

# GRACE



**STRENGTHENING THE DIGITAL COMPETENCIES OF CULTURAL AND CREATIVE  
MICROENTERPRISES TO SET IN MOTION THEIR CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

**REPORT ON LESSONS LEARNT AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**



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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the **Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations Report** is to provide a concrete direction of action according to the findings gathered during the implementation of the previous GRACE project outputs and activities. This document desires to open a wider dialogue on the lifelong learning needs of the creative and cultural micro-businesses, as well as on initiatives that could add to their creativity and innovation capital. Additionally, it locates the GRACE project in the policy debates around strengthening and empowering micro-entrepreneurs and small businesses through the acquisition of digital competencies. As a final point, the report will contribute to an extensive policy dialogue and will provide a basis for the development of future initiatives.

The Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations Report will be available in 6 languages: English, Romanian, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

## To whom is this report addressed?

Entrepreneurs can make use of this document in order to complement their knowledge regarding the reality of the creative and cultural microenterprises from all 6 partner countries. Moreover, this report comes as an additional material to the educational platform (available here: [moodle.grace-initiative.eu](https://moodle.grace-initiative.eu)) which contains a course and other useful resources for entrepreneurs.

Adult educators can consult the report in order to better understand the needs of the entrepreneurs of creative and cultural microenterprises. This document comes as an additional support to the already available Toolkit for trainers and adult educators, which is available here: [Grace\\_IO2\\_-EN-toolkit\\_Final.pdf](#) ([grace-initiative.eu](https://moodle.grace-initiative.eu)). NGOs can use this report in order to discover which is the reality and the needs of entrepreneurs of microenterprises in order to be able to provide customized support and initiatives for them. More information that can be of use can be found on the project's website: [www.grace-initiative.eu](https://www.grace-initiative.eu).

Official institutions can use this report as a reference point while tackling initiatives and other activities concerning the digitalisation of the GRACE's target group. Additionally, the Policy recommendations section can be a starting point for future debated regarding digital support provided for creative and cultural microenterprises.

## **Pathway of the GRACE project - upscaling and transferability insights**

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications, cultural and creative micro-enterprises were gravely affected. Favours traditional business models which imply a face-to-face interaction with the customer, possessing limited/no funds for training & skills acquisition and having a constant need to enrich their creativity, the small businesses were unprepared to face the challenges brought by COVID-19.

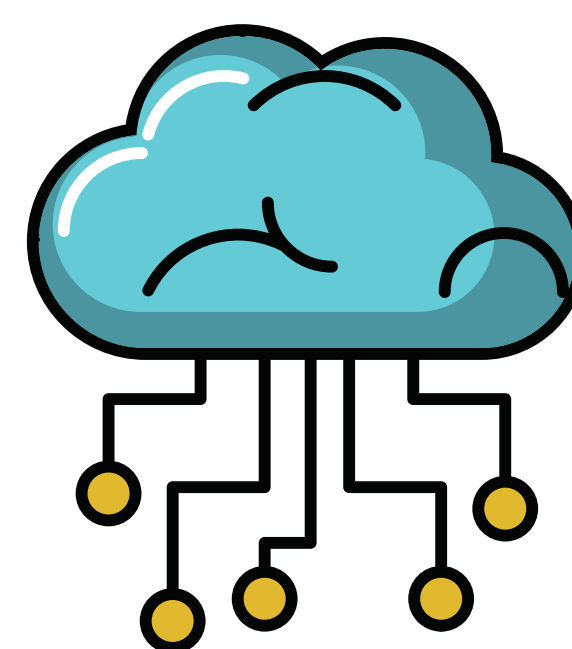
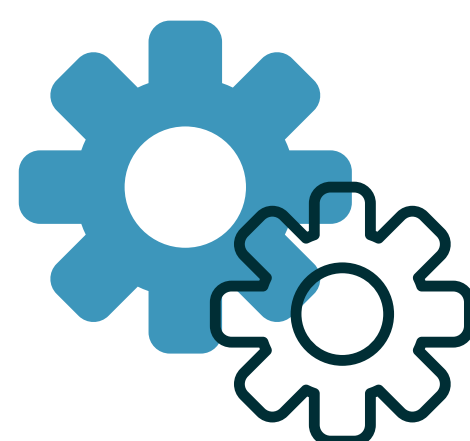
Accordingly, the GRACE project's aim was to create a coordinated response to this issue by fostering a new entrepreneurship frame underpinned by digital tools, equip creative and cultural microbusinesses with digital skills and promote digital cluster formation and networking to spark the innovation and creativity potential of the cultural and creative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). By addressing a variety of goals targeted for the cultural and creative sector, such as digital entrepreneurship, innovative practices, advancing SMEs' competitiveness and growth and sparking the creative potential, the GRACE project promulgates a new way of thinking for cultural and creative microbusinesses to assist them in their digital transformation.



The GRACE project is funded by the European Union through the ERASMUS+ programme, the Partnerships for Creativity line. Moreover, the GRACE project is implemented by a partnership of **7 organizations from 6 European countries**: Romania, Greece, Luxembourg, Spain, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.

Emerging from this specific need, the GRACE project is based on the following **specific objectives**:

- Equip cultural and creative micro-entrepreneurs with digital competencies to successfully position their business in the digital era and advance their competitiveness and growth.
- Increase the knowledge and availability of resources for adult educators working in the field so as to be fully equipped in supporting micro-businesses.
- Establish digital creativity and innovation clusters and networks to strengthen the transfer of knowledge, creativity, and innovative thinking.
- Strengthen the transnational policy dialogue on training support of the creative and cultural micro businesses for their sustainability and growth.



These objectives followed the direction sketched by the 3 deliverables of the project, which together form a learning pathway for responding to the needs of entrepreneurs from the cultural and creative sectors:

### **1. The online educational platform and course**

The educational platform is a nonformal educational space for open and collaborative learning and communication and a reservoir of best practices and other resources for micro businesses. This platform hosts an online course on digital competencies and digital entrepreneurship for creative and cultural microbusinesses tailored to their needs and geared towards innovation and enriched with practical exercises, real business scenarios and examples and case studies. The material on the platform, as well as the course content, are available in 6 languages.

### **2. The toolkit for trainers and adult educators**

The GRACE toolkit includes information, practical guidance, and relevant and timely resources to train microbusinesses in acquiring digital entrepreneurship and support aspiring cultural and creative in the acquisition of digital competencies that would help them in starting up their business. This material is available in the partnership languages, and it is available on the project's website as an open source.

### **3. The Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations Report**

This report contains the GRACE project's legacy and contribution to the policy agenda, delving into questions of training needs and barriers that need to be overcome, and educational pathways that can be created to advance the skills of cultural and creative micro businesses.

## **National data on the piloting phase**

The following section of the report will present the findings gathered in each partner country after piloting the course and the use of the platform. This phase was tailored to the needs of each national context and implemented accordingly.

### **The main objectives of the piloting phase were:**

- To enhance the digital skills of professionals in the sectors of arts and culture
- To provide an alternative online solution for small enterprises of arts and culture
- To provide adult educators and trainers with a complete course for digital skills in arts and culture sector
- To offer a full grasp of future trends and opportunities
- To present and test the platform
- To disseminate the GRACE materials and opportunities



## United Kingdom

Canary Wharf Consulting decided to implement one session with the participants to present the project and its results and then leave the participants to explore and experience the developed content. The structure of the meeting was an online 2-hour session with an introduction to the project, its objectives and aims, the results and the platform developed under IO1. As the partner is experienced in training and pilots, they decided to try to have an interactive element and a conversation between the participants and the facilitator. They initiated the pilot with an ice-breaking activity and then a description of the agenda and goals of the pilot. After that, the platform was presented and one of the modules, the enrolment procedure was explained as well the instructions on how to use the platform. Canary Wharf Consulting informed the participants that they would have access to the content and that they can finalize the training at their own pace and time.

At the end of the pilot, the partner had an open discussion and asked for feedback for the pilot, as well as their general experience with the project. (The participants responded to the Evaluation Questionnaire prepared by the QM of the project for the pilot implementation of IO1).

The total number of enrolments for this phase was 36, but 21 participants attended it in the end. Moreover, 15 individual accounts were created on the platform. The main profiles of the participants in the piloting phase were business owners, self-employed and managers of small businesses.



The participants only filled/answered the questionnaire after the completion of the pilot (this can be considered the initial evaluation, as the participants haven't responded to the questionnaire after finalizing the entire content of the platform, only the pilot/presentation).

**Based on the responses from the evaluation questionnaire, they suggested the following adjustments:**

- A section with Frequently Asked Questions, can be helpful as sometimes the Q-As answer something that they haven't thought about, but it's helpful. Also, it's easier to solve and deal with common misconceptions or difficulties.
- Peer-learning, either video from people who have participated in the training/project to share their experience or professionals who have expertise in digital skills, to share some additional information, but especially if they are closed to their background education and/or age.
- The support from a facilitator is already present with the introductory video for the platform, but participants, especially ones who don't have expertise in digital skills, might often come up with questions or issues. Support on this matter can be provided with an option for a chat as something quicker (we understand that this is not feasible) or with additional videos with common difficulties from participants, or by contacting someone through a communication form which can include what the issue is.



### Some of the lessons learnt from the facilitators/trainers were:

- The difference in the expertise in digital skills can be an important factor that can affect the training. Maybe for something similar, it would be important to make a distinction between the expertise (amateurs, novices, experts) and compare results/needs.
- Technology and digital skills have become an important factor in whether someone can promote their business and make it more visible. It combines a lot of elements and different approaches. Through our project, we manage to cover/talk about some of them. This can be a basis for someone or a starting point.





## Greece

Since there are two partners from Greece, they have conducted a joint piloting phase. KMOP Education & Innovation Hub and Clio Muse Tours organized the piloting in the form of asynchronous online training. During the toolkit webinar, they also presented the platform and the modules. The participants were invited to register on the platform and take the course. They were also asked to fill.

in an evaluation form after they completed the modules. It becomes evident that the partners incorporated the implementation of the piloting within the performance of IO2.

The partners did not organize any live online sessions. As mentioned before, they took advantage of the toolkit webinar to also present the course and invite participants to subscribe to Moodle and take the course. Thus, this webinar was considered the first live session.



Additionally, the course is developed in the format of asynchronous online learning, and it would be difficult and maybe meaningless to have live online meetings as each participant followed their own learning path.

18 Greek participants attended the piloting phase and created an account on the GRACE platform. The profiles of these participants were: professionals of arts and culture; entrepreneurs in the creative and cultural sector; adult educators and trainers.

The participants were asked to fill in an evaluation form after they complete the modules. According to the evaluation forms that 7 participants filled out, the overall experience was very positive. They also noted that this course was exciting and valuable.

**Some of the lessons learnt from the facilitators/trainers were:**

- Professionals and entrepreneurs in the creative and cultural sectors are very positive and open to developing their digital skills.
- The trainers should motivate the participants to complete the final quizzes and activities of the modules, as they are essential for self-evaluation.



## Romania

The European Association for Social Innovation implemented the pilot in Romania using a mixed approach of online intermediary sessions and self-paced learning. The partner took the opportunity to disseminate the piloting phase at the first IO2 webinar they conducted, as well as by using their social media channels and sending out invitations via email to viable actors.

The piloting phase in Romania consisted of two intermediary sessions and an individual-pace learning journey. At first, there were planned three intermediary sessions, but only two of them took place in the end due to the participants' time availability. At the first intermediary session, EaSI presented the project, the platform and the course and realized a demo of interacting with the platform. Afterwards, the trainees were invited to create an account and start their training journey.



The second session was used as a context for questions, the interaction between participants and also a chance for the participants to express their feedback regarding the piloting.

11 people registered to attend the piloting phase, out of which 5 participants were present in the intermediary sessions. 10 people registered on the e-learning platform. The profiles of the participants were the following: entrepreneurs of small businesses; adult educators; researchers.

The evaluation of the piloting phase was conducted at one of the intermediary sessions. The participants evaluated positively the GRACE initiative and the platform, expressing that they find the materials useful. Some of the trainees were already familiar with some of the concepts presented, thus, they suggested that the platform could also include some materials for more advanced participants. Moreover, some of the trainees indicated that they would have needed more practical tools that they can use in order to upgrade their digital skills.



## Spain

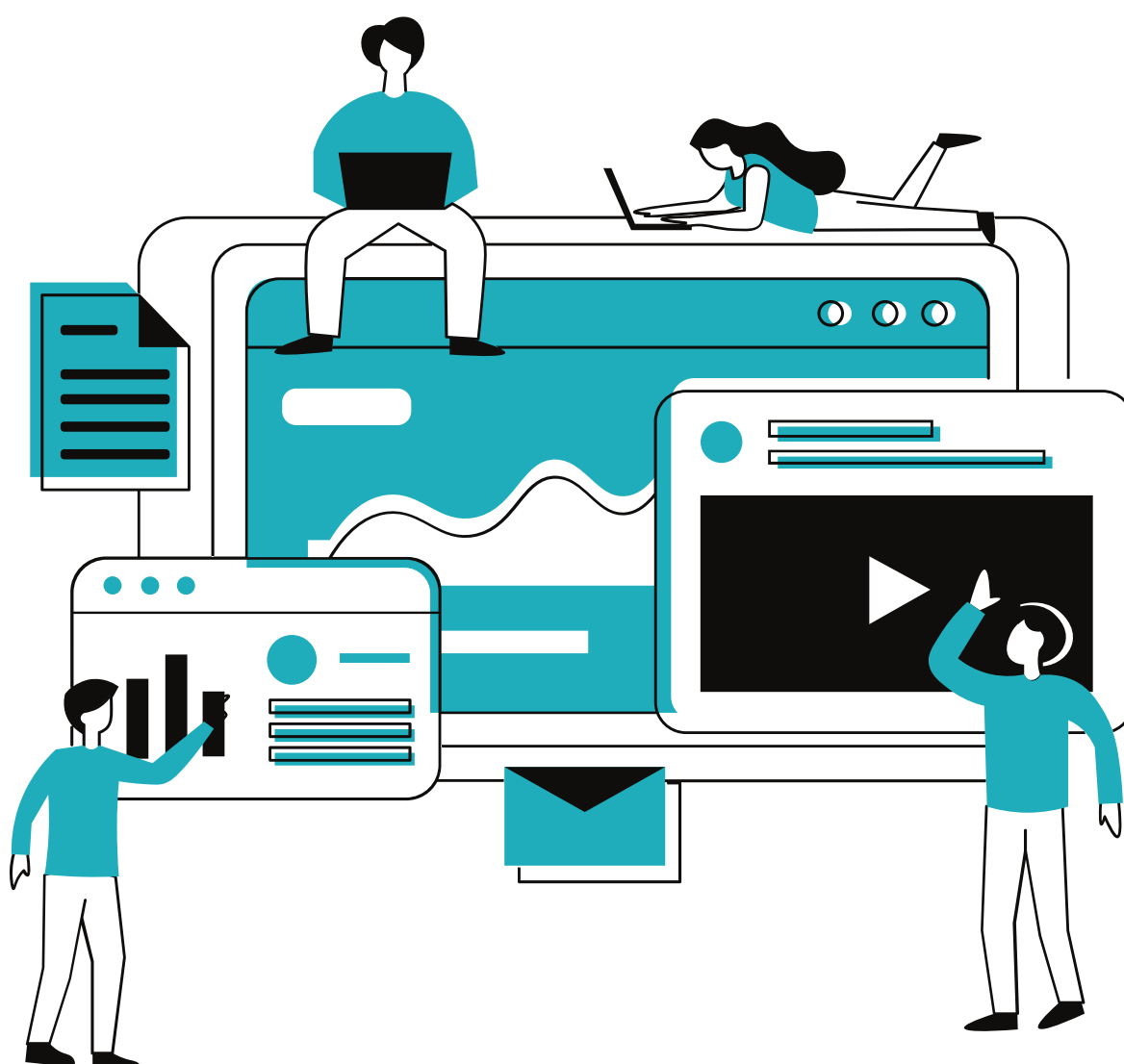
Consultoría de Innovación Social decided to implement the piloting in the province of Granada as this province is full of cultural heritage and very touristic. The pilot training was organized in online sessions as this was easier access for the participants from different locations within the region. The participants were motivated to register on the platform and complete the modules. The online sessions were used to discuss and exchange the results and the additional needs of the participants.

In total 20 participants registered on the platform and completed the course on their own. However, at the piloting sessions, there were present 15 participants. The profile of participants was: adult trainers and professionals of art and culture in the cultural and tourist sector. The second group parts of them employed in SMEs, and parts were self-employed.

The overall feedback given to the instructor was very positive. The participants found the content very interesting. We also asked for the participants' general and additional needs in regard to this project and had to realize that the needs are very diverse, depending on digital skills but also depending on the sector. Some cultural businesses can work more with digital tools to promote and sell their products, than others.

**There were no specific additional recommendations suggested by the participants, as pointed out before.**

- For trainers and recruitment: it is good to have a group with more or less homogenous/the same level of skills and interests, otherwise the interests of the participants might be quite diverse.
- For course advertisement: stress out the specific need for a specific profile in the cultural sector as needs might be quite diverse.
- For receiving feedback: to receive feedback it is better to have people in person and not on a self-learning, in many cases, they do not fill out the evaluation.





## Portugal

In Portugal, Aproximar conducted the pilot online. In total, there were 4 synchronous sessions complementary, with 2 hours each, to the asynchronous hours in Moodle. To Plan the sessions, the following was developed: a Training Program, detailing the modules, content, learning objectives, evaluation methodology, and target group; Session Plans, including the organization of the session, detailing the activities, the material necessary to carry out the sessions, and with a more concrete overview of the topics and of the references used; Chronogram, to schedule the Sessions, happening during the month of December.

The facilitations methods, in pedagogical terms, were expositive, active, and interrogative. The onus was on expositive methods – presenting the content of the modules – but in all sessions, minus the last one, activities were carried out by the participants to assure an interactive learning space and practice what had been presented.

Moreover, given the particularities of Aproximar – a certified teaching entity by DGERT, the public authority that certifies organizations through a global recognition of the capacity of the entity to carry out training, according to a specific quality benchmark – all participants that wished to enrol had to participate in the intermediary sessions. In total, 12 people participated in at least 1 session, with various degrees of completion. In the end, 5 trainees participated in all intermediary sessions with the majority (8) taking part in 2 or more sessions.

In the GRACE Moodle platform, resulting from the Portuguese Pilot, 8 trainees created an account. The profile of the participants was analysed in terms of professional occupation, education, gender, and age: the professional occupation of the trainees; director and photographer; event producer; booker; director of communication; unemployed; producer; brand & sponsorship; cultural projects consultancy; booker, road manager, stage manager, show producer; financial analyst; executive producer; communication professional.



For the GRACE pilot, participants in Portugal completed a Satisfaction Questionnaire (n=6) and a competencies and knowledge assessment before and after the pilot (n=6) to evaluate the satisfaction and impact, respectively, of the training. As per the competencies and knowledge assessment, trainees had to rank their skills and knowledge on a scale of 1 to 5. Overall, considering the 17 items evaluated, participants of the pilot augmented their skills and competencies from an average of 3.1 to 4.5 – representing an increase of 1.4. In a few words, after analyzing the competencies and knowledge assessment and the satisfaction questionnaire, although the Portuguese pilot lacked the expected amount of participants, the training was undoubtedly impactful and well-received.

**As for the trainees, during the feedback of the final session, the following feedback and suggestions were presented:**

- It was very useful even, digital entrepreneurship is a necessary skill in every way.
- Liked the activities very much.
- The resources on Moodle are very complete and interesting.
- Comprehensive training that offers a broad and honest view.
- Useful and innovative tools and strategies.

**Suggestions:**

- Not enough time for the amount of content, more hours for training needed.
- Help to create and nurture the business in a more practical way.
- Needed to have a more practical part.

## Policy Recommendations

This section of the report proposes a number of policy recommendations in the light of the gathered data and research made in every partner country. These recommendations can be used by policy makers and other competent organizations as starting points for the development of future initiatives and strategies that target creative and cultural microenterprises. In addition, this section contributes to the sustainability of the GRACE project by presenting the areas in which further action can be taken.





## United Kingdom

From the partner's experience in implementing the GRACE project, and from the interaction with the participants (stakeholders and immediate target group – small business owners in the cultural and creative sector), we came to the following conclusion.

In the United Kingdom, there are plenty of small businesses which have been gravely affected by the pandemic and the constant evolution in the technological department, has forced them quite abruptly to learn new skills without any specific guidance or assistance. Most of these skills need specific training and people might even have a language barrier, to begin with. Especially since they have been affected by the pandemic, the last thing they want is to spend money on training about something they don't completely understand and don't realise its importance or how it will help them. Based on our experience, participants were willing to participate and try to incorporate new skills and knowledge into their work.

Based on all this, our recommendation would be for policy stakeholders to listen to these needs and assist them in a way that can elevate them. Micro-businesses cover the majority of businesses in the United Kingdom, so we believe it's essential to support them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For the stakeholders to provide some seminars on important matters that might have affected the small businesses (like how to apply for potential compensation for the difficulties they have faced, a couple of consultation meetings with business managers who can support them maintain and elevate their business and seminars on digital skills based on the content of the business and the digital skills level). As mentioned, since English might not be a first language for some, small-scale research on the national background and potential subgroups with an interpreter or a facilitator who speaks their language could help these owners too.

Secondly, arrange meetings in the form of small groups in which business owners can come together and discuss potential issues they had and give the opportunity to others to share how they might have dealt with a similar issue. A mediator/facilitator can be helpful in navigating the conversation and assisting in cases there seems to be a misunderstanding or a difficulty. Also, the facilitator can present some topics and potential issues and ask the participants to answer how they would deal with it, with their current resources.

For now, there isn't any concrete or extended research on the issue that can further support this, but the feedback from the participants of the GRACE project can be used as a basis and follow-up based on that.

The expected impact would be fewer microbusinesses closing because they don't possess the necessary skills/means and support for this new environment and their elevation would mean the blooming of the market industry. It's something that everyone would benefit from. Of course, there are going to be positive side effects as well.



## Greece

Based on the experience and data collected through the desk and field research, the toolkit webinar and the piloting of the GRACE project it is recommended to develop a holistic and strategic plan for strengthening and empowering the digital transition in the creative and cultural sectors.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The first stage is to support this transition on an individual level. This could be facilitated even from school. Developing digital competencies should be incorporated into the main curriculum of the school. Thus, when someone finishes school would be already well equipped with the necessary digital skills. Moreover, there should be opportunities for training on an individual level in the context of lifelong learning during someone's professional life. This could be very helpful for micro-entrepreneurs and self-employed in the creative and cultural sectors.

The second stage is to support the digital transition on an organisational level. Small businesses should provide their employees with opportunities for training and digital skills development. Each business in the creative and cultural sector acts as a dynamic organisation with specific digital needs. Thus, it is crucial to support their employees towards this process of development and change.

The third stage is to support the digital transition on a community level. Opportunities for training and digital skills development should also be available in the context of municipalities or even neighbourhoods.

The fourth and final stage is to support the digital transition on a national level through conferences, good practices exchange, apply to archaeological places and national museums.

It becomes evident that for developing such a holistic plan, funding is absolutely necessary. Funding is fundamental for all stages both for training and infrastructure. For applying such a strategic digital transition, collaboration between the state and the businesses is also necessary. This holistic approach would impact society as a whole and all levels individual, organisational, community and national, thus making the digital transition in creative and cultural sectors smoother and more sustainable.



## Romania

In light of the implementation of the GRACE project's outputs, we have reached the conclusion that action through public policies is required in order to uniformize the level of digital competencies of cultural & creative microenterprises at an EU level. Based on the research done by the GRACE partnership, the development of the trainers' toolkit and the piloting of the GRACE platform, one of the deductions we have reached is that the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected the target group of the project. Moreover, another reached conclusion states that the support provided by public institutions and stakeholders to micro-enterprises in the cultural and creative sector it is limited and presents some gaps. It is to be acknowledged that this reality includes the Romanian micro-enterprises as well.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Constant consultation sessions at the local level with representatives of the municipalities/relevant actors.

The creation of local support networks that include entrepreneurs of cultural and creative micro-businesses and that are managed by local authorities.

The creation of other contexts of cooperation between entrepreneurs of small businesses and relevant stakeholders (networking events; training dedicated to the target group; events where the entrepreneurs can find out about finding opportunities).

## Spain

In Spain, there are a lot of public initiatives to promote the digitalization of small enterprises of all sectors; e.g. the campaign “Espana digital 2025” launched by the Spanish government (<https://espanadigital.gob.es>), which aims at improving the digital connection with 5G technology, but also digital competencies of the users and cybersecurity. The digital competencies of the user include the digital transformation of the enterprise and digital learning. This strategy paper addresses enterprises in general but also specific sectors like the food sector, health, mobility, and tourism.

**There is also an action Plan for SMEs from 2021 to 2023 with about 4.656 M Euros. This includes:**

- Basic digitalization of SMES
- Support in the change management
- Digital training
- Sectoral digitalization support
- A “SME digital label”

The recommendation is to closely monitor the changes obtained during the implementation of the above-mentioned action plan, and then, follow-up and see what are the needs of the micro-entrepreneurs that were not covered. The important factor will be not only to invest in technical equipment but also in the skills of the users so that they are enabled to benefit to the full extent of new technology.



## Portugal

One of the main focuses for the next decade in the European Union is to empower citizens and enterprises in digital transformation. The goals for the European Commission, described in the “The Digital Decade policy programme” are clear: until 2030 more than 90% of SMEs should have at least a basic level of digital intensity, 80% of the population should have at least basic digital skills, and 75% of EU companies should be using Cloud/AI/Big Data. Beyond these goals, policies to protect European data and further develop the European Digital Identity are also concerns for the Digital Decade policy programme.

Nonetheless, the member states of the European Union present different rates of digital inclusion and adoption of digital technologies in businesses, as evidenced by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), the indicators that track and summarize the digital progress of member states.

The Digital Economy and Society Index 2022 Report, showcases two fundamental indicators to access this reality: The Digital Intensity Index (DII), measuring the use of different digital technologies (12 in total) at the enterprise level, demonstrates that in only 4 countries (Finland, Denmark, Malta and Sweden) the share of above 8% of enterprises with have a very high DII (adoption of at least 10 of the monitored technologies). In contrast in Romania and Greece have above 60% of enterprises with a very low DII (small investment in digital technologies).

The difference is even more significant when analyzing small and medium enterprises – in 2021, 80% of SMEs in Nordic countries have a basic level of digital intensity. Compared to Romania and Bulgaria, both below 30% and Portugal and Greece at around 50%; The other fundamental indicator to be analysed is the share of individuals with basic or above basic digital skills. Data from Eurostat (2021) provides a similar picture between member states, Finland, Iceland, and the Netherlands all above 75%, with Romania, the lowest, at 27,72%, while the EU 27 average sits at around 54% (in 2020).



## RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, although a steady increase can be seen in recent years, policy recommendations can be made to assure that the EU goals for 2030 are reached. In this regard, analyzing it as per the framework of the “The Digital Decade policy programme”, two policy recommendations are made in Human Capital targeting the workforce digital skills and Businesses, targeting the integration of digital technology.

Horizontal Open Innovation – Open innovation can be defined as the use by firms of external and internal ideas and paths to market to foster technology advancement (Chesbrough, 2003). Regarding the adoption by micro-entrepreneurs and SMEs, horizontal open innovation reflects easier access to new solutions and a clearer path to the adoption of digital technologies (Brodny & Tutak, 2022).

Although through national policies and action plans, connected to the Digital Europe Programme (i.e., Plano de Ação para a Transição Digital de Portugal, DIGITAL EUROPE European Digital Innovation Hubs), investment and funding into national and European Digital Innovation Hubs have been made, there is lack of strategies and policies to foster technology adoption of enterprises on the low and very low levels of the DIII, that as presented represent the majority of SMEs in numerous member states. These Hubs are tailored to advanced digital skills. As such, the first recommendation is the development of Hubs, or similar networks, to enterprises with low or very low DIII, fostering innovation and collaboration tailored to their needs and assuring that by 2030, 90% of SMEs have at least a basic level of digital intensity.

The second recommendation, connected to the GRACE project and the creative and cultural sector (CCS), is to foster e-commerce through Adult and VET training for workers and entrepreneurs in the CCS, since it is notoriously one of the main drivers of economic and digital progress for the arts sector (Massi et al., 2020), and in the GRACE pilot trainees showed a significant increase in their competences to adapt their business to e-commerce. (CCS), is to foster e-commerce through Adult and VET training for workers and entrepreneurs in the CCS, since it is notoriously one of the main drivers of economic and digital progress for the arts sector (Massi et al., 2020), and in the GRACE pilot trainees showed a significant increase in their competences to adapt their business to e-commerce.

Lastly, in the CCS, the change of the consumer role to an agent that can interact directly to exchange and co-produce art-based products and services (O'Connor & Wynne, 2017) should be taken advantage of at the entrepreneurial level, but also by policy makers, as it represents an opportunity to foster digital skills in the population and assure that European CCS businesses stay at the forefront of digital innovation.



## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the added value brought by this document is represented by the paths for further improvement regarding the digitalisation process of the creative and cultural microenterprises. Additionally, the report presents the reality of the situation in the 6 partner countries and wishes to formulate with it a **call to action** that can answer to the identified needs.

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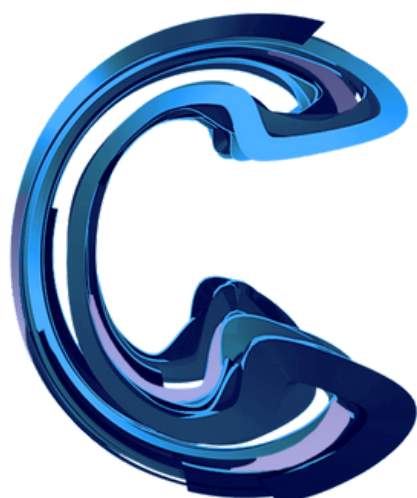


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