Deliverable 3.4: Excellence in entrepreneurship conference

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

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Deliverable Information

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History of Changes

Version	Date	Prepared by	Comments
v0.1	18.06.2025	UNISOFIA	Table of Contents and first sections
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v1.1	17.07.2025	iED	Revised version and submission to Participants Portal

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Introduction

The ExcellEnt Final Conference took place on 19 June 2025 at the GATE Institute in Sofia, Bulgaria. For this culminating event, we chose "Building a Stronger EU Innovation Ecosystem", organized by GATE, as our flagship session. Framing the conference around this theme enabled us to both present the project's key findings and pivot immediately into strategic discussions on next steps.

During the flagship panel, four ecosystem leaders dissected the major shocks and trends revealed by ExcellEnt's research, debated policy "agility hacks" such as an EU-wide "startup passport" for AI, and shared replicable lessons from emerging hubs like Ukraine and Bulgaria. By centering on this topic, we were able to engage 142 on-site attendees from 5+ countries, spanning youth entrepreneurs, incubator managers, policy-makers, investors, and media representatives, and collectively chart a clear roadmap for sustaining and scaling Europe's entrepreneurial excellence.

The conference served first as a celebration of ExcellEnt's collaborative achievements, spotlighting the toolkit's real-world impact and the dedication of all partners. It also amplified our visibility, drawing in new stakeholders and media attention to ensure the project's insights reach beyond the consortium. Finally, it laid the groundwork for consolidation, forging concrete plans to integrate ExcellEnt outputs into existing regional support structures and to sustain cross-border collaboration well beyond the project's official end.

Conference objectives

The primary aim of the ExcellEnt Final Conference was to reach the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem by convening at least 100 key actors—a goal we surpassed with 142 on-site participants. By drawing together a balanced mix of innovators, support organizations, policy influencers, and investors, we ensured that the project's insights and tools were disseminated across multiple stakeholder groups, maximizing both uptake and impact.

A second objective was to bring our research to life through storytelling, by presenting 10 selected anecdotes drawn directly from the project's findings. These concise but powerful narratives—from youth entrepreneurs overcoming market entry barriers to incubator managers innovating resource-sharing practices—highlighted how the ExcellEnt Toolkit and Entrepreneurship Academy translate into real-world empowerment for startups and support organizations alike.

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Equally important was senior partner engagement, with a KPI of having at least 50 % of consortium partners represented by senior staff. By involving VPs, directors, and department heads in our panels and networking activities, we secured high-level buy-in for post-project sustainability and ensured that strategic decisions regarding integration and policy recommendations would carry weight within each organization.

Target Audience

- Entrepreneurs & start-ups: early-stage and growth-phase founders who can immediately apply ExcellEnt's digital tools, analytics models, and shared resources in their ventures.
- Incubators & accelerators: managers and program directors responsible for on-boarding and supporting entrepreneurial cohorts, tasked with integrating the Resource Library and narrative-extraction methods into their curricula.
- Policy-makers & investors: regional development officers, EU policy advisors, and financial backers seeking evidence-based "agility hacks" and data-driven justifications for streamlining regulations and funding mechanisms.
- Media & general public: Journalists, bloggers, and engaged citizens whose coverage and word-of-mouth amplify ExcellEnt's findings, driving further interest and adoption across Europe.

Concept and theme

The conference was anchored by the narrative "Celebrating European Excellence in Entrepreneurship – From Insight to Impact." This storyline threaded through every session, beginning with an opening keynote that highlighted ExcellEnt's data-driven discoveries and culminating in action-oriented discussions on how Europe's ecosystems can evolve. By framing the event as a celebration of what we have learned—and a call to translate those insights into tangible policy and practice—we underscored both the project's achievements and its continuing relevance.

To bring this narrative to life, we organized the agenda in four complementary parts:

- Keynote Inspiration (10 min)
- Results Track (presentation of findings)
- Hands-On Labs (interactive demos of the Toolkit and narrative-extraction methods)
- Matchmaking (curated 1-to-1 sessions)

This progression—from big-picture motivation, to evidence, to experiential learning, to targeted networking—ensured that participants could absorb the research, test the tools, and leave with concrete connections for future collaboration.

Programme

Session	Purpose	Outputs
Opening keynote	Anchor "hero numbers" & vision	Slide deck + live-stream
Results Panel	Present findings and we could do in the future	Video + Q&A transcript
Lab Visits	Deep-dive on methods	Demos, feedback forms
Ecosystem Matchmaking	Curated 1-to-1's	Meeting stats
Networking Social	Informal consolidation	Photo gallery

The opening keynote wove together two complementary narratives: first, a celebration of how far ExcellEnt has come in building truly pan-European entrepreneurial support, and then a candid examination of the barriers that still lie ahead. Ivan Draganov began by recounting the project's journey—from hosting dozens of interactive workshops that connected hundreds of entrepreneurs, to piloting cross-border "soft-landing" missions and bringing a growing community into the Entrepreneurship Academy. We learned how intensive one-on-one labs gave participants hands-on experience with new methodologies, and how strategic reports distilled these experiences into actionable insights for policymakers and ecosystem builders.

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Shifting gears, the keynote then turned to the "pain points" we uncovered on the path to scale. It painted a vivid picture of the moments when early-stage ventures hit a funding cliff after their first angel cheque, and the ways in which many promising ideas still struggle to nail down true product-market fit. We heard about the labyrinth of regulatory requirements that can slow a European startup's momentum, the challenge of accessing global markets without established networks, and the patchwork of support services that too often leaves founders scrambling for fit-for-purpose advice. By framing these obstacles alongside our successes, the keynote set the stage for a forward-looking discussion on how to transform these "growing pains" into new opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and policy reform.

The centerpiece was a 60-minute, no-slide panel on **"Building a Stronger EU Innovation Ecosystem,"** organized and moderated by Ivan Draganov (Manager, Incubator and Accelerator, Institute GATE) on 19 June 2025. Panelists included:

- **Yann Gozlan** (Creative Cluster)
- **Till Lech** (Director of Innovation, NorwAI Center for AI Innovation)
- **Nataly Veremeeva** (Director, TechUkraine)
- **Paul Stefanut** (Co-founder & President, Booster Labs)

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In preparation, panelists received guiding questions and briefing notes by email. To kick off, Ivan asked:

> "*When you look back at the last 12 months, which one unexpected trend or shock most changed the way European founders think about building global businesses—and what should policymakers learn from it?*"

Each expert prepared a distinct "shock" anecdote (e.g., the GenAI boom versus semiconductor shortages, wartime resilience in Ukraine, or the green-tech surge). Follow-up questions explored three core areas:

1. **Emerging Hubs:**
   - How Ukraine shipped ≈ $6.4 billion in IT services despite war, and what talent-pipeline strategies can be replicated?
   - Which infrastructure gap—physical or digital—most hinders scale-up from seed to Series B?
   - Should Europe pursue a continental super-cluster or a federation of micro-hubs connected by open data spaces?

2. **Bottlenecks:**
   - With < 5 % of industrial data reused outside its silo, what incentive (tax credit, data trust, liability shield) would unlock data sharing?

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- Could a single "startup passport" for AI reduce legal overhead from 30 % of seed budgets to 5 %?
- How might innovation quotas, outcome-based tenders, or pre-commercial pilots direct more public procurement toward startups?

3. **Agility Hacks:**
   - Which EU rule would you sunset tomorrow to accelerate AI adoption?
   - How can the three-year AI Act cycle be compressed to 12 months—what decision-making step should be eliminated?
   - What lessons from Kyiv's wartime innovation cycle (built in weeks) can inform peacetime policy—and which element of a proposed "Talent Schengen" (visas, tax breaks, pension portability) would have the greatest impact?

Panelists were advised to keep responses to under 90 seconds, open with an anecdote or key metric, then deliver a clear takeaway—and to reserve any visuals for the initial deck. This structure maximized audience engagement, ensured depth across themes, and provided practical, replicable insights for all attendees.

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Communication & dissemination plan of the conference

Pre-Event

In the weeks leading up to the conference, we rolled out a dedicated branding kit—complete with logos, templates, and messaging guidelines—to ensure a cohesive visual identity across all channels. A "save-the-date" announcement was shared to our pan-European network of entrepreneurs, support organizations, and policy contacts, while the first press release highlighted the flagship theme and invited media to register. We also provided each partner with a social-media calendar and localized content brief so they could easily translate key posts and tailor messaging to their national audiences.

On-Site

During the event, our communications team conducted "on-the-spot" social media posts with speakers and attendees, capturing fresh anecdotes and insights that were immediately drafted.

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Post-Event

After the conference closed, we shared an update summarizing key sessions and linking to resources. All presentation decks, interview transcripts, and media coverage links were consolidated, ensuring that the entire ExcellEnt community and beyond can access and build upon these materials long after the event.

Conclusion

The ExcellEnt Final Conference successfully brought together a diverse cross-section of Europe's entrepreneurial landscape—youth founders, incubator leaders, policymakers, investors, and media— to both celebrate our collective achievements and tackle the persistent challenges on the path to scale. By centering the event around the theme "Building a Stronger EU Innovation Ecosystem," we were able to weave together inspirational keynotes, data-driven results, hands-on labs, and targeted matchmaking into a coherent narrative of "From Insight to Impact." The curated anecdotes, policy "agility hacks," and practical models shared throughout the panels demonstrated not only the robustness of the ExcellEnt Entrepreneurship Academy and capacity building workshops, but also the appetite for concrete reforms and collaborations that span borders. As we move into the post-project phase, the relationships forged, and the commitments secured at this conference provide a strong foundation for long-term sustainability. Consortium partners will integrate the Entrepreneurship Academy into regional support structures, advocate for the proposed "emergency innovation licenses" and "regulatory sunset" processes and expand our network with new members. With these steps, ExcellEnt's legacy will endure—catalysing European entrepreneurial excellence well beyond the formal end of the grant.

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