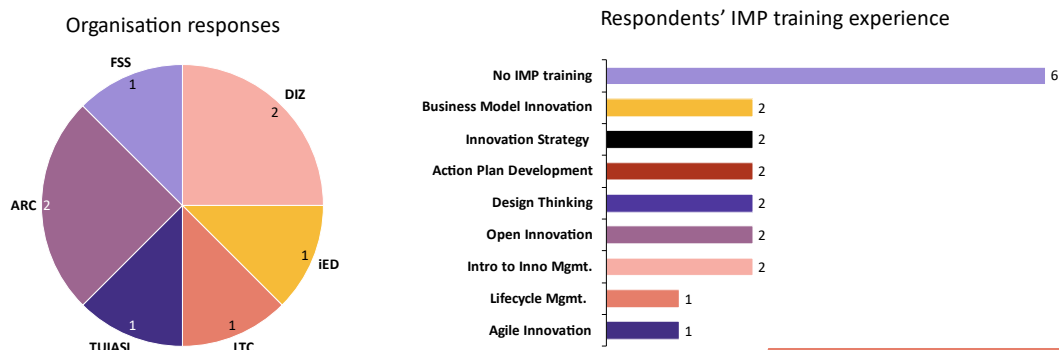


Figure 5 Respondents' IMP training experience

We further explored general priorities and skill sets that are most critical for business advisors when working with SMEs. Interestingly enough, there is a striking unanimity among the respondents regarding the importance of each advisory activity, some seem of more importance for their SMEs and some less, but all respondents confirm its importance with either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”. For example, 60% of organizations strongly agree that “identifying the right clients is important,” while the remaining 40% agree. Similarly, on “approaching and convincing potential clients,” 60% agree and 40% strongly agree a pattern that repeats for data-driven tasks: 80% agree and 20% strongly agree that “leveraging quantitative data” is critical, and for “comparing clients’ innovation capabilities against peers,” 40% strongly agree, 40% agree, and only 20% remain neutral. Fact-based approaches drew positive responses (60% strongly agree, 40% agree), and an especially strong consensus emerged on “deriving recommendations and actionable measures,” where 80% strongly agree and 20% remain neutral. These figures confirm that advisors see every step from client selection through data benchmarking to action planning as essential pillars of effective SME innovation support. In contrast, when it comes to the respondents’ skills to sufficiently address these topics, 40% of organizations strongly agree they can “identify the right clients,” another 40% simply agree, and 20% strongly disagree, exposing a confidence gap at the very front end of advisory work. When it comes to “approaching and convincing clients,” just 20% strongly agree, 60% agree, and 20% are neutral. Analytical abilities show even wider splits: while 60% agree they can leverage quantitative data, 40% actively disagree; and on benchmarking clients against

peers, 40% agree, 40% are neutral, and 20% disagree. Fact-based advisory skills fare slightly better 60% agree, but 20% are neutral and 20% disagree and finally, 20% strongly agree, 60% agree, and 20% remain neutral that they can derive actionable recommendations. These mixed results highlight that, although advisors value each capability highly, many do not yet feel fully equipped to deliver on these priorities.

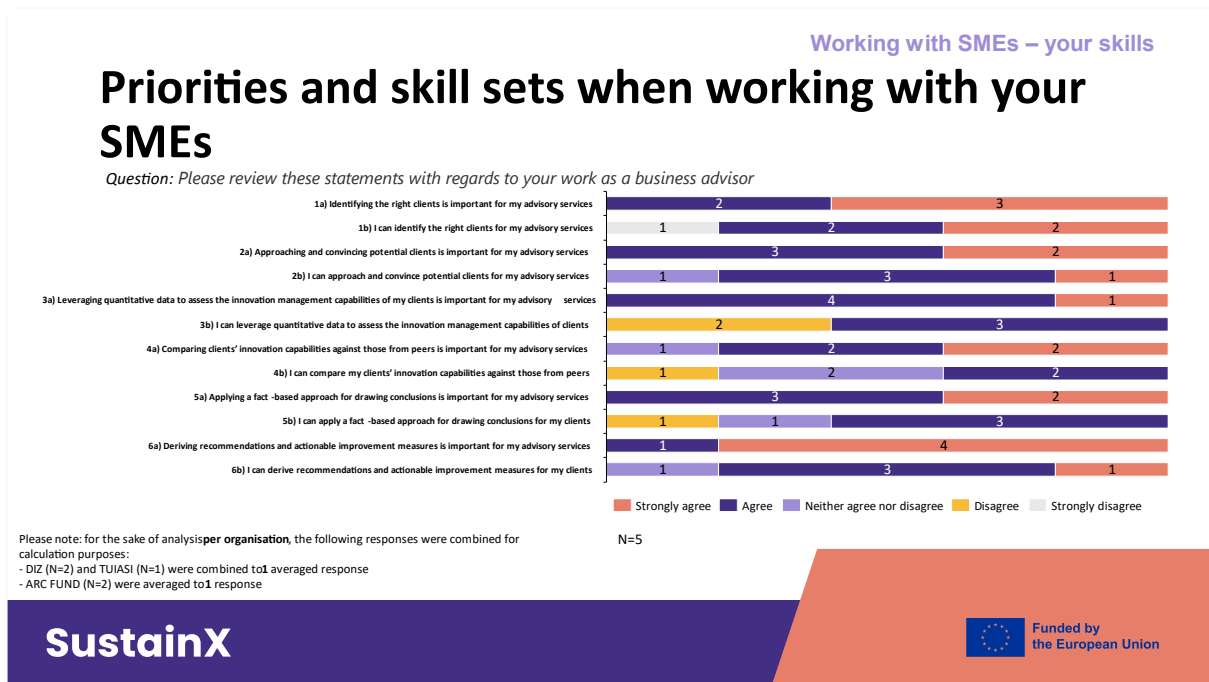


Figure 6 Priorities and skill sets

When looking into the innovation strategy, we can see a clear picture of both the current state of SMEs' strategic thinking as well as the self-assessment by the respondents. When asked whether their clients base innovation strategies on rigorous analyses of market trends, customer needs, competitor offerings, and emerging technologies, all five respondents indicated "neither agree nor disagree." This uniform neutrality suggests that respondents see a significant grey zone: while SMEs may suggest strategic analysis, they do not do so consistently or deeply enough to warrant stronger agreement. In effect, 100 percent of respondents perceive a lack of firmly established analytical foundations underpinning their SMEs' innovation strategies. Looking on the flip side of the question, 60% of respondents feel confident that they can guide SMEs to base their strategies on such comprehensive analyses, rating themselves as "Agree". Another 20% opted for "neither agree nor disagree", indicating uncertainty about their own effectiveness, while the remaining respondents actively "disagree" with their ability to deliver this support. Notably, most see themselves as somewhat capable. A similar pattern can be found with respect

to anchoring strategies in SMEs’ ambitions, innovation lifecycle stages, and competency assessments. When asked if most clients already do this, 80% again selected “neither agree nor disagree”, and 20% “agree”. However, generally speaking, while some respondents do not seem fully well-versed in innovation strategy, majority seems to be comfortable with their skills in this regard. Taken together, these findings highlight two crucial insights. First, there is widespread recognition that SMEs’ current innovation strategies lack robust analytical and lifecycle-oriented foundations. Second, while majority of respondents feel they have the competence to address these gaps, a slight minority remains uncertain or underprepared. This dual picture of strategic ambiguity among SMEs coupled with uneven advisory confidence underscores the need for targeted capacity-building efforts both to deepen SMEs’ own strategic analysis practices and to strengthen advisers’ methodological toolkits for guiding ambition- and data-driven innovation planning.

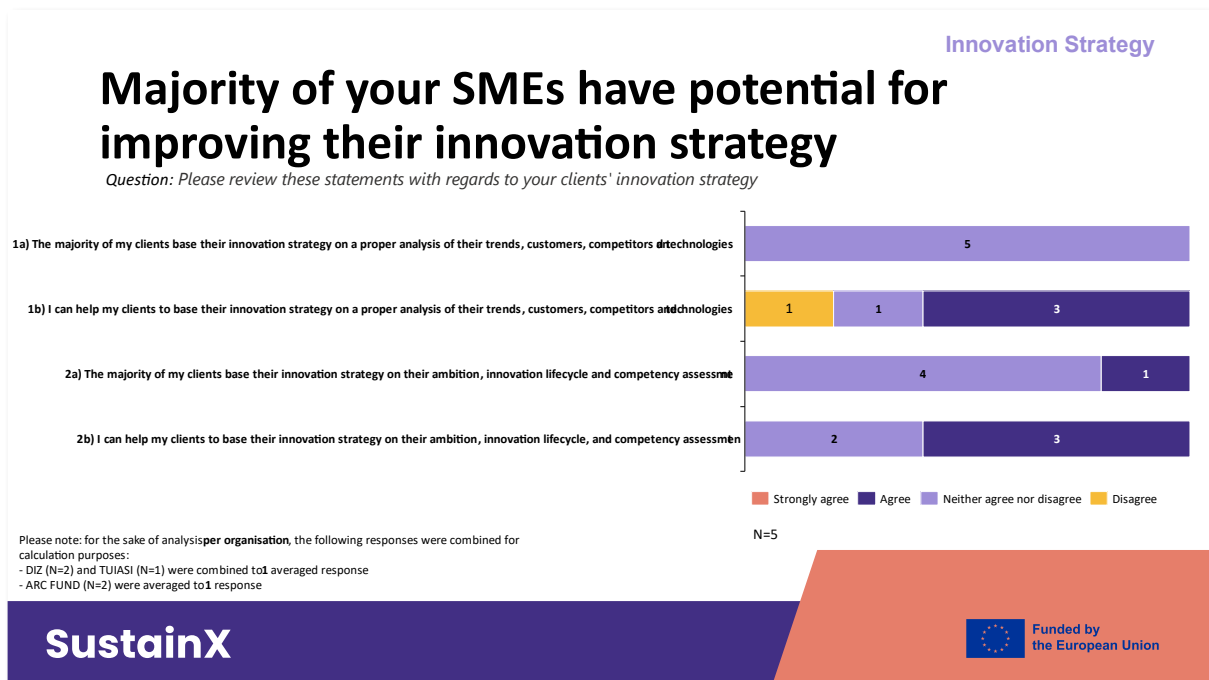


Figure 7 SMEs’ innovation strategy potential

Looking into the decision-making processes, we can see that most SMEs currently lack formal, structured processes for innovation decision-making, yet respondents feel more confident in their own ability to support such processes. When assessing whether majority of their clients innovate in interdisciplinary teams, 80% of respondents chose “neither agree nor disagree” and 20% “disagree,” indicating widespread uncertainty or absence of such collaborative structures among SMEs. In contrast, 60% of respondents “agree” and 20% “strongly agree” that they can guide clients to work in interdisciplinary teams, with just 20% “neither agreeing nor disagreeing” about their own ability. Similarly, on the

question of whether most clients have a formal innovation decision-making process, 80% of respondents again selected “neither agree nor disagree,” while the remaining 20% marked the statement “not applicable,” underscoring the general absence of structured decision frameworks. Yet when asked if they can help their clients develop such processes, 60% “agree” and 20% “strongly agree,” even as 20% “disagree.” Taken together, these statistics reveal a clear gap: 80% of respondents see SMEs’ organizational activities around innovation as unstructured or unclear, but a combined 80% express confidence in their own capacity to introduce and support formal decision-making and interdisciplinary collaboration. This disparity highlights a prime opportunity for targeted training to translate respondents’ advisory confidence into tangible, structured innovation processes within the SMEs themselves.

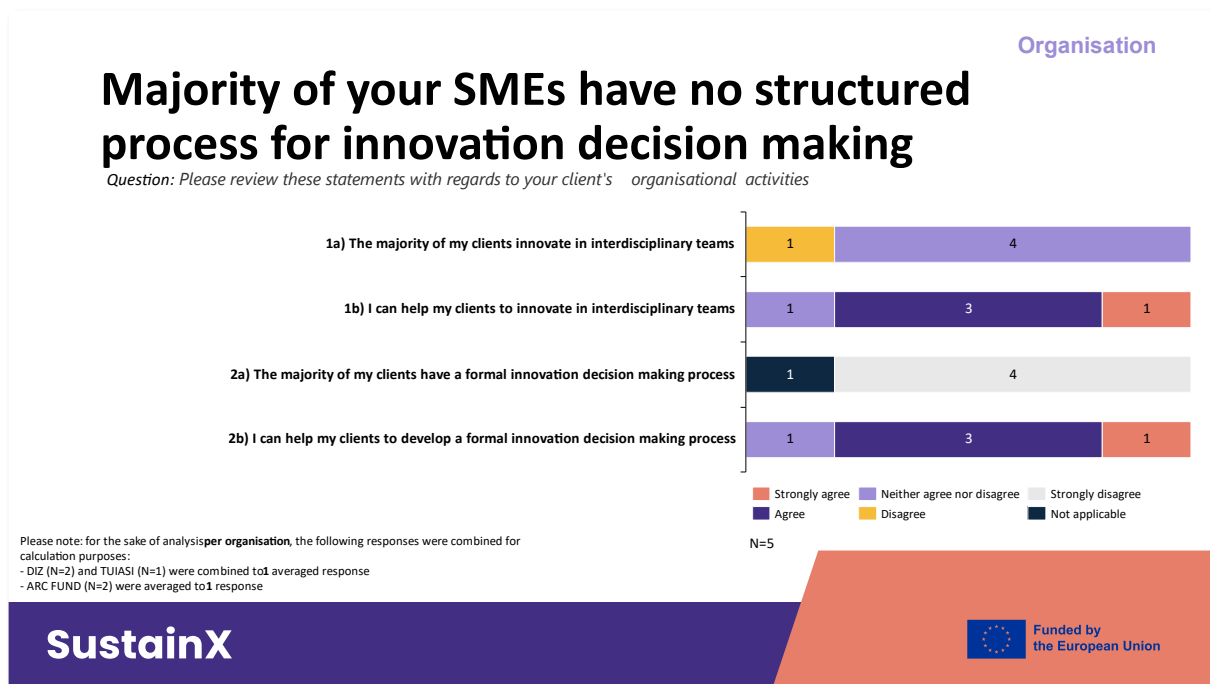


Figure 8 SMEs' lack of decision-making processes

We further looked at external collaborations and we noticed a striking gap between SMEs’ self-sufficiency and respondents’ confidence in their advisory support. When asked whether the majority of their SMEs are able to identify their own partnering needs for innovation, 60% of respondents disagree and the remaining 40% agree, indicating that most SMEs struggle to pinpoint collaboration opportunities unassisted. In contrast, 100% of respondents 80% agree and 20% strongly agree feel fully capable of helping their clients determine these needs. This unanimous advisory confidence underscores the perceived value of structured support in partner-needs assessment. A similar dynamic appears for

clients’ ability to actually connect with suitable innovation partners: 60% of respondents disagree that their SMEs can independently forge the right partnerships, while 40% remain neutral. Yet, when evaluating their own capacity, all respondents unanimously agree (100%) that they can guide SMEs to identify and establish these critical connections. No respondent marked “strongly agree” here, suggesting steady confidence rather than unbridled certainty, but the unanimity of positive self-assessment is nevertheless telling. Together, these figures paint a clear narrative: SMEs in the consortium regions generally lack the internal capability to both recognize their partnering needs and effectively connect with innovation partners, as evidenced by a combined 60% negative rating on both. However, every single respondent believes they possess the requisite skills to bridge this gap, highlighting external collaboration as a prime target for capacity-building activities within this project.



Figure 9 External collaborations

With regards to innovation life-cycle processes, we can see a discrepancy between SMEs’ actual use of formalized development frameworks and respondents’ confidence in guiding those practices. When asked if majority of their SMEs is able to design and implement linear (stage-gate) innovation processes, only 20 % of respondents agree, while 40 % remain neutral and a further 40 % disagree, suggesting that most SMEs lack structured, phase-gate methodologies. This also ties in with the impression that we received from the way SMEs seem to set up their innovation strategy, or lack thereof. In contrast, 60 % of respondents feel confident that they can help clients adopt these linear processes split between 40 % who agree and 20 % who strongly agree with 40 % still

expressing doubt in their own facilitation abilities. A similarly uneven picture emerges for agile methodologies: 60 % of respondents disagree that their SMEs currently employ agile innovation processes, with the remaining 40 % neither agreeing nor disagreeing, indicating limited SME agility. Yet 60 % of respondents agree they can support clients in designing and implementing agile workflows, while the other 40 % remain neutral. When it comes to commercialization outcomes, 80 % of respondents are neutral on whether SMEs successfully commercialize their new products and services, and 20 % disagree only 20 % believe clients already excel in market rollout. Respondents’ self-rated capability to drive commercialization is more optimistic but still mixed: 20 % strongly agree, 20 % agree, 40 % are neutral, and 20 % disagree, highlighting variable confidence in go-to-market support. Finally, on rapidly increasing sales volumes, 100 % of respondents doubt their SMEs’ current performance 60 % disagree and 40 % remain neutral whereas 40 % agree they can help clients accelerate product-and-service uptake, 20 % are neutral, and 40 % disagree. Overall, these statistics underscore that while formal linear and agile innovation frameworks and swift commercialization remain uncommon among SMEs, majority of respondents believe they possess the advisory expertise to introduce these processes to varying degrees.

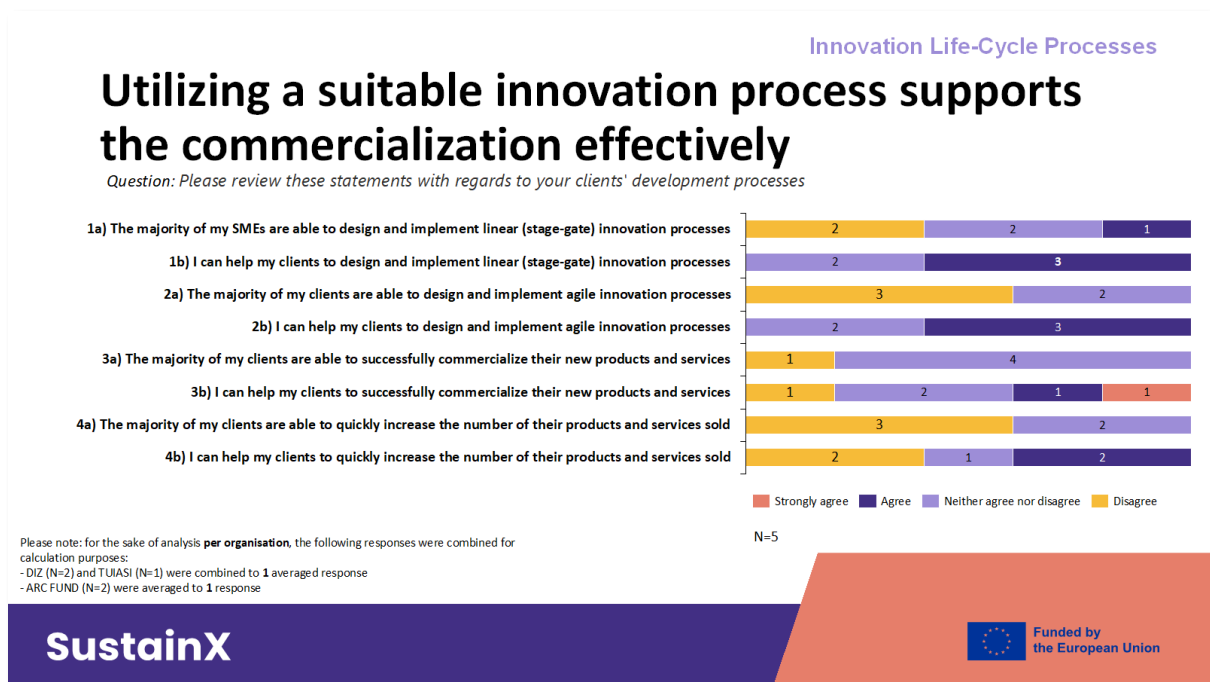


Figure 10 Innovation Life-Cycle Processes

Diving deeper into the topic of business model innovation highlights a significant gap between SMEs’ current capabilities and respondents’ confidence in guiding them toward robust business model improvements. Only 20% of respondents agree that most of their SMEs know how to spot new business model opportunities, while 40% remain neutral and another 40% disagree. In stark contrast, every respondent (100%) feels capable of helping



clients identify these opportunities, all selecting “Agree,” underscoring unanimous advisory confidence in this key area. When it comes to actually developing and implementing business model innovations, 60% of respondents disagree that their SMEs are already doing so, with 20% neutral and just 20% agreeing. Yet 60% of respondents (40% “Agree,” 20% “Strongly Agree”) believe they can guide clients through these innovation processes, and the remaining 40% remain neutral. This pattern low SME self-sufficiency paired with strong advisory conviction repeats for commercialization outcomes: 80% of respondents see their SMEs as unable to successfully commercialize new offerings (20% “Disagree” and 80% “Neither”), even though 40% of respondents “Agree” and 20% “Strongly Agree” that they could support commercialization, with 40% neutral. Finally, in terms of rapidly scaling sales, 60% of respondents disagree that their SMEs can swiftly increase product and service uptake, and 40% are neutral. Yet 40% of respondents “Agree” they can help clients achieve quick scaling, while 40% remain doubtful (“Disagree”) and 20% neutral. Taken together, these statistics reveal that while respondents overwhelmingly trust their own advisory capabilities in business model innovation and commercialization support, the SMEs themselves largely lack the inherent skills or structured processes highlighting clear targets for future capacity-building interventions.

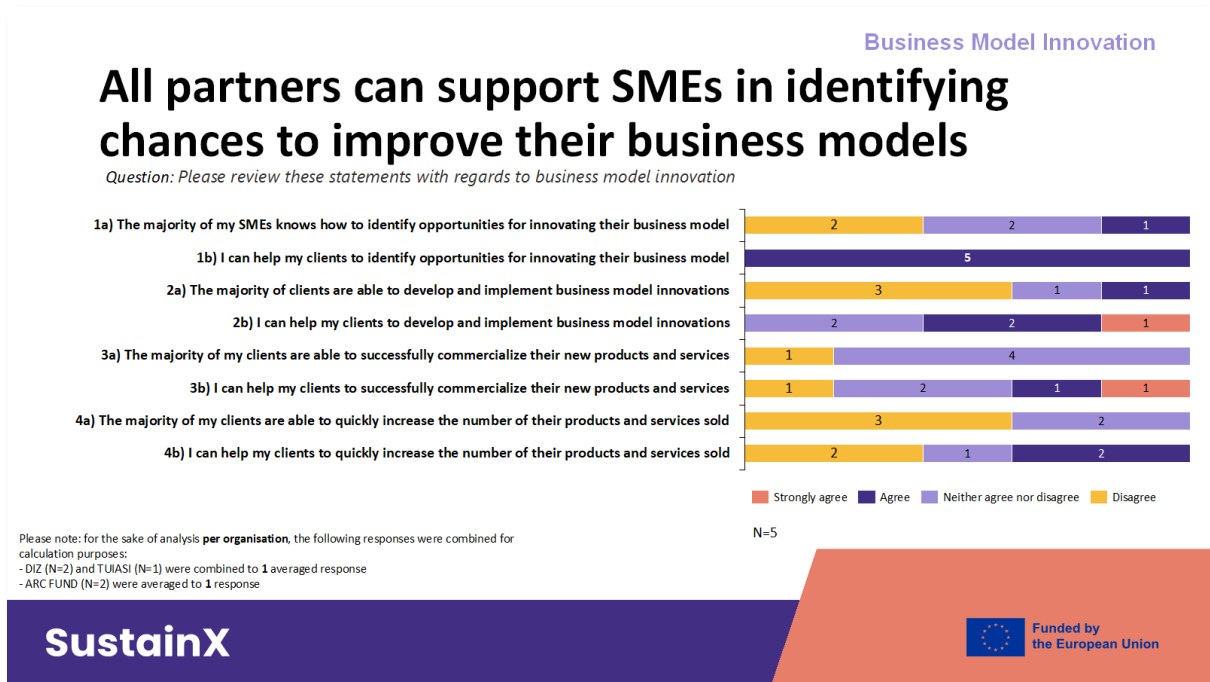


Figure 11 Business Model Innovation

Understanding the regional stakeholder groups in the consortium’s countries and their setup is essential for future activities within this project. We can see the breadth and

variability of stakeholder engagement among SMEs, underscoring both the opportunities and challenges inherent in their external networks. At the top of the spectrum, every respondent (100%) reported that their SMEs interact with associations and foundations as well as with chambers of commerce and industry. This suggests that formal, established networks remain the primary conduits through which SMEs seek resources, legitimacy, and market access. Closely trailing these top-tier actors, 80% of respondents indicated engagement with cluster organizations, large enterprises, SMEs themselves (peer networks), and universities or research institutes. These figures highlight that cross-sectoral cooperation with academic institutions, industry clusters, and larger corporate partners constitutes a cornerstone of the existing innovation ecosystem. It also suggests that SMEs are leveraging both horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (academia-to-industry) channels for knowledge exchange and project collaboration. At the mid-range, banks and other funding bodies appeared in four responses (80%), and government bodies in three (60%), reflecting moderate but uneven access to financial and regulatory support. Notably lower on the engagement scale were development agencies and chambers of crafts (each mentioned by 40% of respondents), while consulting companies for EU funds and innovation agencies were cited by just one organization each (20%). This uneven distribution reveals critical gaps: although SMEs heavily rely on established institutional networks, they underutilize specialized intermediaries such as innovation agencies and EU-fund consultants that could provide targeted funding pathways and technical expertise. Overall, this underscores a pressing need to expand SMEs' stakeholder portfolios beyond traditional actors, fostering deeper connections with innovation-focused bodies to fully exploit collaborative and financial opportunities.



Figure 12 Stakeholder Groups



Moving on from the question of ‘who are the stakeholders’ to ‘how often does the consortium interact with them’, respondents report the most intensive ongoing interactions with SMEs themselves and universities, underscoring these groups’ central role in their advisory work. Specifically, 60% of respondents meet with their SME clients on a weekly basis and 40% on a monthly basis, while universities and research institutes see equal 40/40 splits for weekly and monthly engagement, with the remaining 20% connecting quarterly. This high-frequency contact reflects the critical importance of staying closely connected to both the innovators and the knowledge generators in these ecosystems. By contrast, engagement with large enterprises is somewhat less frequent but still regular: 40% of respondents report monthly touchpoints, another 40% quarterly, and 20% on a weekly basis. Government bodies occupy a similar interaction rhythm, with 40% monthly and 40% quarterly, balanced by 20% meeting weekly. These patterns suggest that while institutional and corporate partners are important, they are engaged less intensively than core SMEs and academic collaborators. Mid-tier stakeholders such as banks and other funding bodies, chambers of commerce, and cluster organizations are contacted on more varied schedules. Funding bodies see 40% yearly, 20% quarterly, 20% monthly, and 20% not applicable, indicating that financial channels are tapped episodically rather than continuously. Chambers of commerce show a 20/20/40/20 split across yearly, quarterly, monthly, and weekly interactions, respectively, while cluster organizations and associations each register 20% weekly, 20% quarterly, 20% monthly, and 20% yearly. Finally, innovation and development agencies are most often engaged quarterly (40%), with smaller shares of monthly (20%), yearly (20%), and not-applicable (20%) interactions. Chambers of crafts, however, are largely out of the regular engagement mix with only a single monthly touchpoint reported. Overall, these frequencies paint a nuanced landscape of stakeholder engagement, highlighting where advisory efforts naturally concentrate and where deeper, more systematic outreach could strengthen the broader innovation network.

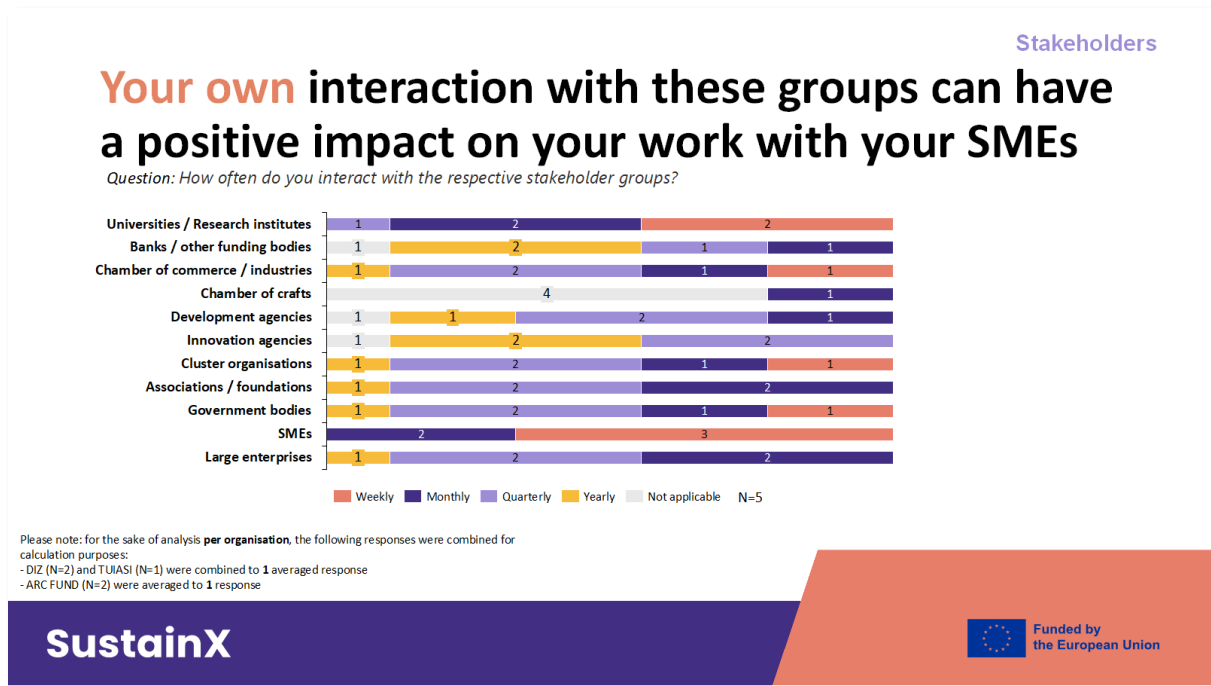


Figure 13 Intensity of Interaction with Stakeholders

Furthermore, understanding the impact each stakeholder has, helps us further understand the SMEs and their needs. Respondents generally view stakeholder impact as uneven, with few groups expressing “extreme” impact over SMEs’ innovation priorities. Universities and research institutes, for example, were seen as having no influence by 20% of respondents, moderate influence by 40%, and slight influence by the remaining 40%. Banks and other funding bodies displayed an even broader dispersion: 20% of respondents rated them as having extreme influence, another 20% saw no influence, 20% as big influence, and 40% as slight influence. This variability underscores that financial stakeholders are perceived neither uniformly powerful nor uniformly disengaged, but rather context-dependent in their impact. Chambers of commerce and industry stand out as consistently influential, with 60% of respondents assigning them moderate influence and 20% big influence; only 20% saw them as having slight impact. Conversely, chambers of crafts were largely seen as marginally relevant, with 60% of respondents rating them “not applicable” and the remaining 40% split between moderate and big influence. Development agencies likewise showed mixed influence: 20% no influence, 40% moderate, 20% big, and 20% slight, reflecting regional differences in how these agencies support local innovation ecosystems. Innovation agencies and cluster organizations show stronger perceived impact: 60% of respondents rate cluster organizations as exerting moderate influence and 40% big influence, while innovation agencies are viewed as having big influence by 60% and extreme influence by 20%, with the rest neutral. Government bodies appear more evenly spread 20% slight, 40% moderate, 20% big, and 20% big suggesting that policy actors can be pivotal but are not universally decisive. Finally, SMEs themselves were seen as holding slight influence by 20%, moderate by 40%,

and big by 40%, indicating that peer dynamics within the SME community are recognized as a significant driver of innovation activity. When asked to identify the top three stakeholders per organization, a clear pattern emerges: ARC FUND cites government bodies, business associations, and technology hubs; DIZ & TUIASI point to funding bodies, research and technology organizations (RTOs) or universities, and industry clusters; LTC highlights fellow SMEs, business support organizations, and R&D institutions; iED emphasizes research/universities followed by SMEs; and FSS names clusters, government bodies, and the chamber of commerce. Across the consortium, this confirms that while no single stakeholder type dominates universally, government, academic, and industry-network actors consistently rank among the most impactful partners for driving SME innovation.

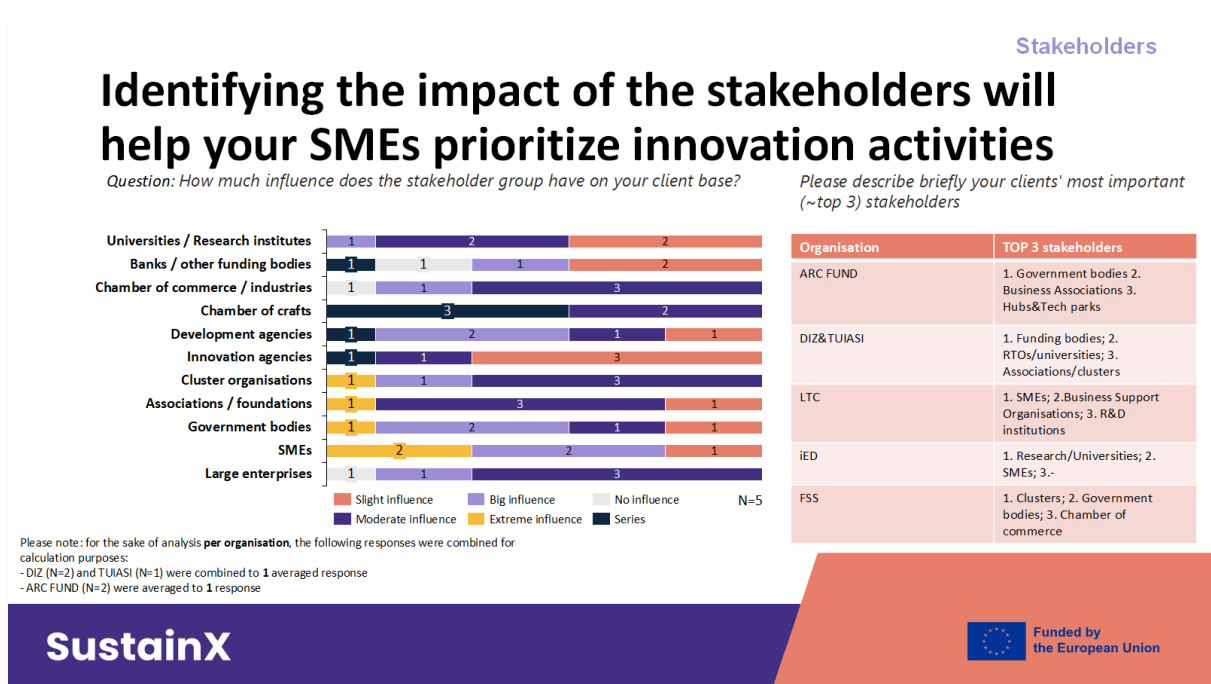


Figure 14 Stakeholder Impact on SMEs

Now, zooming in on the competencies of SMEs themselves, respondents judge their SMEs strongest in project management and digitalization, while core strategic areas and risk competencies lag. 60% of respondents rate their SMEs as very competent in project management and 20% as moderately competent, indicating that structured planning and execution are among clients' clearest strengths. Digitalization follows closely, with 40% very competent and 40% moderately competent, reflecting solid uptake of digital tools. Community engagement also ranks relatively high, with 40% very competent, 20% moderately competent, 20% slightly competent, and 20% not at all competent, suggesting that some organizations effectively leverage local networks and outreach. Majority of competencies fall into the moderately competent category. 80% of respondents place their SMEs at least moderately competent in leadership and change management; 60%

do so for innovation management, market shifts and dynamics, financial acumen, governance, and agile methods; and 60% for sustainability-focused activities. These areas while not yet standout performances represent solid foundations upon which targeted interventions can build. Their moderate ratings imply that, with focused support, SMEs could readily elevate these competencies to the very competent tier. Conversely, risk management and cross-cultural skills emerge as clear weaknesses. 60% of respondents judge SMEs only slightly competent in risk management. Similarly, sustainability-focused activities (20% not at all competent, 20% slightly competent) and cultural knowledge (20% not at all competent, 20% slightly competent) score lower than other strategic areas. Addressing these gaps particularly through dedicated workshops on ESG integration and intercultural collaboration will be critical to ensuring SMEs can navigate complex innovation ecosystems and global value-chain opportunities.

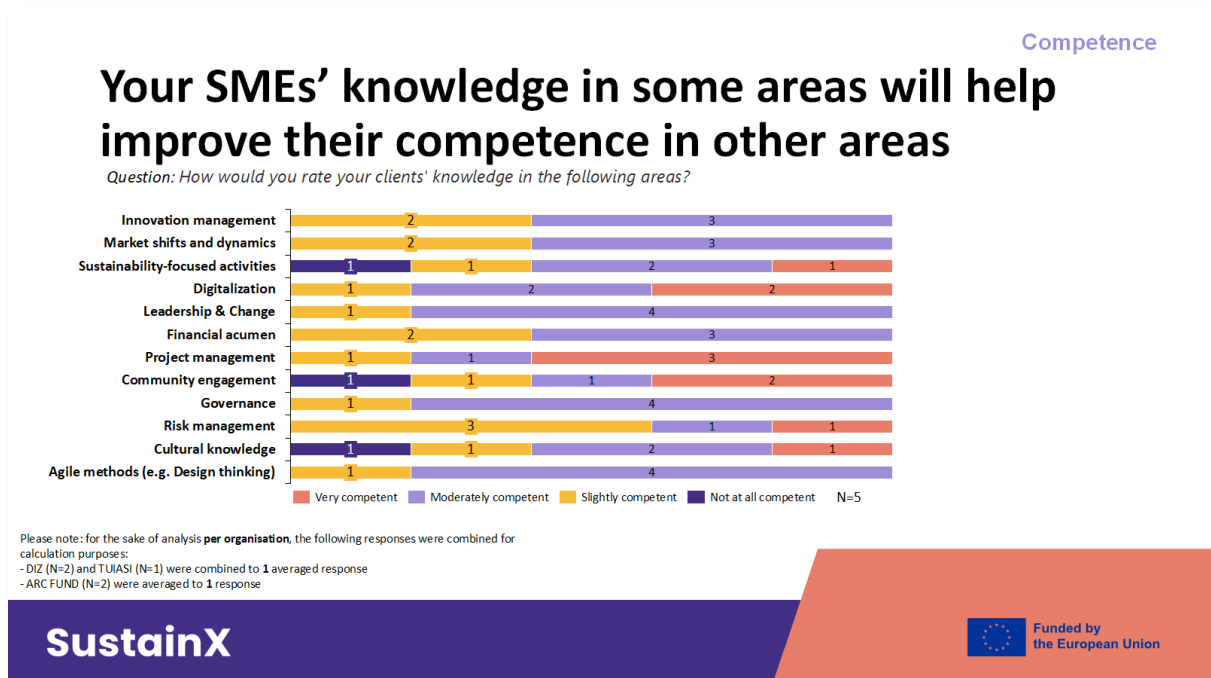


Figure 15 SMEs' competencies

Looking at the innovation environment of the SMEs, we can see that access to EU funding and a strong digital infrastructure clearly stand out as the two most frequently cited strengths, each mentioned by 80% of respondents. This suggests that financial support mechanisms and reliable digital networks form the backbone of innovation capability in these regions. Respondents' emphasis on these two factors underscores their centrality in enabling SMEs to undertake and sustain new technology-driven initiatives. Nearly as vital, 60% of respondents highlighted the presence of active innovation clusters or hubs and a skilled workforce in digital and sustainable technologies. These mid-ranked strengths indicate that localized ecosystems where companies, research organizations, and talent pools converge play a pivotal role in fostering collaborative innovation and ensuring that



SMEs have access to the necessary skills for green and digital projects. By comparison, 40% of respondents noted high-quality R&D institutions, reflecting moderate but not universal confidence in local research excellence. Only 20% of respondents pointed to strong collaboration among SMEs, universities, and governments as a key environmental strength, suggesting that formalized triple-helix partnerships remain underdeveloped. Taken together, these findings highlight clear priorities: building on robust funding channels and digital foundations, while further strengthening cluster activity, talent development, and institutional collaboration to round out the innovation landscape.

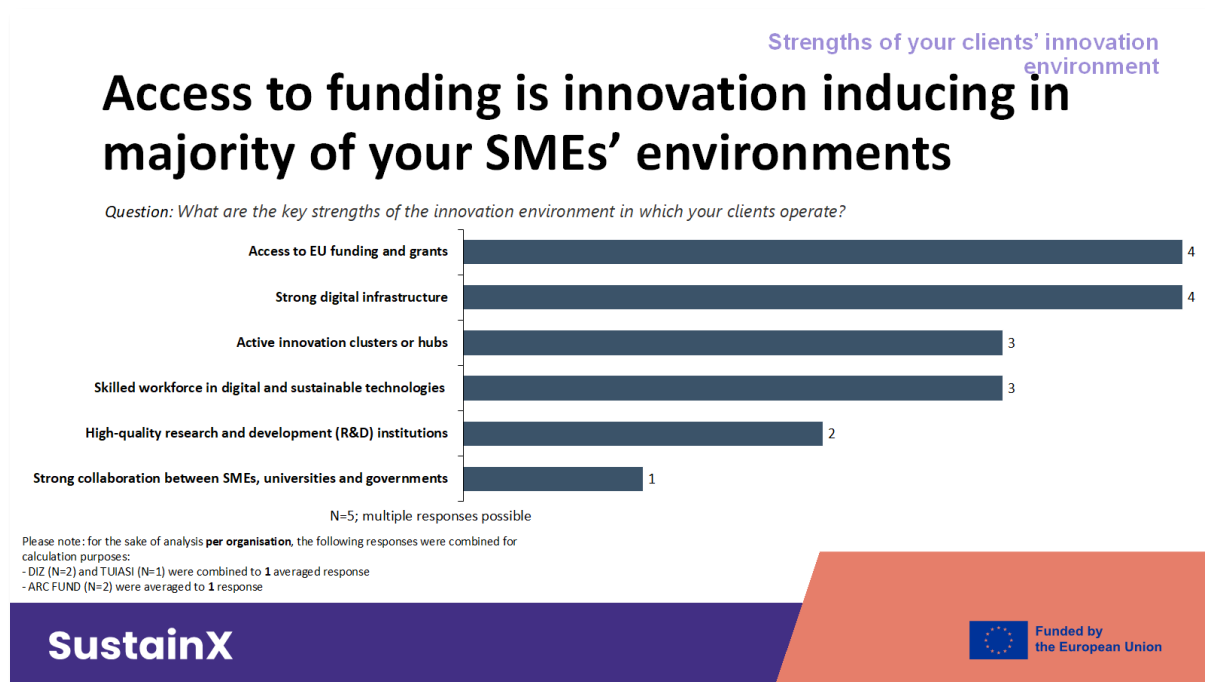


Figure 16 Key strengths in SMEs' innovation environment

When asked what the most impactful innovation initiatives are supporting SMEs in the regions, 80% of respondents identify SME-led innovation projects as the most impactful underscoring the outsized role that firm-driven R&D and internal venture efforts play in driving tangible results. 60% of respondents also highlight EU-funded programs (for example, Horizon Europe or Interreg) as critical catalysts, reflecting the significant leverage that structured grant frameworks provide in scaling collaborative research and cross-border innovation. 40% of respondents point to regional innovation hubs or clusters, indicating that localized networks of companies, research centres, and industry actors contribute meaningfully albeit to a lesser extent to the regional innovation ecosystem. Similarly, 40% endorse public-private partnerships designed to support SME innovation, suggesting that formal collaborations between government agencies and private firms

represent another valuable channel for enabling SME growth and market entry. These findings collectively emphasize that the strongest innovation drivers are those rooted in SMEs’ own initiatives, bolstered by EU funding schemes, while intermediary structures such as clusters and public-private alliances play important but secondary roles. For capacity-building efforts, this implies prioritizing direct support for SME incubators and acceleration programs alongside guidance on accessing and leveraging EU funding, while continuing to foster regional and partnership networks that can amplify and sustain these core innovation activities.

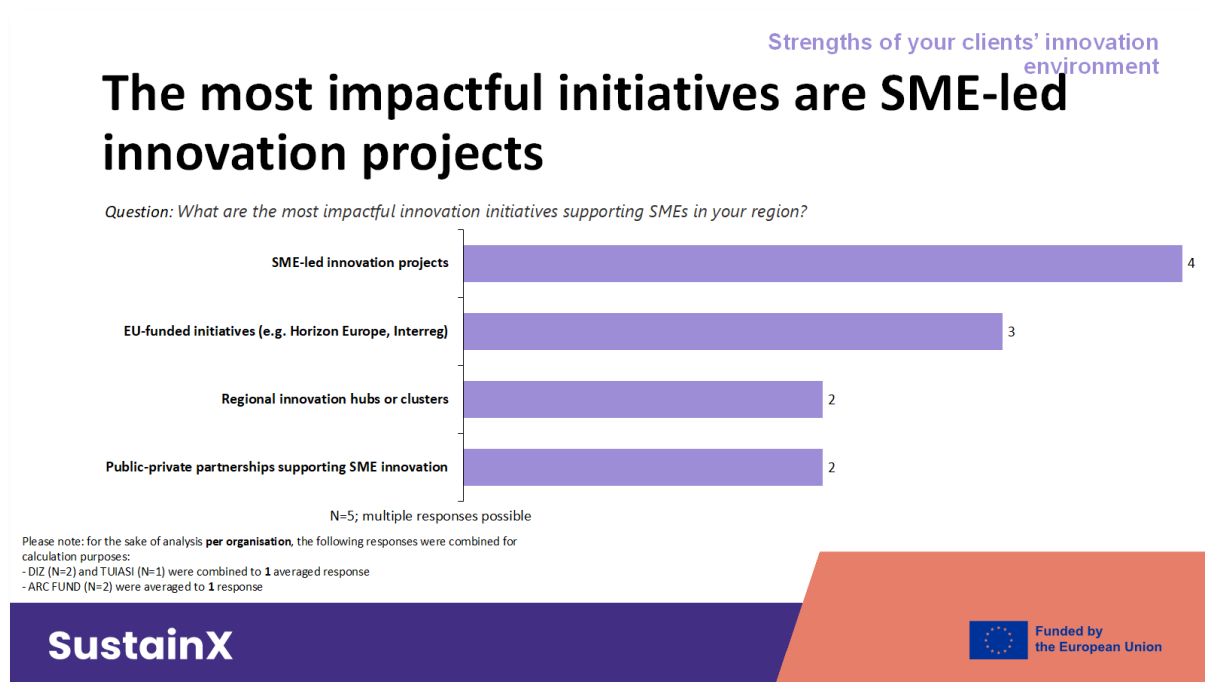


Figure 17 Most impactful initiatives for SMEs

As mentioned beforehand, we worked closely with the ARC FUND team to incorporate questions which would also deliver insights helpful for other tasks, such as Task 1.3 Action Plans which has a very regional and S3-oriented perspective. Therefore, getting into the challenges that SMEs face when it comes to fostering innovation and technological advancements, 100% of respondents identify the mismatch between research outputs and industry needs as the most critical barrier to innovation, highlighting that academic work seldom translates into market-ready solutions. 83% point to brain drain, insufficient support for scaling innovations, and weak digital infrastructure as major impediments, underscoring that loss of skilled talent, absence of growth pathways, and technological gaps severely constrain SME advancement. 67% of respondents cite skill shortages and workforce gaps in key innovation areas, indicating that even with funding and

infrastructure, companies struggle to find the human capital required for complex projects. 50% highlight limited access to innovation and research funding, difficulty in accessing advanced technologies and R&D infrastructure, restricted entry to EU support programs, and burdensome regulatory and administrative barriers, reflecting systemic hurdles that slow or block SME innovation. Finally, 33% report that lack of collaboration between SMEs, universities, research institutions, and policymakers, as well as limited availability of regional innovation hubs or clusters, further weaken the overall ecosystem. These lower-frequency but significant challenges emphasize the need to strengthen networks and expand localized innovation nodes as part of a comprehensive capacity-building strategy.

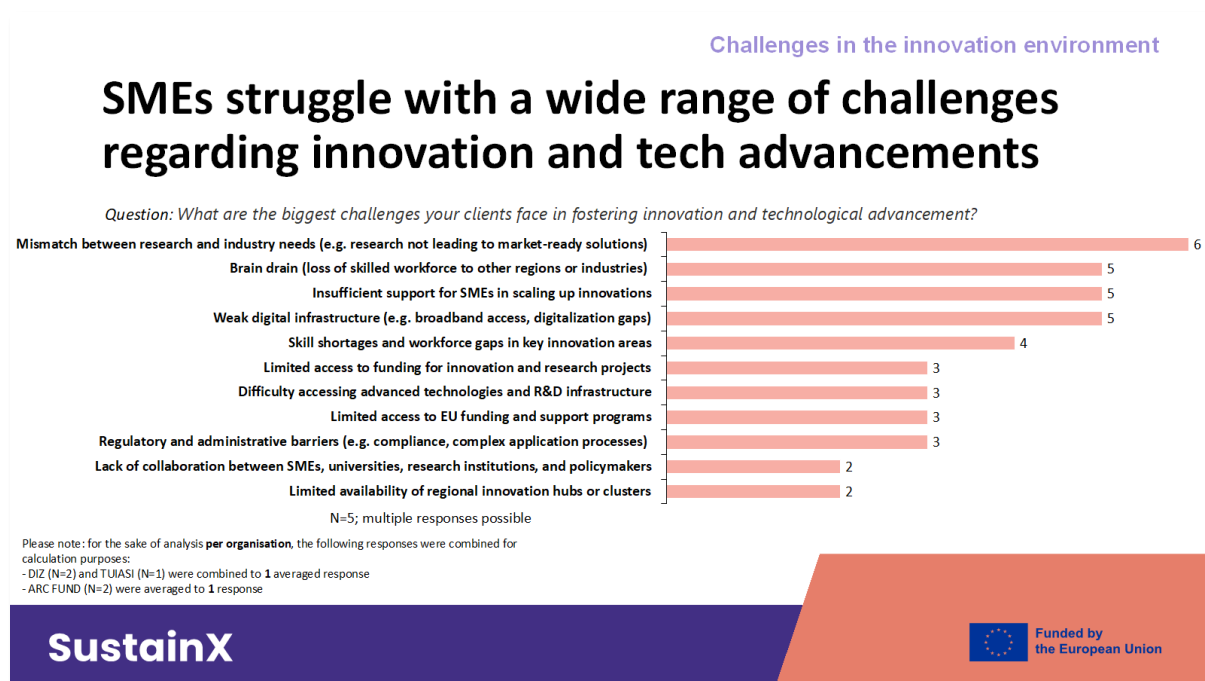


Figure 18 SMEs' challenges for innovation and technological advancements

Next, we looked at the innovation support ecosystem for SMEs and asked, if there were any major gaps identified. 100% of respondents agree that there is insufficient support for SMEs in scaling their innovations and that knowledge transfer between academia and industry is limited, highlighting that both the follow-through on research and the hands-on mechanisms to grow innovations remain critically underdeveloped. 60% identify limited access to EU funding opportunities and weak alignment with Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) priorities as major gaps, suggesting that strategic coherence and financial channels are only partially accessible to companies. Only 20% point to a lack of innovation hubs or clusters, indicating that while physical and organizational nodes exist, they may not be leveraged effectively for scaling. When asked to name the top three most critical challenges, 80% of respondents select insufficient support for scaling innovations, making

it the single most pressing issue. 60% cite brain drain as their second-ranked concern, reflecting acute worries about talent loss undermining SME capabilities. 40% identify lack of access to funding for innovation projects as their third-largest challenge, underlining ongoing barriers in securing the necessary resources to bring ideas to market. All in all, these findings underscore a clear priority order: tackling the systemic gap in scaling support must come first, followed by concerted efforts to retain and attract skilled personnel, and then streamlined access to innovation financing. Addressing these three dimensions will be essential to transform the ecosystem from one where SMEs launch ideas into one where they can sustainably grow and commercialize them.

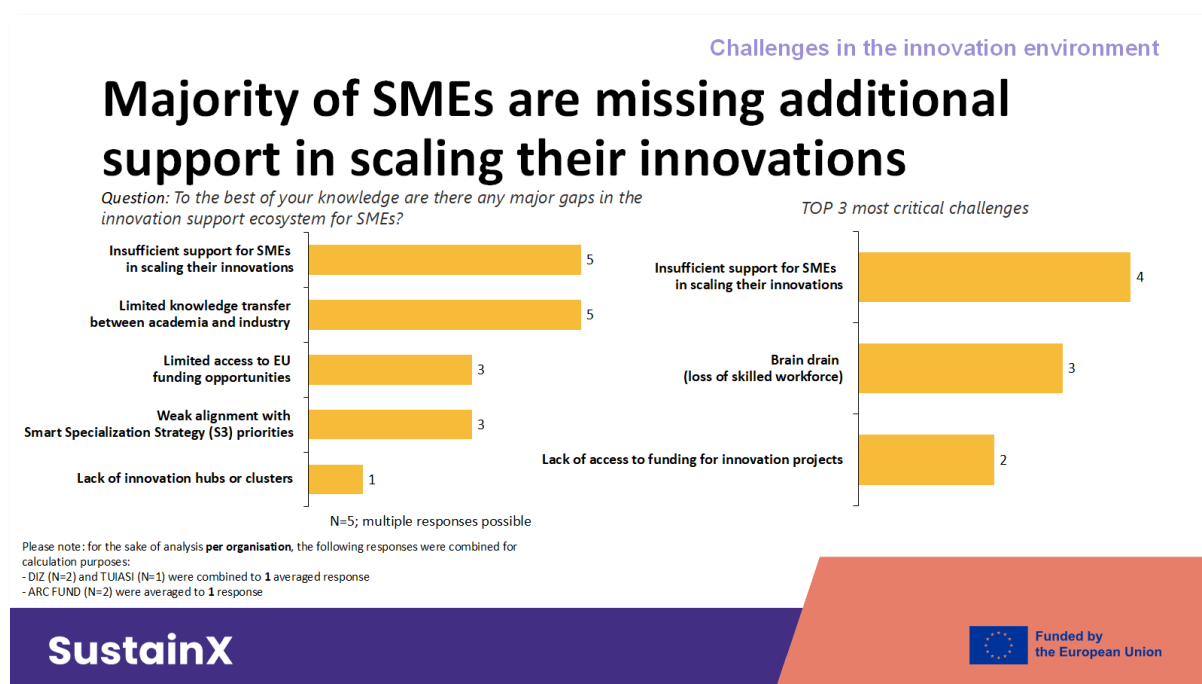


Figure 19 Challenges in SMEs' innovation support ecosystems

Paying special attention to the S3 priorities, 80% of respondents identify digital transformation, sustainable innovation, smart manufacturing & Industry 4.0, and health & well-being as the most relevant priorities for their SMEs. This high level of endorsement underscores a clear focus on leveraging advanced digital tools, green technologies, robotics, IoT, and biotech solutions to drive regional innovation agendas. 60% of respondents highlight agri-food & bioeconomy and creative industries & cultural innovation as important S3 areas, indicating substantial interest in precision agriculture, sustainable food systems, digital media, and creative entrepreneurship. 40% single out deep tech innovation such as AI, blockchain, and quantum computing while only 20% cite social innovation & community engagement and tourism. These results suggest a strong consensus around green and digital transitions, with secondary interest in sector-specific and emerging technologies, and lower emphasis on social or tourism-driven innovation.

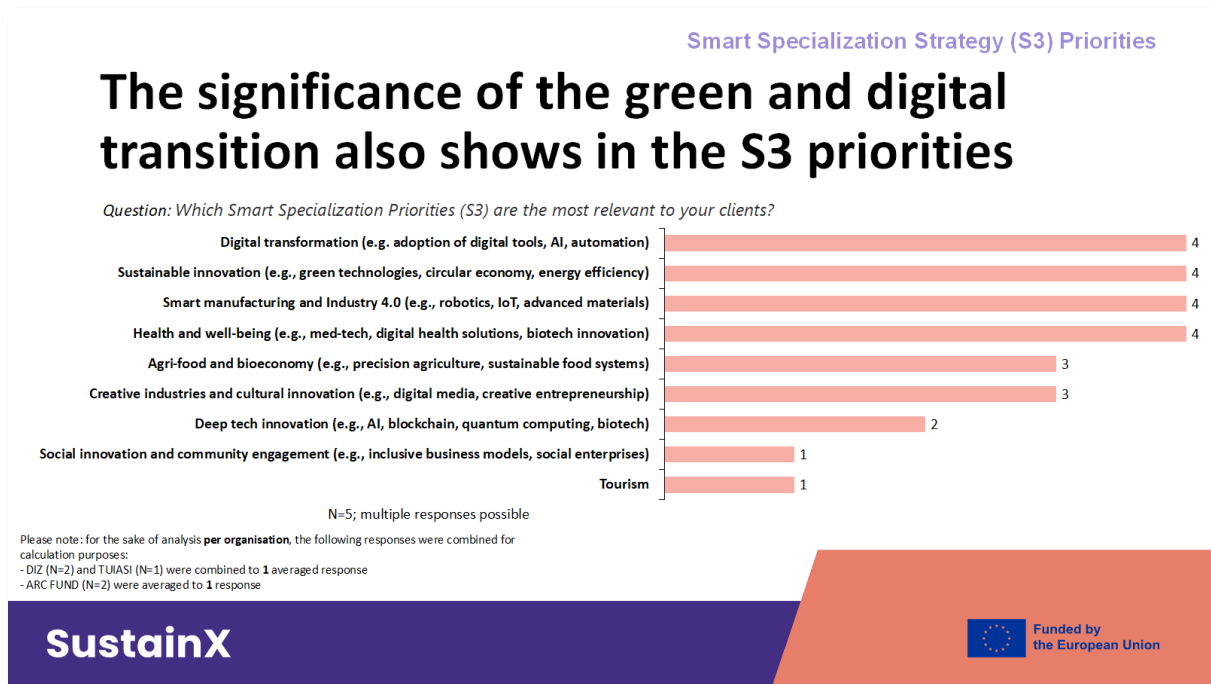
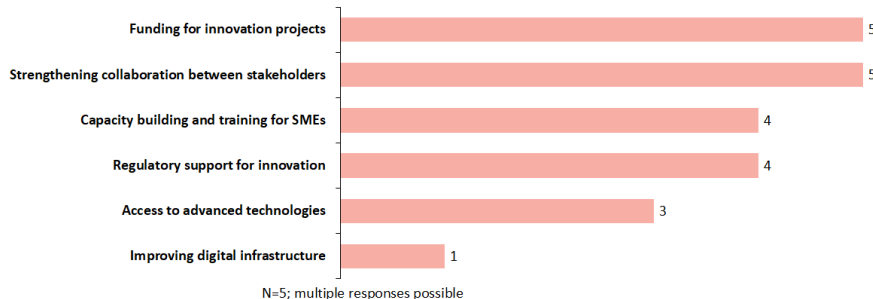


Figure 20 Most relevant S3 Priorities

Now, what does it take to actually align with those S3 priorities? 100% of respondents indicate that SMEs need the most support in securing funding for innovation projects and in strengthening collaboration between stakeholders, highlighting these as top priorities for aligning with S3 objectives. 80% of respondents point to capacity building and training for SMEs as well as regulatory support for innovation, emphasizing the need for both skill-development and smoother compliance frameworks. 60% of respondents identify access to advanced technologies as a key support area, suggesting that while technology availability is important, it ranks below financial and collaborative imperatives. Only 20% of respondents single out improving digital infrastructure as a critical support need, indicating that basic connectivity is less of a barrier compared with funding, collaboration, and regulatory issues. Overall, these findings reinforce the central role of financial resources and ecosystem partnerships in driving SME alignment with Smart Specialization priorities, while also underscoring the importance of targeted capacity-building and regulatory assistance to complement technological access and digital infrastructure improvements.

All SMEs need the most support in funding and collaboration to align with S3 priorities

Question: In which areas do your clients need the most support to align with S3 priorities?



N=5; multiple responses possible

Please note: for the sake of analysis per organisation, the following responses were combined for calculation purposes:

- DIZ (N=2) and TUIASI (N=1) were combined to 1 averaged response
- ARC FUND (N=2) were averaged to 1 response

Figure 21 Alignment with S3 Priorities

To gather further details, we asked which specific actions should be included in future support programs to address the aforementioned challenges and 100% of respondents agree that future support programs must include actions to increase funding opportunities for SMEs and to strengthen collaboration between SMEs, universities, and government, highlighting these as the top two priorities. 80% endorse providing training on digital and sustainable technologies, underscoring the need for targeted capacity-building in emerging tech. 60% call for the development of regional innovation hubs or clusters, while 40% suggest aligning regional policies with S3 priorities as essential steps. When it comes to resource needs, 100% of respondents identify financial resources such as grants and subsidies as most critical. 80% also point to the necessity of technical expertise (e.g., consultants, trainers) and access to EU funding programs, as well as collaboration with other regions or EU projects. Only 40% consider regulatory support from government bodies important, and a mere 20% highlight political stability, suggesting that while systemic governance factors matter, immediate gaps lie primarily in funding and expert-driven implementation support.

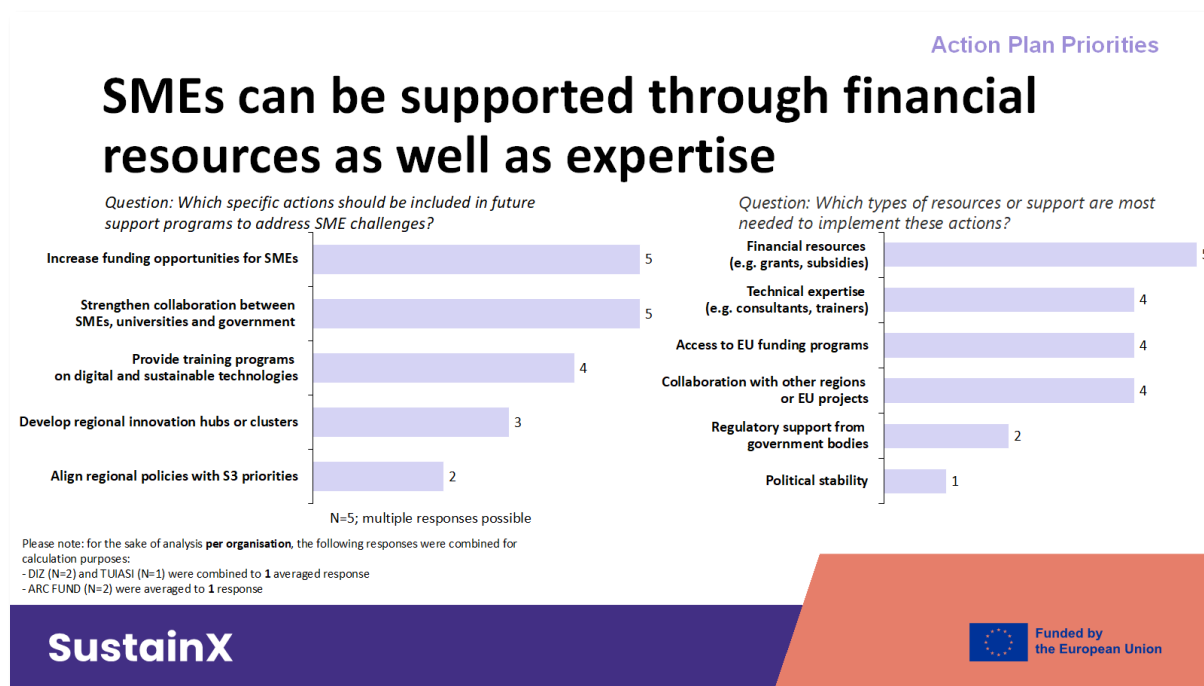


Figure 22 Support actions for SMEs

Through this extensive questionnaire we were able to achieve our objectives of identifying existing competencies within the consortium partners, but also their SMEs, highlighting regional strengths and gaps as well as gaining insights into concrete actions to further develop tailored trainings as well as to feed into the action plans. All of this data acquired through this mapping serve as the basis for building the consortium's training programs in the next and final step.

3.3 Developing customized training programs

The overall analysis of the questionnaire served as a good basis to understand the general picture in the consortium, specifically looking into the consortium partners' skill sets, their SMEs' competencies and also the regional innovation environments. In this section, we will dive deeper into the individual results of each consortium organisation and then into the final training programs. We analysed each consortium organisation's inputs separately (and again some inputs had to be averaged due to multiple responses) to arrive at a list of prioritizations regarding innovation-related topics. As each consortium training is planned for 2 days, we had to prioritize and see which topics or in some cases combinations of topics would be most beneficial to the partner, but also to the SMEs at a later stage (starting 2026). The train-the-trainer approach will come into fruition, once the consortium partners received their trainings till end of July 2025 and will then go on to organize trainings with SMEs directly, passing on the learnings from this training and the

contents we share and learn ourselves till then. For the sake of data input and visualization of data we used a tool of ours that comprises the innovation management related questions and shows the gaps between the skill sets present in the business advisor, i.e. the consortium partner and the SME base as their clients. As mentioned earlier, we worked with the approach looking into what the business advisors are knowledgeable and capable of, comparing that to what the SMEs' focus points are, what they are knowledgeable and capable of. Therefore, we used a simple yet macro-programd excel file to insert the partners' individual inputs and see the gaps needed for prioritization. Thresholds in the gaps identify the urgency of support, thus helping us to finalize a list of needed support in order of prioritization. In this 'tool', previous IMP³ROVE training experience is also asked, which then is taken into account when prioritizing the innovation topics for further support. We should also note that in this exercise we eliminated the topics of innovation culture and enabling innovation factors for the purpose of this mapping, simply because these topics are inherent in any of our trainings already, therefore we evaluated that these sections would add additional questions with little to no value for the analysis. Thus, all partners have N/A in the tool for these sections.

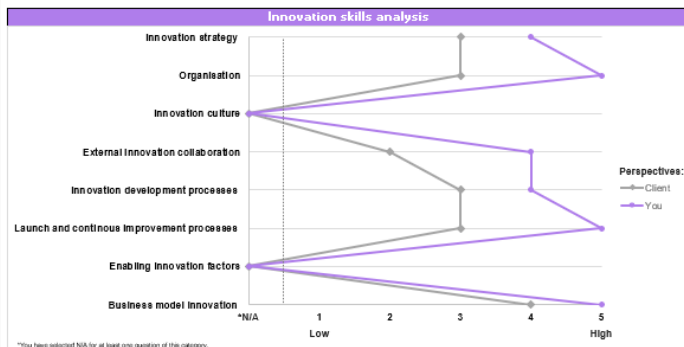
3.3.1 ARC FUND

Starting with our Bulgarian partner ARC FUND, it is to be noted that we received two responses from them, therefore results were averaged to arrive at one coherent response for analysis purposes. In the figure below we graphically present the gaps between which skills the business advisor is confident in, and which skills are needed to support the SMEs depending on how they operate or what they put significance to. This is the aforementioned gap analysis, showing where the need really lies. Thus, if the significance in a certain topic is very low and the matching business advisor's skill set is low as well, we would not prioritize this field for the training support as the significance for the SME is very low. However, if we notice that the significance is high, yet the business advisor's skill set is matching very low, then that would be alarming and reason to give this topic the most urgent priority. Along this logic, the results figure shows the training that would accommodate those gaps and what the urgency would be for the respective training. Thus, for the ARC FUND team the highest priority would be given to the "Introduction to the IMP³ROVE Approach" training, which is our innovation management assessment tool which helps dive deeper into the structures of an organisation in terms of innovation management and benchmark against a database of 8,000 companies globally. This tool is ISO compliant and has proven to be a great analysis tool to review the company's processes and derive data-driven recommendations for long-term improvements and foster growth. As this specific training is a very comprehensive tool training including the framework of innovation and its management ('what is innovation and how do we foster it?') it would bring great benefits to the ARC FUND team. However, we are organizing a



separate webinar series for the whole consortium based on these tool trainings starting in May 2025. The reason is that while we want the consortium training days to be tailored to the consortium partners individually, the tool trainings will be beneficial to all of them regardless of their skill sets in different areas. The intention is to teach the consortium the framework of each of our assessments – as we have several, dedicated to different thematic focus points, such as the mentioned innovation management, but then also digitalization and sustainability, so that they can use them freely with their SMEs later on in the project, depending on their needs. Each of the assessments deliver a tailored benchmarking report, identifying great potentials for further improvements in comparison to competitors. Thus, the series will be organized by us for all of the consortium members as we see the significance across the consortium. If we move on to the training topics that reveal a ‘medium’ need, those would be “Open Innovation”, “Introduction to business advisor skills”, “How to win SMEs for innovation management support services” and “Action Plan Development”. Evidently, these trainings would be the ones to consider more in depth for constructing the ARC FUND training. Strikingly, the responses showed well advanced skills in the fields of innovation strategy, lifecycle management processes and business mode innovation. These areas were said to be of mid to high significance and competence on their SMEs’ side, thus we detect a ‘low need’ for additional training support as the respondents are already skilled beyond the need suitable to their SMEs. In order to then decide on certain training topics, we considered the contents, dependencies and the learnings from each of those trainings and what the impact would be also looking ahead when we think about the trainings that are to be planned with SMEs next year. Therefore, the advisor skills trainings, such as “Introduction to business advisor skills”, “How to win SMEs for innovation management support services” would not be the most suitable for the SMEs to receive from the consortium members. Finally, we arrived at the decision to create a training focusing on the topics of “Open Innovation” and include “Action Plan Development” as thematically it would create a valuable and yet well-structured flow of the training but also allows for further impactful support later on when conducting the training themselves. Below you can find the ARC FUND team’s results in the section of innovation management:

Results



Back to assessment

IMP ^{ROVE} support measures	
IMP^{ROVE} E-learning	Recommendation
Removing cultural barriers E-learning	Not applicable
Innovation management skills trainings	Recommendation
Introduction to innovation management	Not applicable
Innovation strategy development	Low
Removing cultural barriers	Not applicable
Open innovation	Medium
Innovation lifecycle management processes	Low
Design thinking for better innovation management	Not applicable
Business model innovation	Low
Advisor skills trainings	Recommendation
Introduction to business adviser skills	Medium
How to win an SMEs for innovation management support services	Medium
Action plan development	Medium
IMP^{ROVE} tools trainings	Recommendation
Introduction to the IMP ^{ROVE} approach	High
Introduction to the digital innovation quotient	Not applicable
Individual one on one coaching sessions	Recommendation
Individual coaching for closing the project	Not applicable
Individual coaching for organisation	Low
Individual coaching for launch and continuous improvement processes	Low
Individual coaching for enabling factors	Not applicable

Legend	
High	There is a great need for support.
Medium	There is a support need.
Low	There is no immediate support need.
Individual coaching	You have already participated in that training and received a "high" recommendation.
Not applicable	At least one answer is selected as "Not applicable". You have already participated in that individual coaching.
Coaching already taken	

Figure 23 ARC FUND Innovation Management Results

During the project kick-off in January 2025 in Iasi, Romania, the consortium partner Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible kindly offered to contribute to the training programs in order to pass on further knowledge and expertise regarding the topic of sustainability as it is well known that many SMEs still struggle with incorporating sustainable measures into their business processes or even lack comprehensive knowledge altogether. Therefore, we are blocking out 3 hours of time for each of the training programs to accommodate the sustainability section. Based on this composition, we arrived at the following agenda for ARC FUND:



Agenda Day 1	
Open Innovation	10:00 – 10:30 Welcome and introduction to the training Welcome, expectations and objectives
	10:30 – 11:30 Introduction to open innovation
	11:30 – 12:00 Mapping open innovation – understanding the structure, control points, and innovation opportunities
	12:00 – 13:00 Lunch break
	13:00 – 13:30 Identifying the right partners – which type of partners can help you to drive innovation for your ambition, per focus area and innovation process step
	13:30 – 14:30 Breakout session and discussion: IMP ³ ROVE innovation partner radar
	14:30 – 15:15 Designing value propositions to attract 'dream team' partners
	15:15 – 16:00 Reaching out, selecting innovation partners, and collaborating
	16:00 – 16:15 Summary of learnings, wrap -up and outlook
	1 KEARNEY IMP ³ ROVE

Figure 24 ARC FUND Training Agenda Day 1

Agenda Day 2	
Action Plan Development with focus on Innovation	09:00 – 09:15 Welcome and introduction to Day 2
	09:15 – 09:45 Structured problem -solving for effective action plan development
	09:45 – 10:15 Introduction to break-out session "structured problem -solving" based on IMA report
	10:15 – 11:15 Break-out session (Part I): "Structured problem -solving" – Development of 2 -3 hypotheses and finding supportive facts
	11:15 – 12:15 Break-out session (Part II): "Structured problem -solving" – Development of conclusions and recommendations
	12:15 – 12:45 Visualisation of cases
	12:45 – 13:00 Wrap-up and Q&A
	13:00 – 14:00 Lunch break
	2 KEARNEY IMP ³ ROVE

Figure 25 ARC FUND Training Agenda Day 2 (1/2)

Agenda (Day 2)	
	Sustainability Training
	14:00 – 14:20 Concept of Sustainability Sustainability in the SMEs
	14:20 – 14:35 Circular Economy
	14:35 – 14:50 <i>Breakout session: Circular Economy - "The Infinite Loop"</i>
	14:50 – 15:15 Sustainable Technology Sustainable Agriculture
	15:15 – 15:30 <i>Breakout session: Technology for Sustainability in the Agri-Food Sector</i>
	10 min Coffee break
	15:40 – 15:50 Sustainable Business Model Canvas
Sustainability in the SMEs	15:50 – 16:30 <i>Breakout session: Sustainable Business Model Canvas</i>
	16:30 – 16:45 <i>Results breakout session</i>
	16:45 – 17:00 Summary of learnings & wrap -up – Day 2

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Figure 26 ARC FUND Training Agenda Day 2 (2/2)

Generally speaking, once we had compiled the preliminary agendas for every consortium partner, we sent it to them to discuss any open points, questions or requests for adaptations. However, all partners agreed with the agenda and no changes were needed. The same goes for the ARC FUND team.

3.3.2 Digital Innovation Zone and Technical University of Iasi

With the Coordinator Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) and the Technical University of Iasi (TUIASI) we have another exception to the rule of one response per partner. We received two responses from the DIZ team and one from the TUIASI team, thus we averaged a total of 3 responses to arrive at one 'voice'. Both partners reside in the same city, thus it is most efficient to view them as one combined respondent and also to plan one collaborative training program covering both partners. The results show that the highest priorities should be given to the trainings "Introduction to business advisor skills", "Action Plan Development" and "Introduction to the IMP³ROVE Approach", which again will be conducted through an additional webinar series, thus can be excluded from the training program for this partner. As we can see, following the responses the most emphasis was put on topics related to advisor skills, i.e. how to attract new clients, but also how to help them with data-driven analyses, drawing conclusions and deriving recommendations. These were followed by medium priority, which are topics such as "Innovation Strategy Development", "Open Innovation", and "Innovation lifecycle management processes", all of which are in the field of innovation management skills specifically. These modules address the practical mechanics of guiding SMEs through strategic design, collaborative ideation, structured process implementation, client-engagement tactics, and iterative



project support, therefore are also highly linked to what kind of skills a business advisor should bring to the table when working with SMEs. They must learn how to craft robust innovation strategies, introduce SMEs to external partners and ecosystems, manage stage-gate or agile workflows, and win buy-in from hard-to-reach SME leaders. Within the same field of expertise, we found that the respondents are already adequately skilled in “Business Model Innovation” and thus have a low need for additional support.

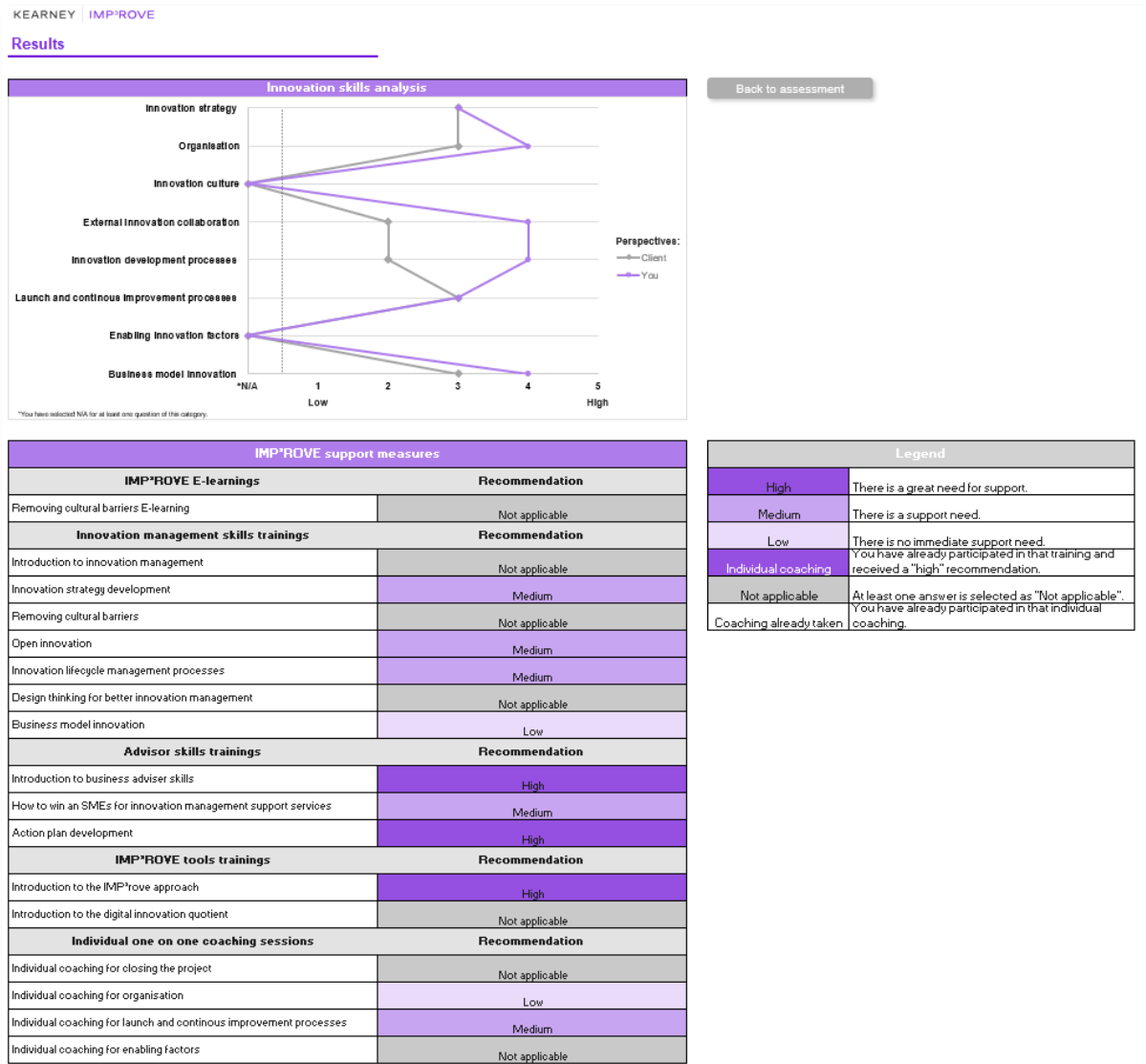


Figure 27 DIZ/TUIASI Innovation Management Results

Now, while we took the results of the questionnaire heavily into consideration for drafting the training program, we did not follow them point by point as we had to also consider the context. As the tools will be introduced in a separate webinar series, the “Introduction to the IMP³ROVE Approach” training will not be included in the training program. In initial discussions with the DIZ and TUIASI team, it was brought to our attention that they are very active in raising awareness for the project with SMEs and that they would like to involve SMEs as early as possible. Thus, they wished to invite SMEs to the consortium training as



well. Taking into account the heterogenous group of participants, we decided that the business advisor-focused training topics would not be suitable with SMEs present as those trainings focus on how to best support SMEs and what kind of methodologies, frameworks and activities to apply in order to successfully ‘win over’ SMEs. We decided that this kind of training would not be as beneficial for the SMEs as it would be for the consortium partners themselves. Therefore, we opted for the ‘medium’ need training topic, “Innovation Strategy Development”. The main rationale behind choosing this training was that SMEs seem to struggle with not only setting up an innovation strategy, but doing so efficiently and, more importantly, comprehensively. Setting up such a strategy that ideally grows company-wide is not a simple task, thus SMEs would benefit from the support of skilled business advisors, such as our consortium partners to do so. Therefore, we decided to focus the consortium training on the topic of “Innovation Strategy Development” and combine it with the sustainability training by the Santa Cruz team again. This leads us to the following agenda:

Agenda (Day 1)	
10:00 – 10:30	Welcome and introduction to the workshop
10:30 – 11:15	The direction-setting role of innovation strategies within innovation management
11:15 – 11:30	Convincing SMEs to think about the distant future – with leading examples, “former” companies, and a view on the competitive environment
10 min	Coffee break
11:40 – 12:00	10 steps to develop an innovation strategy – An overview
12:00 – 12:30	Step 1: Trend analysis
12:30 – 13:00	Breakout session: Trend analysis
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch break
14:00 – 14:30	Presentation and discussion of breakout session results
14:30 – 15:30	Step 2: Customer needs analysis Step 3: Competitor and technology watch Step 4: Ambition analysis
10 min	Coffee break
15:40 – 16:20	Breakout session: Customer needs analysis
16:20 – 16:45	Presentation and discussion of breakout session results
16:45 – 17:00	Summary of learnings & wrap-up day 1

Innovation Strategy Development

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Figure 28 DIZ/TUIASI Training Agenda Day 1



<p>Agenda (Day 2)</p> <p>Innovation Strategy Development</p> <p>2 KEARNEY IMPROVE</p>	09:00 – 09:15 Welcome and introduction to Day 2
	09:15 – 09:45 Step 5: Innovation lifecycle analysis Step 6: Competency assessment
	09:45 – 10:15 Defining the innovation strategy Step 7: Vision and mission
	10:15 – 11:00 <i>Breakout session: Vision and mission incl. discussion</i>
	11:00 – 12:15 Step 8: Search fields Step 9: Competence Roadmap Step 10: Business case
	12:15 – 13:00 Discussion on Steps 8-10 and Q&A
	13:00 – 14:00 Lunch break

Figure 29 DIZ/TUIASI Training Agenda Day 2 (1/2)

<p>Agenda (Day 2)</p> <p>Sustainability in the SMEs</p> <p>3 KEARNEY IMPROVE</p>	Sustainability Training	
	14:00 – 14:20	Concept of Sustainability Sustainability in the SMEs
	14:20 – 14:35	Circular Economy
	14:35 – 14:50	<i>Breakout session: Circular Economy - "The Infinite Loop"</i>
	14:50 – 15:15	Sustainable Technology Sustainable Agriculture
	15:15 – 15:30	<i>Breakout session: Technology for Sustainability in the Agri-Food Sector</i>
	10 min	Coffee break
	15:40 – 15:50	Sustainable Business Model Canvas
	15:50 – 16:30	<i>Breakout session: Sustainable Business Model Canvas</i>
	16:30 – 16:45	<i>Results breakout session</i>
16:45 – 17:00	Summary of learnings & wrap -up – Day 2	

Figure 30 DIZ/TUIASI Training Agenda Day 2 (2/2)

Please note that during finalizing the preparations for this training to take place on April 29–30, 2025, we were notified that the DIZ/TUIASI team decided to leave out the SMEs after all, as we had suggested to invite very few – if any– simply to avoid any repetition to the upcoming SME trainings next year and to stay equally fair to the SMEs who have to go through the open call this year in order to receive trainings from us. Thus, in the actual training, we might include discussions around ‘what makes a good business advisor’ to

address the previously defined needs since now the group has developed into a homogenous group of business advisors only without any SMEs at this early stage.

3.3.2 Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible

In the questionnaire we received one response from our Spanish partner Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible, thus no averaging of results was needed. The Santa Cruz team matrix highlights a strong emphasis on the medium-priority trainings, with fewer low-priority trainings. The intensity of medium-priority trainings signals a clear, but not urgent support need. These would be on the topics of “Innovation lifecycle management processes”, “Introduction to business advisor skills”, “How to win SMEs for innovation management support services”, “Action Plan Development” and again “Introduction to the IMP³ROVE Approach”. Since there are no skills deemed of dire need for training support, we focused on the medium-priority training topics.



Figure 31 Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible Innovation Management Results



<p>Agenda Day 2</p> <p>Introduction to sustainability-driven innovation management and tools</p> <p>2 KEARNEY IMP³ROVE</p>	09:00 – 09:30	<p>Welcome and introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Welcome back and Recap – Introduction to the topic and role of the consultant
	09:30 – 10:15	<p>Raising awareness part 1: Understanding sustainability in the international context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Overview on the most prominent international frameworks and standards – Breakout session: Applying the frameworks
	10:15 – 11:00	<p>Raising awareness part 2: Examining sustainability as a lever for innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The relationship between sustainability and innovation – Guesstimate: the integration of sustainability
	11:00 – 12:00	<p>Garnering interest: Case examples from industry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A deep dive into the textile industry – Breakout session: examples from your industry
	12:00 – 13:00	<p>Lunch break</p>
	13:00 – 13:15	<p>Generating desire part 1: Overview on using IMP³ROVE tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Overview on the IMP³ROVE Corporate Sustainability Navigator Tool – Positioning the tool in the IMP³ROVE Process
	13:15 – 15:00	<p>Generating desire part 2: Conducting the Corporate Sustainability Navigator Tool</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Using the IMP³ROVE platform – Breakout session: The case study – Interpreting the results of the tool
	15:00 – 15:30	<p>Spurring to action: Developing recommendations for your client</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How to generate and read the report – Preparing for your feedback workshop
	15:30 – 15:45	<p>Wrap-up and outlook on further IMP³ROVE support on sustainability</p>

Figure 33 Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible Training Agenda Day 2

3.3.3 Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (iED)

We have already worked with our Greek consortium partner iED in the scope of another project, which also entailed innovation management trainings. Therefore, we also took into account their previous training experience with us when filling out the simple excel tool so to avoid any exact repetitions. In the case of iED we can see that we have several medium-priority training topics, but no high-priority training topics. These include: “Open Innovation”, “Business model innovation”, “Introduction to business advisor skills”, “How to win SMEs for innovation management support services”, “Action Plan Development” and “Introduction to the IMP³ROVE Approach”. These modules represent the most pressing trainings needs, as they collectively address collaborative ideation, revenue-model design, core advisor capabilities and alignment with the IMP³ROVE methodology, i.e. assessment-driven analysis.

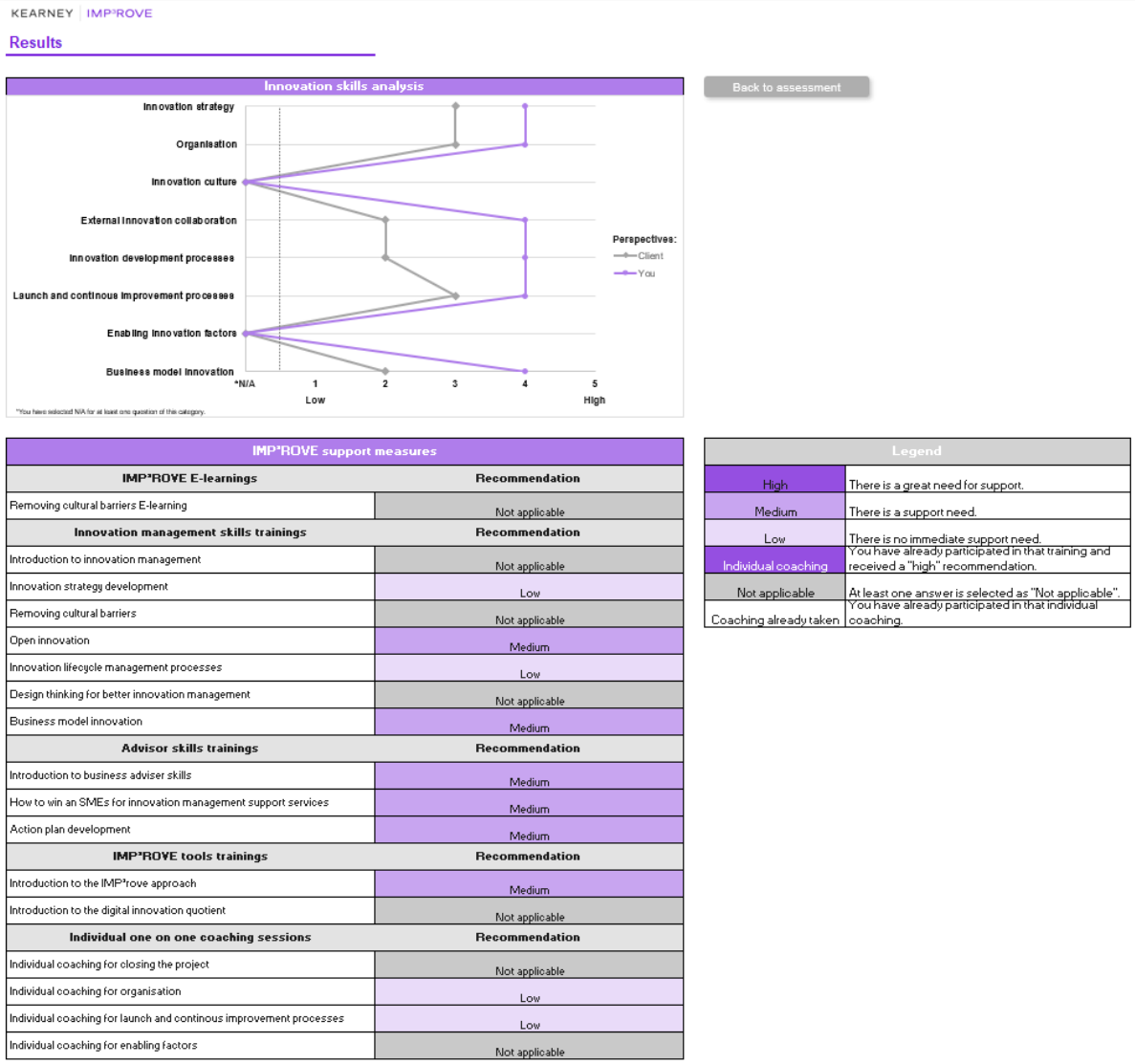


Figure 34 iED Innovation Management Results

Knowing this, we also looked into the extensive history of IMP³ROVE trainings with iED and noticed that majority of trainings were already completed. Therefore, we thought about the indication that the clustering of these training topics suggests. The skill needed seems to be a combination of advisory skills, i.e. questions of how to approach SMEs, how to guide them, etc. and also data analysis, i.e. how to read data, how to draw conclusions and derive recommendations and ultimately how to support SMEs in implementing change. Thus, we decided to combine the topics of "Business advisor skills" and "Action Plan Development" with focus on innovation management. This means, in this training, participants would work with real data from our Innovation Management benchmarking report and practice their data analysis and deduction skills using those. This combination of training topics addresses the major trends in the mapping and tackles both the advisory skills as well as the analytical skills and builds well on top of the previous training experience. The second training day concludes with the Sustainability training provided by



the Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible colleagues again. Thus, the final agenda is as follows:

Agenda Day 1	
Business Advisor Skills	10:00 – 10:30 Welcome and Introduction
	10:30 – 11:00 What makes great advisers? Overview and discussion of key business advisor skills
	11:00 – 11:45 Breakout session Individual reflection on measures to develop your business advisor skills
	11:45 – 12:15 Selecting + engaging clients
	12:15 – 13:00 Breakout session: Selecting + engaging clients
	13:00 – 14:00 Lunch
	14:00 – 14:30 Interviewing for success
	14:30 – 15:15 Break out session on interviewing
	15:15 – 15:30 Communicating to clients
	15:30 – 16:30 Breakout session: Communicating with clients
	16:40 – 17:00 Wrap-up and Outlook

Agenda
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Figure 35 iED Training Agenda Day 1

Agenda Day 2	
Action Plan Development with focus on Innovation	09:00 – 09:15 Welcome and introduction to Day 2
	09:15 – 09:45 Structured problem -solving for effective action plan development
	09:45 – 10:15 Introduction to break-out session "structured problem -solving" based on IMA report
	10:15 – 11:15 Break-out session (Part I): "Structured problem -solving" – Development of 2 -3 hypotheses and finding supportive facts
	11:15 – 12:15 Break-out session (Part II): "Structured problem -solving" – Development of conclusions and recommendations
	12:15 – 12:45 Visualisation of cases
	12:45 – 13:00 Wrap-up and Q&A
	13:00 – 14:00 Lunch break

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Figure 36 iED Training Agenda Day 2 (1/2)

Agenda (Day 2)	
	Sustainability Training
	14:00 – 14:20 Concept of Sustainability Sustainability in the SMEs
	14:20 – 14:35 Circular Economy
	14:35 – 14:50 <i>Breakout session: Circular Economy - "The Infinite Loop"</i>
	14:50 – 15:15 Sustainable Technology Sustainable Agriculture
	15:15 – 15:30 <i>Breakout session: Technology for Sustainability in the Agri-Food Sector</i>
	10 min Coffee break
	15:40 – 15:50 Sustainable Business Model Canvas
Sustainability in the SMEs	15:50 – 16:30 <i>Breakout session: Sustainable Business Model Canvas</i>
	16:30 – 16:45 <i>Results breakout session</i>
	16:45 – 17:00 Summary of learnings & wrap -up – Day 2

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Figure 37 iED Training Agenda Day 2 (2/2)

3.3.4 Latvian Technological Center (LTC)

Last, but definitely not least we will take a look at our Latvian colleague Latvian Technological Center (LTC). We have also worked with LTC on several different projects in the past, thus they are the most advanced consortium partner when it come to our IMP³ROVE training experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that we see no high-priority training topics in the results of the questionnaire, but rather some topics with medium-priority, which are: "Innovation Lifecycle Management Processes", "Business Model Innovation", "Introduction to business advisor skills", "Action Plan Development" and "individual coaching for launch and continuous improvement processes". Furthermore, some additional trainings are flagged as low-priority trainings, such as "Innovation Strategy Development", "Open Innovation", "How to win SMEs for innovation management support services" and "individual coaching for organisation". We can see that the LTC team is already quite advanced in many areas of innovation management, seeing that no topics are flagged as urgent.

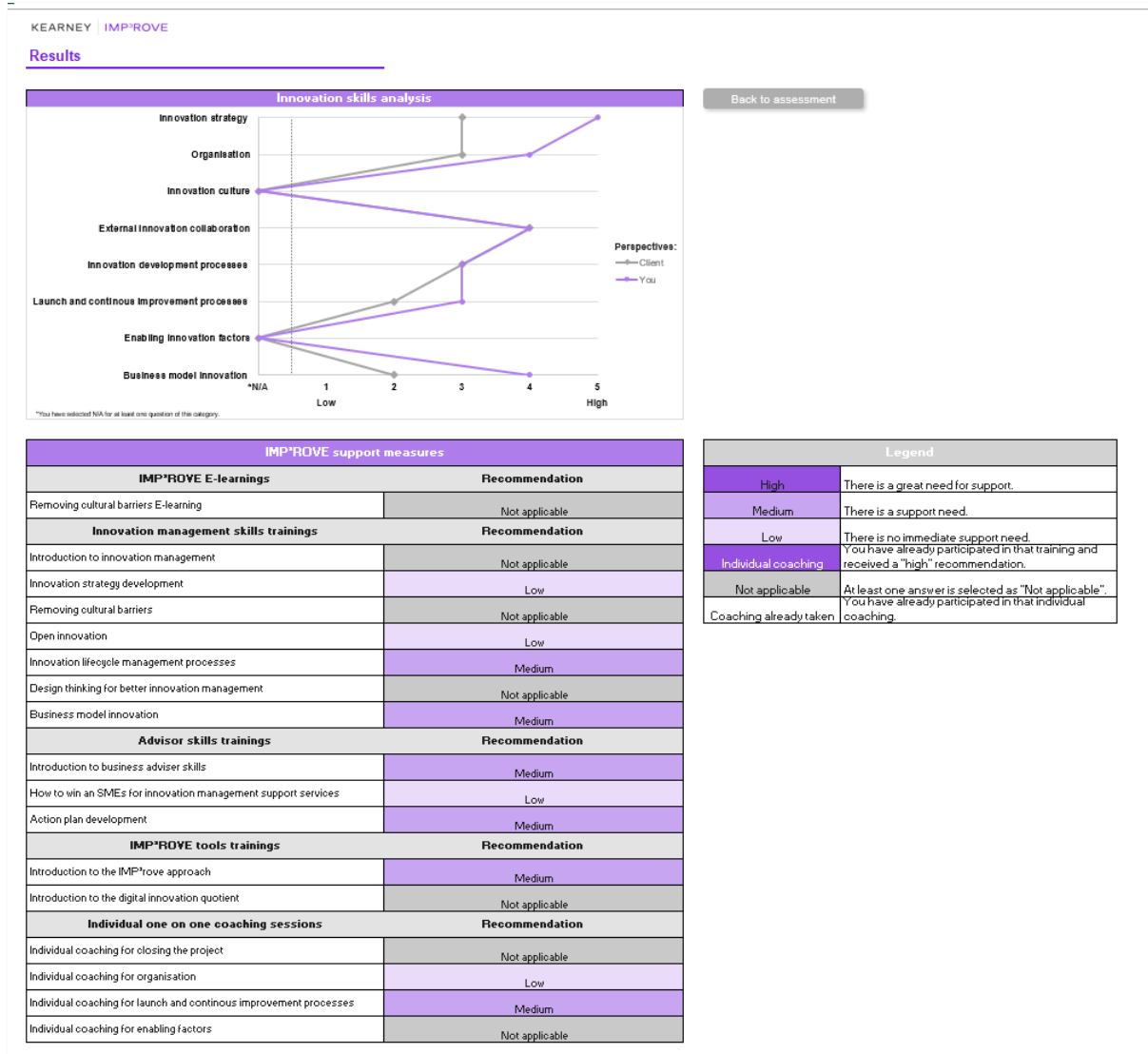


Figure 38 LTC Innovation Management Results

Looking into the history of IMP³ROVE trainings that LTC has already successfully concluded, we noticed that they had already concluded most of our trainings. Thus, we wanted to create a training program with little to no overlap. Therefore, we decided to focus on the topic of sustainability as that had not been touched upon in the previous trainings and is of strong significance, not only for LTC, but for the whole consortium in general. Therefore, we will further look into and intensively work with our sustainability-focused assessment, the Corporate Sustainability Navigator (CSN), followed by the topics of action plan development based on the results of such an assessment, i.e. answering questions such as: How to draw conclusions from the CSN, how to interpret the numbers, what does that specifically mean for the SME, how can we devise conclusions for implementing sustainability in a feasible manner for the SME, and finalizing the training with the section by Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible talking about how to raise awareness for sustainability within SMEs and how to build sustainable business model innovations as a



result. As LTC as a consortium partner is already quite advanced and has access to a high level of skill sets in different areas, we want to move away from the theoretical frameworks a bit and rather focus on the 'doing' and have them work with real-life data and move towards the implementation. While for majority of the consortium members, the train-the-trainer approach means that the contents of this consortium training series will be further presented to SMEs in the form of a training next year, for LTC we plan to take a slightly different route. As this training program is more focused on what LTC themselves can do and how they can support their SMEs further in the field of sustainability, conducting the exact same training with SMEs next year would not be beneficial. Therefore, we will tap into their previous training experience and rather focus on topics, such as "Innovation Strategy Development" and "Business Model Innovation", which would be closer to the SME's day-to-day life rather than how to draw conclusions from our assessments. Furthermore, the plan for the consortium partners and also the reason why we introduce the additional webinar series in the first place, is that the consortium partners will go through our assessments together with the SMEs anyhow to use that data for a more customized support in addition to the trainings. Therefore, teaching the SMEs how to do an action plan based on our assessments brings no value to them, as the consortium members will be the ones to do this advisory work for them while also conducting valuable trainings on different topics with them. Of course, in general we will revisit the training contents for the SMEs in the process of this year as we publish the open call and get a glimpse of what kind of SMEs are applying. This means, we will not necessarily stick to the current training topics that the consortium partners are receiving but might deviate and generate other or additional content for the partners to conduct with the SMEs accordingly. In those cases, we will of course onboard the consortium partners in additional topics to prepare them accordingly for conducting the trainings with SMEs. Furthermore, if need be, IMP³ROVE will also join the SME trainings where relevant.



Agenda Day 1	
Key success factors in raising awareness and examining sustainability within clients	10:00 – 10:30 Welcome and introduction to the training – Welcome, expectations and objectives – Introduction to the topic and role of the consultant
	10:30 – 11:10 Whom to address – Breakout session: Identifying whom to address
	11:10 – 11:25 How to address a potential client – Promote
	11:25 – 11:45 How to address a potential client – Prepare: Examining the industry
	11:45 - 12:45 Lunch break
	12:45 – 14:00 How to address a potential client – Breakout session: Prepare: Examining the client
	14:00 – 15:40 How to address a potential client – Meet: Overview on structure – Breakout session: Meet: Applying the structure with a client
	15:40 – 16:10 Rolling out your sustainability support services – Breakout session: Planning your next steps
	16:10 – 16:30 Wrap-up and outlook – Wrap-up and final Q&A – Outlook on further IMP ³ ROVE support offerings – Opportunity for feedback

1 KEARNEY | IMP³ROVE Source: IMP³ROVE, 2025

Figure 39 LTC Training Agenda Day 1

Agenda Day 2	
Action Plan Development with focus on Innovation	09:00 – 09:15 Welcome and introduction to Day 2
	09:15 – 09:45 Structured problem -solving for effective action plan development
	09:45 – 10:15 Introduction to break-out session "structured problem -solving" based on IMA report
	10:15 – 11:15 Break-out session (Part I): "Structured problem -solving" – Development of 2 -3 hypotheses and finding supportive facts
	11:15 – 12:15 Break-out session (Part II): "Structured problem -solving" – Development of conclusions and recommendations
	12:15 – 12:45 Visualisation of cases
	12:45 – 13:00 Wrap-up and Q&A
	13:00 – 14:00 Lunch break

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Figure 40 LTC Training Agenda Day 2(1/2)

Agenda (Day 2)		Sustainability Training	
Sustainability in the SMEs	14:00 – 14:20	Concept of Sustainability Sustainability in the SMEs	
	14:20 – 14:35	Circular Economy	
	14:35 – 14:50	<i>Breakout session: Circular Economy - "The Infinite Loop"</i>	
	14:50 – 15:15	Sustainable Technology Sustainable Agriculture	
	15:15 – 15:30	<i>Breakout session: Technology for Sustainability in the Agri-Food Sector</i>	
	10 min	Coffee break	
	15:40 – 15:50	Sustainable Business Model Canvas	
	15:50 – 16:30	<i>Breakout session: Sustainable Business Model Canvas</i>	
	16:30 – 16:45	<i>Results breakout session</i>	
	16:45 – 17:00	Summary of learnings & wrap -up – Day 2	

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Figure 41 LTC Training Agenda Day 2 (2/2)

4. Outlook

This task is highly interlinked with Work Package 2 Skills Development, which will put the analytical findings of this task into practice. In an effort of timely planning, we had already defined the training dates for each of the partners in February. All the consortium trainings will be finalized by June, which still leaves enough time for preparing the reporting due end of July for Deliverable 2.1 Consortium group training documentation. The first webinar as mentioned above focusing on the IMP³ROVE assessments is scheduled to take place May 13. More dates for this series will follow upon alignment of availabilities. The intention of this webinar series is to host several of these to ensure that consortium partners can flexibly join and do not 'miss out'. Furthermore, we intend to conduct a comprehensive training journey, which means that consortium partners (and SMEs later on) will be taken care of throughout the whole project and not only for the trainings as they take place. We strive to have the consortium members grow during the project lifetime and feel empowered in also applying their learnings when working with SMEs. Therefore, we intend to offer individual coachings as well, if need be, especially when training the SMEs later on. The specific training dates for the consortium trainings are as follows:

- April 29–30, 2025: Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) and Technical University of Iasi in Iasi, Romania
- May 13–14, 2025: Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (iED) in Larisa, Greece
- May 21–22, 2025: Latvian Technological Center (LTC) in Riga, Latvia

- June 11-12, 2025: Fundación Santa Cruz Sostenible in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain
- June 17-18, 2025: ARC FUND in Sofia, Bulgaria

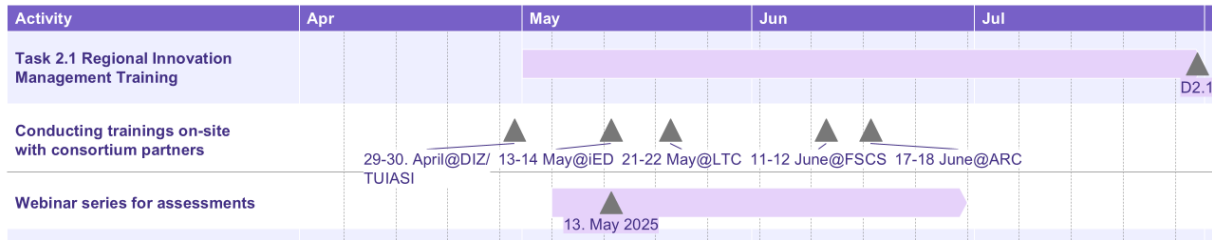


Figure 42 Planned Trainings M4-M7

True to the train-the-trainer approach we are following, during the months May to June we will also start preparing the open call for SMEs to apply for in the late summer/early fall time. The plan is to have the participating SMEs finalized and confirmed by the end of October to mid-November, which means the first trainings with SMEs could start realistically in January 2026. All SME trainings (2 on-site trainings and 1 virtual training per region) will be finished by end of June 2026 at the latest. As mentioned above, while the consortium trainings build the basis for the later to come SME trainings, they will not be a 100% copy. Once we have a better understanding of the SMEs that are applying in terms of maturity level, industry focus, S3 priorities, etc. we will cater the training program to those SMEs accordingly. Therefore, we plan to spend the time between now and January 2026 to further work on the training materials for the SMEs specifically and also onboard the consortium partners on the new materials. What we will do on top of that is that we will prepare the consortium partners also to get familiar with the open call documents needed for the upcoming I3 calls in May 2025. While this activity was not foreseen in the initial proposal, we think this is another service that the SMEs would highly appreciate and that can be leveraged within the frame of this project.

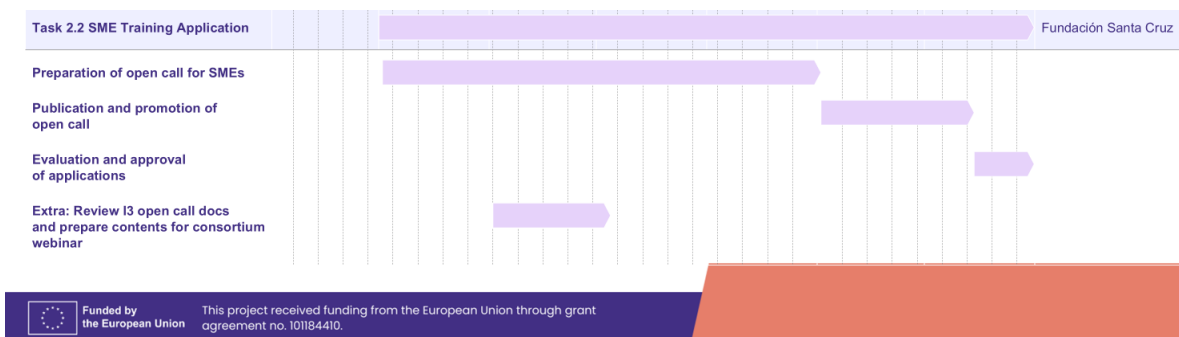
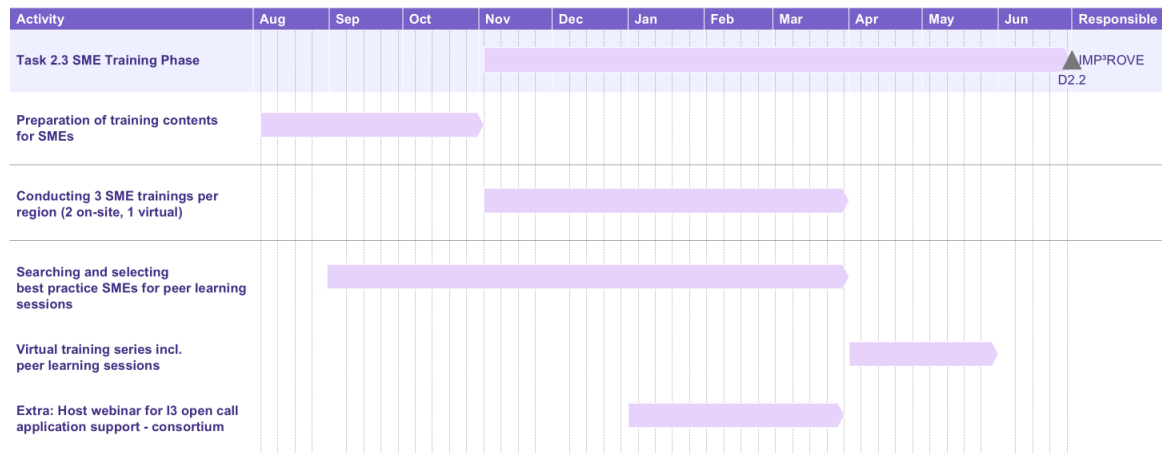


Figure 43 SME Training Application Planning



Funded by the European Union This project received funding from the European Union through grant agreement no. 101184410.

Figure 44 SME Training Phase Planning

SustainX



<https://sustainx.digital-innovation.zone/>

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