

High level report for adoption measures

Policy Makers' Manual

Deliverable D4.3

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

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Disclaimer

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- **Napkin AI** was used for the preparation of select visual elements.
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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.

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1 Executive Summary

This Policy Makers' Manual is a key output of the ExcellEnt project, offering strategic guidance for improving the effectiveness of innovation intermediaries in entrepreneurial ecosystems across four European countries: Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria. Grounded in a participatory methodology and informed by workshops, stakeholder interviews, and ecosystem analysis, the Manual highlights systemic challenges and presents evidence-based recommendations for action at both national and EU levels.

The capacity-building workshops conducted in each country applied the Value Creation Model to assess ecosystem performance by identifying captured, missed, destroyed, surplus, or absent value. This structured diagnostic approach enabled stakeholders to articulate real-time feedback on funding availability, talent gaps, regulatory burdens, coordination failures, and unmet support needs. Despite national differences, common barriers emerged—such as the persistent lack of scale-up capital, fragmented support services, and weak talent retention—underscoring the need for targeted, yet coordinated, solutions.

Building on these findings, the Manual presents five strategic recommendations:

- (1) enhance access to diversified and simplified financing.
- (2) streamline and coordinate support structures.
- (3) foster stronger networks, talent pipelines, and mentorship.
- (4) invest in the capacity of innovation intermediaries.
- (5) align national interventions with EU frameworks like Horizon Europe and the EntreComp competence model.

These recommendations are actionable, rooted in ecosystem evidence, and designed to help policy makers create enabling environments that are more responsive to start-up and intermediary needs.

The ExcellEnt project positions innovation intermediaries as key multipliers in ecosystem development. By supporting their operational sustainability, facilitating peer learning, and linking local ecosystems to European platforms, this Manual serves as a practical resource for public authorities seeking to foster inclusive, resilient, and high-performing innovation systems. It provides a roadmap not only for strengthening intermediaries but also for aligning entrepreneurial ecosystems with broader European ambitions for competitiveness, cohesion, and sustainable growth.

2 Introduction

Under the ExcellEnt project and as part of Task 4.3 regarding 'Sharing results with policy makers' led by partner IDI we organised 4 capacity building workshops to shed light and discuss the challenges and problems Innovation Intermediaries face with. These workshops were conducted online and covered four of the countries represented in the project namely Greece (GR), Ukraine (UA), Turkey (TR) and Bulgaria (BG). The presentations used in the workshops, the results of the workshops a results brief in the form of a consolidated report are included in the Annex parts of this Deliverable. Wooclap was used to engage the audience by means of multiple-choice questions, polls, and open-ended questions.

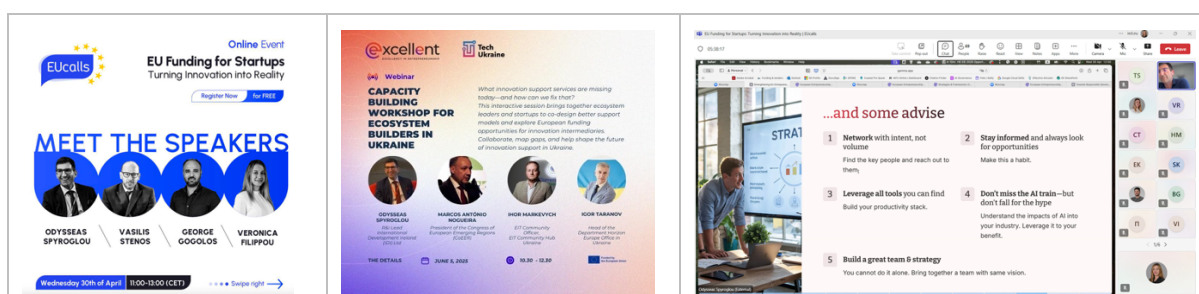


Figure 1: Indicative screenshots from promoting the Workshops and 1 screenshot from the GR Workshop.

The questions were designed in way to allow selection for verifying gaps, challenges, problems and insights from past workshops under other relevant project (notably INNOMOB¹, SHIFTHUB², SOLARHUB³) where partners of our consortium also participate.

The purpose of the present high-level report for adoption measures is to be useful for policy makers as some type of manual. A manual like this is justified as sustainable entrepreneurial and start-up ecosystems need public support (authorities or individuals in policy and decision-making roles at the local, regional or central level) to function and develop properly.

Our goal is to align with current operational and strategic goals at the systemic level and contribute to strengthening ecosystems' connectivity and cooperation. This is a challenging task, so we need to share anecdotal evidence and experiences from workshops and support from public authorities based on their current collaborations, which may be expanded to benefit entrepreneurial ecosystems and their members.

We usually focus on the success stories, but mistakes and failures are equally important. The goal is to increase collaborations between peer innovation/development agencies, local incubators, and entrepreneurship support organisations, as well as build transregional and cross-border/cross-national relationships.

¹ INNOMOB: Unlocking the potential of the Mobility Innovation Ecosystems and Networks (02.2023-12.2024) [GA: [101096746](#)]

² SHIFTHUB: Smart Health Innovation & Future Technologies Hub (01.2023-12.2025) [GA: [101095720](#)]

³ SOLARHUB: A Greek-Turkish Solar Energy Excellence Hub to Advance the European Green Deal (01.2023-12.2026) [GA: [101086110](#)]

3 Methodology, data sources and limitations

The excellent capacity-building workshops in Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria were based on Value Creation Model from EU projects like INNO-MOB and SHIFT-HUB. This model, formulated by the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT), analyses an ecosystem's support mechanisms through multiple 'value' lenses. This approach was successfully used and provided very useful results in similar engagement exercises. By categorising observations into what value is captured, destroyed, missed, surplus, or absent, the framework provides a comprehensive map of where entrepreneurial ecosystems create or fail to create value. In practice, this meant designing questions to systematically probe each of the following dimensions in the workshops.



Figure 2: Value Creation Model

- **Value Captured:** Which existing **services or supports are working effectively** for entrepreneurs (i.e. positive outcomes already being achieved)? This highlights what the ecosystem is doing right, such as mentorship programs leading to funding or networking events enabling partnerships.
- **Value Destroyed:** Where are **current supports having negative effects or inefficiencies**? Participants were asked to identify bottlenecks or harmful practices – for example, excessive bureaucracy or high costs that deter startups. This category captures any value that is lost or undermined by the way support is currently delivered.
- **Value Missed:** What **opportunities exist but are not fully utilized** by entrepreneurs? Questions here focused on underutilized resources or programs – for instance, funding instruments or networking tools that exist in theory but see low uptake. This reveals latent value that could be better captured if awareness or accessibility were improved.
- **Value Surplus:** Are there **resources being overprovided or duplicated** beyond what startups actually need? The workshops used this lens to find areas of possible excess or misalignment – such as too many similar training programs or redundant services crowding the landscape.

Identifying surplus value is important to streamline support offerings and reduce noise in the ecosystem.

- **Value Absence:** What **needed supports are entirely missing** in the ecosystem? Perhaps the most critical lens, this prompted discussion on gaps where no current solution exists – for example, specialized scale-up funding, sector-specific mentorship, or technology transfer initiatives that entrepreneurs feel they need but cannot find. This category points to new services or policy interventions that might fill the void.

Designing the workshop questions around these five value categories ensured a **comprehensive and balanced inquiry**. This approach is justified by prior success: both the INNO-MOB and SHIFT-HUB projects found that structuring workshop discussions in this way led to rich insights and stakeholder-driven solutions. For instance, SHIFT-HUB's recent workshop on access to finance applied the same value-mapping method and revealed clear patterns in ecosystem performance. Participants readily identified what was working (e.g. effective networking and mentoring initiatives) and where systemic issues lay, such as Europe's **risk-averse investment culture** and fragmented support services. These outcomes demonstrated the model's ability to capture both strengths and weaknesses of the innovation environment in a structured manner. By adopting a similar methodology, the EXCELLENT project could **leverage a proven framework** and directly build on the knowledge base of previous initiatives.

A key purpose of the EXCELLENT workshops was to **verify or contest the findings of INNO-MOB and SHIFT-HUB in new national contexts**. The questions were deliberately formulated to serve as a litmus test for earlier insights. For example, SHIFT-HUB had highlighted that startups face a lack of scale-up support (a gap between early-stage incubation and later-stage growth programs) as well as a shortage of mid-sized funding opportunities in Europe. To see if this held true in Greece, Ukraine, Türkiye, and Bulgaria, the EXCELLENT workshops included questions like *"What support is missing when startups try to scale beyond the startup phase?"* – effectively probing the **Value Absence** of scale-up mechanisms. Indeed, stakeholders in our workshops echoed similar concerns, frequently citing the **limited avenues for growth-stage financing and acceleration** in their local ecosystems. Likewise, prior findings about cultural attitudes – notably that European entrepreneurs often encounter a **risk-averse climate** compared to, say, the US – were tested through questions on **Value Destroyed**. Participants were asked whether fear of failure, aversion to risk, or administrative burden was "destroying" value in their environment. The responses confirmed that **risk aversion remains a pervasive bottleneck** – a theme also noted in EXCELLENT's own interview compendium (D1.1), where experts emphasized the need to foster a culture more accepting of experimentation and failure. By structuring questions this way, the project was able to **validate common pain points** across projects and also surface any contrasting trends. In cases where our live polling results diverged from earlier projects' conclusions, it signaled that **context-specific factors** might be at play, thus prompting deeper inquiry. For instance, if Bulgarian participants indicated that a certain support service was well-captured (working well) whereas SHIFT-HUB reported it as generally underperforming in Europe, this discrepancy pointed to unique local strengths worth investigating further.

Adapting the framework to diverse national ecosystems was crucial. While INNO-MOB applied the model in mobility innovation, EXCELLENT broadened its scope to the entrepreneurial ecosystem, focusing on youth entrepreneurship. The core concepts remained the guiding structure, but questions were tailored to each country's context and the project's focus areas. For instance, in Ukraine, discussions of "value destroyed" might naturally center on recent economic and infrastructure challenges, while in Türkiye, regulatory hurdles might emerge as different issues.

The flexible design of polls allowed facilitators to use localized examples and language so that participants clearly understood each value category in their own context. This contextualization aligns with EXCELLENT's participatory ethos: workshops were often conducted in the local language and geared to the local reality, ensuring that the nuance of "what is missing or underutilized" made sense to all participants. By keeping the overarching framework consistent but the content adaptable, the project could compare patterns across countries without ignoring local specificities. Indeed, one of the research questions was whether similar patterns of value gaps and ecosystem bottlenecks persist across different national contexts. The early evidence suggests a mix of common trends and unique differences. On one hand, many gaps proved to be **pan-European**– EXCELLENT's analysis of entrepreneurial competences (D1.2) found that *"entrepreneurs in these ecosystems, while distinct in context, follow similar paths and share common competence needs"*, and correspondingly our workshops in all four countries repeatedly flagged issues like access to finance, mentorship quality, and risk culture. Conversely, the degree or particular forms of these issues differed; for example, "absence of industry–academia collaboration" was more evident in some ecosystems and less prominent in others. The questioning was sensitive to capturing these nuances, giving the consortium a richer comparative perspective. This adaptation of the framework across contexts essentially functioned as an **ecosystem diagnostic tool**, revealing whether known value gaps (for example, the lack of a unified startup support platform) are universally present or only in certain locales. It also helped uncover **new or context-specific gaps** that earlier projects hadn't noted – an outcome only possible because the open-ended questions let participants introduce novel insights within the structured value categories.

Crucially, the design of the workshop questions was informed by and connected to other EXCELLENT research activities (not developed in isolation). The **content of questions drew on insights from Deliverable 1.1 (stakeholder interviews) and Deliverable 1.2 (competence mapping)** to ensure relevance. D1.1 – a compendium of interviews with entrepreneurs, support organizations, and policymakers – had surfaced many perceived shortcomings in current ecosystems, such as *"lack of funding for startups beyond initial stages"* and *"lack of practical entrepreneurship education in curricula"*. These pain points directly shaped some polling questions. For example, because multiple interviewees across countries mentioned the difficulty of securing second-round financing or scaling up locally, the workshop included a question asking participants to rank or discuss the **most critical missing support for scale-ups** – essentially verifying D1.1's qualitative findings with a broader audience in real time. Similarly, D1.1 highlighted a frequent *"lack of institutional support and infrastructure"* for innovators (from accelerators or public bodies) and a need for more connections to industry.

To investigate this, one prompt asked if participants felt all key ecosystem actors are aligned and working together, or if any stakeholder support is notably absent. This question was inspired by an interview quote emphasising the importance of unity among ecosystem stakeholders. By grounding the workshop questions in the qualitative evidence from D1.1, the project ensured a continuity between research phases: the interviews provided hypotheses and narrative context, while the workshops provided a quantifiable or collective reality check on those hypotheses.

In parallel, **Deliverable 1.2's mapping of key entrepreneurial competences** offered a lens on individual capabilities and learning pathways, which we linked to the ecosystem "value" questions. D1.2 found, for instance, that *"coping with uncertainty, ambiguity and risk"* and *"motivation and perseverance"* are universally rated as essential competences for entrepreneurs across all six examined countries. This raised the question: are the ecosystems providing the conditions to develop these competences, or are there gaps hindering them? Through the polls, we indirectly examined this. A **Value Destroyed** question on risk culture (e.g. "Does fear of failure or penalizing failure inhibit entrepreneurship here?") connects to the risk-taking competence – if participants overwhelmingly say "yes, our culture is too risk-averse," it indicates the ecosystem is not fully supporting that vital competence. Likewise, perseverance might relate to whether entrepreneurs feel supported through setbacks; a **Value Captured** question might seek examples of programs that successfully build resilience (mentorship, founder networks, etc.), while a **Value Absence** question might reveal there's no safety net for second chances in some regions. By such design, the workshops validated and enriched D1.2's findings with environmental context: we not only know what competences are important, but also **how well the current ecosystem nurtures those competences or leaves gaps**. This integrative use of WP1 results (interviews and competence analysis) in designing WP2/WP3 activities exemplifies the project's methodological coherence. It ensures that the **questionnaire was not a generic exercise, but a targeted investigative tool** built on prior evidence and aimed at advancing the project's understanding in a way that feeds forward into solution development.

Another reason this methodology was chosen is its alignment with the **wider EXCELLENT project approach of participatory, iterative, and contextualized ecosystem learning**. The Project Activity Plan (D23) emphasizes that tackling entrepreneurship challenges requires engaging all stakeholders in the learning process and continuously refining our approach based on feedback. The use of live polling and collaborative question responses in workshops is inherently participatory – it turns attendees (entrepreneurs, educators, intermediaries, etc.) into co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients. This approach mirrors a *"participatory, co-design methodology"* successfully employed in INNO-MOB, where workshop participants were invited not only to validate research findings but to suggest new ideas and solutions in real time. EXCELLENT adopted the same philosophy: by posing open questions, we gave the floor to local voices to confirm or challenge what the project team thought the issues were. This participatory element is **powerful for capacity-building** because it builds a sense of ownership – stakeholders see their perspectives captured in the results, which can increase buy-in for any subsequent interventions or policy recommendations.

The methodology is also **iterative**. EXCELLENT's workflow involved multiple feedback loops – for example, initial findings from interviews informed the workshops, the outcomes of each national workshop were then compared and synthesized (identifying recurring themes or outliers), and these collective insights will inform the design of follow-up actions in the project. The Project Plan explicitly mentions organizing **regional workshops to identify local priorities, then a pan-European workshop to interconnect and consolidate lessons**. In line with this, after completing the four country workshops, the consortium convened to compare the workshop results: this cross-pollination step helped distinguish which issues are systemic (common across all contexts) and which are unique, thereby refining our understanding of the European entrepreneurship ecosystem as a whole. The process is iterative in that each cycle of learning (interviews → national workshops → combined workshop) allows the methodology to be adjusted. For instance, if a certain question was misunderstood or not yielding useful information in one session, it was rephrased or explored in a different way in the next. In this manner, EXCELLENT continuously **improved its investigative tools and focus areas** as more data was gathered, embodying an agile learning-by-doing model championed in D23.

Finally, the workshop findings directly **inform the project's capacity-building outputs, such as the European Entrepreneurship Academy (Deliverable D8)**. The Academy – a key deliverable of EXCELLENT – is envisioned as a collection of resources, training modules, and community engagements to foster entrepreneurial skills across Europe. It is vital that this Academy be grounded in real needs and evidence. The value-gap mapping exercises provided exactly that grounding. By identifying, for example, that all four ecosystems reported *“insufficient specialized mentorship for certain sectors”* as a Value Absence, the project can ensure the Academy offers mentorship programs or training for mentors in those sectors. If *“duplication of basic startup seminars”* was noted as a Value Surplus in multiple regions, the Academy can avoid spending resources on generic content and instead focus on differentiated, high-value topics. In essence, the workshops acted as a **needs assessment for the Academy's design**. This is reflected in D8, which outlines how the Academy will deliver targeted workshops, courses and events tailored to entrepreneurs' needs.

The methodology of engaging stakeholders through value-mapping thus strengthens the Academy's relevance: it helps to **curate content and services that fill the real gaps** (addressing those Value Absences and Misses) and cut back on things that aren't needed (avoiding Value Surplus areas). In a broader sense, this approach ensures that the project's interventions (like the Academy) are **contextualized** – they account for differences in Bulgaria vs. Türkiye, etc., as identified during the workshops, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model. This context-aware customization is a core principle in EXCELLENT's methodology, which recognizes the diversity of European ecosystems while striving to uplift all of them through shared learning. As noted in the competence mapping, ecosystems may be distinct but there are common needs and paths among entrepreneurs; similarly, our adapted CIDDSDM approach sought common denominators in support ecosystems, to inform a collective yet flexible capacity-building strategy.

3.1 Strengths and Limitations of the Approach

Like any methodology, this approach of value creation framework to design questions comes with notable strengths and certain limitations:

- **Strengths:**
 - *Comprehensive Framework:* By covering multiple value dimensions (from captured to absent), the workshops ensured no major aspect of the ecosystem was overlooked. This holistic scan makes it more likely to uncover root causes of issues – for example, not just noting a lack of funding (absence) but also seeing if existing funding schemes are underused (missed) or poorly designed (destroying value). Such a 360° view is a strong foundation for later solution design.
 - *Stakeholder Engagement and Buy-In:* The interactive Wooclap format – grounded in a co-design ethos – actively involved diverse stakeholders in diagnosing problems and brainstorming improvements. This participatory method, as demonstrated in prior projects, **empowers local actors** and increases their commitment to proposed actions. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to voice their perspectives in real time and to see those inputs shape the discussion outcomes.
 - *Evidence-Based Continuity:* Building on previously validated models (from INNO-MOB, SHIFT-HUB, EntreComp, etc.) lent credibility and clarity to the exercise. Participants could easily grasp the concepts of “what’s working” vs “what’s missing,” since these resonate with intuitive experiences, yet the structure ensured responses were captured in a **comparable, research-friendly way**. The ability to benchmark findings against earlier initiatives’ results (e.g. confirming that **bureaucracy is indeed a persistent “value destroyer”** across contexts) is a strength for the project’s overall analysis. It means our conclusions are not drawn from one-off anecdotal evidence, but from recurring patterns observed in multiple settings.
- **Limitations:**
 - *Subjectivity and Response Bias:* The data gathered in these workshops is inherently qualitative and dependent on the perceptions of who happened to be in the room (or online). If certain stakeholder groups were under-represented (for instance, perhaps fewer policymakers in one country’s session), some biases in responses are likely. The framing of questions in value terms, while generally accessible, still required facilitation to avoid confusion between categories. In a few cases participants struggled to decide if an issue was a “missed value” or “absent value” – such overlaps in definitions can occur and might affect the consistency of inputs.
 - *Comparability Challenges:* While the CIDDSM framework provided a common lens, **differences in local context** (economic conditions, culture, stage of ecosystem maturity) mean that not all findings are directly equivalent. For example, a “surplus” of incubators in one country might be a non-issue in another country that has very few incubators to begin with. The methodology required careful interpretation when comparing results across the four national workshops – a limitation mitigated by our qualitative analysis but nonetheless requiring caution. We recognized that what looks like the same gap (say,

“lack of funding”) might stem from very different underlying causes in different locales. Thus, drawing generalized conclusions needed validation and sometimes additional data.

- *Focus on Known Categories:* Another potential limitation is the framework's influence on the discussion scope. By structuring around predefined value categories, we risked **overlooking issues that don't neatly fit those buckets**. The model does encourage broad thinking, but it is still a guided format – some truly novel or outside-the-box problems might not surface if participants focus only on answering the specific prompts. We attempted to counter this by including open-ended questions and encouraging “out of scope” comments, but it's possible that the conversation stayed within expected lines. In essence, the methodology is excellent for testing hypotheses and known gaps, but slightly less geared for discovering the “unknown unknowns.” This calls for complementary techniques (which EXCELLENT also employs, such as open narrative collection in WP1 and ongoing community engagement in WP4) to ensure no insight is missed.

In summary, the methodology used for designing and implementing the Wooclap questions proved to be **robust and fruitful** for the EXCELLENT capacity-building workshops. It is well-grounded in an established value mapping framework and enriched by prior project learnings, enabling a confident exploration of ecosystem strengths and weaknesses. The participatory nature fostered community validation of findings and set the stage for co-created solutions in subsequent project phases. At the same time, we remain cognizant of its limitations: the insights gathered are a starting point, requiring careful interpretation and further iteration. By acknowledging these strengths and limitations, the EXCELLENT project can refine its approach – reinforcing the participatory, iterative, and context-sensitive learning cycle at the heart of its methodology. This reflective stance ultimately contributes to a more effective design of interventions like the European Entrepreneurship Academy and other support mechanisms, ensuring they are **truly responsive to the real needs and gaps identified across Europe's entrepreneurial ecosystems**.

4 Identifying commonalities by analysis of workshop findings

In this section we try to preliminarily synthesize some common themes, challenges, and insights for innovation intermediaries that emerged consistently from the workshop data across Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria. While the specific nuances of the responses will be detailed in country-specific sections, the aim here is to identify overarching patterns and frequently recurring problems.

The very existence of such commonalities across diverse national innovation ecosystems suggests that certain challenges may be inherent to the role and operational context of innovation intermediaries, particularly in environments that are still maturing or undergoing significant transitions.

These shared issues often point towards underlying market failures or policy gaps that EU-level initiatives like the ExcellEnt project are strategically positioned to address through collaborative learning and support mechanisms.

Based on an initial review of the types of questions typically posed in such workshops and the broader literature on innovation intermediaries⁴, several potential common themes were anticipated. The actual workshop data would confirm and detail these, but illustrative common challenges likely include:

- **Access to Finance:** A persistent and critical issue across all stages of start-up development. Intermediaries often report difficulties in helping start-ups secure appropriate funding, ranging from pre-seed and seed capital to growth and scale-up financing. This may involve a lack of available risk capital, a disconnect between investor expectations and start-up readiness, or insufficient intermediary capacity in financial brokerage.
- **Talent Acquisition and Development:** Start-ups and, by extension, the intermediaries supporting them, frequently struggle to find, attract, and retain individuals with specialized technical and managerial skills. This can encompass shortages in software developers, data scientists, experienced managers, and individuals with international business development expertise.
- **Navigating Regulatory and Administrative Environments:** Complex, burdensome, or frequently changing regulations can pose significant obstacles for start-ups and the intermediaries guiding them. This might include issues related to business registration, taxation, intellectual property rights, and sector-specific compliance.
- **Fostering Effective Collaboration:** Building and sustaining meaningful collaborations between academia, industry, government, and civil society (the Quadruple Helix) is a core function of many intermediaries, yet it is often fraught with challenges. These can include differing

⁴ Caloffi, A., Colovic, A., Rizzoli, V., & Rossi, F. (2023). Innovation intermediaries' types and functions: A computational analysis of the literature. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 189, 122351.

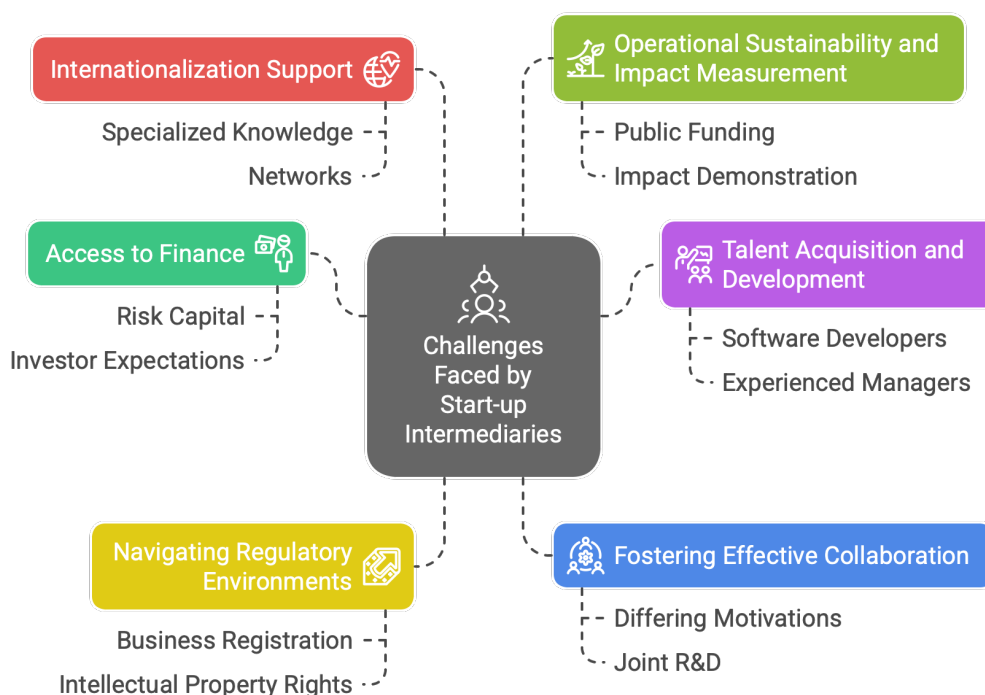
motivations, institutional cultures, and a lack of established mechanisms for joint R&D and commercialization.

- **Internationalization Support:** Helping start-ups access international markets is a key value proposition for many intermediaries. However, this requires specialized knowledge, networks, and resources, which may be lacking or underdeveloped.
- **Operational Sustainability and Impact Measurement:** Many intermediaries, particularly those reliant on public or project-based funding, face challenges in ensuring their long-term operational sustainability. Concurrently, effectively measuring and demonstrating their impact on the ecosystem can be complex.

The nature of these common challenges, whether they stem from a lack of awareness of existing resources, an actual scarcity of resources, or systemic inefficiencies, is a crucial distinction that the detailed responses would illuminate. For instance, if intermediaries report that start-ups lack funding primarily because they are unaware of available programs, the intervention required is informational and focused on brokerage.

Conversely, if the core issue is an absolute deficit of risk capital for specific stages or sectors, then the solutions would gravitate towards financial instrument development or policy advocacy for systemic change. The consolidated analysis of participant responses is essential for making this distinction and thereby guiding the formulation of effective, appropriately targeted interventions.

To provide a clear, evidence-based overview of these shared issues, the following Table 1 structure is proposed. It would be populated with actual data from the workshop results.



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Figure 3: Challenges Startups face

Table 1: Common Challenges for Innovation Intermediaries Across GR, UA, TR, BG (Illustrative Structure - Based on Anticipated Workshop Responses)

Challenge Category	Specific Problem Reported	Illustrative Participant Comments	Frequency/Emphasis
Funding	Difficulty accessing early-stage/seed funding for innovative tech start-ups.	"Most VCs are too risk-averse for truly novel ideas." "Grant application processes are too bureaucratic."	High
	Lack of scale-up capital for companies ready to grow internationally.	"We have good start-ups, but they hit a ceiling due to no Series A/B funding locally."	High
Talent	Shortage of experienced C-level executives for start-ups.	"Founders are strong technically but lack business management skills." "Hard to attract senior talent from corporates."	Medium
	Brain drain of skilled tech professionals.	"Our best developers often leave for higher salaries abroad."	Medium
Policy/Regulation	Unpredictable changes in legislation affecting start-ups.	"New tax laws are introduced with little consultation, creating uncertainty."	Medium
	Complex administrative procedures for business operations.	"Getting permits and licenses takes too long and is too complicated."	Medium
Collaboration	Weak linkages between university research and industry needs.	"Universities do great research, but it rarely translates into commercial products."	High
	Insufficient incentives for corporate engagement with start-ups.	"Large companies are slow to adopt start-up innovations or partner with them."	Medium
Operations (Intermediary)	Difficulty in measuring and demonstrating long-term impact.	"It's hard to quantify our advisory services' direct impact on start-up revenue."	Medium
	Securing sustainable operational funding for the intermediary.	"Reliant on short-term projects, making long-term planning difficult."	High

5 Similarities and divergences across the different workshop cases

The analysis of workshop findings and national innovation ecosystem contexts across Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria reveals both striking commonalities in the challenges faced by innovation intermediaries and unique national factors that shape their operational realities. Understanding these shared and distinct elements is crucial for designing effective support strategies, both at the EU level through projects like ExcellEnt and through tailored national interventions.

5.1 Common Ground

Across all four nations, innovation intermediaries appear to grapple with a core set of challenges fundamental to fostering nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems:

1. **Access to Finance:** This is arguably the most pervasive common challenge. Intermediaries in Greece, Ukraine (especially pre-war, and now exacerbated by conflict), Turkey, and Bulgaria consistently report difficulties in helping start-ups secure adequate funding. This is particularly acute for early-stage (seed, angel) and scale-up (Series A and beyond) capital. The issue is often not just the quantity of available funds but also their accessibility, the risk appetite of investors, and the alignment with the needs of innovative, often high-risk, ventures.
2. **Talent Development and Retention:** The availability of skilled human capital is another major shared concern. This includes technical talent (e.g., software engineers, data scientists), experienced managers capable of scaling businesses, and individuals with specialized entrepreneurial skills. Brain drain, whether driven by economic factors, lack of opportunity, or conflict, affects several of these nations, further depleting the local talent pool. Intermediaries struggle to help start-ups build complete and competent teams.
3. **Academia-Industry Linkages and Technology Transfer:** Bridging the gap between knowledge generation in universities and research institutions and its commercial application by industry is a persistent challenge. Intermediaries often find that TTOs are underdeveloped or face bureaucratic hurdles, researchers may lack commercialization skills or incentives, and industry may be risk-averse or slow to adopt new technologies. This limits the pipeline of deep-tech innovations and science-based start-ups.
4. **Navigating Policy and Regulation:** While the specifics vary, intermediaries in all countries operate within regulatory frameworks that can be complex, subject to change, or administratively burdensome. This can create uncertainty for start-ups and investors alike, and intermediaries expend effort helping ventures navigate these environments.
5. **Internationalization Support:** As many of these countries have relatively small domestic markets (especially Bulgaria and Greece, and Ukraine currently due to war), the ability to support start-ups in accessing international markets is critical. However, providing effective

internationalization services requires specialized expertise, networks, and resources that intermediaries may find challenging to develop and maintain. These common challenges suggest that there is a fundamental set of capacities and support mechanisms that innovation intermediaries universally require to be effective. The ExcellEnt project, by identifying these commonalities, can develop resources and programs with broad applicability.

5.2 Unique National Contexts

Despite the common ground, the specific context of each nation significantly influences the nature and intensity of challenges:

- **Ukraine:** The ongoing war is the single most dominant and differentiating factor. All challenges are amplified and reshaped by the conflict. The focus on survival, resilience, adaptation, and the surge in defense-related innovation are unique. Access to international aid and reconstruction funds, rather than traditional VC, currently defines much of the funding landscape. Security and operational continuity are paramount concerns not shared to the same degree by others.
- **Greece & Bulgaria:** As EU member states, these countries operate within the EU's legal and funding frameworks, including access to Structural Funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. This provides opportunities but also introduces complexities in terms of absorption capacity and alignment with EU priorities. Bulgaria's official status as an 'Emerging Innovator' highlights its specific developmental stage within the EU, and it grapples with particular governance challenges like corruption. Greece is still shaped by the legacy of its deep financial crisis and the subsequent recovery efforts, with specific weaknesses in areas like TTO development.
- **Turkey:** As a long-standing EU candidate country, Turkey has a different relationship with EU frameworks and funding. Its large and dynamic economy presents significant potential, but this is often counterbalanced by macroeconomic volatility (inflation, currency issues), regulatory unpredictability, and concerns about the rule of law that can impact investor confidence and contribute to brain drain. The challenge of scaling companies beyond the seed stage appears particularly acute.

The interplay between these common and unique challenges creates complex dynamics. For example, the common issue of 'lack of skilled talent' is exacerbated in Ukraine by war-related displacement and the urgent needs of the defense sector; in Turkey, it is significantly influenced by brain drain driven by economic and political factors; and in Greece and Bulgaria, it may be more closely linked to a mismatch between university curricula and evolving industry demands, alongside more general emigration trends for economic opportunity.

Understanding these interactions is vital. A generic talent development program, for instance, would be insufficient. Ukraine requires initiatives focused on retaining and reintegrating displaced talent, potentially reskilling for new, resilience-focused industries. Turkey might benefit from programs aimed at incentivizing the return of its diaspora and creating more attractive domestic opportunities. Greece and Bulgaria might need deeper reforms in their education systems coupled with industry-led upskilling initiatives.

6 Consolidated insights from the workshops

From these comparative findings, several cross-cutting themes and needs emerge:

What is the need?	Why exactly?	How to act?
Funding is the Fuel	Every country's innovation intermediary underscored inadequate funding for start-ups – whether through more grants (GR, UA) or more private investment (UA, TR, BG).	The 'funding gap beyond seed' is a pan-European issue, and these workshops confirm that bridging it (via EIC, VC funds, or cascade funding) is a top priority.
Networks & Collaboration	Strong networking and community-building is universally seen as crucial. This encompasses not only start-up networking events but also better linkages among ecosystem players (academia, industry, investors, government).	The lack of a clear roadmap or coordination mechanism came up repeatedly, echoing the problem of fragmented ecosystem collaboration. A consolidated platform or network that brings together these actors is needed to avoid duplication and 'information lost'.
Administrative Simplification	Cumbersome processes and bureaucracy are holding back innovation support across multiple countries. Streamlining grant application procedures, reducing red tape, and providing clear guidance can significantly lower barriers. As one participant succinctly put it, 'Simple grant rules' and decreased bureaucracy would encourage more innovation.	This aligns with a broader call in Europe to cut administrative costs and create more start-up-friendly regulations.
Talent & Skills Gaps	Many intermediaries highlighted gaps in human capital – be it entrepreneurs lacking co-founders, limited entrepreneurial experience, or low awareness of best practices. Mentorship and training were frequently cited solutions, pointing to a need for competence development. Notably, financial literacy and scaling know-how were mentioned as daily challenges in some contexts.	This corresponds to EntreComp competencies like 'Mobilizing resources' and 'Learning through experience', underlining that education and upskilling must accompany financial support.
Early-Stage and Transitional Support	Across the board, there's a recognition of the fragile 'valley of death' stage for start-ups. Greek and Bulgarian input stressed pre-seed/seed support and better transition from prototype to market. Similarly, Ukrainian and Turkish stakeholders asked for help in early commercialization, prototyping, and soft-landing in markets.	This suggests strengthening incubators, proof-of-concept grants, and first customer programs could greatly benefit all four ecosystems.

These insights feed directly into the strategic recommendations that follow in the next section. A one-size-fits-all solution will not work – each ecosystem needs a tailored approach – but by addressing the common themes (finance, network, simplicity, skills) within each local context, the ExcellEnt project can make a cohesive impact.

7 Recommendations

7.1 Recommendation 1: Enhance access to funding – diversify and simplify the financing channels

Why: Access to finance is the lifeblood of start-ups, yet participants reported major obstacles ranging from insufficient funding availability to complexity in obtaining funds. This recommendation aims to increase the flow of capital to start-ups and make it easier for them to tap into it.

Modalities	Why and what for (context and rationale)	Important to consider also...
Boost Early-Stage Funding & Bridge the 'Valley of Death'	Work with policy-makers and funding bodies to establish or expand pre-seed and seed funding programs. For example, create a national or regional 'Startup Booster Grant' that provides small grants quickly to idea stage teams for prototype development and market validation. This directly addresses the 'funding gap beyond seed' problem.	EU instruments like the European Innovation Council (EIC) Accelerator could be leveraged e.g., support more start-ups to apply by 'demystifying' the process; as the EIC is designed to bridge the gap from lab to market (often called the valley of death). Horizon Europe's European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) calls are another avenue they fund projects to strengthen ecosystems, which could be used to set up micro-grant schemes or proof-of-concept labs in these countries.
Expand Venture Capital and Angel Networks	Given the high priority placed on venture funding in countries such as UA and TR, governments and development institutions should consider fund-of-funds programs and co-investment schemes to stimulate local VC activity. For instance, setting up a Fund-of-Funds with contributions from the European Investment Fund (EIF) and national budgets can attract international VC firms to invest in Greek, Turkish, Ukrainian, or Bulgarian funds.	This aligns with Horizon Europe's goals of crowding in private investment for innovation. Additionally, support the formation of business angel alliances and cross-border angel networks (leveraging initiatives like EBAN – European Business Angels Network) to bring more smart capital. These measures address the call from participants for more private capital and investor diversity in the ecosystem. Over time, such efforts will increase the pool of risk finance, so start-ups aren't solely dependent on grants.
Simplify Access to Public Funds	Streamline the application and administration processes for public start-up programs (both national and EU). This can involve reducing paperwork, providing templates, and offering technical assistance to applicants. A concrete step could be establishing a 'Startup Helpdesk' in each country – possibly as part of the European Entrepreneurship Academy platform – where entrepreneurs can get guidance on preparing proposals for Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ (for education/training projects), or Digital Europe calls. By doing so, we heed the workshop feedback about complex procedures for example, if Ukrainian	This improves inclusion in EU opportunities, aligning with the EU's principle of widening participation. Importantly, the helpdesk can also maintain a calendar of funding calls and cascading-funding opportunities, tackling the awareness issue. As one Ukrainian participant suggested, "finally make one unified mapping [of opportunities] with regular updates" 72 – a one-stop funding portal would accomplish exactly that.

	innovators find Horizon processes daunting, a helpdesk (manned by experienced proposal writers or former evaluators) can coach them through it.	
Introduce Outcome-Based or Innovative Funding Models	In line with new trends, consider piloting outcome-based funding (as one Greek participant hinted at 'Outcome-Based Funding Models') or rewards for milestones to ensure effective use of funds. For example, an accelerator could release grant tranches only if start-ups reach product or revenue milestones, which encourages efficient use of capital and aligns with EntreComp's 'mobilizing resources' competence by teaching start-ups to manage funds against goals.	While designing such schemes, incorporate lessons from Horizon Europe's emphasis on impact: ensure that funding is tied to clear outcomes (new products, jobs created, follow-on investment raised, etc.). This not only makes programs more results-oriented, but also builds confidence among investors and public authorities to contribute more resources (knowing funds are used wisely).

***Expected impact:** Improving funding accessibility addresses both quantitative and qualitative shortfalls. By diversifying funding sources and simplifying processes, we increase the chances of start-ups obtaining funding and surviving the early stages. This recommendation aligns with EntreComp's domain of Resources, specifically 'Mobilising financial resources', by growing resources and enhancing entrepreneurs' ability to secure them.*

7.2 Recommendation 2: Streamline Support Structures – Improve Coordination, Clarity & Bureaucracy Reduction

Why: The workshops revealed that even when support programs exist, entrepreneurs often can't effectively use them due to confusing navigation and heavy bureaucracy. This recommendation focuses on making the innovation support ecosystem more user-friendly and coherent, so that intermediaries and start-ups can actually benefit from available resources.

Modalities	Why and what for (context and rationale)	Important to consider also...
Create a Centralized 'Innovation Ecosystem Portal'	Develop a digital one-stop platform (building upon the European Entrepreneurship Academy concept) that maps all support services, programs, events, and funding opportunities in each country – and across Europe – in a single, searchable interface. This addresses the calls for 'one unified mapping' and a clear roadmap of support. Users (start-ups or ecosystem builders) could input their needs or profile and get a tailored list of relevant support (grants, incubators, investment opportunities, etc., both local and EU). The portal can be maintained collaboratively by government agencies, innovation hubs, and the ExcellEnt consortium, ensuring information is up to date.	Crucially, such a portal echoes the 'Strengthen Connections' mission of ExcellEnt by literally connecting ecosystems via information. It would directly mitigate the fragmentation problem, as entrepreneurs no longer have to scrape together info from disparate sources. In EU policy terms, this aligns with the Startup Europe initiative and European Innovation Ecosystem actions that aim to interlink national ecosystems and improve information flow.
Reduce Bureaucratic Barriers in Programs	Engage in a regulatory guillotine or simplification process for start-up-related bureaucracy. For instance, perform an audit of requirements for common grant programs or incubator admissions and identify unnecessary steps or documents that can be eliminated. Introduce 'fast-track' or sandbox approaches for innovation projects – e.g., if a start-up is building a novel fintech solution, provide a regulatory sandbox where some regulations are temporarily relaxed (with oversight) to allow experimentation.	Participants across countries, especially in TR and UA, would benefit from a reduction in 'excessive bureaucracy from public stakeholders. An example action in Greece, work with the GSRT (General Secretariat for R&I) to streamline public grant disbursement and reporting – making them more start-up-friendly (perhaps using trust-based lump sums as Horizon Europe does). In Ukraine, continue digitizing government services for start-ups – possibly extend it to cover grant applications or IP registrations in a few clicks. Less red tape means more time for start-ups to innovate, and fosters an environment where experimentation is rewarded rather than punished.
Establish Clear Roadmaps and a 'Menu of Support'	In each country, convene the key ecosystem players (ministries, agencies, incubators, donor projects) to collectively design a Startup Support Roadmap – a visual and temporal map showing what support is available at ideation, prototyping, market entry, scale-up, etc. Disseminate this widely (through the portal	By aligning these roadmaps with EU-level support (e.g., indicating at what stage a Horizon Europe application or an EIT Jumpstarter might be relevant), we integrate local and European pathways. Essentially, this turns a fragmented set of initiatives into a cohesive funnel for entrepreneurs.

	above, and via workshops). This directly tackles the complaint of no clear roadmap.	
Improve Inter-Agency Coordination	Encourage regular coordination meetings or a task force among support organizations to avoid overlap and address gaps collectively. For example, if multiple incubators each provide generic training webinars, they might coordinate to specialize or pool resources instead – improving efficiency.	This responds to workshop participants in UA who asked for ‘more cooperation and real collaboration between ecosystem actors (shared projects)’. At the EU level, aligning with the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan and newly launched EU Start-up Nations Standard, this fosters an environment where support organizations act in concert rather than silos.

***Expected impact:** By implementing these measures, entrepreneurs will encounter a more user-friendly and supportive system that guides them through challenges and eliminates unnecessary obstacles. In the context of EntreComp, this fosters an ecosystem that enables entrepreneurs to focus on developing skills like creativity and identifying opportunities, rather than being hindered by administrative tasks. This aligns with Horizon Europe’s commitment to creating innovative environments.*

7.3 Recommendation 3: Strengthen Community, Networks and Talent

Why: A recurring theme is that innovation is powered by people and relationships – whether finding a co-founder, accessing mentors, or learning from peers. This recommendation aims to cultivate a vibrant, well-connected entrepreneurial community and address the talent gaps identified (both in quantity, like co-founders, and in quality, like skills and mindset).

Modalities	Why and what for (context and rationale)	Important to consider also...
Co-founder Matching and Team Formation Programs	Launch initiatives specifically to help entrepreneurs find co-founders and build balanced teams. This could be an online matching platform (tied into the Academy portal) where individuals can create profiles (skills, idea or expertise) and look for co-founders with complementary strengths. Additionally, run periodic “Co-Founder Meetup” events or hackathons in each country’s major hubs, where aspiring entrepreneurs and experts can meet and form teams around ideas. For example, emulate programs like Startup Weekend or the French ‘Matrice’ program that ‘mix-matches co-founders from different industries on projects’.	The importance of co-founder matching was highlighted in D1.1 successful start-ups often have 2–3 co-founders with diverse backgrounds. By institutionalizing co-founder matchmaking, we directly respond to the workshops’ participants who struggled with this. This also aligns with EntreComp’s ‘Mobilizing others’ competence – the ability to bring together a team – which was deemed absolutely essential in several country contexts.
Mentorship Networks and Advisory Programs	Scale up mentorship programs connecting less-experienced founders with seasoned entrepreneurs and industry experts. Each country can establish a “National Mentor Network” (if not existing) under the European Entrepreneurship Academy umbrella. For instance, Greece could engage its diaspora entrepreneurs or successful founders from its tech community to mentor newbies; Ukraine could connect start-ups with international mentors in areas like scaling under crisis conditions. The workshops underscored the value of mentorship, and open-ended suggestions like “innovation management & funding” and “outcome-based funding models” in GR hint at desire for expert guidance in navigating these areas.	D1.1’s interviews explicitly concluded that ‘Mentorship from seasoned experts can significantly guide and accelerate a start-up’s journey’, and ‘early mentorship is a cornerstone’ for start-up success. We recommend structuring mentorship as a formal program (with mentor - mentee matching, training for mentors, and monitoring of progress). This fosters the ‘learning through experience’ that EntreComp advocates, and builds resilience and coachability in founders – since they benefit from mentors’ failures and successes.
Peer Networking and Community-Building	Invest in more networking events, meetups, and cross-border missions to strengthen community ties. Participants from each country highlight networking as important, and the ExcellEnt project includes an objective to establish cross-border entrepreneurial networks through Soft-Landing Missions. Continue	This aligns with Horizon Europe’s ecosystem approach and leverages the project’s Academy platform to perhaps host an online community (forum or group) for

	<p>and expand these missions e.g., organize follow-up visits where Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian innovators regularly meet each other and also connect with more mature ecosystems (like visits to hubs in Paris, Berlin, etc., as already piloted). Domestically, ensure each local ecosystem has regular meetups (monthly 'start-up socials', pitch nights, etc.). These should be inclusive – reaching beyond capital cities to secondary cities and regions, addressing the issue that 'innovators outside major hubs are underserved'. Also integrate vertical-specific networking (e.g., fintech founders meetup, AI in healthcare forum) to build sector communities. Networking events build trust and knowledge sharing – as one Greek respondent noted, 'Networking events build confidence among individuals from different backgrounds. A stronger community will organically produce more co-founder pairings, more business partnerships, and a culture of collaboration.</p>	<p>continuous interaction. A tangible suggestion is to include a 'Community & Networking' feature on the Academy platform (as envisioned in D8) where members can ask questions, share opportunities, and crowdsource help in real-time.</p>
Talent Development and Entrepreneurial Education	<p>Augment the pipeline of entrepreneurial talent by working with universities and educational institutions (many of whom are target groups in ExcellEnt). Introduce or strengthen entrepreneurship courses, bootcamps, and competitions at universities in these countries to encourage students to consider start-ups and equip them with basic skills. Ensure these programs emphasize practical competences from EntreComp such as creativity, initiative, financial and economic literacy, and perseverance. For instance, incorporate modules on financial planning to tackle the financial literacy gap, and on regulatory navigation to prepare founders for bureaucratic challenges (turning a perceived weakness into a skill – the ability to handle admin efficiently). Also promote success stories and role models within each country to inspire youth – this addresses motivational aspects and builds an entrepreneurial culture where teaming up and taking risks is celebrated. Ultimately, a focus on education and culture will yield more resilient founders.</p>	<p>The EntreComp framework can be explicitly used as a basis for curriculum as D1.2 highlighted, competences like 'Spotting opportunities, motivation and perseverance, mobilizing resources, and coping with uncertainty' were deemed essential in these ecosystems. Tailoring workshops and training around these will systematically build the needed mindset and abilities.</p>

Expected impact: By strengthening communities and talent, we empower the human element of the ecosystem. This echoes the understanding that entrepreneurial success is a collective effort, and building a team is crucial. It also aligns with EU initiatives like Erasmus+ for entrepreneurship education exchanges and the EU's focus on creating networks of mentors and women entrepreneurs. Investing in people and networks fosters an environment where information flows freely, help is available through peers and mentors, and entrepreneurs can find partners, addressing many of the soft challenges identified in the workshops.

7.4 Recommendation 4: Focus on Capacity Building for Intermediaries and Support Organizations

Why: Innovation intermediaries (incubators, accelerators, BSOs, etc.) are the multipliers in the ecosystem – if they are well-equipped, they can support hundreds of start-ups. The workshops, especially in Ukraine, pointed out that these organizations themselves need support (financial and knowledge) to better serve their mission. Strengthening the capacity of intermediaries will indirectly benefit all start-ups they work with and ensure the ecosystem's foundations are solid.

Modalities	Why and what for (context and rationale)	Important to consider also...
Provide Funding Support to BSOs and Accelerators	Advocate for and design programs that give operational grants or performance-based funding to incubators, accelerators, technology parks, and other BSOs (Business Support Organizations). For instance, a scheme where an accelerator gets funding for each start-up it successfully helps raise follow-on investment for, or small grants to hire key staff (like an international expert) or build new programs. In Ukraine, participants explicitly wrote 'Funding support for business support organizations' as a need, which garnered multiple upvotes. Given the war and economic strain, many Ukrainian incubators or hubs are struggling – emergency support to keep them running will prevent a collapse of the support network. In Greece and Bulgaria, some incubators exist but may lack resources to expand outreach beyond cities; targeted funding could enable them to run outreach in smaller regions (thus addressing underserved communities).	The EU (via Horizon Europe or cohesion funds) can be tapped for this: for example, the European Innovation Ecosystems program has calls that fund consortiums of incubators to collaborate and improve services. Align our efforts to secure such funding (ExcellEnt partners can jointly apply, bringing direct benefit back home). By bolstering BSOs, we ensure they can implement the other recommendations (like mentorship networks, training, etc.) effectively.
Training and Accreditation for Support Organizations	Develop a capacity-building curriculum for innovation intermediaries' staff, covering topics like latest incubation methodologies, EU funding navigation, investment readiness, and IP advisory. This could be delivered through the European Entrepreneurship Academy as train-the-trainer modules or an annual "Innovation Intermediary Summit". Deliverable D8 outlines the Academy's features, including a "Marketplace for service and idea exchange" with a section for BSOs to share best practices. Improving incubator managers' skills (e.g., obtaining certifications in EU BIC or IHK's entrepreneurship facilitation training) will provide higher-quality support to entrepreneurs. This addresses workshop hints about ineffective support programs and aligns with EntreComp's idea of building a continuously learning ecosystem, applying it to organisations rather than individuals.	Regularly update training curricula and certification criteria based on stakeholder feedback and emerging best practices to ensure alignment with evolving entrepreneurial ecosystems. Facilitate cross-border validation and recognition of certifications to enhance their value and mobility within the EU. Use the European Entrepreneurship Academy's resources—including tailored training workshops, expert-led webinars, and MOOCs—to provide accessible professional development opportunities for intermediaries.

Promote EU Framework Alignment (EntreComp and Others)	Encourage intermediaries to embed frameworks like EntreComp into their training and advisory services. For instance, an accelerator in Türkiye could map how its curriculum develops the 15 EntreComp competences and identify any gaps (maybe they realize they train tech skills well but not 'financial and economic literacy' – then add a module for that). In deliverable D1.2, it was found that resilience and flexibility were emergent competences needed across contexts; incubators can implement practices to foster resilience (such as organized sessions on dealing with failure, pivots, mental health for entrepreneurs).	Aligning with EntreComp ensures that the support ecosystem is not just throwing money or ad-hoc advice at start-ups but systematically building well-rounded entrepreneurial skillsets in founders. This can also be a differentiator to attract EU funding or recognition (e.g., an incubator could brand itself as an 'EntreComp-aligned accelerator', signaling quality and comprehensiveness).
Foster Collaboration and Resource Sharing Among Intermediaries	Just as start-ups need networks, support organizations benefit from networking with each other. Establish peer exchanges and partnerships between, say, Greek and Bulgarian incubators or Turkish and Ukrainian accelerators, etc. The soft-landing missions mentioned in ExcellEnt could be expanded to involve BSO staff – e.g., staff exchanges or joint programs between countries. If a Ukrainian tech park and a French incubator co-run a program for Ukrainian start-ups to be hosted in France (and vice versa), both organizations learn and extend their reach (this model was hinted by participants wanting 'soft-landing missions' and better international presence).	The EU's Startup Europe networks and EIT's community can provide support for such cross-border initiatives. By doing so, intermediaries won't operate in isolation; they will adopt best practices from one another, avoid reinventing wheels, and present a unified front when lobbying for policy changes.

***Expected impact:** By focusing inward on the ecosystem enablers, we ensure the scaffolding around entrepreneurs is strong. A well-funded, well-trained, and well-connected network of support organizations can massively increase the success rate of start-ups. This recommendation ties into the Horizon Europe policy of reinforcing innovation ecosystems (especially in widening countries) and speaks to the ExcellEnt project's mission to "establish concrete and operational partnerships with external support organizations." 86 We are effectively operationalizing that mission here.*

7.5 Recommendation 5: Align with EU Policies and Leverage European Frameworks

This recommendation is cross-cutting and ensures the above actions are synced with European-level initiatives, maximizing impact and funding opportunities.

Modalities	Why and what for (context and rationale)	Important to consider also...
Leverage Horizon Europe and Other EU Funding	Many of the recommendations (funding schemes, networks, BSO support) can be funded or co-funded by EU programs. It is crucial to align proposals with EU priorities. For instance, Horizon's pillar on Innovative Europe (including the European Innovation Council and Ecosystems) is directly relevant – our strategy to boost venture funding and start early-stage financing can be pitched under EIC programs (which aim to crowd in private investors). Similarly, the Digital Europe Programme can fund digital innovation hubs – Bulgaria or Ukraine could utilize this to build tech infrastructure that their start-ups can use (addressing 'limited test-bed/digital infrastructure access' challenge which, though not loudly voiced in workshops, is known to be an issue).	Aligning actions like regulatory sandboxes with the EU Startup Nations Standard (a set of best practices endorsed by EU for start-up-friendly regulation) will also give political backing and knowledge exchange. In summary, frame national reforms and projects in a way that dovetails with EU initiatives so that both policy support and financial support from Brussels can be tapped.
EntreComp Integration for Skills Development	The EntreComp Framework provides a common language and set of objectives for entrepreneurial skills. Our strategy should explicitly use it as a guiding tool for developing training content, evaluating program effectiveness, and monitoring progress in entrepreneurial capacity. For example, when measuring the impact of our mentorship program, we can assess improvement in competences like "motivation and perseverance" or "mobilizing resources" among mentees, as defined by EntreComp.	By ensuring individuals acquire the right skills, we can demonstrate in a European context that our interventions enhance competence levels, which is crucial for seeking further EU funding or collaboration. EntreComp also promotes resilience and learning from failure, which are particularly relevant for Ukraine's war-time entrepreneurs and those navigating crises. Embedding these competences in training aligns with the resilience that interviewees across countries emphasized. Policymakers and education designers in these countries should formally adopt EntreComp (several EU countries have already done so in their curricula) and reference it in their methodology.
Policy Advocacy at the European Level	Use the evidence from these workshops and monitoring to contribute to EU-level policy discussions. For example, highlight issues like bureaucracy and funding gaps in Eastern/Southeastern Europe in forums like the EU SME Assembly or directly communicate with EISMEA (the European Innovation Council and SMEs Agency). By	Aligning with these large policy goals means our efforts are both supported by and contributory to the European agenda of improving the start-up environment continent-wide.

	sharing our findings, such as 'Excessive bureaucracy and overregulation remain a significant hurdle' or 'Simplifying grant rules and creating a capital markets union would greatly aid start-ups', we support broader reforms.	
Synergies with Other EU Projects and Platforms	The ExcellEnt project can seek synergies with projects like Startup Europe (EC), ENEA (European Network of Entrepreneurship Agencies), and platforms such as EUROCHAMBRES' Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, etc. For example, the Soft-Landing missions can coordinate with the Soft-Landing project previously funded by Startup Europe which exchanged start-up ecosystem leaders among countries – this avoids duplication and uses proven models. Likewise, tap into the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) in each country for its database of SMEs and innovators, linking them with our Academy resources especially on funding and partnerships (EEN can help find international partners for start-ups, addressing 'limited access to global markets' identified in the challenges list).	By not reinventing the wheel and instead plugging our targeted actions into existing European networks, we increase their reach and sustainability.

***Expected Impact:** By collaborating with established EU projects and platforms, we aim to enhance the reach and effectiveness of the ExcellEnt project's interventions. Partnerships with initiatives like Startup Europe and the Enterprise Europe Network prevent duplication of efforts and leverage proven networks and resources, streamlining access to funding, partnerships, and international markets for start-ups. This integration allows innovation intermediaries to provide more comprehensive support, facilitate cross-border exchanges, and ensure sustainable outcomes by embedding local actions within broader European ecosystems.*

8 Concluding recommendations for enhancing innovation intermediary effectiveness

The findings from the ExcellEnt project workshops, contextualized by the broader innovation ecosystem analyses, point towards several strategic avenues for enhancing the effectiveness of innovation intermediaries in Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria. These recommendations are structured to provide overarching strategies applicable across the board, tailored advice for each specific national context, and suggestions for leveraging existing external frameworks and support mechanisms. The overarching goal is to empower intermediaries to better serve their entrepreneurial communities and contribute more effectively to economic development and innovation.

8.1 Overarching Strategies for the ExcellEnt Project and Beyond

The common challenges identified across the four diverse countries highlight the potential for shared learning and collaborative action, which projects like ExcellEnt are well-positioned to facilitate.

Develop Targeted Capacity-Building Modules	Based on the frequently reported challenges (e.g., access to finance, talent development, IP management, internationalization, digital transformation of intermediary services), design and deliver specialized training modules.	These should be practical, case-study-based, and adaptable to different intermediary types (e.g., TTOs, incubators, accelerators, clusters). For example, a module on "Advanced Financial Literacy for Intermediaries" could cover topics from angel investment and VC term sheets to accessing EU financial instruments and crowdfunding.
Establish a Knowledge-Sharing and Networking Platform	Create a sustainable platform (digital and/or through regular events) for innovation intermediaries from these and other EU/Associated Countries.	This platform should facilitate the exchange of best practices, successful case studies, common challenges, and innovative solutions. Peer learning circles, as mentioned in some contexts, and guidance on building effective consortia for EU projects can be key components. This fosters a community of practice, reducing isolation and accelerating collective learning.
Support Policy Advocacy Capabilities	Equip intermediaries with the skills, data, and frameworks to effectively advocate for evidence-based improvements in their national innovation policies.	This could involve training on policy brief development, stakeholder engagement, and using comparative ecosystem data (such as that generated by ExcellEnt) to make a compelling case for reform.
Promote Standardization and Benchmarking (where appropriate)	Encourage the voluntary adoption of common metrics or frameworks for intermediaries to assess their own performance and impact.	Standardisation, though important, can improve benchmarking, peer learning, and demonstrating collective value to funders and policymakers. Mapping TTOs and their performance indicators is a starting point for this thinking.

Facilitate Cross-Border Collaboration and Market Access:	Actively support initiatives that connect start-ups and intermediaries across national borders within the ExcellEnt network and the broader EU.	This could include organizing joint matchmaking events, facilitating participation in international trade fairs, and creating directories of trusted partners in different markets.
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These overarching strategies aim to build a more cohesive and capable network of innovation intermediaries, enhancing their individual and collective ability to drive innovation. The ExcellEnt project can serve as a vital catalyst in this process, laying the groundwork for sustained collaboration and improvement.

9 Conclusion

The capacity-building workshops conducted under the ExcellEnt project have provided valuable, direct insights into the multifaceted challenges confronting innovation intermediaries in Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria. This report, through the analysis of these workshop findings and contextualization with existing research, underscores the critical role these intermediaries play as catalysts within their respective entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by a complex interplay of common hurdles and unique national circumstances.

Access to appropriate finance, the development and retention of specialised talent, navigating regulatory landscapes, and fostering robust collaborative networks are persistent pain points for intermediaries. These challenges reflect deeper systemic characteristics of their innovation environments. The specific manifestations of these challenges, from Ukraine's war-torn reality to Bulgaria's 'Emerging Innovator' struggles, Turkey's scaling bottlenecks, and Greece's post-crisis rebuilding, require nuanced understanding and tailored responses.

Enhancing innovation intermediaries' capabilities requires a multi-level strategy. Direct support, such as targeted capacity building, knowledge sharing, and networking, is crucial. Equipping intermediaries with advanced skills in financial brokerage, IP management, internationalisation, and policy advocacy can yield significant returns.

However, the analysis also reveals that the challenges faced by intermediaries are often symptoms of broader ecosystem deficiencies. Therefore, sustainable improvement requires parallel efforts at the national policy level. This includes reforms to create more favorable investment climates, align education systems with industry needs, streamline regulatory processes, and strengthen national research and innovation systems. The recommendations provided by international bodies like the OECD, the World Bank, and the European Commission offer valuable roadmaps for such reforms.

The strategic engagement of diaspora communities, the leveraging of EU-wide programs like Horizon Europe and the EIT, and the effective utilization of national recovery and support mechanisms (such as the RRF⁵ for Greece and Bulgaria, and the Ukraine Facility for Ukraine) are also crucial levers for progress.

The journey to more vibrant and resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems requires collaboration. Innovation intermediaries are crucial navigators and connectors. By addressing their challenges through concerted efforts involving intermediaries, national governments, and EU support structures like the ExcellEnt project, significant potential for innovation-driven growth, job creation, and enhanced competitiveness can be unlocked across nations and within the wider European landscape. The continued support, adaptation, and empowerment of these pivotal organisations are essential for achieving these ambitious goals.

⁵ Recovery and Resilience Facility, a key instrument of the EU's Next Generation EU recovery plan. It provides financial support to EU member states to implement reforms and investments aimed at making their economies and societies more sustainable, resilient, and better prepared for the green and digital transitions.

10 Annex: Capacity Building Workshop Consolidated Report

Innovation Intermediary Challenges

*Consolidated Report from Greece, Ukraine, Turkey,
and Bulgaria Workshops*

Jun 2025

Odysseas Spyroglou,
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Executive Summary

The EXCELLENT project conducted four online capacity-building workshops in Greece (GR), Ukraine (UA), Turkey (TR), and Bulgaria (BG) to identify challenges faced by innovation intermediaries. Using Wooclap for audience engagement, these workshops revealed both common challenges and country-specific issues.

Key Findings:

- Access to Funding is the top challenge across all countries, especially for early-stage and scale-up ventures.
- Bureaucracy and complexity in support programs create major barriers.
- Talent gaps - difficulty finding co-founders and skilled team members.
- Fragmented support landscape - no clear roadmap for accessing help.
- Limited international networks for market access.

Priority Solutions:

- Venture capital and angel investment (especially in UA and TR).
- EU funding programs (particularly valued in GR).
- Mentorship and networking programs.

- Simplified administrative processes.

Workshop Findings by Country

Greece (GR) Workshop

Top Startup Supports:

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Access to public grants (58% of participants)
- Investor access (45%)
- Networking events (35%)

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Difficulty finding co-founders (37%)
- High administrative complexity in grants (30%)
- Lack of clear support roadmap (23%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Greek participants prioritized:

- EU funding instruments - EIC/Eureka (22%)
- Horizon Europe R&I programs (16%)
- Venture capital (12%)
- Cascading EU project funding (11%)

Key Gaps:

- "Valley of death" funding between prototype and market
- Roadmap services to navigate support programs
- Talent development initiatives
- Better university-industry technology transfer

Ukraine (UA) Workshop

Top Startup Supports:

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Public R&I grants (58%)
- Networking/community building (50%)
- Private investment access (50%)
- Mentorship (33%)

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Excessive bureaucracy (38% - highest among all countries)
- Administrative complexity in funding (38%)
- No clear roadmap of support (25%)
- Difficulty finding co-founders (25%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Ukrainian participants prioritized:

- Venture capital (31% - highest share across all countries)
- Angel investment (18%)
- Cascading EU funds (15%)
- Horizon Europe programs (6%)

Key Gaps:

- Absence of capital markets and small investment amounts
- Funding support needed for business support organizations
- Dominance of state-run science (96%) blocking tech transfer
- Insufficient post-seed funding and soft-landing programs

Turkey (TR) Workshop

Top Startup Supports

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Networking & community-building events (55% - highest among all countries)
- Public grants, private investors, mentoring (each ~36%)
- Product validation support (27%)

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Heavy regulation (30%)
- Excessive bureaucracy (20%)
- Ineffective support programs (20%)
- Lack of clear support roadmap (10%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Turkish participants prioritized:

- Venture capital (20%)
- Angel investors (18%)
- Cascading EU project funding (15%)
- EIC/Eureka programs (10%)
- Horizon Europe (10%)

Key Gaps:

- Internationalization support for startups
- Protection of entrepreneurs' rights vs. investors
- Early-stage support (pre-seed, prototyping)
- High-profile networking platforms

Bulgaria (BG) Workshop

Top Startup Supports:

What services supporting startups are the most valuable?

- Industry engagement through open innovation (50%)
- Mentoring & coaching (33%)
- Networking events (17%)
- Tech support structures (17%)
- **Note:** Public grants scored 0% - stark contrast to other countries

Major Challenges:

What are the biggest problems / challenges in current innovation support structures?

- Finding co-founders (40%)
- Excessive public-sector bureaucracy (20%)
- Lack of clear support roadmap (20%)

Funding Priorities:

When allocating 100 points across services, Turkish participants prioritized:

- Cascading funding (27.5% - highest among all countries)
- Venture funds (18.8%)
- SME Instruments like EIC (15%)
- Mentorship programs (12.5%)
- Horizon Europe (2.5% - very low)

Key Gaps:

- Basic resources and guidance needs
- Free legal/financial guidance for startups
- Clearer procedure guidance for funding
- More information on non-dilutive funding options

Consolidated Cross-Country Analysis

Common Challenges

1. Funding Access (Universal Priority) **All countries struggle with funding gaps, particularly:**

- Early-stage funding (seed, angel investment)
- "Valley of death" between prototype and market
- Scale-up capital (Series A and beyond)
- Complex application processes for public funding

2. Administrative Barriers

- Ukraine reports highest bureaucracy issues (38%)
- Turkey faces heavy regulation (30%)
- Greece notes grant complexity (30%)
- Need for simplified processes across all countries

3. Talent and Team Building

- Co-founder matching: major issue in Greece (37%) and Bulgaria (40%)
- Skills gaps in technical and managerial areas
- Brain drain affecting multiple countries
- Limited entrepreneurial experience

4. Fragmented Support Landscape

- No clear roadmap: Greece (23%), Bulgaria (20%), Ukraine (25%)
- Information gaps about available programs
- Poor coordination between support organizations
- Insufficient outreach beyond major cities

5. Limited International Access

- Small domestic markets (especially Bulgaria, Greece)
- Need for international market entry support
- Limited global networks and partnerships

Key Differences by Country

Funding Approach Preferences:

- **Greece:** EU programs and grants (38% combined priority)
- **Ukraine:** Private investment focus (49% combined VC + angels)
- **Turkey:** Balanced approach but emphasizing private capital (38%)
- **Bulgaria:** Alternative funding channels (cascading grants 27.5%)

Regulatory Environment:

- **Turkey:** Highest regulatory burden concerns
- **Ukraine:** Bureaucracy amplified by war conditions
- **Greece:** Process complexity over regulation per se
- **Bulgaria:** Focus on human capital over regulatory issues

Support Infrastructure:

- **Bulgaria:** Emphasizes industry partnerships and mentorship
- **Turkey:** Values networking and community building
- **Greece:** Focuses on EU integration and funding access
- **Ukraine:** Crisis-driven focus on survival and adaptation

Strategic Recommendations

1. Enhance Access to Funding

Immediate Actions:

- Create "Startup Booster Grants" for pre-seed funding
- Establish Fund-of-Funds programs with EU Investment Fund
- Support business angel networks and cross-border angel alliances
- Introduce outcome-based funding models

EU Integration:

- Leverage EIC Accelerator programs for "valley of death" funding
- Use Horizon Europe's European Innovation Ecosystems calls
- Tap European Investment Fund for venture capital development

2. Streamline Support Systems

Digital Infrastructure:

- Develop centralized "Innovation Ecosystem Portal"
- Create single, searchable interface for all support services
- Implement "Startup Helpdesk" in each country
- Maintain updated calendar of funding opportunities

Process Simplification:

- Conduct regulatory audit to eliminate unnecessary steps
- Introduce fast-track approaches for innovation projects
- Create regulatory sandboxes for fintech and emerging sectors
- Establish clear startup support roadmaps

3. Strengthen Networks and Talent

Community Building:

- Launch co-founder matching platforms and events
- Scale mentorship programs connecting experienced entrepreneurs
- Organize regular cross-border missions and exchanges
- Create sector-specific networking (fintech, AI, healthtech)

Capacity Development:

- Integrate EntreComp framework into training programs
- Focus on financial literacy and scaling capabilities
- Build resilience and crisis management skills
- Strengthen university-industry collaboration

4. Support Innovation Intermediaries

Organizational Capacity:

- Provide operational funding for incubators and accelerators
- Develop training curriculum for intermediary staff
- Create peer exchange programs between countries
- Support collaboration and resource sharing

Performance Improvement:

- Implement quality standards and certifications
- Align services with EntreComp competencies
- Foster collaboration between support organizations
- Build evidence base for effective practices

5. Leverage EU Frameworks

Policy Alignment:

- Align with EU Startup Nations Standard
- Integrate with Startup Europe initiatives

- Leverage Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programs
- Contribute to EU policy dialogues on innovation

Cross-Border Integration:

- Coordinate with Enterprise Europe Network
- Build synergies with existing EU projects
- Develop integrated European innovation pathways
- Support policy advocacy at EU level

Conclusion

The EXCELLENT workshops revealed both shared challenges and unique national contexts across Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria. While funding access and administrative complexity are universal concerns, each country requires tailored approaches within a coordinated EU framework.

Success depends on parallel action: expanding funding options, simplifying processes, strengthening networks, and building institutional capacity. The recommendations provide a roadmap for transforming these innovation ecosystems from fragmented, resource-constrained environments into vibrant, interconnected networks that can compete globally.

By addressing these challenges systematically and leveraging EU frameworks, these four countries can move from catching up to leading in specific innovation areas, contributing to Europe's overall competitiveness and resilience.

This report consolidates findings from four EXCELLENT project workshops conducted in 2025, using Wooclap audience engagement data and qualitative feedback from innovation intermediaries across Greece, Ukraine, Turkey, and Bulgaria.