EXCELLENCY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Ecosystem builder's handbook and toolkit

Deliverable D4.2

ExcellEnt: Excellency in Entrepreneurship: Expanding European entrepreneurship by boosting youth (self) employability and promoting a sharing resources culture

Horizon Europe Programme, Project number 101100515

Prepared by: **IDI – International Development Ireland Ltd.**

Current version: **V1.0 – June 2025**

Disclaimer

Funded by the Horizon Europe Programme of the European Union under Grant Agreement number 101100515. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA). Neither the European Union nor the EISMEA can be held responsible for them.

Disclaimer on Use of Generative AI Tools

In the preparation of this document, various Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools were used to support research, content organisation, and editorial refinement. Specifically:

- **OpenAI's ChatGPT** and **Google's NotebookLM** (in research modes) were used to assist in researching and identifying relevant sources, summarizing literature, and organising resources into comparative tables.
- **Napkin AI** was used for the preparation of select visual elements.
- **Apple AI Writing Tools** and **Microsoft Copilot** were used for proof-reading, grammar corrections, and proofreading to ensure clarity, coherence, and consistency across the text.

All outputs have been reviewed and validated by the author and 2 reviewers. The use of AI tools is acknowledged as part of the document's methodology, in line with transparency and responsible innovation practices. The author is responsible for the final content.

Deliverable Information

Grant Agreement #:	101100515
Project Title:	Excellency in Entrepreneurship: Expanding European entrepreneurship by boosting youth (self) employability and promoting a sharing resources culture
Project Acronym	ExcellEnt
Project Start Date:	January 15th, 2023
Work Package:	WP4
Related Task(s):	T4.2
Deliverable Title:	Ecosystem builder's handbook and toolkit
Deliverable Type:	R
Dissemination level	PU- Public
Number of Pages:	
Date of last Update	6 June 2025
Responsible Organization:	IDI – International Development Ireland Ltd.
Author	Odysseas Spyroglou

Table of Contents

1 Executive Summary

The **European Ecosystem Builder's Toolkit** is a practical guide designed to support those building and strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems across Europe. Developed under the Horizon Europe-funded **Excellent** project, the toolkit aims to boost creativity, support entrepreneurs, and connect innovation hubs throughout the EU.

It brings together the latest insights, hands-on methods, and useful tools to help ecosystem builders create dynamic, supportive environments for entrepreneurship. With a focus on collaboration, shared learning, and strategic analysis, the toolkit helps identify an ecosystem's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. By promoting **productive entrepreneurship**—businesses that drive innovation and economic growth—the toolkit offers a clear framework and resources for ecosystem builders to increase their impact.

Chapter 1: Conceptual Foundation outlines the rationale for ecosystem building and introduces the key roles of ecosystem builders. It situates the ExcellEnt project within the broader European innovation policy context, emphasizing in productive entrepreneurship and inclusive ecosystem development as core objectives.

Chapter 2: Framework for Ecosystem Development presents an in-depth analysis of ecosystem structures, drawing on established models such as Isenberg's domains, the Startup Genome lifecycle, and the Kauffman Foundation's ESHIP goals. It identifies the vital functions—such as connectedness, trust, and resource flows—and emphasizes in the roles of ecosystem builders as facilitators, not just coordinators. The chapter also introduces the "ExcellEnt Blueprint," a staged, adaptive methodology derived from the project's ecosystem work across six countries.

Chapter 3: Methodologies and Tools introduces evidence-based methodologies for assessing and evolving ecosystems. These include SWOT analysis, stakeholder mapping, asset inventories, and impact measurement frameworks like the ANDE Toolkit and Project Excellent's own D33 Impact Monitoring Framework. The chapter guides ecosystem builders in using data and feedback to drive iterative improvement.

Chapter 4: Community Engagement and Support Mechanisms focus on the practical side of building strong support systems for entrepreneurs. This includes how to plan, launch, and grow programs like incubators, accelerators, mentoring, funding support, and attracting talent. The section shares real examples from around the world and turns proven methods into easy-to-follow templates. It also looks at how to help start-ups expand into new regions, work across borders, and grow their ecosystems. Finally, it offers clear strategic advice to guide future actions.

Chapter 5: The Practical Toolkit presents a curated, categorized collection of frameworks, templates, digital tools, checklists, and resource guides. These span from ecosystem diagnostics and planning (e.g. ANDE, Triple Helix models) to programmatic support (e.g. SecondMuse, JTP Groundwork, NIDHI Guidelines), community engagement (e.g. Forward Cities, Visible Network Labs), and platform-

enabled collaboration tools (e.g. Miro, Slack, Typeform). Each resource is described with usage guidance and adaptability notes.

Chapter 6: Toolkit Deployment explains how the toolkit will be made available through the **European Entrepreneurship Academy platform** (https://europreneurship.eu). This platform serves as the main place to access the handbook and all related tools. It offers features like creating groups, sharing resources, running diagnostics, finding partners, and using a marketplace. The platform supports educators, schools, support organizations, and entrepreneurs. It is designed to grow and improve through user input and collaboration, helping ensure long-term impact and community strength in line with the **ExcellEnt** project's goals.

Conclusions and Final Insights highlight the main challenges in building ecosystems—such as fragmentation, limited resources, and policy barriers. They stress the importance of flexible, inclusive, and data-driven strategies. The section promotes a **systems-thinking** approach that understands how policy, education, finance, infrastructure, and community culture all work together. The handbook concludes with practical solutions to common problems and encourages future cooperation among Europe's ecosystem builders.

2 Introduction

The European Ecosystem Builder's Handbook and Toolkit: Building Entrepreneurial Capacity

Entrepreneurship plays a pivotal role in shaping Europe's innovation-led growth and resilience. Yet, building and sustaining thriving entrepreneurial ecosystems requires more than the sum of its parts—it demands vision, coordination, and intentional strategy. Recognizing this, the *ExcellEnt* project, under the Horizon Europe programme, aims to empower entrepreneurial ecosystem builders with the tools, frameworks, and knowledge necessary to nurture vibrant innovation environments across diverse European contexts.

This Handbook and Toolkit (Deliverable D4.2) is a key output of the **ExcellEnt** initiative, focused on sharing best practices with emerging ecosystems. It draws from pan-European activities like interviews, workshops, diagnostics, and soft-landing missions, combining research and fieldwork across partner ecosystems.

The handbook follows the ecosystem builder's journey—starting with core concepts, then covering ecosystem structure, development methods, startup support, funding, and impact measurement. It concludes with a practical toolkit deployed via the **European Entrepreneurship Academy** platform, a central hub for access, collaboration, and growth.

Blending theory, tools, and success stories, this resource aims to guide ecosystem builders at all stages and encourages joining a broader European community committed to entrepreneurship as a force for economic, social, and ecological progress.

How to Use This Handbook

This Handbook is organised into thematic chapters that guide readers through key aspects of ecosystem building and tool deployment:

- Chapter 1 – Conceptual Foundations: Introduces the rationale for ecosystem building, key roles of ecosystem builders, and the policy background of the ExcellEnt project.
- Chapter 2 – Framework for Ecosystem Development: Defines the structural components of entrepreneurial ecosystems and identifies their vital functions, grounded in field research and literature.
- Chapter 3 – Methodologies and Tools: Describes practical assessment and diagnostic tools for mapping, evaluating, and planning ecosystem development.
- Chapter 4 – Community Engagement and Support Mechanisms: Presents mechanisms and programmatic approaches to support entrepreneurs, foster community-building, and stimulate cross-border collaboration.
- Chapter 5 – Toolkit for Ecosystem Builders: A curated collection of templates, frameworks, checklists, and digital resources to be used in day-to-day operations and strategic initiatives.

- Chapter 6 – Toolkit Deployment: Explains how the toolkit is embedded into the European Entrepreneurship Platform, how users can access, share, and co-develop resources, and how the platform supports ongoing training and community building.

Each chapter is structured to balance conceptual guidance with actionable content, allowing readers to engage at different levels—whether exploring strategies or applying tools in practice.

3 Framework for Ecosystem Development

Developing a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem requires more than just assembling components; it demands a strategic vision and a clear understanding of the ecosystem's current state, strengths, weaknesses, and potentials. This chapter explores leading models for ecosystem architecture and practical methodologies for diagnosis, providing a foundation for informed action by ecosystem builders.

3.1 Defining the Modern Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

A modern entrepreneurial ecosystem is a network of connected parts within a specific area that work together to support and grow successful new businesses. According to the OECD, it includes formal and informal institutions, physical and digital infrastructure, various organizations, supportive policies, and clear rules. All these create an environment that helps new companies start and expand.

The focus is on "productive entrepreneurship," meaning businesses that add real economic value and innovation by creating and growing new firms, not just any activity. This focus helps ecosystem builders concentrate on supporting ventures that benefit society and the economy. The idea of entrepreneurial ecosystems has changed over time. Originally, it meant groups of similar industries in one area. Now, it's seen as a dynamic and adaptable system where different parts constantly interact and evolve. This is important for projects aimed at strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems in the EU and encouraging innovative entrepreneurs.

An ecosystem thrives not only because of its parts—like startups, schools, and investors—but because of how these parts connect and work together. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) points out that it's the relationships between these parts that create the right conditions for entrepreneurship. Research shows these ecosystems are continuously shaped and recreated through ongoing interactions.

So, building an ecosystem is more than just putting the right pieces in place. It's about actively encouraging and improving the connections between people and organizations—like a jazz jam session where everyone improvises and collaborates to create something greater. This approach helps ideas, capital, and talent flow freely, leading to more successful and innovative new businesses.

3.2 Pillars of a Vibrant Ecosystem: Core Components and Dynamics

A strong entrepreneurial ecosystem is built upon several interconnected pillars, each contributing to its overall momentum. Drawing from our project insights and from the literature, the key components include both Stakeholders and Framework Elements.

Stakeholders (Actors/Participants) in the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

- **Startups & Entrepreneurs:** startups are the core of the ecosystems, the engines of innovation and growth, bringing new products, services, and employment opportunities to the market, driving economic activity.
- **Educational Institutions:** Universities, colleges, and vocational training centers are essential for talent development, research, and fostering entrepreneurship among students and researchers.
- **Incubators and Accelerators:** These organizations provide structured support through mentorship, guidance, training programs, access to funding, and networking opportunities, aiding early-stage ventures and those prepared for growth.
- **Investors and Funding Organizations:** Access to various forms of capital is essential. This includes angel investors, venture capital firms, governmental funding agencies, grant-awarding bodies, and crowdfunding platforms, each playing a role at different stages of a startup's lifecycle.
- **Support Organizations (ESOs):** This category includes Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs), Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), providers of legal and consulting services, and co-working spaces offering flexible infrastructure and community.
- **Government & Policy:** Public bodies at local, regional, and national levels influence the entrepreneurial landscape through policies, regulatory frameworks, and initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to entry and growth.
- **Corporations:** Big companies can support startups by becoming early customers, offering investment, or sharing skilled talent.
- **Community Leaders ("Treetops"):** Influential individuals who help promote the ecosystem, drive change, and connect people and resources.
- **Funders (Public and Private):** These are not direct investors in startups but fund the ecosystem itself—like foundations, government programs, and CSR initiatives.

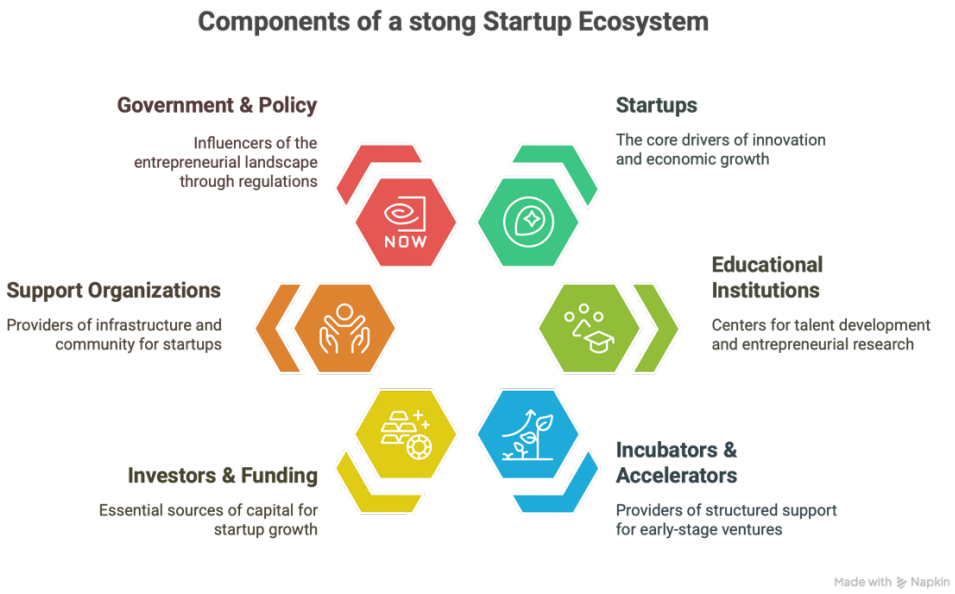

Figure 1: Components of a Startup Ecosystem

Ecosystem Framework Elements (Conditions/Foundational Pillars):

- **Human Capital/Talent:** The availability of a skilled workforce, including individuals with technical expertise, managerial capabilities, and specific entrepreneurial talents, is a key factor in an ecosystem's success.
- **Markets:** Access to markets, both domestic and international, allows startups to test, validate, and scale their products and services effectively.
- **Culture:** A societal and community culture that supports entrepreneurship – encouraging risk-taking, collaboration, celebrating successes, and viewing failure as a learning opportunity – is an important asset.
- **Networks:** Diverse and accessible business and social networks facilitate the flow of information, opportunities, mentorship, and partnerships.
- **Infrastructure:** Robust physical infrastructure (transportation, utilities) and digital infrastructure (broadband connectivity, data centers) are fundamental requirements for modern entrepreneurship.

While elements like funding and buildings often get the most attention, it's usually the less visible elements—like a supportive culture, strong networks, and inspiring leadership—that are harder to build. Yet, these are often what make an entrepreneurial ecosystem truly successful in the long run. Experts, including the Kauffman Foundation and scholars like Isenberg, stress that trust, shared goals, and collaboration are more important than just giving out money.

Our project's work, especially the "Mapping of the Key Entrepreneurial Competences" deliverable, looks at the mindsets and attitudes that help build a strong entrepreneurial culture. Ecosystem builders need to do more than just offer resources. They must also focus on building the right environment. This means sharing success stories, highlighting role models, encouraging real connections, and promoting a common vision of ambition and growth.

3.3 The Ecosystem Orchestra: Key Stakeholders and their Roles

A strong entrepreneurial ecosystem works like a well-organized orchestra. Each stakeholder is like a musician with a different instrument and role. Just as musicians must play in harmony to deliver a great performance, these stakeholders must work together to create successful outcomes. For the ecosystem to work well, these groups must collaborate closely. This helps ensure better use of resources, sharing of knowledge, stronger advocacy, and continuous progress. As noted by Virtus InterPress (Ostapenko et al., 2024), cooperation between businesses, public bodies, communities, and others is vital for building an innovation-driven economy.

However, these relationships are complex. Stakeholders have different levels of influence, and sometimes their goals may not align. Understanding the roles of "Treetops" (leaders), "Grassroots" (entrepreneurs and local actors), and "Funders" is essential for clear communication and engagement.

As the Kauffman Foundation highlights, limited resources, trust issues, and unclear collaboration benefits can make cooperation difficult. Competition is also a natural part of the system. This means that ecosystem builders need to act as facilitators—helping stakeholders build trust, find common goals, and work together. Tools like stakeholder mapping can help identify key players, understand their power and interests, and develop strategies to manage conflicts and encourage collaboration. To provide a clearer overview, table below outlines the core components of an entrepreneurial ecosystem and the typical roles and interactions of key stakeholders. This serves as a foundation map for understanding the ecosystem's landscape.

Ecosystem Component	Description	Key Stakeholders Involved	Typical Roles/ Contributions	Potential Interactions/ Synergies
1. Accessible Markets	Availability of and access to local, national, and international customers, and industry value chains.	Startups, Corporations, Trade Associations, Government (trade promotion agencies)	Facilitate customer access, partnerships, and market entry.	All play a role in accessible markets, facilitating customer access, partnerships, and market entry.
2. Human Capital & Talent	Availability of skilled labor, experienced managers, and entrepreneurial talent.	Educational Institutions, Startups, Corporations, Training Providers, Individual Professionals	Educate Contribute to the talent pool.	Universities tailor curricula, mentorship programs connect professionals with entrepreneurs, and industry-specific training programs upskill the workforce.
3. Funding & Finance	Availability of seed capital, angel investment, venture capital, debt financing, grants, and other funds.	Angel Investors, Venture Capitalists, Banks, Government Agencies, Crowdfunding Platforms, Foundations	Provide capital at various stages, offer financial expertise, assess risk & provide risk management?.	Investor networks connect startups with capital. Government co-investment funds leverage private investment. Accelerators facilitate access to seed funding. Crowdfunding platforms enable community-backed ventures.
4. Support Systems	Incubators, accelerators, co-working spaces, mentorship programs, legal/accounting services, ESOs.	Incubators, Accelerators, Mentors, Service Providers, Universities, Industry Associations	Provide infrastructure, training, mentorship, networking, specialized advice, community building.	Incubators nurture early-stage ideas. Accelerators scale promising startups. Mentors guide entrepreneurs. ESOs coordinate support efforts and advocate for entrepreneurs.
5. Education & Training	Entrepreneurship education, skills development	Universities, Colleges, Vocational Schools,	Offer formal degrees, specialized	Universities spin off research into startups. Entrepreneurship

	programs, research institutions generating knowledge.	Research Institutions, Private Training Providers	courses, research outputs, practical skills training, foster entrepreneurial mindset.	programs integrated into curricula. Lifelong learning opportunities for entrepreneurs. Collaboration between industry and academia on R&D.
6. Conducive Culture	Societal attitudes towards risk-taking, failure, success, innovation, and collaboration.	Media, Community Leaders, Educational Institutions, Successful Entrepreneurs, Role Models	Shape narratives, celebrate entrepreneurship, encourage risk-taking, promote collaboration, provide inspiration.	Media showcases success stories and lessons from failures. Role models inspire new entrepreneurs. Educational systems foster creativity and problem-solving. Community events celebrate innovation.
7. Enabling Policies & Leadership	Government regulations, tax policies, legal frameworks, public sector leadership, and advocacy.	Government (Local, Regional, National), Policymakers, Regulatory Bodies, Advocacy Groups	Create favorable legal/tax environment, reduce bureaucracy, provide public goods (infrastructure, R&D funding), encourage entrepreneurship, fair competition, protect IP.	Streamlined business registration processes. Tax incentives for R&D and investment. Public-private partnerships for ecosystem development. Strong political leadership.
8. Networks & Connectivity	Density and quality of social and professional networks, access to peers, mentors, and partners.	Entrepreneurs, Mentors, Investors, ESOs, Industry Associations, Alumni Networks	Facilitate information flow, provide access to resources and opportunities, foster trust and collaboration, offer emotional support.	Connect diverse stakeholders, online platforms for broader connections, industry-specific groups for knowledge sharing, and mentorship networks.
9. Infrastructure	Physical (transport, utilities, office space) and digital (broadband, data centers) infrastructure.	Government, Private Developers, Utility Companies, Telecom Providers, Data Centre Developers/ Operators	Provide essential services and facilities for business operations and innovation.	Public investment in high-speed internet. Development of science parks and innovation districts. Affordable co-working spaces. Reliable energy and transportation networks.

This table provides an essential understanding, assisting ecosystem builders to identify key areas and actors for strategic engagement and development, aligning with the Kauffman Foundation's call to "Map the ecosystem".

3.4 Guiding Philosophies: Leading Models for Ecosystem Architecture

Several important models help explain and guide how to build entrepreneurial ecosystems. Each model offers a different perspective and focus. Knowing these models gives ecosystem builders useful strategies.

Kauffman Foundation Model: The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation is a leading voice in entrepreneurship. Their model focuses on building ecosystems based on community, inclusiveness, and supporting entrepreneurs who are often overlooked because of factors like race, gender, wealth, or location. The goal is to create a shared language and improve coordination among different groups involved. They use a "discover, design, deliver" process to develop ecosystems step by step.

Key strategies include:

- Reducing advantages for established players to give newcomers a fair chance
- Listening carefully to entrepreneurs to understand their needs
- Mapping out the ecosystem to see who is involved and how they connect
- Thinking big but starting small and moving quickly
- Avoiding dividing the community or strategies artificially
- Using crises as chances to innovate and improve

The Kauffman model's focus on inclusivity and community fits well with Project Excellent's aim to connect different European ecosystems and ensure equal opportunities for all.

Ecosystem Lifecycle Model: Startup Genome views entrepreneurial ecosystems as going through four main stages: Activation, Globalization, Attraction (or Expansion), and Integration (Ostapenko et al., 2024). Each stage has its own features, needs, goals, and signals that show when it's time to move to the next stage.

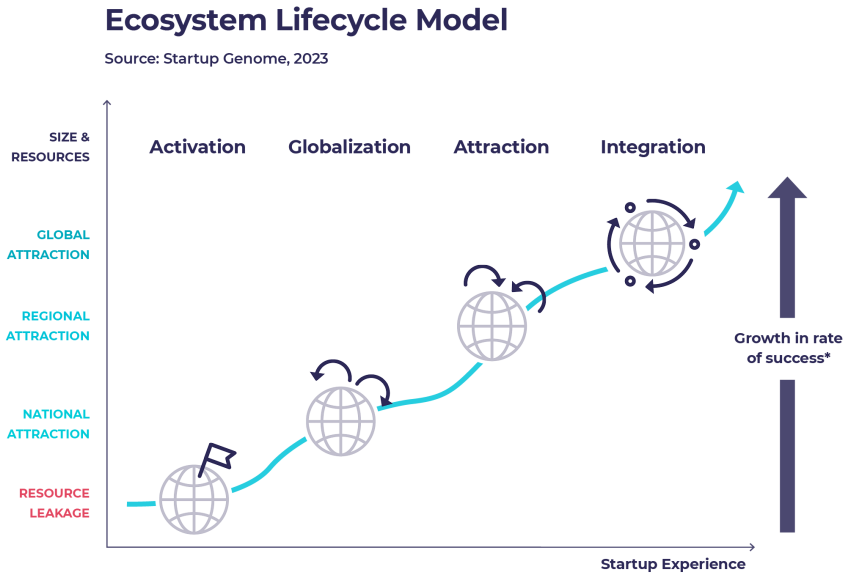

*Figure 2: Startup Genome model: Ecosystem Lifecycle (*As ecosystems advance across the lifecycle, they have higher rates of success, ie. a higher proportion of the ecosystem receives funding, becomes scaleups, and has successful exits.)*

For example:

- In the **Activation** stage, the focus is on increasing the number of startups and getting early funding.

- In the **Globalization** stage, the focus shifts to connecting startups globally and helping them enter international markets.

A key idea of this model is that efforts should match the ecosystem's current stage. Doing the right things at the wrong time wastes resources. This lifecycle model helps ecosystem builders know what actions to prioritize and how to adjust their strategies based on how mature the ecosystem is and what it needs to grow.

Isenberg/Babson College Model: Created by Daniel Isenberg at Babson College, this model highlights six key parts of an entrepreneurial ecosystem:

1. Supportive Culture
2. Helpful Policies and Leadership
3. Access to the Right Finance
4. Skilled People
5. Markets that welcome new products
6. Various Institutional Supports

A main point of this model is that every ecosystem is unique because it develops in its own special context. Many factors interact in complex ways, so there's no one-size-fits-all formula for success. This model provides a clear but flexible framework and stresses the importance of adapting strategies to fit the specific conditions of each ecosystem. This makes it very useful for the diverse ecosystems across Europe.

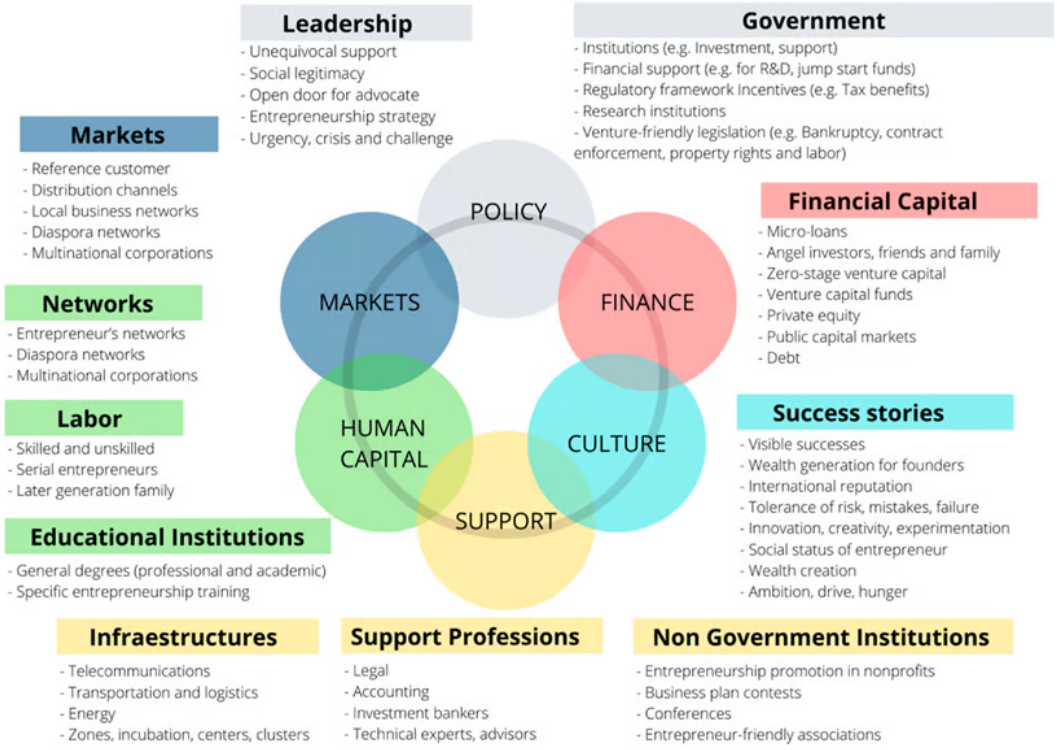

Figure 3: Domains of the Entrepreneurship Ecosystem (2011, Daniel Isenberg)

Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE) – Ecosystem Diagnostic Toolkit: ANDE's toolkit combines nine different evaluation systems into eight main areas to study: Finance, Business Support, Policy, Markets, Human Capital, Infrastructure, Research & Development, and Culture. It's more than just a theory—it includes practical tools like lists of indicators and surveys for businesses to help measure how well an ecosystem is working. Although it was first made for developing countries, its tools can be used in many different settings. ANDE's toolkit is important because it uses real data to help understand ecosystems, support better decision-making, and track progress over time.

Figure 4: ESHIP Goals in Kauffman Foundation Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Understanding these various models helps ecosystem builders recognize the complex aspects of their work and choose or modify frameworks that align more effectively with their local context and strategic goals. Table 2 offers a comparative summary to support this decision-making.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Leading Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Models

Model/ Framework	Core Focus/ Philosophy	Key Components/ Domains/ Phases	Strengths	Limitations	Relevance for European Ecosystem Builders
Kauffman Foundation	Community-driven, inclusivity, supporting disconnected entrepreneurs, bottom-up approach.	ESHIP goals include "Discover, Design, Deliver" process with strategies to favor incumbents less, listen to entrepreneurs, and map the ecosystem.	Strong emphasis on social equity and practical, actionable advice. Focus on the "how-to" of building.	Long-term impact, difficult to quantify quickly.	Relevant for fostering inclusive growth in diverse European regions.
Startup Genome	Lifecycle-based development, aligning strategies with ecosystems' maturity.	Phases: Activation, Globalization, Attraction, Integration. Each with specific characteristics, objectives and triggers.	Dynamic, stage-based approach for strategic prioritization, avoiding misaligned efforts.	Data from tech ecosystems may not always show clear phase transitions.	Useful for understanding ecosystems' evolution and setting realistic goals.
Isenberg/ Babson College	Holistic, context-dependent system with interacting domains.	6 Domains: Culture, Policy & Leadership, Finance, Human Capital, Markets, Institutional Support	Comprehensive and flexible, emphasizing in ecosystems' uniqueness and complex interactions.	Context-emphasized approach is less prescriptive and more challenging to operate	strategies tailor- made to diverse European contexts, discouraging "one-size-fits-all" solutions.
ANDE Ecosystem Diagnostic Toolkit	Practical, data-driven assessment based on synthesized combined frameworks.	8 Domains: Finance, Business Support, Policy, Markets, Human Capital, Infrastructure, R&D, Culture. Includes indicators & survey tools.	Provides concrete tools for diagnosis and measurement. Adaptable, especially for emerging ecosystems.	Indicators may need adaptation for highly developed ecosystems. Relies on data availability.	Methodology for European builders to evaluate ecosystems, identify gaps, and monitor progress.

3.5 The ExcellEnt Blueprint: A European Model for Ecosystem Excellence

Project Excellent, throughout its mission aims to strengthen entrepreneurial practices and forge connections across EU ecosystems, is implicitly developing its own blueprint for ecosystem development.[1] This "ExcellEnt Blueprint" is not a rigid model but rather an adaptive framework emerging from the project's systematic activities and research. Its core lies in a structured progression through key stages, emerging from deep analysis of entrepreneurial competencies and best practices within diverse European contexts.

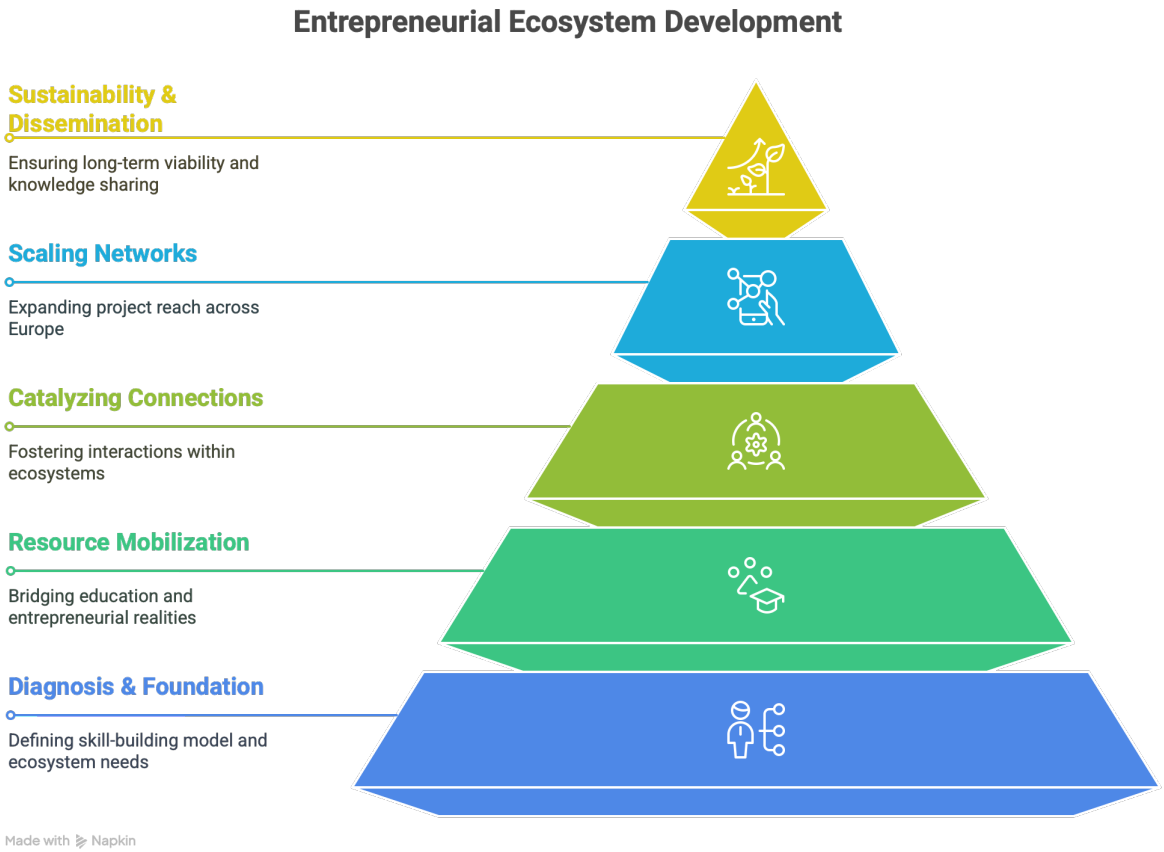

Figure 5: Entrepreneurial System Development in Excellent Project

The project's main steps create a basic structure for building strong entrepreneurial communities:

1. **Understanding and Building Foundations:**
   This first step focuses on creating a practical way to teach important entrepreneurship skills and figuring out what the first six communities need most. It uses reports like D1.2, which shows key entrepreneurial skills across Europe, and interviews with people involved in these communities. This stage helps us understand both individual skills and what the communities require.
2. **Gathering Resources and Filling Gaps:**
   The second step finds and provides the tools and resources entrepreneurs need. It tries to

close the gap between what people learn in school and the real challenges of starting a business by offering helpful and relevant materials.

3. **Connecting People and Encouraging Teamwork:**
   This step works on building better connections and cooperation among community members to support entrepreneurs. Programs like the "discovery program" and Soft-Landing Missions help people in different communities work together.
4. **Growing Networks and Influence:**
   Here, the goal is to reach beyond the original partners by bringing in more entrepreneurial communities across Europe. It shares what's been learned and invites new groups to join, making the network bigger and more effective.
5. **Keeping Things Going and Sharing Knowledge:**
   The last step focuses on making sure the project and its communities last for a long time. This includes building strong partnerships and creating guides, like the handbook based on this report, to help continue developing these communities.

Together, these steps—from understanding needs and finding resources to connecting people, growing the network, and ensuring lasting impact—form a practical way to build entrepreneurial ecosystems. Important reports like the SWOT analysis (covering Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine, France, and Ireland) and the Best Practices Report show effective strategies discovered in the project.

Project Excellent aims to find a model for successful entrepreneurship, link theory with real practice, launch the European Entrepreneurship Academy, and run scale-up missions. This shows a complete approach to improving entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The ExcellEnt Blueprint stands out because it is based on research, cross-country learning, and practical methods. The handbook and toolkit created will guide people building ecosystems all over Europe, using the unique knowledge from Project Excellent's work.

3.6 Taking the Pulse: Methodologies and Tools for Ecosystem Assessment

A thorough understanding of an ecosystem's current state is a prerequisite for effective intervention. As the OECD emphasizes, "Diagnostic work is required to identify the enablers and barriers in each ecosystem". Similarly, the Kauffman Foundation advocates for the fundamental step of "Mapping the ecosystem". This diagnostic phase allows builders to identify strengths to leverage, weaknesses to address, opportunities to seize, and threats to mitigate.

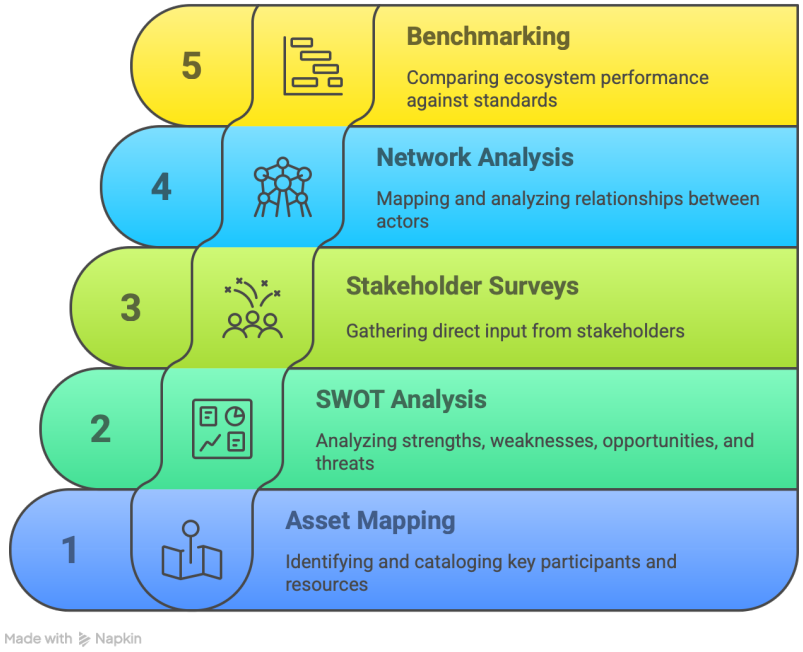

Figure 6: Methodologies for Ecosystem Assessment

Several methodologies are commonly employed for ecosystem assessment:

- **Asset Mapping:** This involves systematically identifying and cataloging the key participants (individuals and organizations), resources (financial, human, physical), and connections within the ecosystem. Both the ANDE toolkit (Aspen Network, 2013) and Kauffman's approaches consider the asset mapping as a foundational activity.
- **SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats):** A widely used strategic planning tool, SWOT analysis can be effectively applied at the ecosystem level. Project Excellent's D5 Report, which conducts SWOT analyses for diverse European ecosystems (Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine, France, Ireland), exemplifies this methodology's utility in gaining contextual insights.
- **Stakeholder Surveys and Interviews:** Gathering direct input from entrepreneurs, investors, support organizations, and other stakeholders provides rich qualitative and quantitative data on their perceptions, needs, and challenges. The ANDE toolkit includes survey instruments, and Project Excellent's "Compendium of Interviews with Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Stakeholders" demonstrates the value of this approach.

- **Network Analysis:** This methodology involves mapping and analyzing the relationships and flows between actors in the ecosystem. It can help visualize the network structure, identify key influencers or brokers, pinpoint isolated clusters, and reveal gaps in connectivity. Tools like Kumu are often used for this purpose [1].
- **Benchmarking:** Comparing an ecosystem's performance and characteristics against others (often more mature or successful) or against the established standards. The OECD conducts national and regional benchmarking, and the MIT Press article on scaling ecosystems discusses various ranking methodologies (Harrington, 2014)

A range of tools supports these methodologies:

- The **ANDE Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Diagnostic Toolkit** offers a comprehensive set of indicators and survey instruments tailored for assessing various domains of an ecosystem.
- **Main Street America** provides practical resources like an "Ecosystem Audit" and "Lifecycle Evaluation" tools, particularly useful for community-level assessment[2].
- Digital tools such as **Kumu** facilitate systems mapping and network visualization, while **PARTNER CPRM** helps manage community partner relationships.
- For data-driven insights, statistical software like **R and Python**, and data visualization platforms such as **Tableau and Power BI**, are increasingly employed to analyze quantitative metrics and interpret market trends [3].

The D33 Impact Measurement and Monitoring Framework developed in Project Excellent is an important tool. It includes clear goals (Strategic Objectives) and specific indicators (KPIs) to measure progress in areas like entrepreneurial success, diversity in the ecosystem, and overall growth. This framework is one of the project's key resources for tracking and understanding impact.To aid in the initial diagnostic phase, Table below offers a synthesized checklist, the strengths of multiple established frameworks and incorporating Project Excellent's specific focus areas.

Table 2: Ecosystem Diagnostic Checklist (Synthesized)

Domain/ Area of Assessment	Key Questions for Ecosystem Builders	Potential Indicators (Examples)	Relevant Frameworks/ Sources
1. Policy & Governance	Are policies supportive of new ventures & innovation? Is regulation clear & efficient? Is there strong leadership & advocacy for entrepreneurship?	Cost/time to start a business; Effective tax rates for startups; Startup-friendly legislation (e.g., Startup Acts); Regulatory burden; Government programs.	Isenberg, Kauffman, ANDE, OECD, Project Excellent D5 (SWOT)
2. Finance & Funding	Is there sufficient access to diverse funding sources (seed, angels, VCs, grants, debt) at all stages? Are investors aware &	Amount of VC/angel investment; Number of active investors/networks; Availability of public funding; Interest rates	Isenberg, Startup Genome, ANDE, Kauffman, Project Excellent D33 (KPIs),

[1] Derr, Alex. "40+ Community Engagement Tools for Building Connected Communities - Visible Network Labs." Visible Network Labs, April 2, 2025. https://visiblenetworklabs.com/2025/04/01/community-engagement-tools-for-building-connected-communities
[2] Main Street America. "Building a Community Entrepreneurial Ecosystem." Main Street America, January 15, 2022
[3] Lee, Sarah. "MBA Guide to a Sharp Venture Ecosystem Scan," Accessed 26/5/2025

	active? Are entrepreneurs investment-ready?	for SMEs; Success in raising capital.	GIZ, EBAN
3. Talent & Human Capital	Is there a pool of skilled talent (tech, business, entrepreneurial)? Are educational institutions aligned with ecosystem needs? Are there entrepreneurial skills development programs?	Availability of STEM graduates; Quality of entrepreneurship education; Entrepreneurial experience in the workforce; Ease of attracting/retaining talent;	Isenberg, Startup Genome, ANDE, Kauffman, OECD Talent Attractiveness
4. Culture & Community	Is there a culture that embraces risk-taking, innovation, & collaboration? Are entrepreneurs celebrated? Is failure seen as a learning opportunity? Is there strong community support?	Societal attitudes towards entrepreneurship; Number of role models/success stories; Density of networking events; Level of trust & collaboration among stakeholders.	Isenberg, Kauffman, ANDE, Startup Genome (Community Behaviors)
5. Markets & Customers	Do startups have access to early adopters & larger markets (local/global)? Are there supportive corporate customers or procurement opportunities?	Size of local/regional market; Access to international markets; Corporate engagement with startups; Public procurement for SMEs.	Isenberg, ANDE
6. Support Infrastructure (ESOs)	Is there a range of accessible & effective support organizations (incubators, accelerators, co-working spaces, mentors, advisors)? Is support coordinated or fragmented?	Number & quality of incubators/accelerators; Availability of mentorship programs; Density of ESOs; Startup satisfaction with support services.	Isenberg, Startup Genome, ANDE, Kauffman, JTP Groundwork, NIDHI
7. Networks & Connectivity	Are there strong, diverse, & accessible networks for entrepreneurs to connect with peers, mentors, investors, & partners? How dense & active are these networks?	Number of networking events; Perceived ease of access to mentors/investors; Collaboration levels between startups & other actors; Online networking platforms.	Kauffman, Startup Genome, ANDE, Project Excellent (Connectedness focus)
8. Innovation & R&D Capacity	Is there R&D in universities & research institutions? Is there effective technology transfer & commercialization of research? Are there prototyping resources?	R&D expenditure; Number of patents/licenses; University spin-offs; Makerspaces/labs; Collaboration between academia & industry.	ANDE, Startup Genome (Startup Experience)
9. Physical & Digital Infrastructure	Is there adequate & affordable physical infrastructure (transport, utilities, office space)? Is there reliable & high-speed digital connectivity?	Internet penetration & speed; Cost of utilities; Availability of affordable workspace; Quality of transport links.	ANDE, European Digital City Index
10. Ecosystem Dynamics & Performance	What is the rate of new firm formation & survival? Are there high-growth firms emerging? How does the ecosystem compare to others (benchmarking)?	Startup birth/death rates; No# scale-ups; Job creation by new firms; Ecosystem ranking (e.g., GEM, GEDI); Project Excellent D33 (KPIs).	Startup Genome, Kauffman, MIT Press (Measurement), Project Excellent D33

This checklist helps ecosystem builders self-assess, identify gaps, and prioritize deeper investigations, that support the "Map the ecosystem" and the "Diagnostic work" recommendations from leading frameworks.

4 Methodologies for Ecosystem Development

Effective ecosystem development depends on the application of proven methodologies tailored to specific goals, whether it's fostering collaboration, nurturing startups, securing funding, attracting resources, or scaling impact. This chapter explores the core strategies, drawing heavily on established best practices and integrating insights from Project Excellent's research and activities, particularly those relevant to the identification of effective approaches as anticipated in Task 4.2. The findings from Project Excellent's **D3 Entrepreneurial Best Practices Report** and the **Compendium of Interviews with Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Stakeholders** will be central to illustrating these methodologies within European context and project-specific learnings.

4.1 Cultivating Connections: Strategies for Collaboration

The dynamism of an entrepreneurial ecosystem is proportional to the strength and quality of its internal and external connections. Collaboration is not merely a desirable feature, but an essential catalyst for resource pooling, cross-pollination of ideas leading to innovation, expanded access to markets and expertise, and the creation of a mutually supportive environment [4]. Indeed, the growth and sustainability of an ecosystem depends on efficient and effective collaboration among its interconnected stakeholders including, universities, government bodies, entrepreneurs, and private corporations.

Methodologies for Fostering Collaboration and Networks:

- **Systematic Network Weaving**: Proactively identify key players, collaborators, and isolated groups. Connect individuals with shared goals, integrate diverse perspectives, and build trust-based, complementary ties. Use digital platforms for outreach and promote collaboration through events like hackathons and sector-specific initiatives.
- **Facilitating Stakeholder Engagement**: Ecosystem builders play a crucial role as conveners by organizing events—forums, workshops and matchmaking sessions to bring diverse stakeholders together. Project Excellent's soft-landing missions exemplify this, encouraging cross-border collaboration through targeted networking and support activities.
- **Addressing Collaboration Barriers**: Successful collaboration requires overcoming common obstacles. These include setting up clear ways to communicate, encouraging respect and openness to navigate different work styles and using strong project management to handle tasks and deadlines. It also involves having clear rules for solving conflicts and defining roles, so everyone knows their responsibilities. Finally, good collaboration requires being flexible with changes and building trust over time. **Leveraging Intermediaries:** Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs), such as government agencies, industry associations, incubators, and accelerators are vital intermediaries. They can design and implement programs, create neutral

[4] FasterCapital. "Collaboration: The Art of Collaboration within an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem." Last modified April 4, 2025. https://fastercapital.com/content/Collaboration--The-Art-of-Collaboration-within-an-Entrepreneurial-Ecosystem.html

spaces for interaction, and broker connections that individual actors might not achieve on their own.[17]

- **Embracing Open Innovation Principles:** This methodology encourages ecosystems to look beyond their internal capabilities by actively seeking external contributions and ideas, engaging in co-creation with external stakeholders, and establishing frameworks for sharing or licensing intellectual property.[12] The Biscay Startup Bay entrepreneurial ecosystem in Spain, fostered by public policies through an Open Innovation lens, provides a compelling case study of this approach.[12]

Insights from Project Excellent

Project Excellent is designed to strengthen ecosystem connections. In **Stage 3**, it focuses on "Enhancing connectedness and collaboration with ecosystem actors" through a structured discovery program. **Stage 4** expands this by "Widening EU entrepreneurial ecosystem connectivity," forming partnerships with local incubators and support organizations across Europe. The creation of the **European Entrepreneurship Academy** further supports this goal by offering a space for ongoing peer learning and networking among stakeholders.

The Kauffman Foundation highlights the need for intentional connections between diverse ecosystem leaders, especially in emerging or fragmented ecosystems where quality interactions don't happen naturally. In such cases, the role of the **ecosystem builder as a 'network weaver'** is critical in building trust and encouraging real collaboration.

Project Excellent's **discovery program** and **soft-landing missions** are clear examples of these active efforts, helping bridge gaps and create meaningful relationships across geographies and sectors.

This handbook aims to provide ecosystem builders with hands-on tools to:

- Map existing networks
- Identify key connectors and isolated players
- Design actions that enable both structured cooperation and spontaneous interaction

The goal is to strengthen the ecosystem's social fabric and boost collective impact.

4.2 Nurturing New Ventures: Best Practices in Startup Support

A core function of any entrepreneurial ecosystem is the provision of effective support mechanisms that help new ventures navigate the journey from idea to market viability and growth. Incubation, acceleration, and mentorship programs are cornerstone methodologies in this regard.

4.2.1 Incubation Programs

Incubators are typically designed for entrepreneurs in the very early stages of venture creation i.e. those still developing their ideas, assembling initial teams, and conducting experiments to establish product-market fit[5]. The support offered, often includes access to physical workspace, shared services, mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs and industry experts, potential introductions to seed investors, and guidance on foundational aspects like legal structuring and accounting. Incubation programs generally offer flexible timeframes, allowing startups to mature at their own pace.

Figure 7: Incubator vs. Accelerator (Image courtesy of Ramotion)

Designing an Incubator: A Practical Framework

A useful model for setting up an incubator comes from the JTP Groundwork technical assistance in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. Key elements include:

- **Clear Mission**: Align with regional goals, such as economic diversification.
- **Strategic Focus**: Choose areas that match local strengths, like Clean Energy or Digitalization.
- **Infrastructure**: Prefer accessible locations, such as city centers.
- **Governance**: Use a multi-partner structure (e.g., NGO-style), involving local authorities, universities, and development agencies for wider support and shared resources.
- **Funding Model**: Combine public funds (e.g., Just Transition Fund), stakeholder equity, and income from paid services.
- **Core Team**: Recruit a skilled, dedicated team to manage and grow the incubator.

[5] Morgan, J.P. "Incubator vs Accelerator: Which Is Best for Your Startup?" Accessed: 7/5/2025

- **Target Groups**: Offer basic support to young or aspiring entrepreneurs and incubation services to early-stage startups (pre-MVP).
- **Support Services**: Provide training, information, networking opportunities, and workspace.

Additional guidance on curriculum design, team development, and managing impact-driven programs can be found in the *Guide to Impact Incubation and Acceleration* by SecondMuse (*Frontier Incubators, 2024*).

4.2.2 Acceleration Programs

Accelerators, in contrast, are structured to help startups with a validated Minimum Viable Product (MVP) and a clear path towards product-market fit to scale rapidly. These programs are typically intensive, cohort-based, and operate over a fixed, shorter duration (e.g., 3-6 months). They offer support, including workshops and working sessions, intense mentorship from a wide range of experts and peers, and often involve an equity stake in exchange for seed funding and program participation.

The NIDHI-Accelerator Guidelines from India offer a useful reference for structuring such programs.[40] Key features include options for sector-specific or sector-agnostic cohorts, a program spanning from 3 to 9 months. It is a hybrid delivery model (on-site and virtual), with strong emphasis on one-to-one mentoring (ideally a minimum of 50 hours per startup), and culmination in a demo day to facilitate access to further capital and market opportunities. The guidelines also address budget considerations and the potential for engaging external partners to manage the program professionally.

4.2.3 Mentorship Programs

Mentorship is a consistently highlighted, critical success factor for entrepreneurs. It provides invaluable guidance, support, access to networks, and technical advice that can significantly impact a startup's trajectory. Effective mentorship programs accelerate the learning curve for entrepreneurs, enhance their strategic thinking capabilities, provide crucial emotional support during challenging times, open doors to new opportunities through the mentor's network, and infuse a sense of accountability.

Figure 8: The Mentorship Relationship (FasterCapital)

Effective Mentorship Program Design

Key practices for designing and running effective mentorship programs include:

- Defining clear goals for both the program and each mentor-mentee relationship
- Establishing systems to track progress and collect feedback
- Promoting accountability and commitment from both parties
- Ensuring tailored, context-specific guidance
- Leveraging mentors' experiences to help avoid common mistakes
- Providing objective, fresh perspectives

Practical guidance is available from sources such as the *eMentors* podcast, *e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems* resources, and the *SCORE* program. The *Chronus* 5-step framework includes:

1. Design the Program
2. Attract Participants
3. Match Mentors and Mentees
4. Guide the Relationships
5. Measure Impact

Similarly, *TogetherPlatform* recommends defining scope, choosing a mentoring format, setting up matching and follow-up systems, equipping participants, monitoring progress, adapting based on feedback, and fostering continuous improvement.

Within Project Excellent, the activity "Defining an actionable skill-building model" informs the structure of our startup support actions. Insights from the *D3 Entrepreneurial Best Practices Report* provide further recommendations based on experiences from the project's European partners. The table below outlines the main types and components of these support mechanisms.

Table 3: Startup Support Program Essentials (Incubation vs. Acceleration vs. Mentorship)

Feature	Incubation Program	Acceleration Program	Mentorship Program
Target Startup Stage	Idea stage, pre-MVP, early validation	MVP achieved, path to product-market fit, early traction, seeking rapid growth/scaling	All stages, tailored to specific needs
Primary Goals	Develop idea, build initial team, validate product-market fit, prepare for seed funding	Rapid scaling, market penetration, secure Series A/follow-on funding, refine business model for growth	Skill development, strategic guidance, problem-solving, network expansion, emotional support, accountability
Typical Duration	6 months to 5 years (flexible, often longer-term)	3 to 6 months (intensive, fixed term)	Varies it can be short or long term focused
Support Offered	Workspace, shared services, foundational business	Intensive scheduled training (growth hacking, sales, etc.),	One-on-one or group guidance, industry-specific

	training, access to mentors & seed investors, legal/accounting aid	deep mentorship from diverse experts, access to VC networks, demo days, seed funding (often for equity)	advice, network introductions, feedback, strategic planning support
Key Success Factors for Program Design	Strong selection process, quality mentorship, relevant curriculum, flexible support, community building, clear milestones, access to early-stage funding. Subject to local needs.	Competitive selection, high-quality mentors & curriculum focused on growth, strong investor network, intensive schedule, measurable outcomes, strong cohort dynamic.	Clear objectives, effective mentor-mentee matching, structured guidance & resources, regular check-ins, feedback mechanisms, confidentiality, commitment from both parties.

A crucial consideration emerging from various frameworks is that the most impactful support programs are not generic replicas of globally famous models but are instead highly contextualized to the specific needs of their targeted entrepreneurs and the unique strengths and characteristics of their local ecosystem. Isenberg's model consistently emphasizes on the importance of context. The detailed design of the Stara Zagora incubator, for example, is carefully tailored to the region's economic transition goals and existing strengths in sectors like Clean Energy and Digitalization (European Commission, 2024). Similarly, India's NIDHI-Accelerator program identifies priority sectors relevant to national strategic goals. Startup Genome also advises that, during the Activation phase, ecosystems should select and focus on one or two startup sub-sectors that build on local economic strengths. This implies that the handbook developed by Project Excellent should strongly guide ecosystem builders in conducting thorough assessments of needs for the targeted entrepreneurs and adapt program designs—including curriculum content, mentor selection criteria, and funding focus—to their specific local or regional circumstances. Project Excellent's D5 SWOT analyses for different EU countries [22] can provide a valuable starting point for this contextualization process across Europe.

4.3 Fueling Growth: Enhancing Access to Diverse Funding Mechanisms

Access to capital is the lifeblood of startups, yet it remains one of the most significant challenges entrepreneurs face, particularly those in underserved communities or operating in emerging ecosystems. A comprehensive ecosystem strategy must therefore include robust methodologies for enhancing access to a diverse range of funding mechanisms.

The Funding Landscape for Startups:

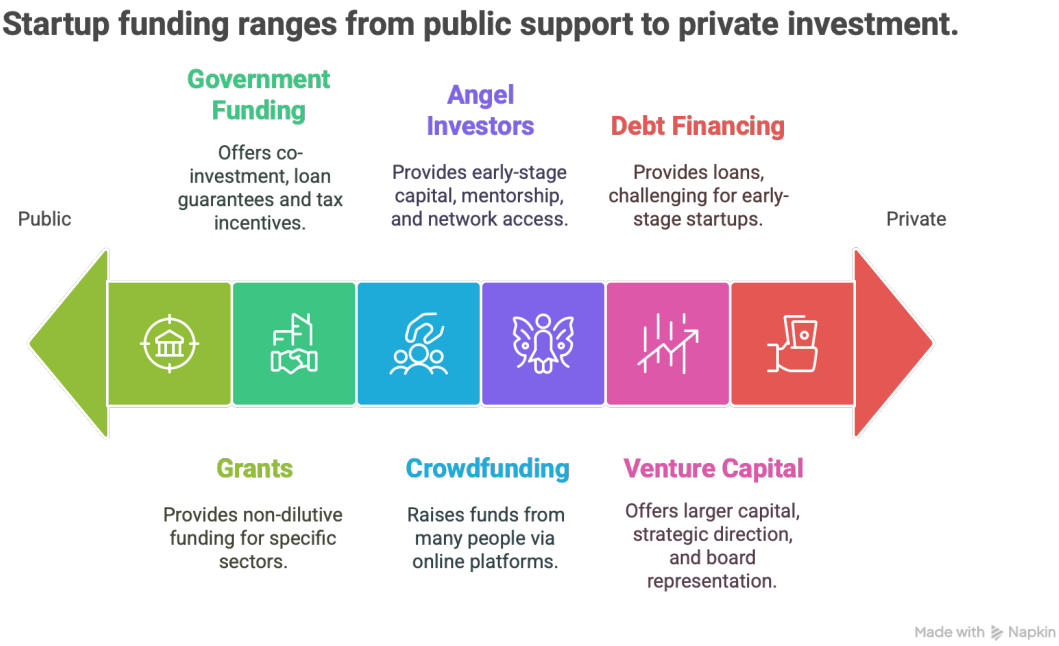

Figure 9: Startup funding landscape

- **Angel Investors:** Typically, high-net-worth individuals who provide early-stage capital (pre-seed and seed) to startups, often in exchange for equity. Beyond funding, angel investors frequently offer valuable industry expertise, mentorship, and access to their networks.[9] Organizations like EBAN (European Business Angels Network) and ACA (Angel Capital Association) provide resources and guides for establishing and managing angel groups[6].
- **Venture Capital (VC):** VC firms provide larger amounts of capital to startups with high growth potential, usually from Series A rounds onwards. They conduct thorough due diligence, take equity stakes, and often play an active role in a startup's strategic direction, typically through board representation. VCs expect substantial returns on their investments[7]. The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) offers insights into best practices for creating effective VC ecosystems, emphasizing the government's role in setting a conducive environment (Lerner et al., 2013).

[6] "Guides on Angel Investing – EBAN." Accessed June 4, 2025. https://www.eban.org/guides-on-angel-investing/

[7] Founders Network. "A Founder's Guide to Startup Fundraising." Founders Network, April 12, 2023. https://foundersnetwork.com/startup-fundraising/

- **Grants:** Non-dilutive funding provided by government agencies, foundations, or other organizations, often targeted at specific sectors (e.g., R&D, social impact, regional development) or to fill market gaps where private investment is lacking. The GIZ guide "Guide on strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems" analyses the approaches to grant funding for entrepreneurs [8].
- **Crowdfunding:** Raising small amounts of money from many people, typically via online platforms. This method is particularly appealing for consumer-facing businesses and can serve as a marketing and validation tool alongside fundraising.
- **Government Funding and Support:** Beyond grants, governments can offer co-investment funds (matching private investments), loan guarantees (reducing risk for lenders), tax incentives for R&D or investment, and direct funding programs, The OECD's "International Compendium of Entrepreneurship Policies" provides a comprehensive overview of such interventions (OECD, 2020).
- **Debt Financing:** Loans from banks or other financial institutions. While common for established businesses, debt financing can be challenging for early-stage startups due to lack of collateral and proven cash flow.

4.3.1 Strategies for Ecosystem Builders to Enhance Funding Access:

Ecosystem builders can adopt a multi-pronged approach:

Increasing the Supply of Finance

- **Capacity Building for Financial Organizations:**

This means offering training and support to financial actors involved in startup and impact investing. It includes:

  - Helping experienced angel investors train new ones
  - Guiding foundations and companies that want to invest in social or environmental impact
  - Supporting venture capital (VC) fund managers with topics like creating investment strategies, raising funds, and making deals
  - Training banks on how to design new financial products and assess risks when working with startups

- **Developing Grant Funding Programs:** Strategically designing and implementing grant schemes to fill specific financing gaps, particularly for innovative or early-stage ventures, ensuring clear objectives, risk mitigation, and proper monitoring.
- **Facilitating Matching Capital:** Implementing programs where public funds match private investments into new funds or directly into startups, thereby de-risking private investment and increasing available capital.

[8] GIZ "Strengthening Entrepreneurial Ecosystems An Interactive Guide for Development Professionals," 28/5/2025 https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2021-en-entrepreneurial-ecosystems-guide.pdf

Improving Entrepreneurs' Ability to Access Finance

- **Investment Readiness Programs:** Equip entrepreneurs with the skills and knowledge to develop strong business plans, financial models, pitch decks, and to navigate the due diligence process. This includes understanding investor expectations, legal and accounting terms.[19] The IRAS program by IPSD.ps is a good example[9].
- **Matchmaking Initiatives:** Organizing events, developing platforms, and planning bespoke introductions to connect vetted entrepreneurs with relevant investors. The GIZ report "Matchmaking between businesses and investors" details various forms of such initiatives.
- **Improving Financial Regulations and Infrastructure:** Advocating for and supporting the development of financial regulations and infrastructure that are conducive to startup financing; including clear rules for new financial instruments and capacity building for regulatory bodies.

Insights from Project Excellent

Project Excellent's consortium includes partners with direct links to the investment and acceleration landscape, such as Booster Labs focusing on DeepTech acceleration, which inherently involves significant capital mobilization. The project's target groups explicitly include investors, and its soft-landing missions often feature matchmaking sessions with potential investors, playing an active role in facilitating financial connections.

The Role of a Financial Ecosystem Builder

A strong ecosystem builder in finance acts more as a *capital choreographer* than a simple connector. Their role goes beyond linking startups to funding—they actively shape a diverse and balanced capital landscape. This includes:

- Building and educating local angel investor networks
- Attracting national and international VC funds
- Strategically using public funding to fill market gaps
- Strengthening the investment-readiness of startups across all stages

This dual focus—on both the *supply side* (training investors) and the *demand side* (preparing entrepreneurs)—is emphasized by GIZ and IPSD.ps. Similarly, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) underscores the government's key role in creating the right conditions for venture capital to grow, such as supporting entrepreneur training and ensuring a strong pipeline of investable ventures.

For European ecosystem builders, this means adopting a comprehensive approach that builds a steady flow of capital from early-stage to scale-up. At the same time, they must equip both entrepreneurs to secure funding and investors to deploy it effectively.

[9] IPSD - Innovative Private Sector Development. "IPSD - Innovative Private Sector Development - Developing a Dynamic Startup Finance Ecosystem," May 15, 2025. https://ipsd.ps/content/our-work/developing-a-dynamic-startup-finance-ecosystem.html

4.4 Attracting Magnets: Strategies for Drawing Talent and Investments

The ability of an entrepreneurial ecosystem to attract and retain high-quality talent and diverse forms of investments is a key determinant of its long-term capacity and global competitiveness. These two "magnets" are often interlinked, as vibrant talent pools attract investment, and investment opportunities attract talent.

Attracting and Retaining Talent

Quality human capital is consistently identified as a cornerstone of thriving ecosystems. Strategies for talent attraction and retention include:

- **Developing Local Talent Pools:** Promoting robust educational training programs at all levels, from vocational training to higher education, that are aligned with the skills demanded by the ecosystem's startups and growth sectors.[19] This includes fostering partnerships between educational institutions and businesses to ensure curriculum relevance and create pathways to employment.[10]
- **Attracting Foreign and Mobile Talent:** Implementing targeted skill development and assistance programs for foreign talent, including pre- and post-arrival support (e.g., relocation information, cultural orientation).[57] Utilizing digital platforms to advertise job vacancies to a global audience, engaging diplomatic efforts to promote the ecosystem as an attractive place to work, and offering tax incentives or streamlined visa processes for highly skilled individuals and/or startup founders are also effective.[11]
- **Focusing on Quality of Life and Inclusivity:** The OECD's Talent Attractiveness Indicators highlight that factors beyond direct job opportunities, such as overall quality of life, family environment, future prospects, income and tax levels, and the inclusiveness of society, play a significant role in attracting and retaining talent.

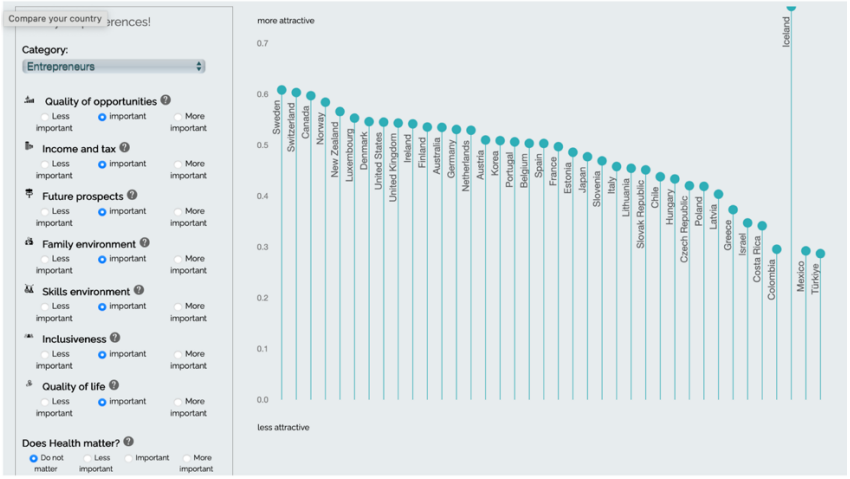

Figure 10: OECD Talent Attractiveness Indicators

[10] "Building a Startup Ecosystem: Lessons from Successful Markets - Seedefy," Accessed 26/5/2025
[11] Migration and Home Affairs. "New Joint EMN–OECD Inform Explores Innovative Strategies to Attract Foreign Talent in the EU," 27/2/2025

Attracting Investments (including Foreign Direct Investments and Corporate Venture Capital):

Securing diverse sources of investments is crucial for fueling startup growth and ecosystem development. Strategies include:

- **Creating a Supportive and Stable Macro-Environment:** This involves establishing supportive ecosystems with clear and favorable legal and regulatory frameworks, robust intellectual property protection, and transparent governance. The IADB report emphasizes on the government's role in creating this conducive environment, which includes ensuring access to cutting-edge technologies and skilled profesionals, and aligning with international norms to provide a familiar and predictable setting for global investors.
- **Promoting Collaborative Innovation and Diversifying Funding Sources:** Actively fostering collaborations between local startups and international corporations or investors, and diversifying the available funding sources beyond traditional VC (e.g., encouraging corporate venturing, strategic alliances, and access to international grants) can make an ecosystem more attractive (Yeboah & Gyan, 2023).
- **Targeted Investment Promotion:** Developing and implementing strategies to specifically attract FDI and CVC, which may involve showcasing local innovation strengths, offering incentives for investments in strategic sectors, and facilitating partnerships and joint ventures that promote knowledge transfer while safeguarding local interests.
- **Strengthening Local Capabilities:** Investing in local education and skills development supports domestic talent and makes the ecosystem more attractive to foreign investors seeking a competent workforce.[59] Establishing well-regarded startup incubation and acceleration programs can also signal a mature and supportive environment for investments.

Insights from Project Excellent

Project Excellent's work is predominantly linked to talent and investment attraction. Deliverable D1.2 "Mapping of Key Entrepreneurial Competences is fundamental for understanding the talent needs and gaps within European ecosystems", thereby describing strategies for talent development and attraction. The project's various soft-landing missions are designed to connect ecosystems, which can directly lead to the attraction of talent (e.g., entrepreneurs relocating or collaborating) and investment (e.g., investors discovering new opportunities). The overarching goal of "Widening EU entrepreneurial ecosystems connectedness" involves making participating ecosystems more visible and attractive to external talent and resources.

Figure 11: Excellent Soft Landing Missions

It is crucial to understand that attracting talent and investments extends beyond mere marketing or promotional campaigns. It requires the fundamental construction of a genuinely attractive, supportive, and opportunity-rich environment where both skilled individuals and capital can find long-term value and thrive. This includes paying close attention to non-business factors. The OECD Talent Attractiveness indicators, for instance, cover a broad spectrum including "Quality of opportunities, Income and tax, Future prospects, Family environment, Skills environment, Inclusiveness, and Quality of life"[12]. Furthermore, research highlights that "non-business inputs significantly shape relocation decisions," encompassing aspects like the quality of private well-being systems (e.g., cost of living, family support networks) and the level of societal development (e.g., public safety, technological advancement).[47] A deterioration in these broader societal factors can lead to "ecosystem leakage," where talent and capital exit even from ecosystems that are otherwise rich in traditional business inputs.[47] Consequently, ecosystem builders must often adopt a broader advocacy role, collaborating with urban planners, educational authorities, and civic organizations to contribute to overall community development, as these efforts directly impact the ecosystem's magnetism for talent and investments.

[12] Talent Attractiveness 2023 Tool, https://www.oecd.org/en/data/tools/talent-attractiveness-2023.html

4.5 Achieving Scale: Methodologies for Expanding Ecosystem Activities and Impact

Scaling an entrepreneurial ecosystem involves moving beyond foundational activities and early-stage support to fostering an environment where a significant number of companies can achieve substantial growth, and where the ecosystem itself becomes more robust, interconnected, and self-sustaining. This requires a strategic and multifaceted approach. As Nesta points out, a key challenge is that "Too many startups start, but never scale," underlining the importance of policies and initiatives that support firms beyond their initial formation. (Haley H et al., 2016)

Core Strategies for Scaling Ecosystems:

- **Establishing a Clear Vision and Strategic Intent:** A shared vision, capitalizing on the region's unique strengths and resources, is of paramount importance. This involves developing a comprehensive "resource compass" to connect entrepreneurs to services from ideation to scale and conducting regular needs assessments and gap analysis to refine the ecosystem cohesively.
- **Building Robust Networks and Fostering Deep Partnerships:** Scaling requires moving from isolated efforts to a deeply collaborative environment. This involves facilitating strong partnerships among diverse stakeholders including ESOs, investors, corporations, universities, and government agencies.[17] Mature ecosystems understand that rallying together provides a competitive edge and access to greater opportunities.
- **Prioritizing Execution and Accountability:** Strong leadership and clear accountability mechanisms are essential for driving the execution of scaling strategies. This includes setting clear, measurable goals and establishing milestones to track progress towards defined objectives. Building a capable team with experience in managing complex stakeholder relationships and navigating through complex politically situations is crucial for effective execution.
- **Embracing Calculated Risk-Taking:** Achieving significant breakthroughs often requires taking calculated risks. This might involve backing startups with unproven track records but high potential, experimenting with novel support programs, or forging partnerships with new or unconventional actors within the ecosystem. A culture of strategic risk-taking, clearly communicated to and supported by stakeholders, can yield substantial rewards.
- **Cultivating an Innovation Culture and Investing in Innovation Infrastructure:** Innovation is the engine of entrepreneurship. Scaling efforts must include fostering a pervasive culture of innovation and investing in the necessary infrastructure, such as makerspaces, advanced technical colleges, and support networks specifically designed to mentor and fund innovative startups, including access to capital for prototyping and testing (e.g., via programs like SBIR).
    - **Promoting Inclusivity (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion - DEI):**
      Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be at the core of how ecosystems are built and how support programs are designed. An ecosystem that includes and supports people from underrepresented or underserved groups is not only fairer—it's also stronger and more innovative. This starts with making sure the team building the ecosystem is diverse, and

continues across all activities and services, actively identifying and removing both obvious and hidden forms of discrimination.

- **Leveraging Data and Insights for Continuous Improvement:** "What cannot be measured cannot be improved." Systematic data collection and analysis are vital for understanding customer (entrepreneur) needs. Evaluating program effectiveness, identifying areas for adjustment, and demonstrating impact to funders and stakeholders is equally crucial too.

The **Startup Genome Ecosystem Lifecycle Model** provides a valuable framework for understanding scaling dynamics. As ecosystems mature through the Activation, Globalization, Attraction, and Integration phases, the strategies required for scaling also evolve. For example, the Attraction phase is specifically focused on leveraging global resource attraction to significantly expand the size and capacity of the ecosystem.

Scalability Framework: Lessons from St. Louis

The MIT Press framework by Ken Harrington, based on the St. Louis case study, offers a clear and practical approach to scaling entrepreneurial ecosystems. It includes:

- **Mapping assets** across four stages—discovery, idea, startup, and growth—and across three levels of development: individual entrepreneurs, ventures, and the broader economy.
- **Tracking progress** using a range of indicators, including economic metrics, social/cultural shifts, and ecosystem rankings.
- **Building momentum** through a mix of top-down strategies (such as public investment in infrastructure and research) and bottom-up efforts led by local champions and collaborative community initiatives.

The St. Louis example shows that growth was driven by new sources of capital, organically expanding entrepreneur support programs, and long-term public investment.

Insights from Project Excellent

Project Excellent aims to support startup growth through initiatives like "Scale-up Missions," which help ventures move beyond early stages. Two key phases of the project—Stage 4, *Widening EU entrepreneurial ecosystems connectedness*, and Stage 5, *Consolidating the community and making the project activities sustainable*—focus on expanding the ecosystem's reach, impact, and long-term strength.

A major factor in achieving sustainable growth is how the role of the ecosystem builder evolves. In the early stages, especially in developing ecosystems, top-down leadership and coordination are often needed. But real, lasting scale happens when the ecosystem becomes self-sustaining. This means empowering a variety of actors to take initiative and contribute independently.

Rather than relying on a single central body, scaling works best when intermediary organizations and shared infrastructure enable broad participation and leadership. The St. Louis case study showed that

growth accelerated when new organizations emerged, operated independently, and governed themselves. Nesta supports this, noting that "ecosystems should ultimately become self-perpetuating," while Startup Genome refers to this state as one of *high and self-sustaining global connectedness*.

Therefore, ecosystem builders should shift from being the main drivers to becoming enablers—building capacity in others, encouraging shared leadership, and creating the right conditions for organic, resilient growth.

The table below synthesizes effective methodologies identified or developed through Project Excellent, particularly those aligning with the goals of Task 4.2. It draws from the project's deliverables (D3 Best Practices, D1.2 Competences, D5 SWOT insights, D33 Impact Measurement), the Compendium of Interviews, and learnings from the five core process stages.

Table 4: Key Methodologies for Ecosystem Builders (Highlights from Project Excellent/Task 4.2)

Methodology / Approach	Description	Key Principles	How it Addresses Ecosystem Challenges	Relevant Project Excellent Finding/ Deliverable/ Activity	Potential Tools for Implementation
Cross-Ecosystem Comparative Analysis (SWOT-based)	Cross-ecosystem comparative analysis using SWOT frameworks identifies common patterns, unique characteristics, and transferable best practices.	Contextual understanding, comparative benchmarking, identification of systemic issues, evidence-based strategy development.	Addresses fragmented knowledge, lack of tailored strategies, and helps identify scalable solutions by learning from diverse contexts.	D5 Report on the SWOT Analysis of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine, France, Ireland); Stage 4 Workshops on SWOT of emerging/advanced ecosystems.	Standardized SWOT template, comparative analysis matrix, expert workshops, peer review sessions.
Entrepreneurial Competence Mapping & Targeted Skill-Building Model Development	Identifying core competencies for entrepreneurial success and designing targeted interventions to cultivate them.	Needs-based curriculum, experiential learning, alignment with ecosystem demands, continuous feedback and iteration.	Addresses talent gaps, insufficient entrepreneurial education, and misalignment between education and real-world needs.	D1.2 Mapping of the Key Entrepreneurial Competences 22; Stage 1: Defining an actionable skill-building model.1	Competency frameworks, skills assessment tools, curriculum development guides, learning management systems (e.g., iED's Athena platform 1).
Stakeholder-Driven Best Practice Distillation	Qualitative research with stakeholders to uncover knowledge and best practices.	Capturing knowledge from the ground up, valuing, turning qualitative data into actionable insights.	Rejects purely theoretical models, incorporates local knowledge, fosters engagement.	Compendium of Interviews with Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Stakeholders; D3 Entrepreneurial Best Practices Report.	Semi-structured interview guides, qualitative data analysis software, best practice documentation templates, case study development frameworks.

Cross-Border Ecosystem Discovery & Soft-Landing Missions	Programs facilitate partnerships, market access, and knowledge exchange between ecosystems.	Experience learning, networking, matchmaking, cultural immersion, and development through ambassadors.	Addresses lack of international connectivity, limited market access for startups, and siloed ecosystem development.	Project Excellent's Soft-Landing Missions to Ukraine, Bulgaria, Ireland, France, Turkey, Greece.	Mission planning checklists, participant selection criteria, matchmaking platforms/protocols, post-mission follow-up strategies.
Systematic Impact Measurement & Adaptive Management Framework	A structured approach to define strategic objectives and KPIs for ecosystem development initiatives.	Data-driven decision making, accountability, continuous improvement, stakeholder reporting, alignment with strategic goals.	Addresses lack of clear metrics, difficulty demonstrating impact, and enables effective resource allocation.	D33 Impact Measurement and Monitoring 22, including its structured tool for data collection and analysis.	KPI dashboards, data collection templates/surveys, logic models/theory of change frameworks, regular review meetings, reporting templates.
Resource Curation & Knowledge Hub Development	Identifying, aggregating, and making accessible resources for entrepreneurs and ecosystem builders.	Centralized access, user-centric design, quality control of resources, continuous updating, community contribution.	Addresses information asymmetry, fragmented resources, and difficulty in navigating available support.	Stage 2: Identifying and making available resources 1; iED Academy - European Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub 1; The ExcellEnT Project Platform itself (User Query).	Content management systems, online databases, e-learning platforms, community forums, resource tagging/categorization systems.

5 The Ecosystem Builder's Practical Toolkit

This chapter transitions from methodologies to curated collection of practical tools, templates, frameworks, and digital resources; designed to assist ecosystem builders in their day-to-day operations and strategic initiatives. The aim is to provide actionable instruments that can be adapted to various European ecosystem contexts.

5.1 Strategic Navigation: Frameworks for Planning and Impact Assessment

This section presents a curated selection of Ecosystem Strategic Planning Frameworks that offer structured methodologies, analytical tools, and theoretical foundations for ecosystem builders. Based on leading academic institutions, innovation agencies, and community development networks, these frameworks provide practical guidance for assessing ecosystem dynamics, designing stakeholder interactions, and planning long-term growth. Whether focused on urban innovation, startup pipeline design, or community-level revitalization, models such as, the Triple and Penta Helix, approaches like the Main Street Four-Point Approach, and guideline such as the Bentley University's entrepreneurship roadmap—can be applied to diverse European contexts and ecosystems with different maturity levels.

5.1.1 Building Frameworks

Framework	Source & Link	Description
Entrepreneurial Insights Across Europe	*ExcellEnt Project* – Strategies for Success from the ExcellEnt Project	A compendium capturing the experiences and strategies of successful founders across six European entrepreneurial ecosystems, offering peer-based insights for planning support services and scaling pathways.
The Innovation Radar	*European Commission* – Innovation Radar	Identifies and maps high-potential innovations emerging from EU-funded research, supporting strategic planning for commercialization, technology transfer and ecosystem enrichment.
Starting a Business in the EU	*EU Guide* – Starting a Business in the EU	A practical guide outlining the administrative, legal and strategic steps needed to establish and/or expand a business across EU countries. Also, enabling informed decision-making for new ventures.
From Starting to Scaling: Fostering Startup Growth in Europe	*European Investment Bank* – EIB Startup Scaling Report	Analyzes the conditions that affect startup growth and scaling-up in Europe, offering evidence-based recommendations for policy design and support infrastructure.
Bentley University's Entrepreneurship Frameworks	Bentley University	Provides an overview of entrepreneurship frameworks including Effectuation, Lean Startup, and Disciplined Entrepreneurship. It also discusses strategic tools like Porter's Five Forces and Blue Ocean Strategy, offering a structured approach to understanding customers, value propositions, go-to-market strategies, business models,

		MVP development, and scaling plans.
Number Analytics MBA Guide to Venture Ecosystem Scan	Number Analytics	Emphasizes in theoretical principles such as Systems Theory and the Triple Helix model, advocating for data-driven approaches using quantitative metrics. It highlights the role of supportive policy frameworks and provides actionable insights for ecosystem analysis.
Main Street America's Four-Point Approach	Main Street America	Introduces a structured framework for community ecosystem building, focusing on Organization, Promotion, Design, and Economic Vitality. This approach helps local leaders in evaluating and enhancing their entrepreneurship support systems.
Triple Helix Model of Innovation	Wikipedia	Describes the interactions between academia, industry, and government to foster economic and social development. This model serves as a foundation for understanding the dynamics of innovative ecosystems.
Quadruple and Quintuple Helix Innovation Frameworks	Wikipedia	Expands upon the Triple Helix model by adding the public (civil society) and the natural environment as additional helices, emphasizing in the importance of societal and ecological considerations in innovative ecosystems.
Penta Helix (Pentalytics) Model	Daniel Harple - Wikipedia	Introduced by Daniel Harple, this model incorporates the five key stakeholders: Industry, Academia, Government, People, and Funding. It utilizes advanced network graph analysis to drive systemic innovation and provides tools for economic cluster modeling and urban innovation mapping.

5.1.2 Impact Assessement Frameworks

Framework	Source & Link	Description & Use
European Innovation Scoreboard	*European Commission* – European Innovation Scoreboard	Provides a comparative analysis of R&I performance across EU countries, enabling ecosystem actors to benchmark their region's innovation strengths and gaps.
Crowdfunding Guide	*EU Platform Resource* – Crowdfunding Guide: Strategies and Insights for Small Businesses	Offers a practical overview of crowdfunding as a financing method, with guidance on planning, platform selection, and regulatory considerations, particularly for SMEs.
Excellent Impact Measurement and Monitoring Framework	Project ExcellEnt (D33)	A core internal tool of the ExcellEnt project, this framework defines **Strategic Objectives (SOs)** and **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** across three domains: entrepreneurial success, diversity and inclusion, and ecosystem strengthening. It provides structured methodologies for **data collection**, **ongoing monitoring**, and **adaptive management**, allowing ecosystem builders to demonstrate progress and adjust interventions in real time.
Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Diagnostic Toolkit	ANDE – Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs	Offers a comprehensive toolkit for ecosystem assessment, with specific metrics including **firm formation rates, SME growth, job creation**, as weel as,

		broader development indicators like **poverty reduction**. It also, includes guidance on stakeholder interviews, surveys, and policy evaluation methods.
Ecosystem Scaling Metrics and Rankings	MIT Press / Scaling Ecosystems Article	Highlights multi-dimensional evaluation tools used in scaling ecosystems. Recommends tracking economic indicators (e.g., **jobs created, wages, investment**), **social cohesion (diversity, trust, connectivity)**, and using standardized benchmarks like the **Kauffman Index**, **GEM**, and **GEDI** to enable comparisons and strategy validations across regions.

5.2 Actionable Blueprints: Templates and Checklists for Program Design and Operations

Effective ecosystem building often involves designing and implementing various support programs and initiatives. Templates and checklists can streamline these processes, ensuring comprehensive planning, and incorporation of best practices.

5.2.1 Incubator & Accelerator Program Design

#	Source & Link	Description
1	**Kauffman Foundation – Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Building Playbook 3.0** [Web]	Offers modular worksheets for program design, cohort selection rubrics, KPI dashboards, and DEI checklists.
2	**SecondMuse – Guide to Impact Incubation and Acceleration** [PDF]	Provides templates for curriculum development, team building, and strategies for dealing with venture failure.
3	**Theseus.fi – Accelerator Best Practices Literature Review** [PDF]	Presents a preliminary framework guiding the evaluation and design of accelerator programs.
4	**JTP Groundwork for the Stara Zagora Incubator (Bulgaria)** [PDF]	Analyses a development plan covering mission, strategic focus, infrastructure needs, governance models, financial planning, team structure, target audience definition, service offerings, and an initial timeline.

5.2.2 Mentorship Program Setup

1	**MIT Venture Mentoring Service (VMS) Toolkit** [WEB]	Provides a structured approach to mentoring with guidelines on mentor selection, matching, and program management.
2	**Chronus – 5-Step Guide to Mentorship Programs** [WEB]	Outlines a clear process flow for establishing mentorship programs, from design to measuring impact.
3	**Together Platform – Detailed Mentorship Program Checklist** [WEB]	Covers critical aspects from defining program scope to scalability planning.
4	**e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems – Entrepreneur Mentoring Guide** [WEB]	Provides a concise 2-page guide on entrepreneur mentoring, useful for quick reference.

5.2.3 Event Organization

1	**Techstars – Startup Weekend Organizer Guide** [WEB]	Offers comprehensive resources for planning and executing startup events.

2	**LiveGroup – Event Management Checklist** [WEB]	Comprehensive guide to event planning for workshops, conferences, networking events and demo days.

5.2.4 Lean Startup Business Model Tools

1	**MaRS Discovery District – Entrepreneur's Toolkit [WEB]**	Offers a collection of worksheets and guides on business model design, value proposition crafting.
2	**Y Combinator – Startup Library** [WEB]	Provides a repository of startup advice, including essays and videos on how to start a company.

5.2.5 Startup Finance & Investment Readiness

1	**SBA – Lender Match Tool** [WEB]	Connects entrepreneurs with SBA-approved lenders and facilitates access to capital.
2	**Startup Canada – Investment Readiness Playbook** [WEB]	Comprehensive guide related to preparation for investments, including pitch development and investor relations.
3	**Stripe – Checklist for Business Startups** [WEB]	Offers a fundamental checklist for founding teams, covering essential early steps.

5.2.6 Community Engagement & Network Orchestration

1	**Forward Cities – Promising Practices Webinars [WEB]**	Provides community-mapping exercises, trust-building surveys, and stakeholder persona cards.
2	**Visible Network Labs – Community Engagement Resources** [WEB]	Offers templates and toolkits for community engagement, including strategic planning and intervention implementation guides.
3	**Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs** [WEB]	Cross-border exchange program fostering entrepreneurial learning and network building.

5.2.7 Ecosystem Measurement & Governance

1	**Startup Genome – Global Startup Ecosystem Assessment Methodology [WEB]**	Provides KPI definitions, Excel dashboard templates, and benchmark data for ecosystem assessment.
2	**Stakeholder Mapping Matrix** [WEB]	Instructions and examples on how to map stakeholders in an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.
3	**Excellent Project Regional Ecosystem SWOT Analysis Template** [WEB]	Based on the methodology used in Project Excellent, this template will guide builders in conducting a structured analysis of their local ecosystem's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

5.2.8 Technology for Ecosystem Management and Community Engagement

In the contemporary landscape, the effective utilization of digital tools is no longer a luxury but a fundamental necessity for efficient ecosystem management, broader community engagement, data-informed decision-making, and seamless collaboration, particularly within a pan-European context.

- **Project Management and Collaboration Tools:** A plethora of digital tools can assist ecosystem builders in managing projects, coordinating with stakeholders, and tracking progress. Widely used platforms include Asana, Notion, Monday.com, Trello, Zoho Projects, Basecamp, Jira and many more related to task management and workflow automation. For visual collaboration,

brainstorming, and strategic planning, Miro is a powerful online whiteboard. Tools like Smartsheet offer flexible project management, while TeamGantt excels in Gantt chart-based scheduling. For team communication, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Google Workspace are standard.

- **Community Building and Engagement Platforms:** Cultivating a vibrant online community is crucial for peer learning and sustained engagement. Platforms like Mighty Networks and Discourse are designed for community building, while Khoros and Kajabi offer solutions for managing online communities and member engagement. Effective online community engagement strategies include educating members about available resources and services, making members feel valued through recognition and gamification (e.g., awarding badges, creating leaderboards), leveraging user-generated content, and proactively re-engaging inactive members through personalized outreach or targeted calls to action. Defining clear engagement goals, deep understanding of community members' interests and needs and utilizationof community analytics to tailor content and initiatives are also key components in community building.
- **Data Analytics and Visualization Tools:** To make sense of ecosystem data and track performance, tools like Tableau and Power BI enable the creation of interactive dashboards and visualizations. For more advanced statistical analysis, programming languages like R and Python are widely used.
- **Survey and Feedback Collection Tools:** Gathering input from entrepreneurs and stakeholders is essential. Online survey tools such as SurveyMonkey, Typeform, and the EU Survey platform facilitate the creation and distribution of surveys and the collection of valuable feedback.
- **European Entrepreneurship Academy:** Developed by **ExcellEnt project,** this portal is serving as a collaborative hub for entrepreneurs, ecosystem builders, and support organizations across Europe. It features a member-only community with networking tools, a dynamic activity feed, customizable groups, and messaging functions. Users can access a marketplace for offers and requests and enter an entrepreneurial resources hub with learning materials and diagnostics Finally, a regularly updated events and news section is also available. The platform supports easy onboarding via LinkedIn and/or Google, offers advanced search filters, and it is designed to facilitate cross-border collaboration, peer learning, and access to startup support services.

5.3 Toolkit Deployment: The European Entrepreneurship Academy Platform

The "Ecosystem Builder's Handbook and Toolkit" (D4.2) developed under Project ExcellEnt is designed as a comprehensive resource to support the enhancement and collaboration of entrepreneurial ecosystems across Europe. Central to the deployment, accessibility, and sustained impact of this toolkit is the **European Entrepreneurship Academy (EEA) platform**, accessible at https://europreneurship.eu. This digital platform serves as the primary delivery system for the handbook and its associated tools and as a dynamic, evolving hub for knowledge sharing, networking, and community building within the European entrepreneurial landscape. For a detailed exposition of the platform's architecture, features, and operational plan, readers are referred to **Deliverable D8: Operationalisation of the European Entrepreneurship Academy**.

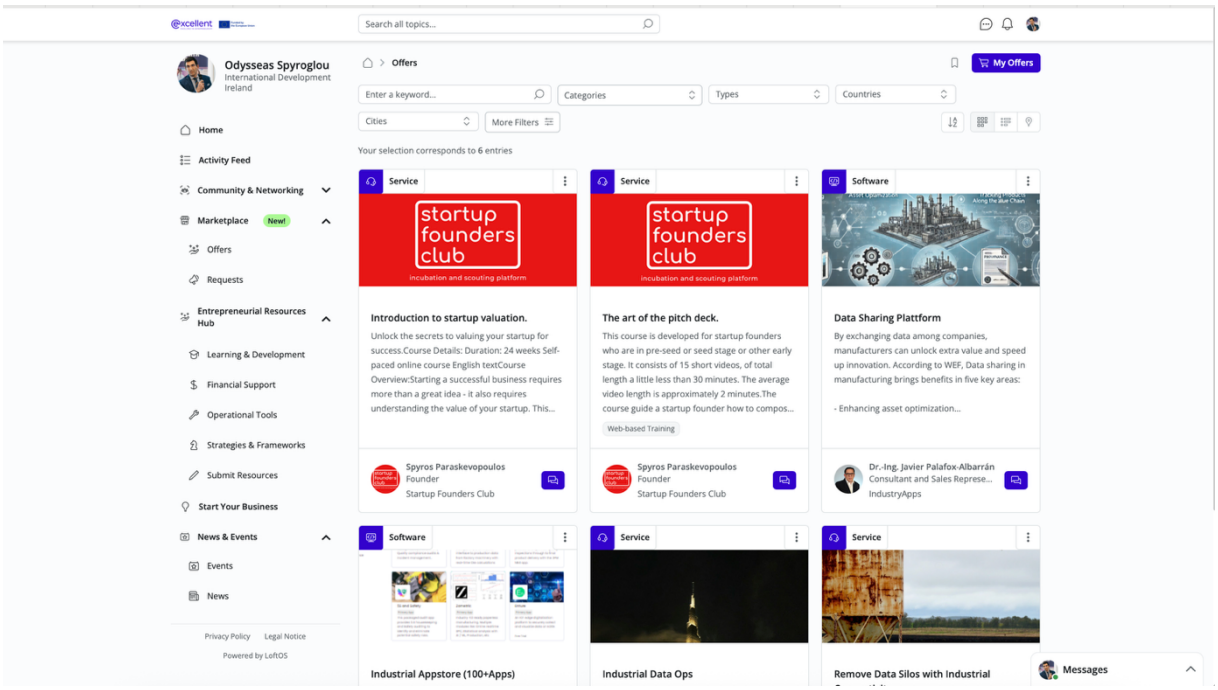

Figure 12: European Entrepreneurship Academy (EEA)

The European Entrepreneurship Academy (EEA) as the Central Hub

The EEA platform is envisioned as the central repository and interactive gateway for all resources generated by the ExcellEnt project. Its mission is to empower entrepreneurs by providing the knowledge, resources, and network necessary to succeed in a competitive and rapidly evolving business environment, by fostering innovation and facilitating the exchange of ideas. The D4.2 handbook and its constituent toolkit elements—including strategic frameworks, methodologies, templates, and checklists—are digitized and integrated within the EEA platform. This ensures that ecosystem builders and other stakeholders have continuous and easy access to these resources. The platform's "Entrepreneurial Resources Hub" is a key section for housing these materials, alongside other educational content like MOOCs and webinars.

The EEA Platform: An Evolving Toolkit Repository

Beyond being a static repository for the D4.2 toolkit, the EEA platform is designed as an evolving ecosystem of tools and knowledge. The "Entrepreneurial Resources Hub" includes a "Submit Resources" functionality, enabling ecosystem builders, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), mentors, and entrepreneurs themselves to contribute their own validated tools, templates, case studies, best practices, and learning materials. This collaborative approach ensures that the toolkit remains a living resource, continuously updated and enriched by the diverse experiences and expertise of its community members. This dynamic nature allows the platform to stay up to date with emerging trends and the actual needs of entrepreneurial ecosystems across Europe.

Leveraging the EEA Platform for Ecosystem Building, Education, and Training

The EEA platform offers multifaceted functionalities that ecosystem builders can leverage to enhance their activities and support their respective communities:

1. **Accessing and implementing the D4.2 Toolkit**: Ecosystem builders can directly access the digital version of the D4.2 handbook for methodological guidance and strategic frameworks. The practical tools, templates, and checklists outlined in Chapter 4 of the handbook are available on the platform, often in interactive or downloadable formats, facilitating their direct application in program design and operational activities.
2. **Developing and Delivering Training**: The "Entrepreneurial Resources Hub", with its collection of MOOCs, webinars, and curated learning materials, provides a rich foundation for ecosystem builders to design and deliver training programs tailored to the needs of their members (e.g., startups, SMEs). The "Start Your Business" section, featuring diagnostic tools like Igostartup, Valuater, and myStartupTool, offers practical resources for early-stage entrepreneurs.
3. **Fostering and Managing Communities**: The "Groups" feature allows ecosystem builders to create and manage their own dedicated online communities. These can be private or public groups for specific cohorts in an incubation/acceleration program, local ecosystem members, or special interest groups. This functionality supports targeted communication, resource sharing, and peer-to-peer learning. Group creation options include defining industry focus, descriptions, and access controls (hidden groups or approval-based access).
4. **Enhancing Network Connectivity:** The platform's "Community & Networking" section, including the comprehensive "Ecosystem" directory, allows builders to **link** their members with a broader network of corporates, startups, public institutions, research institutes, incubators, accelerators, and investors across Europe. Advanced filtering options by keywords, industry, location, and founding year enhance targeted networking are also available.
5. **Facilitating Resource Exchange**: Through the "Marketplace", ecosystem builders can help their members find or offer services, software, hardware, patents, or research results. The "Requests" section enables users to post theis needs for investment, funding, solutions, or partners, while the "Offers" section allows them to showcase their own capabilities.

Synergizing the Handbook, Toolkit, and Platform for Maximum Impact

The true strength of Project ExcellEnt's output lies in the combined use of the D4.2 handbook, its embedded toolkit, and the EEA platform.

- The **Handbook** provides the fundamental knowledge, methodologies (Chapter 3), and strategic frameworks (Chapter 2, 4.1) – the "why" and "how-to" of ecosystem building.
- The **Toolkit elements**, as described throughout the handbook and particularly in Chapter 4, offer concrete, actionable instruments.
- The **EEA Platform** acts as the primary, interactive delivery mechanism for these tools and provides the dynamic environment for their application, for community engagement and for ongoing learning and resource discovery.

Ecosystem builders can use the handbook to design evidence-based support services (e.g., incubation programs, mentorship schemes, collaborative networks) and then utilize the platform's "Groups," "Entrepreneurial Resources Hub," and "Marketplace" to deliver, manage, and scale these services effectively. The platform thus becomes the main operational toolkit and the initial access point for engaging with the ExcellEnt resources.

Benefits for Various Target Groups

The EEA platform, as the main deployment vehicle for the toolkit, is designed to reach out to a diverse audience within the entrepreneurial ecosystem:

- **Aspiring and Existing Entrepreneurs/Startups/SMEs**: Gain direct access to learning materials, diagnostic tools (e.g., "Start Your Business"), and practical frameworks. They can network with peers, mentors, and potential investors, find partners, or offer their services through the Marketplace.
- **Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) & Training Organizations**: Can utilize the "Entrepreneurial Resources Hub" to supplement their curricula, contribute their own educational content and research, promote their entrepreneurship programs and events, and connect their students to a broader European entrepreneurial network.
- **Incubators, Accelerators, and other Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs)**: Can showcase their services and success stories within the "Ecosystem" directory, use platform tools like "Groups" to manage their cohorts, deliver tailored content, and connect their supported startups with a wider network of mentors, investors, and corporate partners.
- **Investors and Mentors**: Can identify promising startups and entrepreneurs through the "Ecosystem" directory and "Marketplace Requests", and offer their expertise, mentorship, or investment opportunities via "Marketplace Offers" or by engaging in relevant "Groups."

Future Evolution and Sustainability through the EEA Platform

The European Entrepreneurship Academy is not a static product, but a platform designed for organic growth and long-term sustainability. Its evolution will be driven by:

- **Community Contributions**: The "Submit Resources" feature, alongside user-generated content within groups and marketplace listings, ensures that the platform's knowledge base and toolkit continually expand with relevant, practical inputs from the community.
- **User Feedback**: Mechanisms for collecting user feedback, both implicitly through analytics and explicitly via surveys or contact forms, will inform future developments, feature enhancements, and content curation.
- **Dynamic Content**: The "News" and "Events" sections will be keeping the community informed about the latest trends, opportunities, and activities within the European entrepreneurial landscape.
- **Networking Effects**: As the user base grows, the value of the platform for networking, matchmaking, and collaboration will increase, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement and resource sharing.

The EEA platform is thus a main component in achieving Project ExcellEnt's goal of "Consolidating the community and making the project activities sustainable", ensuring that the handbook, toolkit, and the collaborative spirit developed during the project have a lasting impact on European entrepreneurial ecosystems.

For a comprehensive understanding of the European Entrepreneurship Academy's functionalities, architecture, and operational strategy, ecosystem builders and interested stakeholders are encouraged to consult **Deliverable D8: Operationalization of the European Entrepreneurship Academy**. This document provides the detailed blueprint for the platform that underpins the practical application and widespread dissemination of the D4.2 Ecosystem Builder's Handbook and Toolkit.

6 Conclusions & Insights: Cultivating Sustainable and Connected European Ecosystems

The aim of ecosystem building is to create environments that are not only vibrant and supportive in the short term but are also sustainable, resilient, and deeply connected, fostering continuous innovation and entrepreneurial success across Europe. This chapter explores how real-world examples, proactive challenge management, effective online resource dissemination, and a robust learning network can contribute to this vision.

6.1 Celebrating Success: European Ecosystem Success Stories (General Landscape)

Real-world examples and success stories are invaluable for illustrating effective strategies, inspiring action, and demonstrating the tangible impact of well-executed ecosystem building efforts (User Query). Several European initiatives and regions are often cited for their effective ecosystem policies and vibrant startup scenes:

- **Startup Delta/TechLeap.NL (Netherlands):** Highlighted by the OECD as an example of an independent public-private partnership that successfully brings together all regional entrepreneurial ecosystems in the country, fostering a national approach to innovation. While specific impact data isn't detailed in the snippets, its model of coordination is noteworthy.
- **Startup Estonia:** Another OECD-cited example, this governmental initiative is dedicated to supporting and developing Estonia's entrepreneurial ecosystem, known for its digital-first approach and supportive policies for startups. Research on the Tartu ecosystem, a key Estonian university town, explores how its interconnected domains influence opportunity development (Fischer, 2019).
- **European Entrepreneurial Region (EER) Award Winners:** The EER scheme evaluation report showcases good practices from various awarded regions. For instance, the Extremadura Region (Spain) adopted a fully collaborative and inclusive governance model for its entrepreneurship policies, involving a wide network of stakeholders and an online platform for entrepreneurs, because of the EER application process (European Commission, 2019).
- **Biscay Startup Bay (Spain):** This ecosystem serves as a case study for building entrepreneurial environments through Open Innovation principles, actively fostered by regional public policies. (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2024)
- **Leading European Hubs:** Cities like London, Paris, Amsterdam, Stockholm, and Berlin are consistently ranked among the top global and European startup ecosystems. Emerging hubs include Copenhagen, Barcelona, Madrid, Zurich, Helsinki, Oslo, Manchester, Brussels, Prague, and Warsaw, each with unique strengths and development trajectories (Csefalvay Z & Szombathy Z, 2022)

6.2 Project Excellent Highlights and Learnings

Project Excellent itself is generating plenty of insights and potential success stories through its engagement with six core ecosystems (Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine, France, Ireland) and hteir? wider European outreach:

- **Insights from Diverse Ecosystems:** The D5 Report on the SWOT Analysis and the "Compendium of Interviews with Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Stakeholders" provide rich, contextualized learnings from these six countries. These deliverables will highlight specific strengths (e.g., emerging tech scenes, specific policy supports) and challenges that offer lessons for other European regions.
- **Impact of Soft-Landing Missions:** The project's soft-landing missions are designed to create tangible connections and collaborations. Success stories emerging from these missions – such as new partnerships formed, startups accessing new markets, or best practices shared and adopted – will be key highlights. For example, the resilience and innovation of Ukrainian startups under pressure [22], Bulgaria's positioning as a dynamic emerging innovation hub, and the connections forged in established ecosystems like Ireland and France will offer valuable narratives.
- **Codified Best Practices:** The **D3 Entrepreneurial Best Practices Report** will incorporate the most effective strategies and initiatives observed or developed during the project, providing concrete examples of what works in a European context.

All project results can be found in Project's Portal.

A common thread in many successful European ecosystems is the presence of strong public-private partnerships, a deliberate focus on international connectedness (both within Europe and globally), and the skillful adaptation of global best practices to specific local or national contexts. Initiatives like Startup Delta/TechLeap.NL represent the public-private model. The EER scheme actively promotes multi-level governance and inter-regional cooperation. Project Excellent's own soft-landing missions are explicitly designed to foster these cross-border linkages. Furthermore, the European Commission's report "A Robust Innovation Ecosystem for the Future of Europe" strongly emphasizes in the need for enhanced connectivity, coordination, and collaboration across the continent. This handbook and the related toolkit should therefore prominently feature diverse European case studies, including those emerging from Project Excellent, that emphasize in transferable lessons while always underlying the importance of adapting strategies to unique contextual factors (Barrera, 2020).

6.3 Addressing Common Challenges in Ecosystem Building

While the potential benefits of thriving entrepreneurial ecosystems are immense, the path to build them is often filled with challenges. Recognizing these common obstacles is the first step towards developing effective strategic responses.

- **Access to Finance:** Limited availability of diverse funding options (seed, angel, VC, grants, debt) across all stages of startup development remains a persistent issue, particularly for early-stage ventures and emerging entrepreneurs.[13]
- **Talent Gaps and Brain Drain:** Attracting, developing, and retaining skilled entrepreneurial and individuals with technical skills is a major concern for many ecosystems. "Brain drain" to more established hubs can restrain local growth.
- **Policy and Regulatory Barriers:** Complex, unclear, or unfavorable laws and regulations, high administrative burdens for starting and running businesses (e.g., licensing, taxes), and lack of policy coherence can significantly hinder entrepreneurial activity.
- **Cultural and Mindset Barriers:** Societal attitudes that are risk-averse, a low tolerance for failure, a lack of visible role models, or insufficient community support can dampen entrepreneurial aspirations and activity.
- **Fragmented Support Systems and Networks:** Lack of coordination among support organizations, inaccessible and/or exclusive networks, and insufficient entrepreneurial education and/or mentorship can leave entrepreneurs struggling to find the right help at the right time.
- **Market Access and Uncertainty:** Difficulties in acquiring initial customers, accessing distribution channels, navigating competitive markets (both domestic and international), and dealing with market uncertainty pose significant challenges.
- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Inadequate physical infrastructure (transport, reliable utilities) or digital infrastructure (broadband access, digital literacy) can create competitive disadvantages.
- **Complexity of Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Managing the diverse interests, expectations, and potential conflicts among multiple stakeholders (government, academia, industry, investors, ESOs) is inherently complex and can be stalled by poor resources and lack of trust.
- **Ecosystem Leakage:** The loss of talent, capital, or startups to other regions, often intesifies bynon-business factors such as quality of life, cost of living, or public safety deteriorate.
- **Knowledge and Data Gaps:** fragmented understanding of ecosystem dynamics, poor understanding of how ecosystems emerge, and a lack of reliable, comparable data can impede evidence-based policymaking and intervention. (Wadichar et al., 2024)

6.4 Strategic Responses

Addressing these challenges requires targeted and often multi-faceted interventions:

- **Policy Advocacy and Reform:** Engaging with policymakers to advocate for startup-friendly regulations, tax incentives, streamlined administrative processes, and dedicated entrepreneurship strategies. Resources like the OECD's "International Compendium of

Entrepreneurship Policies" and the "Entrepreneurship Policy Toolkit" offer extensive guidance on policy levers.

- **Targeted Program Development:** Designing and implementing specific programs to address gaps in funding (e.g., angel networks, co-investment funds, grant schemes), talent development (e.g., skills training, entrepreneurship education), and network building (e.g., mentorship programs, industry clusters, matchmaking events).
- **Emphasis on Inclusive Practices:** Actively working to ensure that ecosystem support reaches and benefits disconnected or emerging entrepreneurs, according to the Kauffman Foundation and Economic Impact Catalyst[13].
- **Cultivating Trust and a Collaborative Culture:** Implementing strategies that foster open communication, share understanding, and trust among stakeholders, thereby reduces friction and encourages collaboration.[14]

Many of these ecosystem challenges are not isolated issues but are systemic and interconnected. For instance, a lack of early-stage funding can be linked to a risk-averse culture, which in turn might be influenced by educational systems that do not sufficiently promote entrepreneurial thinking. The Kauffman Foundation notes that its ESHIP Goals are "nested and interrelated". The OECD describes ecosystems as an "inter-related set of institutions". The "ecosystem.build" toolkit [15] identifies seven interdependent challenge areas: Finance, Market Access, Business Support, Governance, Culture, Infrastructure, and Human Capital. Attempting to fix one component in isolation, without considering its relationship with others, is unlikely to yield sustainable improvements to the rest. This implies that ecosystem builders must adopt a systems-thinking approach to problem-solving. They need to understand the complex interrelations of various factors and design holistic, adaptive strategies that address multiple leverage points simultaneously; rather than seeking simplistic, silver-bullet solutions.

Table 5: Common Ecosystem Challenges & Strategic Responses

Common Challenge	Description/ Symptoms	Potential Root Causes	Strategic Responses/ Methodologies (with Toolkit Reference)	European Examples/ Project Excellent Insights
Lack of Early-Stage Funding	Startups struggle to find seed/angel capital; "valley of death."	Risk-averse investors; undeveloped angel networks; lack of investment-ready startups; information asymmetry.	Develop angel networks (Ch3.3, EBAN guides 48); Investment readiness programs (Ch3.3, IPSD.ps 49); Government co-investment/grant schemes (Ch3.3, GIZ 11, OECD Compendium 52).	Startup Estonia's focus on funding access; Project Excellent's D33 KPIs for funding.22
Fragmented	ESOs work in	Lack of coordination	Ecosystem mapping	TechLeap.NL

[13] "How to Build a Successful Entrepreneurship Ecosystem - Economic Impact Catalyst," 28/5/2025
[14] "Collaboration: The Art of Collaboration within an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem - FasterCapital," 28/5/2025
[15] Entrepreneurship Policy Toolkit. Entrepreneurship Policy Toolkit. Entrepreneurship Policy Toolkit, 28/5/2025

Support Network	silos; entrepreneurs confused by offerings; duplication of efforts; gaps in support.	mechanisms; competition between ESOs; insufficient funding for coordination.	(Ch2.3, Kauffman 4); Facilitate stakeholder collaboration (Ch3.1, FasterCapital 37); Establish intermediary/coordinating bodies.	model of national coordination 3; Project Excellent's focus on connectedness (Stages 3 & 4)
Weak Entrepreneurial Culture	Low societal value for entrepreneurship; fear of failure; lack of role models; insufficient risk appetite.	Historical/cultural norms; educational system focus; negative media portrayal; lack of visible successes.	Promote success stories & role models (Ch1.2); Entrepreneurship education from early age (Ch3.2); Foster peer networks & communities (Ch3.1); De-stigmatize failure.	EER scheme fostering entrepreneurial spirit; Project Excellent's D1.2 on entrepreneurial attitudes.
Policy & Regulatory Hurdles	Complex business registration; high tax burden on startups; restrictive labor laws; lack of IP protection.	Outdated legislation; lack of policymakers' understanding of startup needs; strong incumbent lobbying.	Policy advocacy (Ch5.2); Regulatory sandboxes (Ch5.4, EU Report 23); Simplify administrative procedures (OECD Compendium); Startup Acts (ecosystem.build toolkit).	Estonia's e-residency & startup-friendly policies; Project Excellent's D5 SWOT identifying policy issues.
Talent Shortages & Mismatches	Difficulty finding skilled tech/business talent; graduates lack practical entrepreneurial skills.	Misalignment between education & industry needs; brain drain; lack of specialized training programs.	Strengthen university-industry links (Ch1.2); Develop targeted skills programs (Ch3.4, Project Excellent D1.2); Attract foreign talent (OECD Talent Attractiveness).	Ireland's success in attracting tech talent; Project Excellent's skill-building model (Stage 1).
Limited Market Access	Startups struggle to reach first customers, scale to new markets, or enter corporate supply chains.	Lack of market knowledge/networks; dominance of large incumbents; complex procurement processes.	Facilitate corporate-startup partnerships (Ch3.1); Support internationalization (Soft-Landing Missions Ch4.4); Promote SME access to public procurement.	Biscay Startup Bay's Open Innovation approach; Project Excellent's Soft-Landing Missions.

7 References

Aspen Network. (2013). *Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Diagnostic Toolkit*.

Audretsch, D. B., Belitski, M., & Herzig, M. (2025). The jazz jam session improvisation model of stakeholder engagement in entrepreneurial ecosystems. *Journal of Small Business Management*, *0*(0), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2025.2450009

Auerswald, P. E. (2015). *Enabling Entrepreneurial Ecosystems - Insights from Ecology to Inform Effective Entrepreneurship Policy*.

Barrera, Alex. (2020). *A robust innovation ecosystem for the future of Europe : report on the results of the stakeholder consultation October 2019 - February 2020*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Campos-Blázquez, J. R., Martín-García, S., & Cárdenas-Muñoz, M. (2024). Building an entrepreneurial ecosystem through Open Innovation fostered by public policies. *Journal of Innovation and Knowledge*, *9*(4). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2024.100587

Csefalvay Z, & Szombathy Z. (2022). *Concertation or Convergence? How the technological Specialisation of Scaleups is Shaping the Entrepreneurial Ecosystems of the European Cities* (Vol. 4).

European Commission. (2019). *European Entrepreneurial Region (EER) - Evaluation and Stock-Taking*.

European Commission. (2024). *Designing a business incubator: Development plan (final report I) and Process action plan (final report II)*.

Fischer, E. (2019). *A Framework for Entrepreneurs to Assess Business Accelerator Programs*.

Frontier Incubators. (2024). *Guide to Impact Incubation and Acceleration Collaborative Insights and Strategies in the Asia-Pacific*.

Haley H, Siddharth B, Bielli, S., Bone J, & Finger Y. (2016). *Digital Entrepreneurship An "Idea Bank" for Local Policymakers*.

Harrington, K. (2014). *Is your Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Scaling? An Approach to Inventorying and Measuring*.

Isenberg, D. J. (2016). Applying the ecosystem metaphor to entrepreneurship: Uses and abuses. *Antitrust Bulletin*, *61*(4), 564–573. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003603X16676162

Lerner, J., Garcia-Robles, S., & Leamon, A. (2013). *Best Practices in Creating a Venture Capital Ecosystem*.

Mason, C., & Brown, R. (2014, June). Entrepreneurial Ecosystems And Growth Oriented Entrepreneurship. *Background Paper Prepared for the Workshop Organised by the OECD LEED Programme and the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs*.

OECD. (2020). *International Compendium of Entrepreneurship Policies*. OECD. https://doi.org/10.1787/338f1873-en

Ostapenko, V., Tyshchenko, V., Rats, O., & Brusentseva, O. (2024). Structuring and Determining the Influence of Stakeholders on the Innovation Ecosystem. *Journal of Governance and Regulation*, *13*(1), 123–134. https://doi.org/10.22495/jgrv13i1art11

Roshan, R., Balodi, K., & Theodoraki, C. (2025). Entrepreneurial ecosystem typologies for entrepreneurial dynamism: a configurational theorizing. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2025.2475898

Wadichar, R. K., Manusmare, P., & Burghate, M. A. (2024). Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: A Systematic Literature Review. In *Vision* (Vol. 28, Issue 2, pp. 143–156). Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1177/09722629221093866

Yeboah, S. A., & Gyan, S. (2023). Harmonizing FDI and Local Entrepreneurship: Strategies for Inclusive Growth. *ResearchGate*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373388153