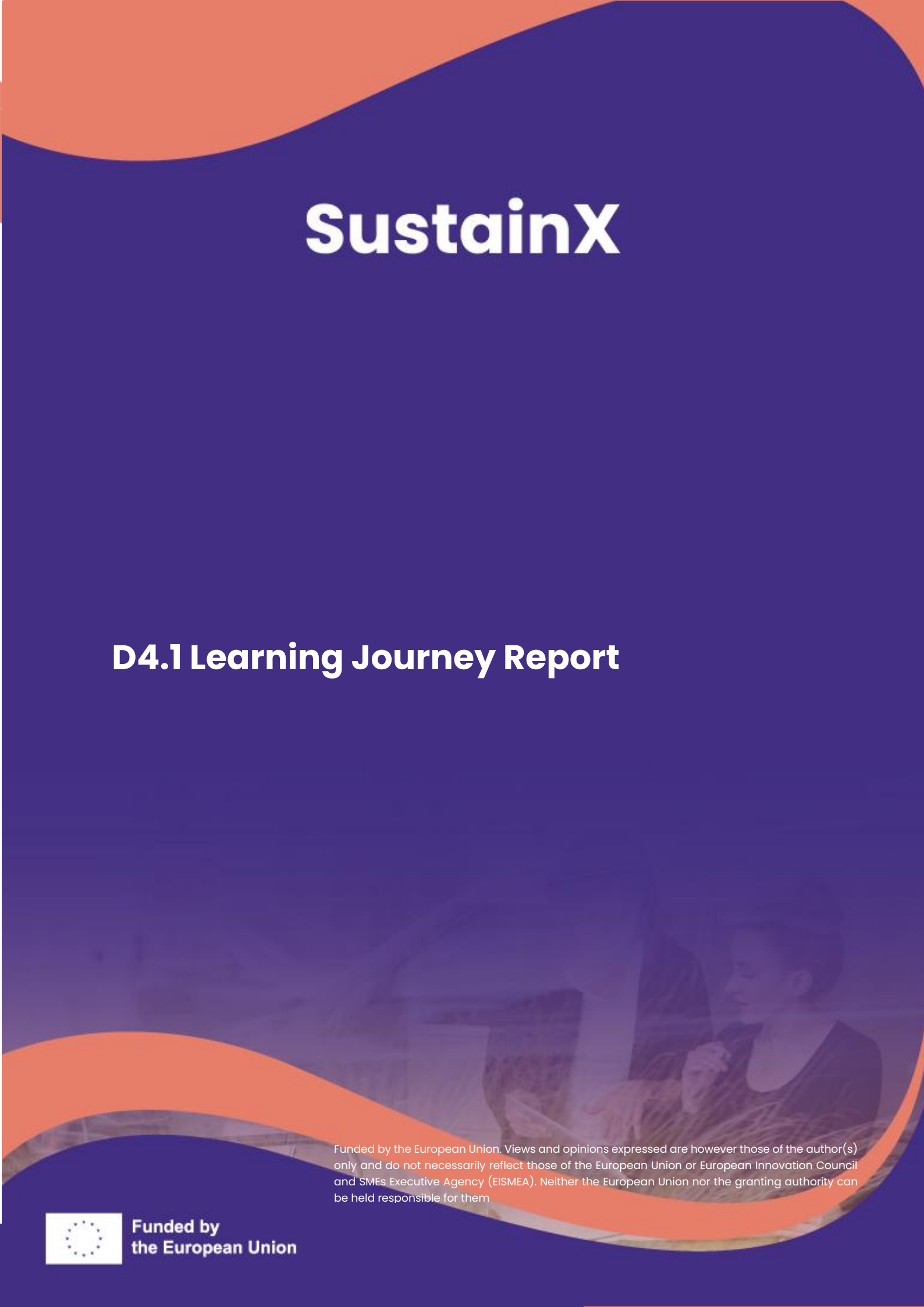
SustainX

D4.1 Learning Journey Report



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Deliverable Information

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0.2			
1.0			

Disclaimer

Executive Summary

This deliverable presents the outcomes of the SustainX Learning Journey held in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). It provides an overview of the programme, key activities, and insights gained from visits to innovation hubs and industrial ecosystems. The report also highlights the main learnings, the outcomes of the debriefing session, and the planned follow-up actions to support SMEs across partner regions.

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1. Introduction

The SustainX Learning Journey took place from 2 to 5 March 2026 in North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, bringing together all consortium partners (14 participants) from all participating regions. The activity was organised within the framework of Work Package 4 (WP4), focusing on capacity building and interregional knowledge exchange.

The Learning Journey aimed to provide partners with a structured opportunity to explore advanced innovation ecosystems and to identify good practices that can be transferred and adapted to support SMEs in their respective regions.

The programme focused on key themes relevant to the SustainX objectives, including:

- Innovation ecosystems and collaboration models
- Digital transformation and Industry 4.0
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications for SMEs
- Sustainable and energy-efficient production systems

The Learning Journey combined site visits, technical presentations, networking activities, and a structured debriefing session to capture key insights and define follow-up actions.

2. Objectives of the Learning Journey

The SustainX Learning Journey was designed as a core capacity-building activity within the project, aiming to strengthen the ability of consortium partners to support SMEs in their regions through exposure to advanced innovation ecosystems.

In particular, the Learning Journey sought to provide participants with a comprehensive understanding of how mature ecosystems, such as the one in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) in Germany, facilitate innovation, collaboration, and technology adoption among SMEs.

A key objective was to explore how different types of innovation actors, including innovation hubs, clusters, research institutions, and technology providers, interact and cooperate to create a supportive environment for business development. Through direct interaction with these actors, participants were able to observe how structured support mechanisms are implemented in practice.

Another important objective was to examine the role of digital technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Industry 4.0 systems, and data-driven production, in enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs. The Learning Journey provided insights into how these technologies are applied in real industrial contexts and how SMEs can gradually integrate them into their operations.

Furthermore, the activity aimed to identify concrete practices and approaches that could be transferred to the partner regions. This included not only technological solutions but also organisational models, collaboration frameworks, and methods for engaging SMEs in innovation processes.

The Learning Journey also served as an opportunity to strengthen collaboration among consortium partners. By exchanging experiences, challenges, and perspectives, participants were able to identify common priorities and opportunities for joint action, contributing to the broader objectives of the SustainX project by supporting knowledge transfer, enhancing interregional cooperation, and laying the groundwork for the implementation of regionally adapted actions targeting SMEs.

3. Overview of the Programme

The SustainX Learning Journey was implemented as a four-day programme combining structured presentations, site visits, interactive discussions, and collaborative reflection activities. The design of the programme followed a progressive approach, moving from general ecosystem understanding to practical insights and, finally, to the identification of transferable actions.

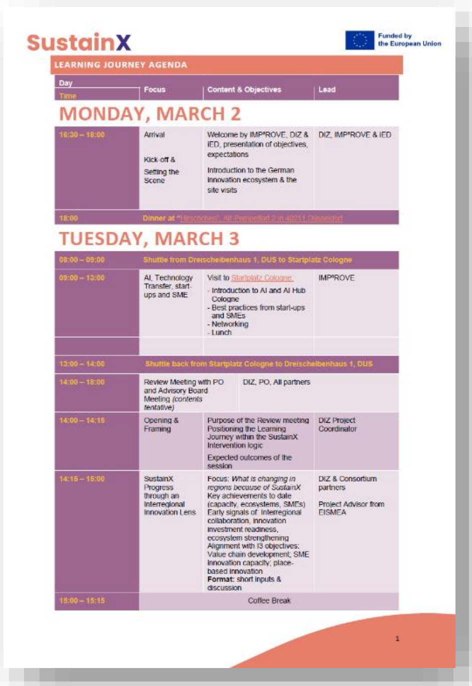
The first day focused on setting the context and aligning participants. The session included an introduction to the objectives of the Learning Journey, as well as an exchange of expectations among partners. This initial step ensured that all participants had a shared understanding of the purpose of the activity and allowed for the identification of specific interests and priorities to be explored during the visits.

The second day was dedicated to the exploration of innovation hubs and AI-driven ecosystems. Participants visited Startplatz Cologne and the AI Hub Cologne, where they were introduced to the role of startup ecosystems in fostering innovation. The presentations highlighted how such hubs provide structured support services to startups and SMEs, including mentoring, networking opportunities, and access to expertise and resources. Particular emphasis was placed on the growing importance of Artificial Intelligence as an enabling technology across sectors. The visit also included a guided tour of the facilities, offering participants a first-hand experience of the collaborative working environment.

The third day focused on industrial innovation and cluster-based collaboration models. The visit to the ‘it’s OWL cluster’ and SmartFactoryOWL provided insights into advanced manufacturing environments and the practical application of Industry 4.0 technologies. Participants were exposed to demonstration systems, including robotics, data-driven production processes, and digital solutions supporting manufacturing. The sessions highlighted how collaboration between research institutions and industry can accelerate innovation and facilitate the adoption of new technologies by SMEs. The concept of “test

before invest" was presented as a key mechanism supporting SMEs in reducing risks associated with innovation.

The final day was dedicated to a structured debriefing session, where participants reflected on the experiences of the previous days. Using an interactive methodology, partners worked collaboratively to identify key learnings, discuss their relevance for their regional contexts, and define potential follow-up actions. The session allowed for the consolidation of knowledge gained during the Learning Journey and ensured that the results were translated into concrete ideas for implementation.



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LEARNING JOURNEY AGENDA

Day / Time	Focus	Content & Objectives	Lead
MONDAY, MARCH 2			
16:30 – 18:00	Arrival Kick-off & Setting the Scene	Welcome by IMP³ROVE, DIZ & iED, presentation of objectives, expectations Introduction to the German innovation ecosystem & the site visits	DIZ, IMP³ROVE & iED
18:00	Dinner at "Hirschchen", Alt Pempelfort 2 in 40211 Düsseldorf		
TUESDAY, MARCH 3			
08:00 – 09:00	Shuttle from Dreischeibenhaus 1, DUS to Startplatz Cologne		
09:00 – 13:00	AI, Technology Transfer, start-ups and SME	Visit to Startplatz Cologne - Introduction to AI and AI Hub Cologne - Best practices from start-ups and SMEs - Networking - Lunch	IMP³ROVE
13:00 – 14:00	Shuttle back from Startplatz Cologne to Dreischeibenhaus 1, DUS		
14:00 – 18:00	Review Meeting with PO and Advisory Board Meeting *(contents tentative)*	DIZ, PO, All partners	
14:00 – 14:15	Opening & Framing	Purpose of the Review meeting Positioning the Learning Journey within the SustainX Intervention logic Expected outcomes of the session	DIZ Project Coordinator
14:15 – 15:00	SustainX Progress through an Interregional Innovation Lens	Focus: *What is changing in regions because of SustainX* Key achievements to date (capacity, ecosystems, SMEs) Early signals of Interregional collaboration, innovation investment readiness, ecosystem strengthening Alignment with I3 objectives: Value chain development; SME innovation capacity; place-based innovation **Format:** short inputs & discussion	DIZ & Consortium partners Project Advisor from EISMEA
15:00 – 15:15	Coffee Break		

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Time	Focus	Content & Objectives	Lead
15:15 – 16:00	Work Package 3 Activities	E.g. Alignment and/or identifying value chains at the consortium level	TUIASI, consortium partners
16:00 – 17:00	Forward-looking discussion: Scaling & Sustainability	**Focus:** From project to long-term interregional cooperation How SustainX results can be i) capitalized; ii) replicated; iii) scaled to other regions **Discussions on:** post-project sustainability, policy uptake, interregional alliances	Project Advisory Board (online), DIZ & Consortium Partners Project Advisor from EISMEA
17:00 – 17:45	Wrap-up and key takeaways	Summary of key messages from: Project Advisor, Advisory Board, Agreed strategic orientations for the next phase, next steps and follow-up actions	
18:00	Dinner at "L'osteria, Berliner Allee 8, 40212 Düsseldorf"		
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4			
09:00 – 12:00	Shuttle from Dreischeibenhaus 1, DUS to It's OWL Lemgo		
12:00 – 17:00	Digital Transformation	It's OWL: a top German industry cluster demonstrating how SMEs implement intelligent systems and Industry 4.0 solutions	IMP³ROVE
17:00 – 19:30	Shuttle from It's OWL Lemgo to Dreischeibenhaus 1		
19:30	Dinner at „Füchschen", Ratinger Strasse 28, 40213 Düsseldorf		
THURSDAY, MARCH 5			
09:00 – 12:00 (at the latest with final lunch after)	Reflection & Evaluation (Debrief)	Joint debriefing session, identification of transferable practices, lessons learned, and next steps	iED All partners
12:15	Lunch at „Schilling's" Gustaf Gründgens Platz 1, 40211 Düsseldorf		

MEETING LOCATION EVERYDAY (MARCH 02 - 05, 2026)

DREISCHEIBENHAUS 1, 40211 DUSSELDORF

Figure 1. Agenda of the Learning Journey

Overall, the programme successfully combined theoretical input with practical exposure and interactive reflection, enabling participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of advanced innovation ecosystems and their relevance for SME support.

4. Description of Visits and Activities

4.1 Startplatz Cologne and AI Hub Cologne

The visit to Startplatz Cologne and AI Hub Cologne provided valuable insights into the role of innovation hubs in supporting startups and SMEs.

Participants attended a presentation by the CEO of the AI Hub, which focused on the increasing importance of Artificial Intelligence across industries and its growing accessibility for SMEs. The presentation included practical examples of AI applications and demonstrated how such technologies can be integrated into business processes to improve efficiency and competitiveness.

The session emphasised that AI is not limited to large enterprises but can also be effectively utilised by SMEs when supported through appropriate tools, guidance, and ecosystem structures.

Following the presentation, participants were guided through the facilities, where they observed a dynamic and collaborative working environment. The space was designed to foster interaction, creativity, and knowledge exchange, bringing together startups, SMEs, and experts in a shared ecosystem.

The visit also included networking opportunities, allowing participants to interact with local actors and exchange ideas, further reinforcing the importance of collaboration within innovation ecosystems.

Figure 2. Visit to Startplatz Cologne and AI Hub – collaborative workspace and presentation session

4.2 it's OWL Cluster and SmartFactoryOWL

The visit to the it's OWL cluster and SmartFactoryOWL provided a comprehensive overview of advanced industrial innovation systems. Participants were introduced to a range of Industry 4.0 technologies and applications, including: robotics and automation systems; data-driven production processes; smart manufacturing solutions; digital tools supporting industrial operations.

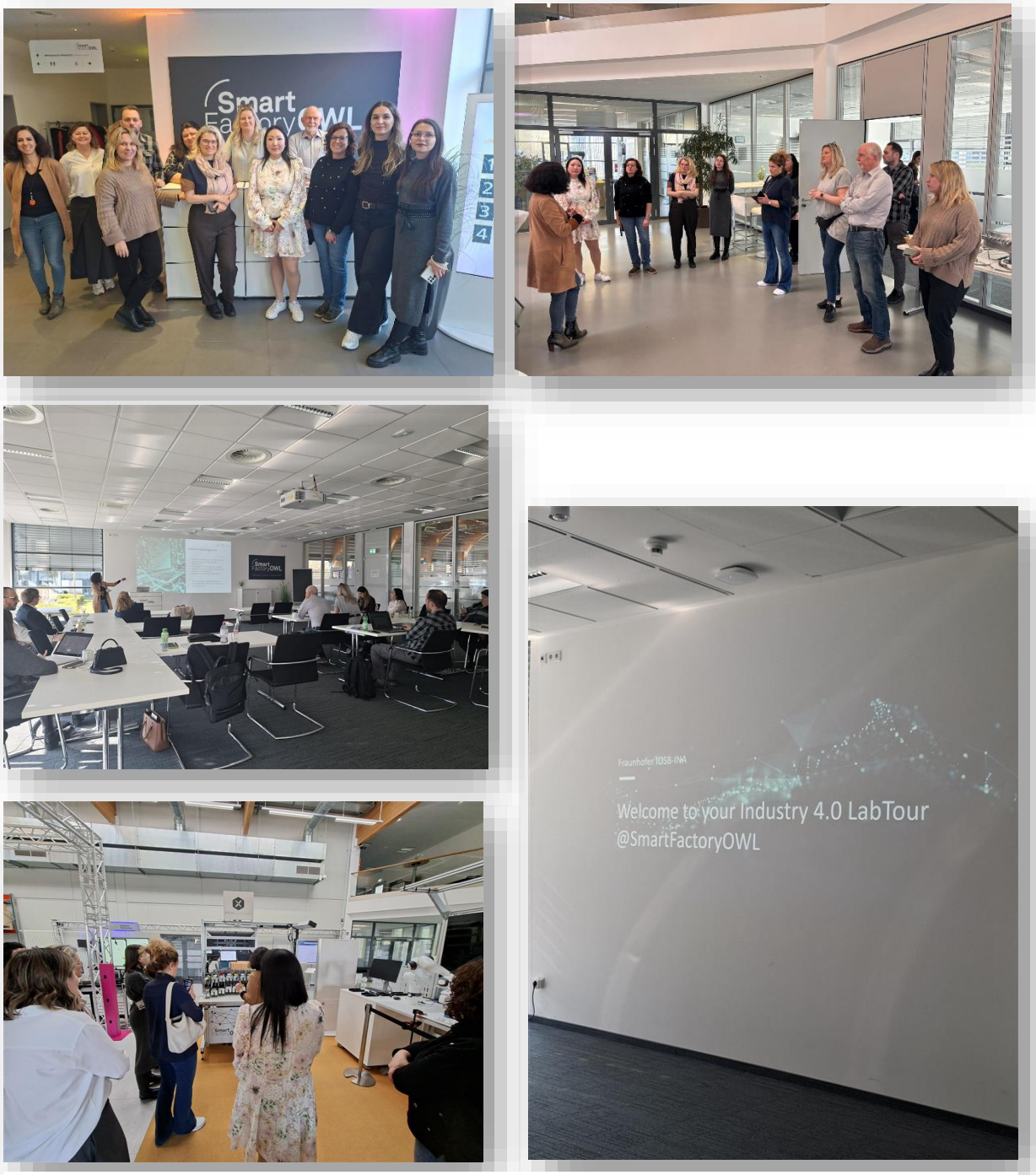

Figure 3. Demonstration of Industry 4.0 technologies at SmartFactoryOWL

A central concept presented during the visit was the "test before invest" approach, which allows SMEs to test new technologies in real-life environments before making investment decisions. This approach reduces uncertainty and supports more effective adoption of innovation. The demonstrations included prototype systems and experimental setups, showcasing how digital technologies such as AI, IoT, and data analytics can be integrated into production environments. The visit highlighted the importance of strong collaboration between research institutions and industry, as well as the role of clusters in facilitating knowledge transfer and innovation uptake.

4.3 Technical Content and Key Themes

The presentations delivered during the Learning Journey covered several key themes related to digital transformation and sustainable innovation. Industry 4.0 was presented as a paradigm shift towards interconnected, data-driven production systems, enabling increased flexibility, efficiency, and transparency in industrial processes. Artificial Intelligence was highlighted as a key enabling technology, with applications across multiple sectors. The presentations demonstrated how AI can support SMEs in areas such as process optimisation, quality control, and decision-making. Sustainable production and energy efficiency were also key topics, with examples of smart factories that integrate renewable energy sources and optimise energy consumption through digital monitoring systems. Finally, the concept of digital twins was introduced as a tool for real-time modelling and optimisation of production systems, supporting both efficiency and sustainability.

5. Key Learnings and Insights

5.1 Innovation Ecosystems and Collaboration Models

One of the most important learnings was the role of innovation hubs and clusters as central coordinators of the ecosystem. Rather than acting solely as physical spaces, these entities function as active facilitators, connecting startups, SMEs, research organisations, technology providers, and investors.

The visits demonstrated that successful ecosystems are built on continuous interaction and collaboration. Regular networking events, mentoring activities, and open communication channels create a dynamic environment where knowledge is shared and partnerships are formed. This ongoing exchange contributes to the development of trust among stakeholders, which is essential for long-term cooperation.

Furthermore, the presence of structured programmes—such as acceleration schemes, mentoring initiatives, and innovation projects—ensures that SMEs and startups receive targeted support throughout their development process. These programmes are often

designed to guide companies from initial idea generation to market implementation, providing a clear pathway for innovation.

Another key aspect observed was the importance of physical and organisational infrastructure. Well-designed spaces that encourage interaction, combined with strong institutional frameworks, create an environment where innovation can thrive. The integration of different actors within a shared ecosystem enhances synergies and maximises the impact of available resources.

5.2 SME Support Mechanisms

The Learning Journey highlighted that SMEs benefit significantly from structured and practical support mechanisms. In contrast to fragmented or ad hoc initiatives, the ecosystems visited in NRW provide coordinated services that address the specific needs of SMEs. These services typically include:

- Access to expertise and mentoring
- Training and capacity-building activities
- Opportunities for networking and collaboration
- Support in identifying and implementing innovation solutions

A particularly important observation was that successful SME support focuses on practical application rather than theoretical knowledge. SMEs are more likely to engage in innovation processes when they can clearly understand the benefits and see concrete examples of how technologies can be applied in their operations.

Additionally, the importance of simplifying access to innovation was emphasised. By reducing complexity and providing clear entry points, innovation ecosystems enable SMEs to gradually adopt new technologies without being overwhelmed by technical or financial barriers.

The role of intermediaries, such as innovation hubs and clusters, is also critical in this context. These organisations act as bridges between SMEs and more complex innovation environments, helping translate technological concepts into practical solutions.

5.3 Technology Transfer and Innovation Uptake

Technology transfer emerged as a central theme throughout the Learning Journey. The visits demonstrated that effective transfer of knowledge and technologies requires close collaboration between research institutions and industry.

One of the most significant approaches observed was the use of demonstration environments and testbeds. These facilities allow SMEs to experiment with new technologies in a controlled setting before making investment decisions. The “test before invest” concept reduces uncertainty and lowers the risk associated with innovation, making it more accessible for SMEs.

In addition, the importance of aligning innovation projects with real industrial needs was highlighted. Projects that are based on concrete challenges faced by companies are more likely to result in applicable and impactful solutions.

Another key learning was the role of structured transfer chains, which guide SMEs through different stages of innovation—from awareness and experimentation to implementation and scaling. These structured processes ensure continuity and support SMEs throughout their innovation journey.

Overall, the Learning Journey demonstrated that technology transfer is not a one-time activity but a continuous process that requires coordination, support, and collaboration.

5.4 Digital Transformation and Industry 4.0

The Learning Journey provided valuable insights into the practical implementation of digital transformation and Industry 4.0 concepts. Participants were exposed to real-life examples of how digital technologies are integrated into industrial processes to improve efficiency, flexibility, and productivity.

Industry 4.0 was presented as a paradigm shift towards interconnected and data-driven systems, where machines, products, and processes communicate and operate in a coordinated manner. This transformation enables companies to optimise production, reduce costs, and respond more effectively to changing market demands.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was highlighted as a key enabling technology within this context. The presentations demonstrated that AI can be applied in various ways, including predictive maintenance, quality control, process optimisation, and decision support. Importantly, it was emphasised that AI is becoming increasingly accessible to SMEs, particularly when supported through appropriate tools and ecosystem structures.

Another important aspect of digital transformation is the integration of data across systems. The use of digital platforms, cloud computing, and IoT technologies enables companies to collect, analyse, and utilise data in real time, supporting more informed decision-making.

The Learning Journey also highlighted the importance of organisational change in supporting digital transformation. Companies need to develop new skills, adopt agile structures, and foster a culture that embraces innovation and continuous learning.

5.5 Sustainability and Green Innovation

Sustainability was identified as a key dimension of innovation, closely linked to digital transformation. The concept of “green factories” demonstrated how digital technologies can support more efficient use of resources and reduce environmental impact.

Participants were introduced to systems that monitor and optimise energy consumption, enabling companies to identify inefficiencies and improve performance. The integration of renewable energy sources into production processes was also highlighted as an important step towards more sustainable industrial systems.

The use of digital twins was presented as a particularly powerful tool in this context. By creating virtual models of physical systems, companies can simulate and optimise processes in real time, improving both efficiency and sustainability outcomes.

In addition, the concept of circular production was explored, focusing on reuse, recycling, and reduction of waste. These approaches contribute to more sustainable value chains and align with broader European objectives related to the green transition.

5.6 Common Challenges and Opportunities

The Learning Journey also allowed participants to reflect on common challenges faced across regions. While the level of ecosystem maturity may vary, several shared issues were identified.

These include:

- The need to further strengthen collaboration among ecosystem actors
- The importance of creating accessible entry points for SMEs
- The challenge of supporting SMEs in adopting complex technologies
- The need for sustained and coordinated support mechanisms

At the same time, significant opportunities were identified. The experiences from NRW demonstrate that with the right structures and approaches, it is possible to create dynamic and effective innovation ecosystems that support SMEs in a practical and impactful way.

The insights gained through the Learning Journey provide a strong foundation for adapting and implementing similar approaches in the partner regions, contributing to the overall objectives of the SustainX project.

6. Debriefing Session Outcomes

The final day of the SustainX Learning Journey was dedicated to a structured debriefing session, designed to consolidate the knowledge gained during the visits and to translate it into practical insights and actions for the partner regions.

The session was organised using an interactive and collaborative methodology, allowing participants to actively contribute and reflect on their experiences. A shared digital whiteboard was used to structure the discussion and capture inputs in a systematic way . Participants worked by region, ensuring that reflections were contextualised and aligned

with regional realities. The use of this tool enabled a structured and transparent process, allowing all partners to contribute and visually map key insights and proposed actions.

The debriefing process was structured around three main dimensions:

- Transfer of knowledge from the NRW ecosystem
- Identification of regional actions
- Approaches for transferring knowledge to SMEs

This structure enabled a gradual transition from observation to reflection and finally to action.

Figure 4. Debriefing session during the final day of the Learning Journey

6.1 Transfer of Knowledge from the NRW Ecosystem

Participants identified a number of key elements that characterise the innovation ecosystem observed during the Learning Journey.

A central finding was that innovation hubs and clusters function as active ecosystem orchestrators, connecting startups, SMEs, research institutions, corporates, and investors. These organisations go beyond providing infrastructure, playing a key role in facilitating

collaboration, coordinating activities, and supporting the development of innovation projects.

The importance of collaborative environments was also emphasised. The visits demonstrated that successful ecosystems create "safe spaces" where companies can interact, exchange ideas, and explore opportunities without immediate pressure to deliver results. These environments foster creativity, experimentation, and trust among participants.

Another key insight was the value of structured support programmes, which combine mentoring, training, networking, and access to resources. These programmes provide a clear pathway for SMEs and startups, helping them move from early-stage ideas to implementation and growth.

In addition, participants highlighted the strong alignment between research and industry, particularly in cluster-based environments such as it's OWL. This alignment ensures that innovation projects are based on real industrial needs, increasing their relevance and impact.

6.2 Identification of Regional Challenges and Gaps

The debriefing session also provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own regional contexts and identify areas where further development is needed.

A common theme across regions was the need to strengthen coordination among ecosystem actors. While many regions already have relevant organisations and initiatives, these often operate in a fragmented way, which may limit their overall impact. Participants also noted the importance of creating more accessible and inclusive environments for SMEs, where companies can engage with innovation without facing significant barriers. In particular, SMEs may require additional support in understanding and adopting complex technologies such as AI and Industry 4.0. Another challenge identified was the need for more sustained and long-term support mechanisms. In some cases, activities are implemented through projects or short-term initiatives, without continuity or follow-up, which reduces their effectiveness.

These reflections were expressed in a constructive and forward-looking manner, focusing on opportunities for improvement rather than limitations.

6.3 Regional Actions and Follow-up Activities

Building on the insights gained, participants identified a number of practical and realistic actions that can be implemented at regional level.

Short-term actions include:

- Organisation of local workshops and knowledge-sharing sessions with SMEs and ecosystem stakeholders
- Integration of key learnings into existing project activities, such as training and matchmaking events
- Strengthening collaboration between local actors, including clusters, research institutions, and innovation organisations

Participants also highlighted the importance of fostering joint activities among ecosystem actors, such as co-organised events and collaborative initiatives, to enhance coordination and impact.

In the medium term, regions aim to:

- Explore opportunities for pilot projects and demonstration activities
- Strengthen links between research and SMEs
- Develop more structured approaches to innovation support

These actions are aligned with the SustainX objectives and contribute to the development of stronger regional innovation ecosystems.

6.4 Transfer of Knowledge to SMEs

A key focus of the debriefing session was how the knowledge gained during the Learning Journey can be effectively transferred to SMEs.

Participants agreed that dissemination should go beyond simple information sharing and focus on practical and actionable formats. These include:

- Workshops and training sessions
- Mentoring and advisory activities
- Matchmaking events and networking opportunities

The content to be shared with SMEs will include:

- Key learnings from the NRW ecosystem
- Practical examples of digital and sustainable solutions
- Good practices related to collaboration and innovation support

In addition, participants highlighted the importance of using existing communication channels, such as project events, newsletters, and online platforms, to reach a wider audience.

The timing of these activities was also considered, with initial actions expected to take place within the coming months and to continue throughout the project duration.

6.5 Overall Value of the Debriefing Session

The debriefing session played a crucial role in ensuring that the Learning Journey results were effectively consolidated and translated into meaningful outcomes.

By combining individual reflection with collaborative discussion, the session enabled participants to:

- Identify common priorities across regions
- Exchange perspectives and experiences
- Develop a shared understanding of key challenges and opportunities
- Define concrete next steps

The structured approach and the use of a shared tool facilitated a transparent and inclusive process, allowing all participants to contribute.

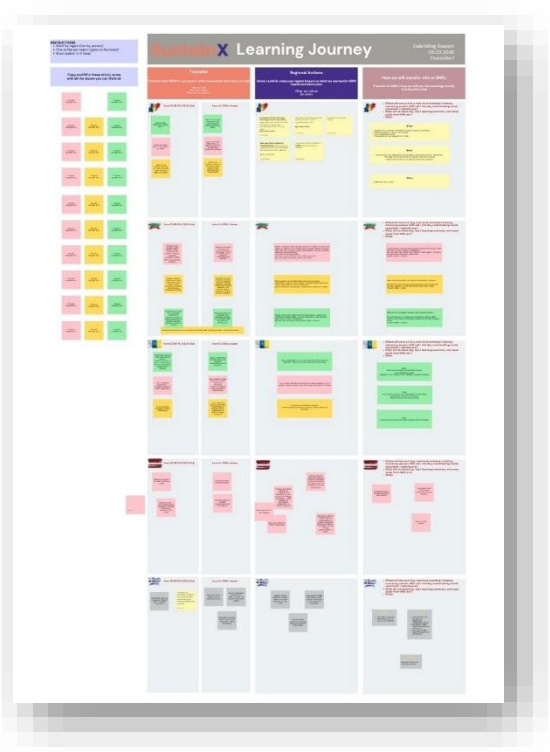

Figure 5. Collaborative debriefing canvas used for capturing insights and actions

Overall, the debriefing session ensured that the Learning Journey moved beyond knowledge acquisition and contributed directly to the development of actionable strategies within the SustainX project.

7. Impact on the Consortium

The SustainX Learning Journey had a significant and multidimensional impact on the consortium, contributing to the strengthening of knowledge, collaboration, and strategic alignment among partners.

Firstly, the activity enhanced the overall understanding of advanced innovation ecosystems. Through direct exposure to the North Rhine-Westphalia ecosystem, participants gained valuable insights into how innovation hubs, clusters, research institutions, and industry actors interact to support SMEs. This improved understanding allows partners to better position their own regional ecosystems within a broader European context.

Secondly, the Learning Journey contributed to the development of partners' capacity to support SMEs more effectively. By observing practical examples of innovation support—such as structured mentoring, demonstration environments, and collaborative spaces, participants were able to identify approaches that can be adapted to their local contexts.

This is particularly relevant for enhancing SME engagement in digital and green transition processes.

In addition, the activity facilitated knowledge exchange among partners, enabling them to share experiences, challenges, and perspectives. This peer-to-peer interaction strengthened mutual understanding and helped identify common priorities across regions. As a result, the consortium is better equipped to address shared challenges through coordinated actions.

Another important impact was the reinforcement of interregional collaboration. The Learning Journey created a shared reference point for all partners, allowing them to align their approaches and explore opportunities for joint initiatives. This contributes to the long-term objective of fostering stronger interregional cooperation beyond the duration of the project.

Furthermore, the activity supported a more strategic perspective on innovation. By engaging with a mature ecosystem, participants were able to move beyond isolated actions and consider more integrated and systemic approaches to SME support. This includes the importance of combining technological, organisational, and collaborative elements in order to achieve sustainable impact.

Finally, the Learning Journey strengthened the overall coherence of the SustainX project. The insights gained contribute directly to the implementation of project activities, ensuring that they are informed by practical experience and aligned with proven approaches. This enhances the quality and relevance of the project outputs and supports the achievement of its objectives.

7.1 Participant Feedback and Internal Evaluation

As part of the internal evaluation of the Learning Journey, all participating partner organisations completed a short feedback questionnaire assessing the relevance, quality and perceived value of the activity. The results indicate a very high level of satisfaction, with responses consistently concentrated in the “Agree” and “Strongly agree” categories.

Quantitative Highlights

The participant feedback was collected through a structured questionnaire completed by all participating partner organisations. The results indicate a very high level of satisfaction with the Learning Journey, with responses consistently concentrated in the “Agree” and “Strongly agree” categories across the main evaluation criteria. Participants confirmed that the objectives of the Learning Journey were clear, the agenda was relevant to SustainX and SME needs, and the sessions and visits provided practical and applicable insights.

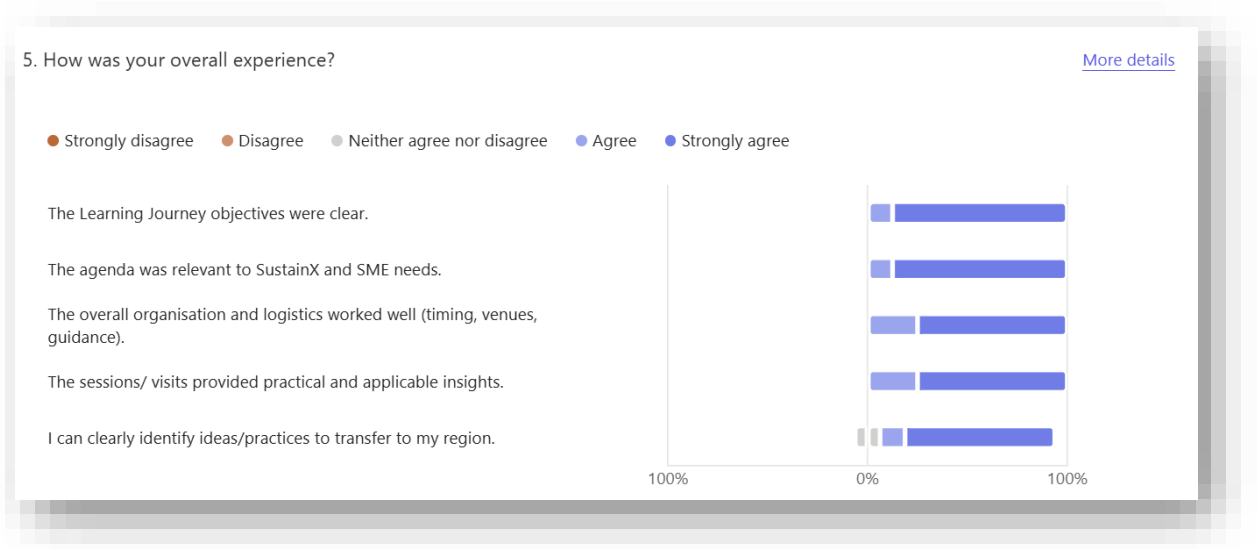

Figure 6. Overall participant evaluation of the Learning Journey (rating distribution)

The overall rating of the Learning Journey was particularly positive, reaching an average score of 9.6/10. In addition, all respondents indicated that they would recommend a similar Learning Journey format in the future. This confirms that the format was perceived as relevant, useful, and valuable for the consortium. The quantitative results also show that partners were able to identify transferable practices for their regions and recognised the relevance of the visits to the wider SustainX themes of digital transformation, sustainable innovation, and SME support. In addition, all participants confirmed that they were able to identify at least one transferable practice for their region.

Key Insights from Participants

The qualitative feedback further confirmed the value of the Learning Journey as a practical learning experience. Participants particularly highlighted the importance of strong ecosystem collaboration models, as observed through Startplatz / AI Hub and it's OWL. The role of innovation hubs and clusters as intermediaries connecting SMEs, startups, research organisations, companies, and public actors was repeatedly identified as one of the most valuable takeaways.

Another recurring insight was the importance of the "test-before-invest" approach, which allows SMEs to explore and experiment with new technologies before committing to larger investments. Participants also emphasised the value of shared infrastructure, applied research, and structured innovation support services. Overall, the responses suggest that the Learning Journey helped partners better understand how advanced ecosystems can make innovation more accessible and practical for SMEs.

Transferability & Impact

The feedback confirmed that the Learning Journey was not perceived only as an informative visit, but as an activity with clear transfer potential for the participating regions. Respondents indicated that they were able to identify practices, tools, and approaches that could be adapted to their own regional ecosystems, particularly in relation to SME support,

innovation hubs, cluster collaboration, and "test-before-invest" models. Several partners also identified concrete quick wins, such as organising local workshops, sharing key learnings with ecosystem stakeholders, strengthening collaboration between SMEs and support organisations, and exploring mentoring or pilot activities. This shows that the Learning Journey contributed directly to the practical objectives of SustainX by helping partners translate observations from NRW into regionally relevant actions.

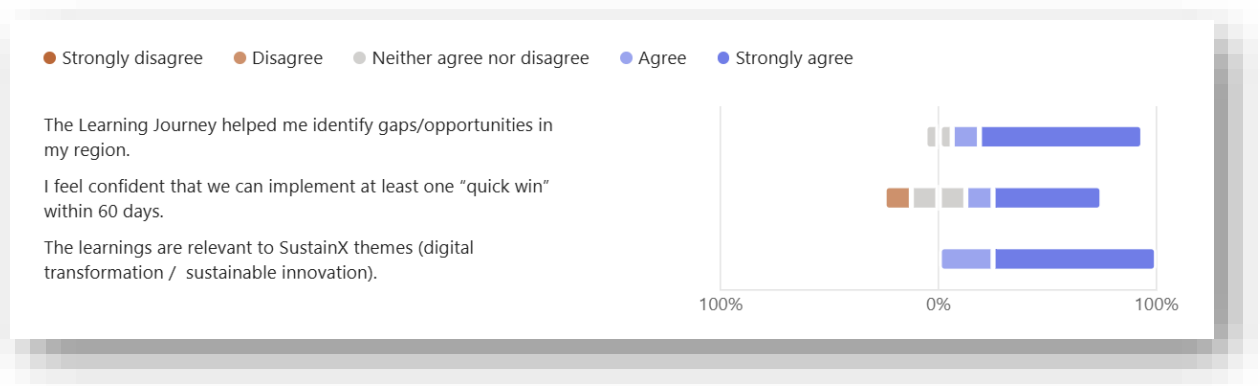

Figure 7. Participant agreement levels across key Learning Journey evaluation criteria

Debriefing Session Evaluation

The debriefing session was also positively evaluated by participants, as it helped structure the reflection process and capture the main learnings from the visits. The use of a collaborative canvas supported a clear and participatory discussion, allowing partners to organise their insights around transferability, regional actions, and SME engagement. Respondents highlighted that the session helped them reflect on what they had seen, align with other partner regions, and identify possible next steps. The feedback also suggests that the debriefing was an important bridge between the study visits and the implementation phase, ensuring that the Learning Journey resulted in concrete reflections rather than remaining a purely observational activity.

8. Dissemination and Communication

The SustainX Learning Journey was supported by a set of dissemination and communication activities aimed at increasing the visibility of the project and sharing key insights with a broader audience.

A dedicated article was published on the SustainX project website, providing an overview of the Learning Journey and highlighting its main objectives, activities, and outcomes. The article contributes to informing stakeholders about the project's progress and the value of interregional learning.

In parallel, a series of posts were published on LinkedIn, covering different moments of the Learning Journey. These posts focused on key themes such as innovation ecosystems,

Industry 4.0, and SME support, presenting the experience in an accessible and engaging way. The use of visual material, including photos from the visits, helped illustrate the activities and enhance audience engagement.

Figure 8. Dissemination activities – website article and LinkedIn communication

The dissemination efforts aimed not only to document the activity but also to communicate its relevance to SMEs, innovation actors, and policymakers. By highlighting practical examples and key learnings, the content supports the broader objective of promoting knowledge transfer and encouraging the adoption of innovative approaches.

In addition to the already published materials, a short video is being prepared to capture reflections from consortium partners. The video will include brief testimonials, providing a more personal perspective on the Learning Journey and its impact. This format is expected to further enhance communication and reach a wider audience.

Overall, the dissemination activities contribute to strengthening the visibility of the SustainX project and to showcasing the importance of interregional collaboration and learning. They also support the transfer of knowledge beyond the consortium, ensuring that the insights gained during the Learning Journey can benefit a broader community of stakeholders.

9. Conclusions

The SustainX Learning Journey successfully provided consortium partners with a valuable opportunity to explore advanced innovation ecosystems and to better understand how mature support structures can contribute to SME innovation, digital transformation, and sustainability.

Through visits to innovation hubs and industrial demonstration environments, participants gained practical insights into how collaboration between startups, SMEs, research institutions, technology providers, and clusters can generate tangible value. The activity

also demonstrated the importance of structured support pathways, experimentation environments, and knowledge transfer mechanisms in helping SMEs engage with innovation in a practical and accessible way.

The final debriefing session ensured that the knowledge acquired during the Learning Journey was consolidated and translated into meaningful reflections and follow-up ideas for the partner regions. In this sense, the activity did not remain limited to observation, but contributed to the identification of actions and approaches that can inform future SustainX activities.

Overall, the Learning Journey represented an important milestone within WP4, strengthening the consortium's shared understanding of innovation ecosystem development and supporting the wider objectives of the SustainX project.

SustainX

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