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# Concluding Report

## DECO - ENTER4FUTURE

**Developing need-based entrepreneurial competences and  
showing opportunities in entrepreneurship**

**Activating potentials for sustainable economic  
development in rural regions**

**Project period: 01/10/2024 - 31/12/2025**

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# 1 Introduction

The following report presents the results and key insights of the DECO – ENTER4FUTURE project, a European initiative, within Erasmus+ KA210-VET framework, focused on strengthening entrepreneurship skills among young people in vocational education and training (VET), particularly in rural areas. This report offers an accessible overview of why entrepreneurship matters for the future of rural regions, what challenges young learners face, and how education can help unlock local potential in a sustainable and inclusive way.

Rather than addressing only experts, this report is designed to guide any interested reader through the project's objectives, activities, and outcomes. It explains how partners from Germany, Italy, Lithuania, and Portugal worked together to understand learners' needs, test practical training approaches, and develop tools that support confidence, creativity, and real-life entrepreneurial thinking. Special attention is given to learners with fewer opportunities and to gender equality, highlighting how inclusive education can contribute to stronger communities and local economies.

By combining research, hands-on experiences, and real stories from rural contexts, this report demonstrates how VET learners can be strengthened through entrepreneurship education, providing a supportive approach to sustainable development in Europe's rural regions.

## 2 Project Priorities and Goals

The DECO – ENTER4FUTURE project was conceived as a strategic effort to strengthen the role of VET learners in shaping the future of rural entrepreneurship across Europe. In a context where rural regions face demographic decline, skills shortages, and limited access to innovation ecosystems, supporting VET learners in developing entrepreneurial competences is essential for long-term economic sustainability. The project therefore sought to explore how VET learners, particularly those with fewer opportunities, can be activated to recognize local opportunities,

contribute to regional development, and access meaningful pathways into entrepreneurship, self-employment or innovative forms of work.

To achieve this, the project combined research, collaborative design, and hands-on training to develop a shared European approach to entrepreneurship education, tailored to the needs of VET learners in rural contexts. Partners from Germany, Lithuania, Italy, and Portugal jointly investigated how entrepreneurship is currently understood among VET learners, what barriers prevent engagement with entrepreneurship, and which competences are needed to encourage an entrepreneurial mindset.

A particular emphasis was placed on gender equality, acknowledging the systemic barriers that limit women's participation in entrepreneurship and addressing these through role models, inclusive teaching approaches, and targeted recommendations.

The project also aimed to strengthen organisational capacity across the participating organisations. By exchanging expertise, identifying best practices, and learning from diverse European VET systems, partners contributed to a more robust and interconnected network of actors who support entrepreneurship. This collaborative effort culminated in the creation of a Training Guide, intended as a practical tool for VET professionals who wish to integrate entrepreneurship education into their curricula. Additionally, the project's activities generated a set of European recommendations aimed at policymakers, VET institutions, and stakeholders. Ultimately, the project aimed to foster employability, promote inclusion and diversity. The knowledge gained has already begun to influence educational practices locally and has the potential to support broader transformations across European VET systems.

The main target group comprises VET learners, many of whom have limited exposure to entrepreneurship education, as well as learners facing social, economic, or geographical barriers. The project also engages VET institutions, teachers, trainers, mentors, and local stakeholders, such as business and women's associations, and public bodies, through dissemination at local, regional, and European levels, fostering broader societal acceptance of entrepreneurship as an alternative career option for learners.

Finally, it should be noted the relevance of the project in the European context and in the European Vocational Education and Training System. Declining self-employment rates across the European Union, with many companies lacking successors, and regional disparities are European challenges well identified, not to mention the fact that VET learners often acquire occupational skills, but lack entrepreneurial competences, which are increasingly vital for employability and innovation. Therefore, DECO – ENTER4FUTURE project is directly linked to Erasmus+ priorities of adapting VET to labour market needs, sustainable development, rural revitalisation and fostering inclusion and diversity.

### 3 Project Activities

The following section of the report presents the activities carried out within the scope of the DECO – ENTER4FUTURE project and explains how they are interconnected and structured in a clear and progressive manner. This chapter was designed to present the actions carried out, the reason behind them, and how each activity contributed to the overall results of the project. The activities are parts of a coherent process that ranges from analysis and understanding to practical implementation and evaluation.

The project began with an analytical phase focused on examining the entrepreneurial context in the participating countries and identifying the needs, challenges, obstacles and opportunities faced by VET learners, particularly in rural areas. This initial step provided solid evidence base and ensured that the project was grounded in real situations and experiences. Rather than relying on statistical generalisation, the project adopted a qualitative, learner-centred approach, placing strong value on learners' experiences. The insights gained through interviews and exchanges directly informed the development of practical and context-sensitive educational materials. The findings should therefore be understood as exploratory and illustrative, rather than conclusive or statistically representative.

Building on this, the partners met transnationally in Germany to share findings, reflect on common patterns, and jointly design training content that directly responded to the issues identified during the research phase.

The development of the Training Guide represents the core output of this process, translating qualitative research insights into a practical and accessible educational tool. The guide was then tested in real learning environments through workshops and networking events in all partner countries, allowing learners to engage with entrepreneurship in a hands-on and meaningful way. These activities also created direct links between education and local entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The final activity focused on evaluation, gathering feedback from learners, educators, and stakeholders to assess the effectiveness of the training and identify lessons learned. This step ensured quality, relevance, and transferability of the results.

Overall, this section provides a clear overview of how the project progressed from understanding needs to delivering and validating practical solutions that can support entrepreneurship education in rural vocational contexts across Europe.

### 3.1 Activity 1: Examination and interviews

Activity 1 established the analytical foundation of the DECO – ENTER4FUTURE project by examining the entrepreneurial landscape across four participating regions: Germany, Italy, Lithuania, and Portugal. Through coordinated desk research, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and semi-structured interview guide, partners explored the opportunities, constraints, and needs shaping entrepreneurship in rural areas and influencing VET learners' motivation and capacity to engage in entrepreneurial pathways. This initial mapping phase demonstrated that, despite cultural and structural differences, the four countries share many common challenges, making the transnational approach particularly valuable.

In Germany, research revealed a complex set of economic, social, and administrative barriers that influence VET learners' perception of entrepreneurship. Learners, teachers, and entrepreneurs reported limited access to financial support, complex bureaucratic requirements, and persistent cultural tendencies toward job security rather than entrepreneurial risk-taking. VET learners in rural regions often face



additional challenges, such as limited transportation, reduced access to business networks, and fewer innovation hubs. Gender emerged as a critical issue: young women frequently reported lower levels of self-confidence regarding entrepreneurship, fewer role models, and a perception that business creation is still male dominated.

In Lithuania, the findings aligned with the German context but also highlighted the strong intrinsic interest among youth in starting small-scale enterprises, particularly in creative sectors and community development. Despite this motivation, young people in VET often lack practical entrepreneurial training, exposure to real case studies, and access to mentors who can accompany them through early-stage idea development. Educators and local stakeholders pointed to the need to strengthen collaboration between VET centers and local entrepreneurship support organisations, including business incubators and municipal development agencies. Gender considerations showed that young women, while often highly capable, tend to underestimate their entrepreneurial potential and express greater concern about financial risks than male peers.

The Portuguese contribution added crucial insights into the specific situation of southern European rural regions. The research emphasized that Portugal's rural areas hold significant potential for entrepreneurship in sectors such as sustainable agriculture, local crafts, cultural industries, and eco-tourism. However, these opportunities remain underdeveloped due to limited entrepreneurial literacy among VET learners and insufficient connections between educational institutions and the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. Teachers noted that learners often struggle to access information about existing support programs, local funding opportunities, or business development mechanisms. Challenges such as youth migration to urban areas, demographic decline, and limited infrastructure were also identified as key factors shaping the rural entrepreneurial environment. Gender-specific findings highlighted that young women show strong creativity and motivation, but face barriers linked to confidence, visibility, and access to tailored mentorship. Stakeholders stressed that increasing the visibility of successful female entrepreneurs in rural Portugal would be highly beneficial in inspiring and guiding the next generation.

Italy presents a paradoxical entrepreneurial landscape: a strong tradition of SMEs and self-employment, but very low early-stage entrepreneurial activity, particularly among

young people. Entrepreneurship is often driven by necessity rather than innovation. Structural barriers include heavy bureaucracy, limited access to finance, and regional disparities between the North and South. VET systems remain largely focused on traditional trades, with entrepreneurship education fragmented and uneven. Gender disparities are pronounced: women face restricted access to finance, lack of mentorship, strong sectoral segregation, and caregiving burdens that limit entrepreneurial engagement, particularly in rural and southern regions.

To generate comprehensive and comparable findings, interviews were conducted with 10 VET learners in each partner country, resulting in a total of 40 learner participants. Additionally, five individuals per country working in entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship education, such as business owners, trainers, and support professionals, were interviewed, adding a further 20 perspectives. This design ensured that both learners' experiences and expert insights were systematically included.

Across the four countries, Activity 1 revealed a common structural gap: entrepreneurship education in VET is often insufficient, disconnected from real practice, and not fully aligned with learners' needs, especially those of rural youth and women. Although VET learners possess solid technical skills, they frequently lack entrepreneurial mindset training, role models, and awareness of concrete opportunities in their local areas. More importantly, the research highlighted that many learners with fewer opportunities face additional socio-economic barriers that reduce their access to support networks and practical learning experiences.

The insights gathered through Activity 1 shaped the strategic direction of the entire project. They provided a robust evidence base for the development of the Training Guide, informed the design of transnational workshops and thematic activities, and supported the creation of recommendation frameworks aimed at enhancing entrepreneurial education within European VET systems. This activity also allowed partners to reflect critically on their organisational practices, deepen their understanding of rural entrepreneurship, and identify opportunities for more inclusive and equitable approaches that support all learners, particularly women and those with fewer opportunities.



## 3.2 Activity 2: Meeting of the partners in Germany and developing training material

Activity 2 took place during a transnational partnership meeting in rural Germany, where all organisations came together to compare their research results and discuss the common challenges identified across countries. This meeting served not only as a platform for knowledge exchange but also as an opportunity to co-create a shared understanding of what entrepreneurship education should look like in rural VET settings. By examining similarities and differences across national contexts, partners developed a stronger appreciation of how local realities shape learners' needs and expectations.

A key achievement of Activity 2 was the development of a comprehensive training framework designed to be adapted by VET providers across Europe. Partners collaboratively refined the structure of the Training Guide, defining learning outcomes, methodologies, and practical activities. Working together allowed the team to validate each component, ensuring that the guide addressed the gaps identified in Activity 1, such as the need for fostering entrepreneurial mindset, building financial literacy, enhancing communication skills, and promoting sustainability in business models.

The meeting also enabled partners to engage directly with the rural context of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern by visiting the RBB-Müritz VET Centres, which were awarded the German School Award “Beste Schule Deutschlands” in 2022. Discussions with department heads and teachers provided first-hand insights into how structural barriers, limited advisory services, scarce networking opportunities, and resource constraints shape learners' experiences. This immersion helped ensure that the Training Guide remained grounded and addressed genuine barriers rather than abstract or overly theoretical challenges.

Furthermore, the meeting strengthened consortium collaboration. By sharing national examples, discussing best practices, and learning from each other's VET systems, partners deepened their understanding of how to support gender-inclusive entrepreneurship. The group collectively recognised the importance of featuring diverse role models, promoting a supportive learning atmosphere, and designing activities that reflect real opportunities within rural labour markets.

Activity 2 thus played a crucial role in shaping a cohesive and high-quality training tool, while reinforcing the project's overarching commitment to empowering VET learners through practical, inclusive, and contextually relevant entrepreneurship education.

### 3.3 Activity 3: Networking event with workshop in Germany, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal

Activity 3 involved testing the Training Guide in real-life learning environments, transforming theoretical material into meaningful learning experiences for VET learners. Across Germany, Italy, Lithuania, and Portugal, partners implemented workshops, interactive sessions, and networking events to observe how learners engaged with the content and to evaluate the guide's practical effectiveness.

In Germany, the event involved a total of 29 VET learners, two VET social pedagogues, two VET teachers, and two business professionals representing relevant local companies and providing valuable insights. The workshops and networking sessions were facilitated by entrepreneurs (MMT), who shared practical experiences from their own careers and engaged directly with the young participants' questions. Through interactions with the participants, learners gained first-hand understanding of the challenges, decision-making processes, and practical realities of starting and running a business. The involvement of female role models from both male- and female-dominated sectors proved particularly impactful, inspiring female learners and encouraging them to explore non-traditional career paths.

In Italy, the networking event and workshop brought together entrepreneurs, digital nomads, and participants from diverse backgrounds to discuss entrepreneurship in rural contexts. The session focused on sharing motivations, opportunities, and challenges related to starting businesses in rural areas, highlighting benefits such as lower costs, stronger community ties, access to decision-makers, and untapped potential in areas like sustainable tourism, digital services, and agro-innovation. Participants emphasized the importance of mixed local and online business models to address challenges such as bureaucracy, seasonality, and isolation, and encouraged young vocational learners to start small, engage with local communities, and build supportive networks.

In Lithuania, the activity engaged 21 VET learners through workshops and group exercises designed to test the applicability of the training materials. Participants explored entrepreneurship in their local context, practiced collaborative business planning, and applied digital and sustainability principles introduced in the guide. Interactions with local business professionals allowed learners to ask questions, gain insights about real entrepreneurial challenges, and observe practical problem-solving strategies. Feedback confirmed that the guide successfully supported learners' confidence, creativity, and awareness of local business opportunities.

In Portugal, practical sessions involved 35 learners from VET schools, alongside local entrepreneurs and teachers. Workshops focused on SWOT analysis, financial literacy, and pitching exercises, providing learners with tangible tools to plan and evaluate business ideas. The networking event was highly appreciated, as learners could observe the experiences of both male and female entrepreneurs and discuss gender-specific barriers, such as balancing family responsibilities with business ownership, and being successful in traditionally male-dominated sectors. These interactions inspired learners and reinforced the relevance of slow and sustainable entrepreneurship approaches, which were highlighted in the training guide.

Across all four countries, the practical sessions demonstrated the value of experiential learning. Learners participated in group discussions, collaborative exercises, and introductory business planning, which allowed them to see entrepreneurship as a dynamic process rather than a distant concept. The networking events successfully bridged the gap between education and local labour markets, giving learners direct insight into entrepreneurial journeys, challenges, and success factors. Female learners benefitted from the visibility of women entrepreneurs, which helped challenge traditional gender stereotypes and fostered greater self-confidence.

The testing phase also validated the adaptability of the Training Guide. While the framework provided clear structure and learning objectives, it was flexible enough to accommodate diverse learner profiles, regional contexts, and educational environments. This adaptability proved essential for VET providers working with learners who have fewer opportunities, limited prior exposure to entrepreneurship, or differing educational needs.

Activity 3 confirmed that hands-on learning, combined with exchanges with entrepreneurs and business professionals, real-world examples, and community engagement, is an effective approach to building entrepreneurial competences in rural VET contexts. The country-specific data reinforce that the Training Guide is both practical and inclusive, offering replicable methods to strengthen entrepreneurship education across European rural regions.

### 3.4 Activity 4: Evaluation and results

Activity 4 focused on evaluating the training sessions and networking events from both the learners' and professionals' perspectives. Through feedback discussions, surveys, and reflective exercises, partners collected detailed insights into what aspects of the training worked well and where further improvements might be needed. This evaluation was essential not only for refining the Training Guide but also for gaining a deeper understanding of how to sustainably integrate entrepreneurship education into VET systems.

Learners consistently highlighted the importance of practical, hands-on activities over purely theoretical learning. They expressed appreciation for exercises that allowed them to collaborate, think creatively, and simulate real entrepreneurial challenges. Many participants reported increased confidence in their ability to develop ideas, communicate effectively, and reflect on their personal strengths and weaknesses. Several also emphasized that interacting with entrepreneurs encouraged them to consider career paths they had never previously explored.

Feedback also showed the importance of tailoring activities to learners at different stages of their educational journey. Participants in job-preparation courses, for example, required activities that focused on basic entrepreneurial awareness, financial literacy and building soft skills, while more advanced VET learners benefited from exercises that included financial planning or sustainability-oriented business models. This helped project partners better understand how to differentiate the guide for diverse educational contexts.

From a gender equality perspective, the evaluations demonstrated that featuring female role models significantly affected learners' perceptions, particularly among

young women who often struggled to imagine themselves in entrepreneurial roles. By showcasing women's entrepreneurial journeys, especially in male-dominated sectors, the project helped challenge stereotypes and encouraged more inclusive participation.

Overall, Activity 4 reinforced the value of collaboration between VET providers, local businesses, and community actors. Such cooperation proved essential for creating relevant learning experiences and ensuring that entrepreneurship education remains connected to real labour market needs. The evaluation outcomes contributed substantially to refining the recommendations and enhancing the final Training Guide.

## 4 Training Guide

The DECO – ENTER4FUTURE Training Guide is a modular educational resource designed to foster entrepreneurial competences among young learners in vocational education and training, particularly those not enrolled in business-oriented programmes. It responds to identified gaps in entrepreneurship education within VET systems and aims to make entrepreneurship a more accessible, inclusive, and realistic career pathway, especially in rural and marginalised regions.

The primary purpose of the Training Guide is to strengthen entrepreneurial mindsets and practical competences among VET learners through low-threshold, practice-oriented methods. The Training Guide is designed primarily for learners who are not enrolled in business-oriented programmes. Through the integration of hands-on activities, it allows for flexible use across different sectors and can be applied in both project-based and classroom learning settings.

It also serves as a practical resource for VET providers and trainers, supporting them in strengthening their expertise, enhancing their teaching practice, and exploring innovative educational approaches. Trainers and providers are encouraged to adapt the content to their specific contexts and the needs of their target groups.

The Training Guide is structured around four core thematic pillars, each addressing a key competence area identified as critical for VET learners' entrepreneurial development:



## **Slow Entrepreneurship**

The guide introduces slow entrepreneurship as a foundational concept, reframing entrepreneurship away from rapid growth and high risk towards sustainability, local embeddedness, long-term impact, and personal and collective well-being. This approach is presented as particularly relevant for rural contexts and vocational profiles rooted in craftsmanship, services, care, culture, and local production.

## **Business Plan Development**

Learners are guided in transforming ideas into structured and feasible business concepts. The guide emphasises business planning as a risk-reduction and decision-making tool, supporting strategic thinking, feasibility assessment, and resource planning through practical instruments such as SWOT analysis and the Business Model Canvas.

## **Financial Literacy**

Financial literacy is addressed as both an entrepreneurial and life skill. The guide focuses on budgeting, cost structures, pricing basics, and financial planning, highlighting their relevance for risk management, sustainability, and access to funding. Particular attention is given to the challenges faced by learners with limited prior exposure to financial education.

## **Communication Skills**

The guide recognises communication as a transversal competence essential for entrepreneurship and employability. It covers public speaking, pitching, active listening, and cross-cultural communication, with a strong emphasis on confidence-building, adaptability, and community engagement in local and rural contexts.

The guide is intentionally modular and flexible, allowing trainers to select, adapt, and combine units according to their learners' needs, institutional constraints, and local contexts. Each thematic area includes clearly structured group activities with defined objectives, learning outcomes, durations, materials, and facilitation tips. Pitch-based



methods are integrated across all pillars as a recurring pedagogical tool to reinforce learning, reflection, and peer feedback. One can also verify that emphasis is placed on practical relevance, learner engagement, and the transferability of skills beyond entrepreneurship alone.

This Training Guide aligns with the direction set by the Union of Skills and the renewed EU Vocational Education and Training policy framework, which place strong emphasis on entrepreneurial, transversal, and sustainability-oriented competences that remain relevant across changing labour markets. Entrepreneurship is framed as a cross-cutting competence, with learning activities designed to strengthen initiative, financial judgement, communication, and local problem-solving, all of which are explicitly highlighted in current EU skills and lifelong learning policies. The focus on slow entrepreneurship reflects the EU priority on territorially rooted skills ecosystems, where VET supports local economic resilience rather than short-term mobility or growth-driven models. Business planning, financial literacy, and communication modules are embedded in rural and peripheral contexts, providing a concrete response to EU objectives, as set out in the Council Recommendation on VET (2020) and recent skills policy updates<sup>12</sup>.

## 5 General reflections and recommendations for the use of results

The DECO – ENTER4FUTURE project successfully demonstrated that rural VET learners possess substantial entrepreneurial potential that can be activated through targeted, inclusive, and context-sensitive educational approaches. By combining research, transnational collaboration, practical implementation, and evaluation, the project offered a comprehensive understanding of how to support learner's entrepreneurship in rural communities while highlighting the active role VET providers can play in sustainable regional development. Across Germany, Italy, Lithuania, and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/education/skills/union-skills\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/education/skills/union-skills_en)

<sup>2</sup> <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/vocational-education-and-training>

Portugal, learners were exposed to real-world entrepreneurial scenarios, workshops, and networking events, which together created a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

A key reflection from the project concerns the connection between VET education and local economic ecosystems. Entrepreneurship is not a skill that can be fully developed in the classroom alone; it requires exposure to actual challenges, hands-on problem solving, and ongoing interaction with local entrepreneurs. Activities such as workshops, business simulation exercises, and networking sessions allowed learners to understand entrepreneurship as a practical process rather than a theoretical concept. In addition, these interactions encouraged learners to explore opportunities within their own regions and promoted sustainable local development. By witnessing firsthand, the successes and challenges of companies, small business owners, including female entrepreneurs overcoming societal barriers, learners gained valuable insights that helped strengthen both confidence and motivation.

Gender equality emerged as a central priority throughout the project. Female learners often face structural barriers, particularly among young women, as a structural problem starting at early ages and reinforced by missing skills, limited access to mentorship, networks, funding and persistent cultural stereotypes. DECO – ENTER4FUTURE addressed these challenges by promoting female role models, integrating confidence-building exercises, and providing guidance in financial literacy and business planning. By actively highlighting women's achievements in both traditionally male-dominated and female-dominated sectors, the project offered tangible examples of success, inspiring young women to envision themselves as capable entrepreneurs and leaders in their communities, contributing to sustainable economic development and as potential successors in business ownership. Ensuring that VET learners from disadvantaged backgrounds or with fewer opportunities could equally benefit from these initiatives further reinforced the project's commitment to inclusion and diversity.

The Training Guide developed through the project represents a concrete tool for VET educators to design engaging, relevant, and flexible entrepreneurship learning experiences. It consolidates lessons learned from the national research, pilot workshops, and transnational exchange, providing structured yet adaptable guidance for classroom and extracurricular activities. To maximize its impact, VET institutions

are encouraged to integrate the guide into their curricula, adapt it to local contexts, and maintain continuous dialogue with regional stakeholders. Local authorities, policymakers, and other actors are also invited to support these initiatives through investments in advisory services, mentoring programs, and collaborative networks that strengthen the link between education and the labour market.

Another important insight concerns the value of international collaboration. Exchanges between partners enabled the sharing of diverse perspectives, methodologies, and practical experiences, enriching the project outcomes and ensuring strong European relevance. Cross-country comparisons highlighted both shared challenges, such as gaps in entrepreneurial competences, gender-specific barriers, and the need for mentorship, and country-specific nuances, allowing for tailored interventions while preserving a common framework for entrepreneurship education. Disseminating the results and training guide through VET networks, Erasmus+ platforms, and rural development actors ensures that the project's findings can reach a wider audience and contribute to long-term capacity building in European rural entrepreneurship education.

## **6 Recommendations for the development of European VET Education**

Based on the project's findings, several European-level recommendations emerge. At policy and system level, it is recommended to recognise entrepreneurship as a viable and valuable career pathway within VET. This includes ensuring that policies, curricula and funding instruments explicitly address the needs of VET learners in rural regions, where access to support services is often limited.

At institutional level, VET providers should embed the DECO Training Guide or similar needs-based tools into regular curricula, adapting modules to local contexts and learner profiles. The training in entrepreneurial competences should be extended to all VET learners, and not only to those in business-related courses. It is also important to

highlight that sustained impact depends on continuity: one-off events are effective, but long-term mentoring, follow-up activities and repeated exposure are essential to consolidate learning and confidence. Therefore, regularly organise workshops and networking events within VET schools, bringing entrepreneurs into familiar learning environments is essential.

From a pedagogical perspective, European VET systems should prioritise inclusive, participatory, and confidence-building learning environments, particularly for learners with fewer opportunities. The reports indicate that fear of failure and low self-confidence are as significant barriers as structural constraints. Learners would benefit greatly if VET institutions actively facilitated exchanges and collaboration with regional entrepreneurs. Future development should aim to institutionalise these formats, ensuring regular opportunities for learners to engage with role models and employers. This approach would not only benefit learners and VET providers but could also help bridge existing gaps between employees and entrepreneurs.

With regard to the promotion of gender equality, this can be achieved through increased visibility and targeted support, including the showcasing of female entrepreneurs in both traditional and non-traditional sectors. Highlighting women who have progressed from apprenticeship to leadership roles while managing family responsibilities can help counter stereotypes and normalise women's success in traditionally male-dominated sectors. In addition, integrating mentoring schemes and providing targeted training to address gender-specific barriers are crucial measures.

Furthermore, VET education must be contextualised to rural realities, i.e., integrating local case studies, and highlighting rural advantages, such as lower costs, community ties, niche markets, while preparing learners to manage rural-specific challenges, such as mobility and limited advisory services.

The project provides strong evidence that entrepreneurship in rural Europe can be effectively promoted through VET. The DECO – ENTER4FUTURE approach demonstrates high relevance for European agendas to improve VET by combining employability, social inclusion, gender awareness and sustainable regional development into a coherent and transferable model.

## 7 Conclusion

DECO – ENTER4FUTURE provides a comprehensive and replicable model for fostering entrepreneurial skills among VET learners in rural Europe. By linking research, training, and real-world engagement, the project demonstrated that practical learning, inclusion, and gender equality are essential for developing a sustainable and equitable entrepreneurial landscape. The combination of hands-on training, exposure to local business realities, and tailored guidance empowers learners to transform potential into action, supports local economic development, and offers a strong reference point for future VET initiatives across Europe.

Therefore, it is considered that the project delivers clear and substantial European added value, which could not be achieved through isolated national actions. The transnational comparison of Germany, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal revealed shared structural challenges, which demonstrates that these issues are European in nature, rather than country-specific. The co-creation of the training guide through transnational cooperation ensured that common European priorities, such as inclusion, gender equality, employability, sustainability were addressed, even though national specificities were respected. Finally, as mentioned earlier in this report, the final output of the project is transferable across diverse VET systems and rural contexts, not forgetting that the project is strongly aligned with Erasmus+ priorities.

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