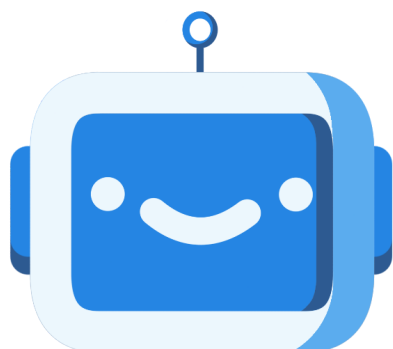
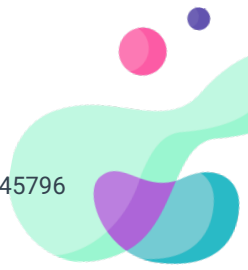
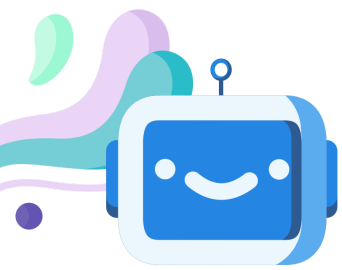




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Bots4Business



Policy and Practice Recommendations Report

Bots4Business (B4B)

*Comparative synthesis of national desk research and focus group findings across
Austria, Croatia, France, Ireland, Italy and Spain*

Deliverable purpose: to translate the evidence collected in six national research contexts into a coherent action framework for VET providers, SMEs, business support organisations and policymakers.

Project number: 2024-1-AT01-KA220-VET-000245796

Work package: WP5 – Communication, Policy Recommendations & Sustainability Strategy

Lead author: CONFIMI Industria Basilicata (CIB)

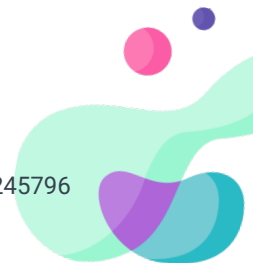
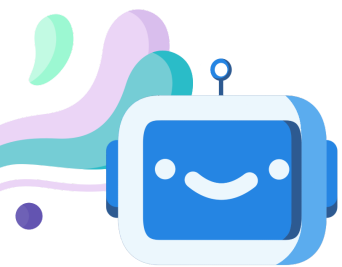
Co-development: BFI Burgenland with support from all project partners

Version and date: Final report • July 2026



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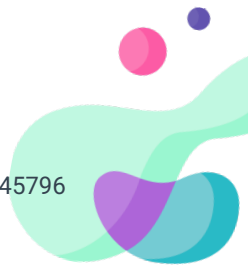
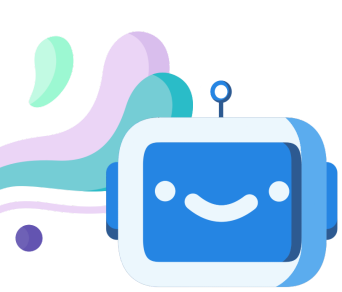


Document Control

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This report was developed within the Bots4Business partnership. It synthesises national research undertaken by the six country partners and reflects the combined contribution of VET professionals, SME representatives, entrepreneurs, business support actors, trainers, consultants and public or regional stakeholders who participated in the focus groups.



Executive Summary

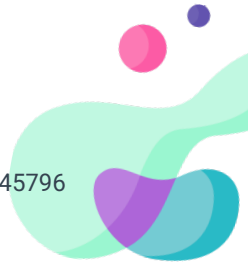
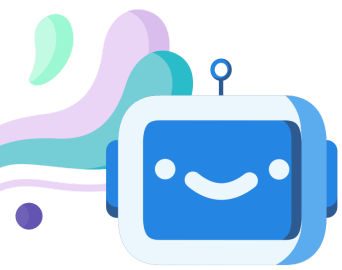
Core finding: Across all six countries, the decisive gap is not awareness of artificial intelligence but the capacity to move from informal experimentation to strategic, safe and measurable use in SMEs. VET providers can fill this gap only if their own professionals receive structured AI-related CPD and become integrated into the wider SME innovation ecosystem.

This Policy and Practice Recommendations Report brings together six national desk research reports and six national focus group reports from Austria, Croatia, France, Ireland, Italy and Spain. The national evidence was reviewed through a common analytical framework covering the organisation and readiness of VET systems, national AI and digital strategies, AI competence among VET professionals, AI adoption by SMEs, VET-SME collaboration, policy and funding mechanisms, future skills needs and the sustainability of support structures. The qualitative component comprised 45 reported focus group participants, supplemented in Italy by further structured questionnaire inputs.

The six countries differ in institutional architecture and digital maturity, yet the direction of travel is remarkably consistent. National AI strategies, Digital Decade roadmaps, recovery investments, digital innovation hubs and VET reforms have created a strong policy foundation. At the same time, implementation remains uneven across sectors, territories and enterprise sizes. Micro-enterprises, rural businesses, traditional sectors and organisations with limited internal digital capacity face the greatest difficulties. In every country, the evidence points to a gap between the rapid diffusion of easy-to-use AI tools and the slower development of organisational strategy, data governance, workforce capability and responsible-use practices.

The desk research also reveals a shared weakness in the VET system. Most national reports found no harmonised national measurement of AI competence among VET professionals. Existing CPD is fragmented, often project-based and more developed in ICT or technical fields than in services and traditional sectors. Four competence gaps recur across the partnership: AI fundamentals; the application of AI to business transformation; AI-enabled digital pedagogy; and ethics, data protection, governance and compliance. Spain has a mature teacher digital competence framework and Austria has strong employer-linked VET structures, but neither case yet provides a complete, SME-oriented AI pathway for all VET professionals. Croatia's modular VET reform, France's branch-based system, Ireland's FET/ETB network, Italy's multilevel VET landscape and Spain's decentralised system each offer different entry points for reform.

The focus groups validate and sharpen these findings. SMEs are already using AI for content creation, customer communication, translation, administration, research, data analysis,

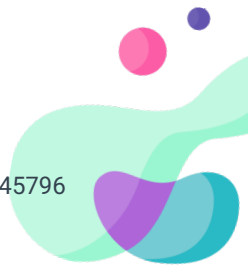
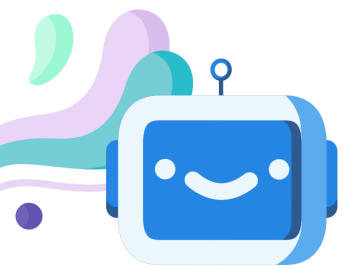


marketing and selected workflow automation. Usage is commonly task-specific, informal and driven by individual initiative. Participants consistently requested short, modular, hands-on learning; sector-specific cases; mentoring and advisory support; clear guidance on GDPR, the EU AI Act and confidentiality; and assistance in selecting tools and measuring value. They see VET providers, chambers, business associations, enterprise agencies and digital innovation hubs as trusted intermediaries, but report that these actors often work in parallel rather than through a coherent support pathway.

Priority recommendations

1. Adopt a shared AI competence framework for VET professionals, aligned with DigComp, DigCompEdu, the European approach to micro-credentials and the EU AI Act, and adapt it to national qualification and CPD systems.
2. Provide protected time, incentives and practical train-the-trainer pathways so VET staff can develop AI literacy, business transformation capability, digital pedagogy and responsible-AI competence.
3. Offer SMEs a low-threshold adoption pathway that begins with an AI readiness and use-case scan, continues through a short learning sprint and mentoring, and ends with a documented implementation and risk-control plan.
4. Institutionalise local and regional cooperation among VET providers, SMEs, chambers, employer organisations, EDIHs, competence centres, enterprise agencies and public authorities through co-design labs, AI clinics and work-based pilots.
5. Simplify access to funding by combining training vouchers, small pilot grants, advisory support and co-financing, with explicit eligibility for micro-enterprises, sole traders, rural firms and traditional sectors.
6. Publish practical, plain-language responsible-AI guidance for SMEs and VET providers, covering data classification, confidentiality, human oversight, output verification, transparency, copyright, procurement and incident escalation.
7. Create a common monitoring framework that distinguishes experimentation from operational and strategic adoption, tracks trainer capacity and measures inclusion, business outcomes and sustainability.
8. Maintain B4B resources as open, versioned and regularly updated materials supported by communities of practice and clear ownership after the project period.

The report proposes a phased roadmap. During the first six months, partners and public stakeholders should establish a baseline, validate a common competence model, prepare the readiness tool and responsible-AI starter pack and select sectoral pilots. During months



6–18, the model should be tested through trainer CPD, SME learning sprints, mentoring, regional clinics and co-design labs. During months 18–36, successful components should be embedded in recognised CPD, micro-credentials, VET curricula, funding programmes and regional innovation structures. The proposed indicators are deliberately practical: trainer competence gain, number and profile of SMEs supported, share of participants with an AI action plan and acceptable-use rules, completion of risk checks, implemented use cases, documented operational benefit and continued access to updated resources.

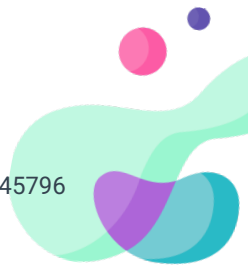
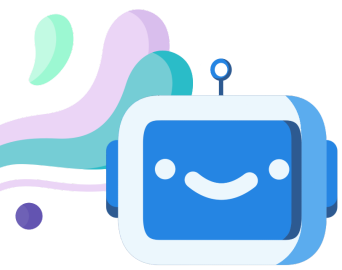
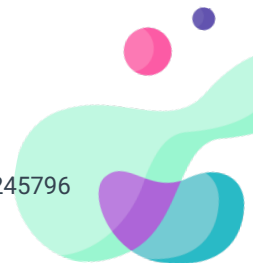
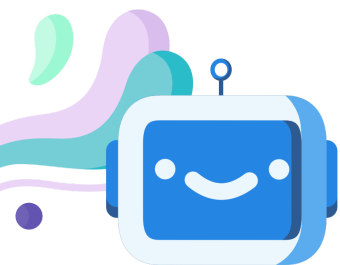


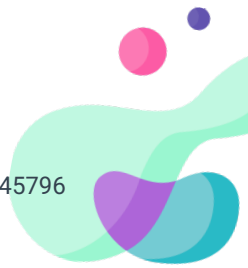
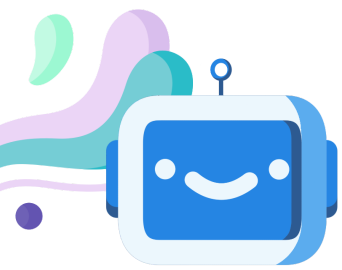
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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
B4B	Bots4Business
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EDIH	European Digital Innovation Hub
ETB	Education and Training Board (Ireland)
FET	Further Education and Training
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IFP/VET	Istruzione e Formazione Professionale (IT)/ Vocational Education and Training
LEO	Local Enterprise Office (Ireland)
PII	Personally Identifiable Information
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WBL	Work-Based Learning



A. Introduction

A.1 Project and policy context

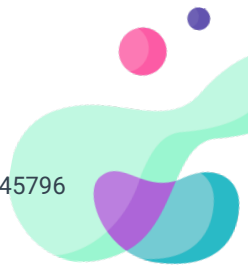
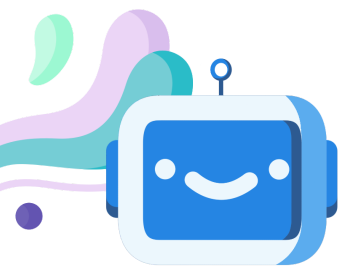
Bots4Business operates at the intersection of three policy priorities: the digital transformation of European SMEs, the modernisation of vocational education and training and the responsible implementation of artificial intelligence. SMEs are adopting accessible AI tools at a pace that often exceeds their capacity to redesign processes, train staff, protect data and assess legal or ethical implications. At the same time, VET systems are expected to respond quickly to changing labour-market needs despite curriculum cycles, trainer CPD arrangements and institutional partnerships that were not designed for technologies evolving on a monthly basis.

WP5 – Communication, Policy Recommendations & Sustainability Strategy addresses this implementation challenge by converting evidence from national desk research and stakeholder consultation into recommendations that can be used in practice. The purpose is not to advocate technology adoption as an end in itself. The report instead defines the conditions under which AI can support productivity, innovation, job quality and learning while preserving human judgement, transparency, inclusion and compliance with European values and rules.

A.2 Purpose of the report

The report has four linked purposes. First, it provides a concise but substantive comparison of the national evidence collected in the six partner countries. Second, it identifies common problems and country-specific priorities without forcing unlike statistics into a single ranking. Third, it turns the findings into operational recommendations for VET providers, SMEs and intermediary organisations. Fourth, it proposes policy actions, ownership, sequencing and indicators that can support uptake beyond the project lifetime.

- Summarise national VET, AI policy and SME adoption contexts across Austria, Croatia, France, Ireland, Italy and Spain.
- Synthesise focus group findings on awareness, barriers, training needs, policy support and sustainability.
- Define practice-level actions that can be applied by B4B partners, VET organisations, trainers, SMEs and business support actors.
- Set out EU, national and regional policy recommendations with realistic mechanisms, responsible actors, time horizons and monitoring indicators.



- Provide a delivery-ready evidence base for communication, multiplier events, sustainability planning and future cooperation.

A.3 Scope and intended audiences

The main audiences are VET decision-makers and trainers; SME owners, managers and employees; employer organisations, chambers and clusters; EDIHs, competence centres and enterprise agencies; national and regional authorities responsible for education, skills, digitalisation and economic development; social partners; and EU-level stakeholders working on skills, AI adoption and SME competitiveness. The recommendations distinguish between actions that can begin within organisations and actions that require changes in policy, funding or institutional coordination.

Interpretation principle: AI readiness is treated as an organisational capability rather than the possession of a particular tool. A ready organisation can select a proportionate use case, understand its data and risk conditions, prepare staff, keep humans accountable and verify whether the intervention creates value.

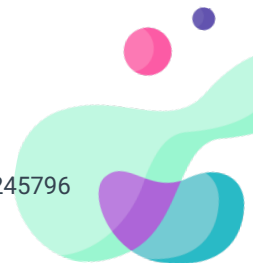
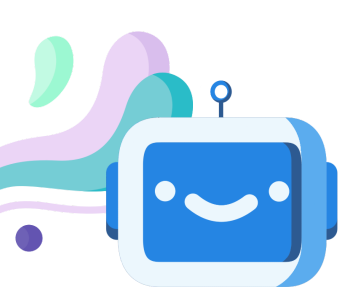
A.4 European relevance

The cross-country findings support the objectives of the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030, the European approach to micro-credentials and the EU AI Act. The report also reflects the role of Erasmus+ in testing transferable cooperation models: national systems remain responsible for qualifications and VET governance, but common competence language, reusable training components and comparable monitoring can reduce duplication and accelerate responsible uptake. The strongest added value of B4B is therefore not a single course. It is a bridge among education, enterprise support and local implementation.

B. Methodology

B.1 Evidence base

The synthesis is based on twelve primary project documents completed in 2026: six national desk research reports and six national focus group reports. The desk research followed a shared template covering five substantive domains: national VET and policy context; VET professional AI competence and CPD; SME AI adoption and barriers; VET–SME collaboration and support ecosystems; and future trends and strategic opportunities. Each national report concluded with key findings and policy recommendations. The focus groups followed a



common guide covering six thematic areas: context; perceptions and awareness; barriers; skills and the role of VET; policy and institutional support; and sustainability.

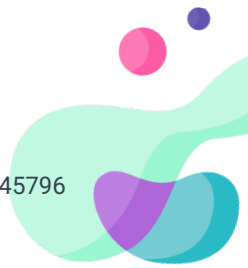
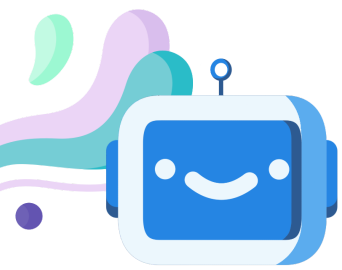
Table 1. Primary national evidence and focus group coverage

Country	Partner	Desk research	Focus group coverage
Austria	BFI Burgenland	National desk research	10 participants; in person; about 2 hours; 28 May 2026
Croatia	Callidus	National desk research	7 participants; in person; 2 hours; 11 May 2026
France	Infinitivity Design Labs	National desk research	7 participants; online; 60 minutes; 3 April 2026
Ireland	Future in Perspective Ltd	National desk research	5 participants; online; 2 hours; date not stated in the report
Italy	CONFIMI Industria Basilicata	National desk research	7 participants; in person; 90 minutes; supplemented by a structured questionnaire
Spain	Academia Postal 3 Vigo S.L.	National desk research	9 participants; in person; about 2 hours; 29 May 2026

Across the six focus groups, the national reports identify 45 participants. The groups included VET trainers and adult educators, SME owners and entrepreneurs, HR and business professionals, consultants, business support organisations and regional or local stakeholders. This purposive composition was designed to capture practical experience and institutional perspectives; it was not intended to produce statistically representative estimates. Participant names and contact details contained in national evidence annexes are not reproduced in this synthesis.

B.2 Synthesis procedure

- Evidence extraction. Findings from each national report were mapped against the common template fields. Quantitative indicators were recorded with their original definition and source context.
- Within-country synthesis. Desk research and focus group evidence were compared to identify convergence, tension and gaps between policy design and stakeholder experience.



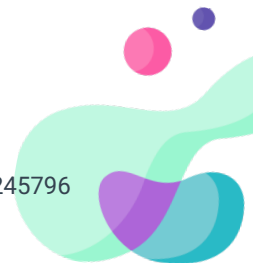
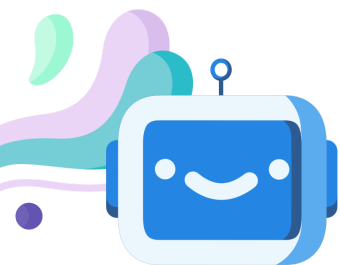
- Cross-country thematic coding. Recurring findings were organised under policy readiness, adoption maturity, skills, responsible AI, collaboration, territorial inclusion and sustainability.
- Recommendation design. Each recurring problem was translated into a practice or policy response with an intended outcome, mechanism, ownership, timing and suggested indicators.
- Validation logic. Recommendations were retained where they were supported by several countries or where a national finding represented a clearly transferable structural issue. Country-specific adaptation points were preserved.

B.3 Treatment of quantitative evidence

National adoption figures are not directly comparable. Some indicators cover all enterprises with at least ten employees, others use SME surveys, some count any AI-assisted tool use and others distinguish experimentation from full-scale implementation. The reference years, sample designs and sector coverage also differ. The report therefore uses quantitative evidence to illustrate national conditions and the gap between experimentation and maturity, not to rank countries. Where a national report explicitly states that no statistic was available, this absence is treated as a policy and monitoring gap rather than replaced by an estimate.

B.4 Limitations

- Focus group samples were small and purposive; their value is explanatory and practical rather than statistically representative.
- Participant profiles differed by country, which shaped emphasis: for example, Ireland included micro-business service providers, France focused on founders and entrepreneurs and Austria included a strong VET and education-management perspective.
- National desk research reports drew on different datasets and sometimes on estimates; definitions of AI adoption and digital maturity varied.
- AI technologies, market offerings and regulatory implementation are changing quickly. Recommendations therefore prioritise adaptable processes, tool-neutral guidance and planned review cycles.
- The report synthesises national evidence as submitted. It does not independently audit every external statistic cited in those reports.



Strength of the method: The combination of structured desk research and stakeholder dialogue makes it possible to distinguish formal policy capacity from the day-to-day conditions affecting SMEs and VET professionals.

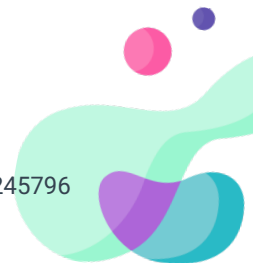
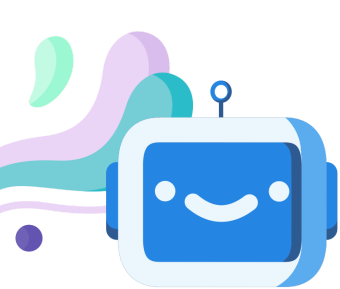
C. National Key Findings – Summary

C.1 Cross-country overview

All six countries have a favourable strategic direction for AI and digital transformation. They are aligned with European digital, skills and responsible-AI priorities and have access to public programmes, enterprise-support actors and innovation infrastructures. The central challenge is implementation coherence. Policy ambition is rarely matched by a complete delivery chain connecting awareness, trainer capacity, SME diagnostics, practical learning, mentoring, finance, risk guidance and long-term follow-up.

Table 2. Comparative national snapshot

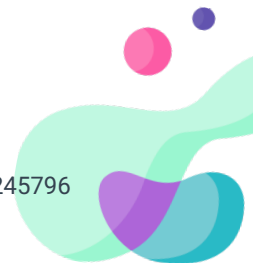
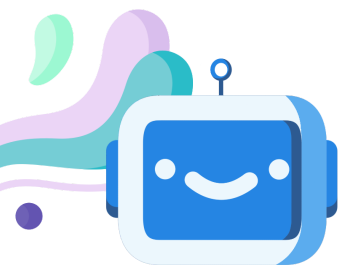
Country	System and policy assets	SME adoption pattern	VET capacity gap	Strategic opportunity
Austria	Strong dual VET and employer engagement; national AI strategy and mature training institutions.	Growing use, especially in manufacturing, logistics, marketing, finance and tourism; rural gaps remain.	AI-specific CPD and ethical/business transformation competences are uneven.	Use strong VET–employer links for applied pilots; target rural regions such as Burgenland.
Croatia	Digital policy momentum and modular VET reform from 2025/26; active actors including ASOO, CARNET and Regional Centres of Competence.	Basic digitalisation provides a base, but advanced AI uptake is below ambition and uneven by sector.	AI teacher capacity remains project-led; work-based learning is not yet systematically AI-focused.	Embed short AI modules and teacher CPD into modular reform; connect VET, SMEs and EDIHs.
France	High AI research and investment capacity; strong alternance system and extensive support through OPCOs, CCI,	A persistent gap exists between national ambition and adoption in smaller firms, non-ICT sectors and	No national AI competence standard for VET trainers; branch qualification updates can be slow.	Scale micro-credentials and co-design in non-ICT and non-Paris contexts; simplify



Country	System and policy assets	SME adoption pattern	VET capacity gap	Strategic opportunity
	Bpifrance and EDIHs.	regions outside major hubs.		navigation of funding.
Ireland	Strong national AI ambition and enterprise ecosystem; FET delivered through SOLAS and ETBs.	Adoption is rising but micro-businesses and traditional sectors remain less prepared; full-scale adoption is limited.	No structured AI CPD pathway for FET tutors; ETBs are weakly integrated with LEO and EDIH AI support.	Make VET professionals trusted local AI intermediaries and connect ETBs to enterprise support.
Italy	National AI strategy and recovery investments; diverse VET, business association, DIH/EDIH and competence-centre ecosystem.	Rapid experimentation with generative AI but low strategic maturity; strong regional and firm-size differences.	Trainer competence, governance and SME co-design are fragmented; southern and rural areas have weaker access.	Use business associations and innovation hubs to deliver practical CPD, mentoring and territorial access.
Spain	Comprehensive digital policy and VET reform; strong teacher digital competence architecture and decentralised delivery.	AI use is increasing, but practical integration and structured employee training remain uneven, especially in micro-enterprises.	AI-specific competence among VET professionals is not measured; provision varies across sectors and regions.	Create a shared national baseline with regional adaptation and link VET to Chambers, EDIHs and SME programmes.

C.2 Policy readiness exceeds delivery readiness

Austria, France, Ireland, Italy and Spain have explicit national AI strategies or refreshed strategic frameworks, while Croatia is strengthening AI governance through its digital transformation agenda and EU-aligned roadmap. Recovery and resilience investments, Digital Europe, ESF+, national skills programmes and EDIHs provide an enabling environment. Nevertheless, national reports repeatedly identify fragmented programmes, complex eligibility or application procedures, limited visibility among SMEs and a shortage of local guidance. Policy instruments often support technology investment, general



digitalisation or enterprise training without creating a joined-up AI learning pathway involving VET providers.

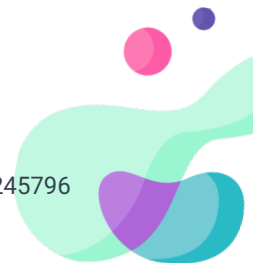
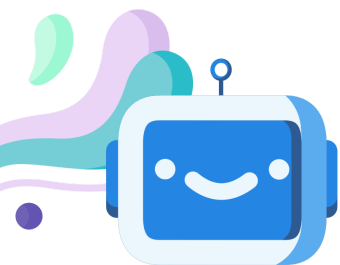
The implication is important: adding another information portal or stand-alone course will not resolve the delivery gap. SMEs need a recognisable route from first enquiry to diagnostic, practical training, safe experimentation, implementation support and follow-up. VET providers can contribute continuity and local reach, while enterprise agencies and innovation hubs contribute technical expertise and access to funding. Coordination must be designed, funded and monitored rather than assumed.

C.3 SME AI adoption is growing but remains shallow and uneven

Across the national reports, AI adoption has accelerated since the diffusion of generative AI tools. The most common uses are content generation, customer communication, document preparation, translation, marketing, administrative automation and data analysis. Manufacturing, ICT, finance and professional services tend to show higher readiness, while construction, hospitality, agriculture, retail, traditional services and many micro-businesses lag. Larger firms and urban regions generally have more expertise, funding and access to innovation networks.

Table 3. Illustrative adoption indicators reported nationally

Country	Indicator reported in national desk research	Interpretation caveat
Austria	National report estimate: about 25–35% of SMEs use some AI-supported tool; only about 15–20% invest in structured AI training.	Report estimates; significant sector and regional variation. Not directly comparable with official enterprise statistics.
Croatia	No precise national SME AI percentage identified. The report notes 56% of SMEs at basic digital intensity in 2023 and strong data-analytics use, but weaker advanced-technology uptake.	Digital intensity and analytics are enabling conditions, not AI adoption measures.
France	10% of firms with at least 10 employees used AI in 2024; a separate SME/ETI survey reported about 32%, and later generative-AI use was higher.	Different samples and definitions illustrate the gap between official technology measures and self-reported tool use.
Ireland	Official company use rose from 8% in 2023 to 15% in 2024; SME research reported about 35% integrated AI, while only 6% of	Any-use, integration and full-scale adoption are different stages and should be tracked separately.



Country	Indicator reported in national desk research	Interpretation caveat
	businesses achieved full-scale adoption in another survey.	
Italy	National report places SME AI use broadly between 5% and 15%, depending on sector and methodology; professional tool use is much higher than organisational maturity.	Evidence points to widespread experimentation but limited AI-driven organisational models.
Spain	11.4% of enterprises with at least 10 employees used at least one AI technology in 2024.	Official SME-specific training and skills-gap measures remain limited.

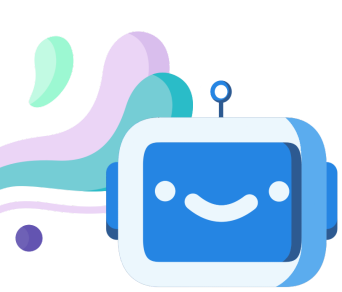
The indicators should not be used as a league table. They instead show why policy needs a maturity model. A business using a free generative-AI tool for occasional drafting is not in the same position as a business with approved workflows, trained staff, data controls, performance measures and accountable human oversight. B4B activities should make this distinction explicit and help SMEs move one step at a time.

C.4 VET professional competence is the central bottleneck

Five national reports explicitly state that no comprehensive national measurement of AI competence among VET professionals is available; Austria provides estimates but also notes significant variation. Across the partnership, trainers in ICT, engineering and advanced manufacturing are generally more exposed to AI than colleagues in business administration, tourism, retail, health, social care and other service fields. Existing CPD frequently focuses on general digital skills, isolated tools or education technology rather than the combined competences required to guide SMEs.

Table 4. Shared VET professional competence gaps

Competence domain	Required capability	Cross-country gap
AI fundamentals	Understand core concepts, capabilities, limitations and common workplace uses.	Uneven baseline knowledge outside ICT; confusion between automation, analytics and generative AI.
Business transformation	Map processes, select proportionate use cases, redesign workflows, estimate value and manage change.	The most persistent gap: trainers may know tools but lack experience connecting AI to SME strategy and operations.



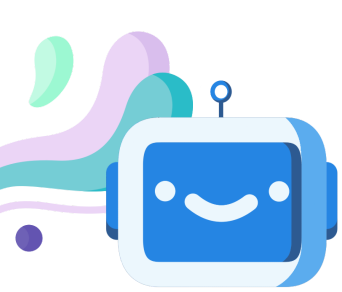
Competence domain	Required capability	Cross-country gap
Digital pedagogy	Design practice-based learning, assessment and WBL tasks that use AI without weakening learner agency.	General digital teaching has advanced, but AI-supported learning and assessment remain early and inconsistent.
Ethics and governance	Apply data protection, confidentiality, human oversight, transparency, bias, copyright and AI Act principles.	Responsible-AI content is fragmented and often not adapted to VET or micro-enterprise scenarios.
Facilitation and mentoring	Build confidence, address fear, support experimentation and connect SMEs to specialist help.	VET professionals are not always recognised or funded as innovation intermediaries.

A competence framework must therefore combine technical, pedagogical, business and governance capabilities. It should also differentiate roles. Not every trainer needs to become an AI specialist. All VET professionals need a safe baseline; facilitators need the capacity to support SME use-case development and learning; leaders need to plan institutional adoption, quality assurance, partnerships and staff development. This role-based logic aligns with the B4B CPD approach and offers a practical basis for micro-credentials.

C.5 Existing CPD is useful but fragmented

Every country has relevant training providers and programmes. Austria can draw on BFI, WIFI and labour-market services; Croatia on CARNET, ASOO and the BrAIIn initiative; France on OPCOs, national platforms, 3IA institutes and the Osez l'IA ecosystem; Ireland on Skillnet, SOLAS eCollege, ETBs and enterprise supports; Italy on Scuola Futura, interprofessional funds, DIHs and competence centres; and Spain on INTEF, FUNDAE, INCIBE, Chambers and regional systems. The problem is not complete absence. It is that access, recognition, sector relevance, protected staff time and continuity vary substantially.

Common CPD barriers are workload and lack of release time; course cost or travel; unequal territorial provision; rapid obsolescence of content; difficulty selecting relevant offers; lack of training designed for non-technical sectors; and uncertainty about how learning will be recognised. A successful CPD pathway should therefore be modular, blended, practice-based, regularly updated and connected to recognised professional development. It should include mentoring and peer exchange rather than end when a course is completed.



C.6 VET–SME collaboration exists, but AI-specific collaboration is weak

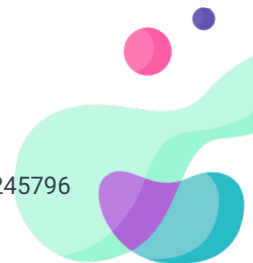
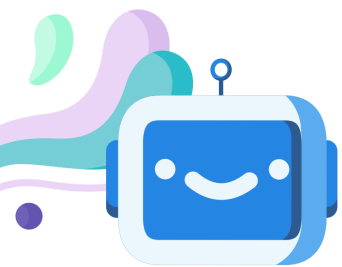
All six countries have established forms of VET–enterprise cooperation, including apprenticeships, alternance, placements, work-based learning, employer participation and sectoral training. Yet AI-focused curriculum co-design, trainer exposure to live business problems and joint experimentation remain limited outside ICT-intensive contexts. Innovation hubs and enterprise agencies often work alongside VET systems rather than with them. This separates technical advice from sustained learning and weakens the transfer of workplace innovation into curricula.

Table 5. Main collaboration gap by country

Country	National collaboration gap
Austria	Strong general cooperation, but few AI-specific joint projects; rural AI ecosystems are weaker; business needs enter curricula too slowly.
Croatia	Relevant actors exist but no simple AI cooperation pathway links them; work-based learning is not systematically AI-focused.
France	AI co-design between CFA/VET and SMEs is rare outside ICT; infrastructure is concentrated in major hubs; funding is difficult to navigate.
Ireland	ETBs, LEOs, EDIHs and Skillnet largely operate in parallel on AI; no dedicated funding stream supports VET–SME AI partnerships.
Italy	SMEs often host learners but have limited influence on AI learning outcomes; access to hubs is fragmented and regional disparities are pronounced.
Spain	VET and business-support structures pursue complementary goals but are often separate; VET professionals have limited access to AI innovation projects.

C.7 Territorial, sectoral and organisational inequalities

The same distributional pattern appears repeatedly. Capital regions, industrial clusters and technology-intensive sectors have stronger access to skills and support. Rural regions such as Burgenland, southern and less-developed Italian regions, Irish micro-businesses outside major urban networks, French firms outside Paris and other innovation hubs and micro-enterprises across Spain and Croatia have fewer opportunities to access specialised help. Traditional sectors also face a relevance problem: generic AI examples rarely show how



adoption should work in tourism, agriculture, construction, logistics, retail, care, crafts or very small service businesses.

An inclusive policy should not define success only as increasing average adoption. It should reduce the gap in the ability to make informed choices. Some SMEs may reasonably decide not to adopt a given tool after a readiness and risk assessment. The policy objective is therefore competent, proportionate and responsible decision-making, with additional support for groups that would otherwise be excluded.

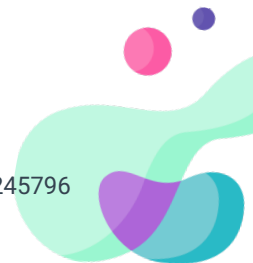
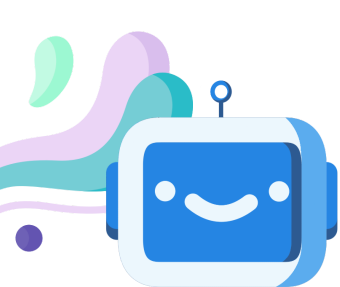
C.8 Country priorities

Country	Priority application of the common framework
Austria	Apply a national AI competence model through existing VET institutions; fund rural SME upskilling; use apprenticeship and employer structures for applied pilots.
Croatia	Embed AI teacher CPD and SME-oriented modules in modular VET reform; link ASOO, CARNET, Regional Centres of Competence, SMEs and CROBOHUB++.
France	Create a VET trainer AI standard and recognised micro-credentials; extend co-design through OPCO, CCI and EDIH networks to non-ICT and non-metropolitan sectors.
Ireland	Establish an AI CPD pathway for FET professionals; integrate ETBs with LEOs and EDIHs; publish accessible compliance guidance for micro-businesses.
Italy	Strengthen AI-focused trainer CPD and curriculum co-design through business associations, EDIHs and competence centres; prioritise southern, rural and micro-enterprise access.
Spain	Set a common AI competence baseline for VET professionals with autonomous-community adaptation; connect VET providers to Chambers, EDIHs and digitalisation programmes.

D. Focus Group Findings – Summary

D.1 Participation and interpretive value

The focus groups provided a practice-based test of the desk research. Their participants represented the organisations expected to use or mediate B4B results. Austria brought a strong education-management, HR and digital-expert perspective; Croatia mixed VET, SME, marketing and logistics experience; France involved SME founders and entrepreneurs; Ireland focused on micro and small service businesses; Italy included SMEs, consultants, business



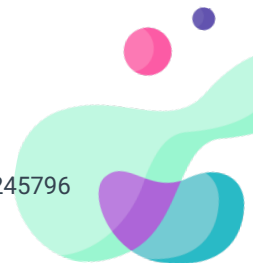
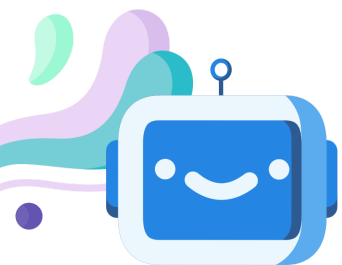
support and regional actors; and Spain combined SMEs, a sector association, HR and VET/adult education. The findings are not prevalence estimates. Their value lies in showing how policy and training are experienced at operational level.

Table 6. Focus group profile and dominant messages

Country	Participants	Format	Dominant messages
Austria	10	In person	Early implementation; positive attitudes; concerns about data, ethics and reliability; trainer upskilling and regional funding requested.
Croatia	7	In person	Uneven readiness; informal use; need for tool selection, responsible AI, short modules and trusted local intermediaries.
France	7	Online	Moderate maturity and active task-level use; cost, subscriptions, trust, language, privacy and dependency concerns; strong demand for continuous support.
Ireland	5	Online	Low-to-moderate digitalisation among micro-businesses; fear, GDPR and funding access prominent; mentoring and local delivery preferred.
Italy	7	In person + questionnaire	Generally positive perception and several use cases; gaps in skills, organisational culture, specialist support and accessible funding.
Spain	9	In person	High awareness but mainly isolated productivity uses; practical VET support, collaboration and long-term open resources prioritised.

D.2 Perceptions and current use of AI

Participants across all countries regarded AI primarily as a productivity and efficiency tool. Common examples included drafting and summarising documents, translation, marketing content, customer responses, administration, research, basic coding support, data analysis, procurement support and performance monitoring. Manufacturing and logistics examples also included process optimisation and predictive applications. The positive perception was pragmatic rather than uncritical: AI was described as useful when it complements human work, reduces repetitive effort and expands capability, but not as a substitute for accountability, relationships or strategic judgement.



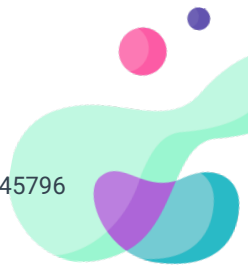
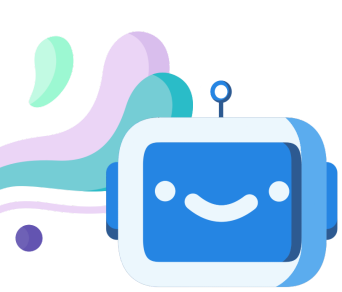
The dominant adoption pattern is informal and individual. Employees or owners experiment with publicly available tools without an organisational policy, approved workflow, shared prompt or output-quality standard. France and Spain explicitly described task-specific rather than strategic integration. Ireland showed that even businesses with moderate digitalisation may not use AI at all. Italy reported relatively good digitalisation among participants but still identified a need for cultural change and long-term strategy. The common transition challenge is therefore from personal use to governed organisational use.

D.3 Barriers and risks

Table 7. Cross-country focus group barriers

Barrier	How it appears in practice	Coverage
Knowledge and skills	Limited understanding of tools, use cases, prompting, output evaluation, data and process integration.	All six countries
Time and capacity	Owners and small teams lack time to compare tools, attend long courses or lead change.	Especially micro-enterprises; explicit in Croatia, Ireland and Spain
Cost and investment	Subscriptions, consultancy, staff time and uncertain return make adoption difficult.	Strongly emphasised in Austria, France, Ireland and Italy
Trust and reliability	Hallucinations, inaccuracies, over-reliance and unclear responsibility require verification and human oversight.	All six countries
Data and regulation	GDPR, confidentiality, AI Act obligations, copyright and use of non-EU tools create uncertainty.	All six countries; especially prominent in Ireland and France
Organisational culture	Resistance to change, fear of job replacement, weak leadership and lack of internal rules slow adoption.	Austria, Ireland, Italy and Spain
Ecosystem complexity	Funding and support exist but are fragmented, hard to find or poorly adapted to the smallest firms.	All six countries
Access and fit	Generic offers do not match sector, language, region or micro-business reality.	France, Ireland, Italy and all territorial comparisons

The barriers are mutually reinforcing. A firm without internal competence cannot judge whether a subscription is good value; uncertainty about confidentiality discourages experimentation; lack of time prevents structured learning; and fragmented support increases



the cost of finding help. Policy responses must therefore bundle skills, advice, finance and governance rather than treat them as separate problems.

D.4 Skills needs and preferred learning design

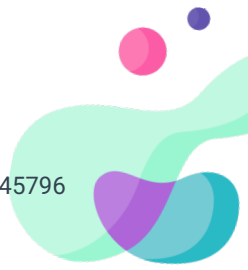
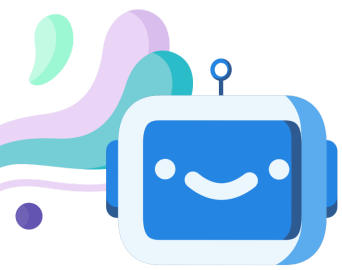
The strongest focus group consensus concerns learning design. Participants do not want long, abstract or highly technical programmes. They want to work on realistic tasks with immediate relevance to their organisation and to receive help when implementation problems arise. The common competence set includes basic AI literacy; prompt formulation; critical evaluation and fact-checking; data awareness; workflow and use-case mapping; ethical and legal use; change management; adaptability; creativity; cybersecurity awareness; and the ability to know when specialist or legal advice is required.

- Short, modular units that can be completed around operational responsibilities.
- Hands-on tasks using realistic SME scenarios and sector-specific cases.
- Blended delivery combining concise self-study with live workshops, coaching or clinics.
- Mentoring and consultancy that adapt general principles to an individual business process.
- Peer learning and communities where SMEs and trainers can share experience and troubleshoot.
- Regular content updates and tool-neutral guidance so learning does not become obsolete.
- Visible recognition through CPD records, badges or stackable micro-credentials.

D.5 The role of VET

Participants consistently identified VET providers as potential translators between complex technology and business practice. Their comparative advantage is trust, pedagogy, local presence and the ability to sustain learning beyond a one-off consultancy intervention. However, this role is credible only when trainers have up-to-date competence, access to practical examples and a referral network for technical, legal or funding questions. VET institutions must therefore evolve from course providers to learning and innovation intermediaries.

This expanded role includes diagnosing learning needs; helping SMEs select a bounded use case; facilitating safe experimentation; involving learners in real business challenges; supporting reflection and measurement; and linking firms to EDIHs, chambers, enterprise



agencies or specialist providers. It does not require VET staff to provide legal advice or build complex AI systems. Clear role boundaries and escalation routes are essential.

D.6 Policy support and communication

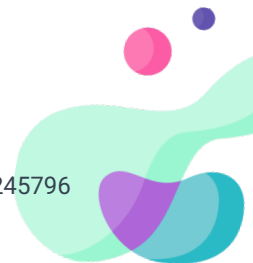
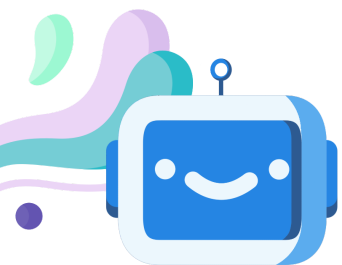
The focus groups called for clearer and simpler communication about available support. Trusted channels differ by country, but the principle is common: SMEs respond better to concrete, locally relevant messages from organisations they already know than to generic national campaigns. Effective communication should state who is eligible, what problem the support solves, the time commitment, the expected output and who can help with the application. Funding should be accompanied by advisory support because the smallest firms may lack the capacity to define a project before applying.

Suggested instruments include training vouchers, short diagnostic sessions, mentoring, pilot grants, sector workshops, local information desks, centralised but navigable portals and co-financing for staff development and implementation. Regulatory communication should use plain language and examples. It should explain proportionality, data handling, human oversight and documentation without presenting all AI use as high risk.

D.7 Sustainability and future perspectives

Participants expect AI to become a normal component of competitiveness and work across sectors. They therefore reject one-off project logic. Sustainable support requires open and accessible materials, regular updates, affordable tools, continuing professional development, mentoring and active networks. France highlighted dependence on external providers and future pricing; several countries emphasised EU-aligned, privacy-conscious solutions; Spain, Croatia and Austria stressed continued access to project resources; and Italy, Ireland and France showed strong interest in communities and long-term advice.

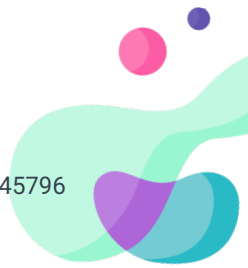
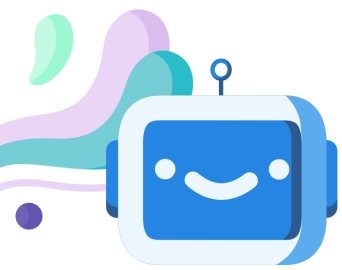
Sustainability test: A project result is sustainable only if a named organisation owns its maintenance, users can still find and apply it, content is reviewed against technological and regulatory change and the support network continues to accept referrals.



D.8 Convergence between desk research and focus groups

Table 8. Desk research–focus group convergence

Theme	Desk research evidence	Focus group evidence	Implication
Adoption maturity	Statistics and policy reports show uneven uptake.	Participants describe isolated, informal and task-level use.	Use a staged maturity model and start with bounded use cases.
Skills	Trainer and SME AI competence is not systematically measured or developed.	Participants request practical literacy, prompting, critical evaluation and mentoring.	Build role-based CPD and baseline assessment.
Responsible AI	AI Act, GDPR and governance appear in policy frameworks.	Data, confidentiality, reliability and legal uncertainty directly inhibit use.	Provide a practical starter pack and referral route.
Collaboration	VET–SME structures exist but AI-specific cooperation is weak.	Participants value trusted local intermediaries and ecosystem cooperation.	Fund regional co-design labs, clinics and pilots.
Inclusion	Regional, sectoral and firm-size gaps recur in national evidence.	Micro-firms and less digitally mature organisations report the greatest constraints.	Target access, not only average uptake.
Sustainability	National reports identify project dependency and fragmented provision.	Participants request ongoing support, updated resources and communities.	Assign ownership, review cycles and long-term funding.



E. B4B Practice-level Recommendations

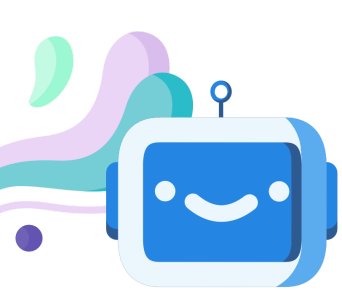
E.1 Design principles

The practice recommendations are intended for immediate adaptation by B4B partners, VET organisations, trainers, SMEs and intermediary organisations. They are designed as a connected pathway rather than a menu of unrelated activities. The pathway begins with readiness and competence, moves through safe experimentation and implementation and ends with review, recognition and continued support.

- Business problem first: begin with a process or learning need, not a tool demonstration.
- Proportionate adoption: match complexity, cost and governance to the use case and organisation.
- Human accountability: keep named people responsible for decisions, verification and escalation.
- Learning by doing: combine concise concepts with tasks, evidence and reflection.
- Tool neutrality: teach selection criteria and transferable methods rather than dependence on one vendor.
- Inclusion by design: accommodate micro-enterprises, rural participants, varied digital baselines and non-technical sectors.
- Sustainability from the start: assign owners, versions, update cycles and referral partners.

E.2 Recommended B4B implementation pathway

Stage	Practice	Minimum output
1. Discover	Readiness and use-case scan	Baseline, priority process, risk screen and learning needs
2. Prepare	Role-based CPD for VET staff and SME leads	Shared vocabulary, competence goals and safe-use rules
3. Experiment	Short learning sprint and guided pilot	Tested workflow with human oversight and evidence
4. Implement	Mentoring, clinic and ecosystem referral	Action plan, ownership, procurement and support route



Stage	Practice	Minimum output
5. Review	Outcome and governance check	Decision to stop, adapt or scale; lessons captured
6. Sustain	Community, micro-credential and update cycle	Recognised learning and continued access to current resources

E.3 How to read the practice recommendations

The recommendations in this section are identified by the letter P, meaning Practice-level Recommendation. P1–P10 are actions that can be implemented directly by B4B partners, VET providers, trainers, SMEs and business-support organisations. Each P recommendation specifies the intended practical outcome, the reason for action, the core implementation steps, the actors responsible, the proposed timing and indicators that can be used to monitor progress. The P codes make it easier to refer to individual operational measures during piloting, partner meetings and sustainability planning.

P1. Introduce an SME AI readiness and use-case scan

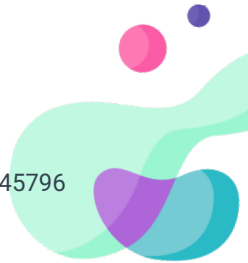
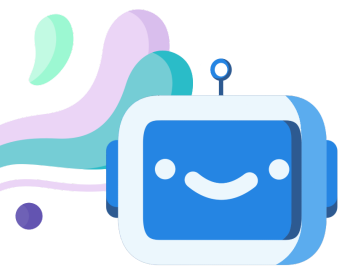
Intended outcome: Each participating SME leaves the first contact with a realistic starting point, one priority use case and a clear decision on whether to proceed.

Why it matters. National evidence shows that awareness is high but organisations struggle to select relevant tools, assess readiness and connect adoption to a business process. A short diagnostic prevents unfocused experimentation and helps tailor training.

Core actions.

- Use a 45–60 minute structured conversation covering business objective, process, people, data, risk, expected benefit and existing tools.
- Classify the organisation's stage as awareness, experimentation, operational adoption or strategic adoption; avoid a single numeric score without explanation.
- Select one bounded, low-risk use case and identify what must remain under human control.
- Produce a one-page action and learning plan, including a stop condition when data, legal or value concerns cannot be resolved.

Primary actors. A trained VET facilitator with the SME owner or process lead; specialist referral where required.



Timing. Immediate; integrate into every B4B-facing SME activity.

Suggested indicators. Share of SMEs completing a baseline; share identifying a feasible use case; share receiving a documented risk and learning plan; diversity of enterprise size, sector and location.

P2. Deliver role-based AI CPD for VET professionals

Intended outcome: VET staff acquire the level of competence required for their role and can support SMEs without being expected to become technical specialists.

Why it matters. All six national reports identify gaps in AI fundamentals, business transformation, digital pedagogy and governance. A single undifferentiated course cannot meet the needs of trainers, facilitators and institutional leaders.

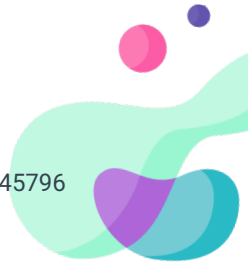
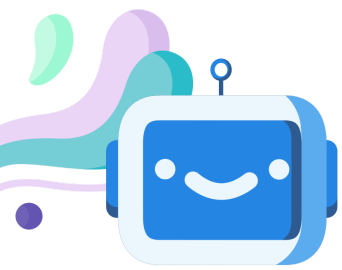
Core actions.

- Define three stackable roles: Learner for safe baseline use; Facilitator for SME diagnostics, learning sprints and mentoring; Leader for institutional strategy, quality, partnerships and staff development.
- Include common modules on capabilities and limitations, process mapping, prompting, output verification, data awareness, AI Act/GDPR principles and human oversight.
- Require evidence of practice, such as a redesigned lesson, an SME use-case plan or an institutional acceptable-use procedure.
- Recognise completion through CPD records or stackable micro-credentials and review content at least annually.

Primary actors. VET providers, teacher-training bodies, qualification authorities and B4B partners, with SME and responsible-AI experts.

Timing. Design within 3–6 months; pilot during months 6–12; refine and recognise during months 12–24.

Suggested indicators. Completion and assessment rates; pre/post competence gain; share applying learning within three months; number of institutions recognising the pathway; participant profile by sector and region.



P3. Create protected train-the-trainer capacity

Intended outcome: AI-related CPD becomes part of normal staff development rather than an additional unpaid burden carried by a small number of enthusiasts.

Why it matters. Workload and lack of time are recurring barriers. Without protected time, training reaches those already engaged and widens internal competence gaps.

Core actions.

- Select a cross-disciplinary trainer cohort that includes non-ICT subjects and varied regions.
- Provide release time for training, preparation, peer observation and material adaptation.
- Use a co-facilitation model in which an AI-capable trainer works with a sector specialist.
- Create monthly peer clinics to discuss failed as well as successful experiments and update shared materials.

Primary actors. VET leadership, HR/CPD managers, staff representatives and public funders.

Timing. Begin with every pilot cohort and maintain as a recurring institutional CPD cycle.

Suggested indicators. Hours of protected learning time; breadth of departments represented; number of co-taught sessions; trainer retention; proportion of materials updated by practitioners.

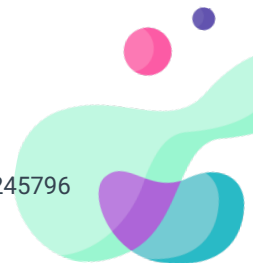
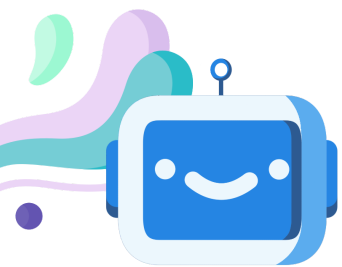
P4. Run short SME AI learning sprints

Intended outcome: SMEs test one use case safely, measure the result and make an evidence-based decision to stop, adapt or scale.

Why it matters. Focus groups strongly prefer practical, modular and business-oriented learning. A four-to-six-week sprint creates enough structure for learning without requiring a long programme.

Core actions.

- Combine a short workshop, guided workplace task, check-in and final review; allow blended participation.
- Use the SME's own process but synthetic or non-sensitive data during early experiments.



- Define a baseline and one or two outcome measures, such as time saved, error rate, response quality or employee confidence.
- Document the prompt or workflow, verification steps, owner, data rule and escalation route so the test can be repeated.

Primary actors. VET facilitators, SME process owners, business associations and technical mentors.

Timing. Pilot within 6 months; repeat quarterly or integrate into existing enterprise training calendars.

Suggested indicators. Sprint completion; implemented use cases; documented baseline and outcome; share of pilots stopped for a justified reason; follow-up adoption after three and six months.

P5. Build a sector-based use-case and learning library

Intended outcome: Trainers and SMEs can see what proportionate AI adoption looks like in their sector and adapt tested learning tasks.

Why it matters. Generic demonstrations reduce relevance for traditional sectors and micro-enterprises. National evidence highlights distinct needs in manufacturing, logistics, tourism, retail, professional services, agriculture, construction, care and administration.

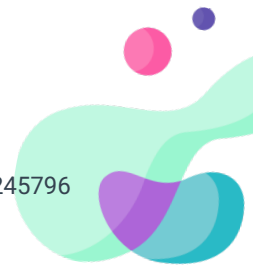
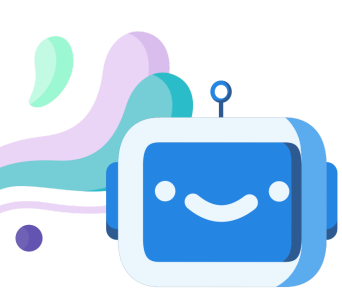
Core actions.

- Develop concise cases structured around problem, process, data, people, tool category, risk, human oversight, learning task and measurable result.
- Include low-cost and no-code examples alongside clear warnings about confidential data and unsupported claims.
- Provide trainer notes, SME worksheets, assessment criteria and an accessibility check.
- Version every case and remove or revise examples when tools, prices, regulation or evidence change.

Primary actors. B4B partners, sector bodies, SMEs, VET trainers and EDIHs or competence centres.

Timing. Initial library within 6–9 months; quarterly technical scan and annual formal review.

Suggested indicators. Number of validated sector cases; number of countries adapting each case; user ratings on relevance; update timeliness; evidence of use in training and SME pilots.



P6. Provide a responsible-AI starter pack

Intended outcome: Every participating organisation has simple minimum controls for safe experimentation and operational use.

Why it matters. Data protection, confidentiality, unreliable outputs, copyright and AI Act uncertainty appear across all focus groups. Fear can lead either to avoidance or unmanaged use. Plain-language controls support proportionate confidence.

Core actions.

- Include an AI tool inventory, data-classification guide, acceptable-use template and human-oversight checklist.
- Require verification of factual, financial, legal, safety-critical and personally consequential outputs by a competent person.
- Provide a vendor and procurement checklist covering data location, model training on inputs, retention, access controls, transparency, cost and exit options.
- Include incident escalation, copyright and disclosure prompts, plus a clear statement that the pack does not replace legal advice.

Primary actors. VET quality leads, SME management, data protection or legal specialists and sector bodies.

Timing. Minimum viable pack within 3 months; review against regulatory and market changes every six months.

Suggested indicators. Share of participating organisations adopting acceptable-use rules; completion of data and oversight checks; incidents identified and managed; referral use; user understanding of role boundaries.

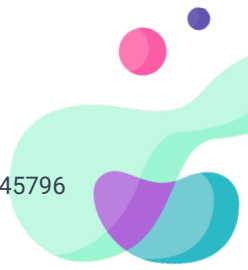
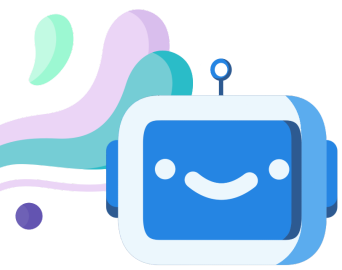
P7. Establish local AI clinics and mentoring

Intended outcome: SMEs and trainers can obtain timely, trusted help after training and are referred to the right technical, legal or funding actor.

Why it matters. One-off training does not resolve implementation questions. Focus groups want hands-on support and trusted local intermediaries, while national evidence shows fragmented ecosystems.

Core actions.

- Offer regular open clinics through VET providers, chambers, business associations or enterprise offices.



- Use a triage protocol: learning support remains with the VET facilitator; technical, legal, cybersecurity and financing questions move to named specialists.
- Maintain a public, country-specific referral map with eligibility and contact routes.
- Capture recurring questions anonymously and use them to update training, guidance and policy feedback.

Primary actors. VET providers, chambers, employer bodies, EDIHs, enterprise agencies and regional authorities.

Timing. Launch during pilots and maintain monthly or bi-monthly according to demand.

Suggested indicators. Clinic attendance; response and referral time; resolution rate; repeat participation; share of users from micro/rural firms; guidance updates triggered by recurring questions.

P8. Use VET–SME co-design labs and AI-focused work-based learning

Intended outcome: Business needs shape learning and learners contribute to supervised, useful experimentation without carrying inappropriate responsibility.

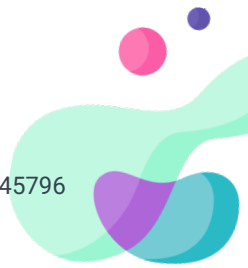
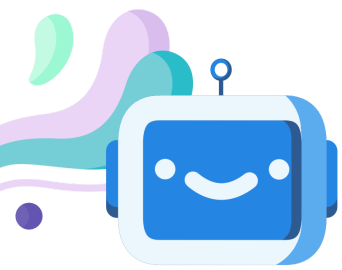
Why it matters. General work-based learning is established, but AI-specific co-design is weak. Labs create a controlled bridge among curriculum, trainer development and SME innovation.

Core actions.

- Invite SMEs to submit bounded process challenges rather than requests for a predetermined tool.
- Form teams of SME staff, trainers and learners with clear ownership, confidentiality and intellectual-property arrangements.
- Use synthetic, anonymised or appropriately governed data and prohibit learners from making unsupervised consequential decisions.
- End each lab with a demonstrator, learning evidence, risk review and recommendation to stop, adapt or scale.

Primary actors. VET schools and adult-learning providers, SMEs, sector bodies, learners and innovation hubs.

Timing. Pilot in 1–2 sectors per country within 12 months; integrate successful formats into WBL thereafter.



Suggested indicators. Number and diversity of co-design labs; SME and learner satisfaction; curriculum changes; demonstrators evaluated; proportion of challenges leading to continued collaboration.

P9. Design access for micro-enterprises, rural areas and non-technical sectors

Intended outcome: Support reaches organisations most likely to be excluded from mainstream AI programmes.

Why it matters. Territorial, sectoral and firm-size gaps recur in every country. Equal invitations do not create equal access when travel, time, application capacity and course relevance differ.

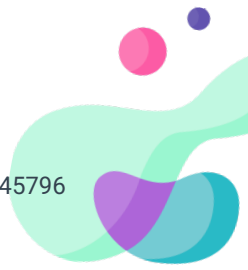
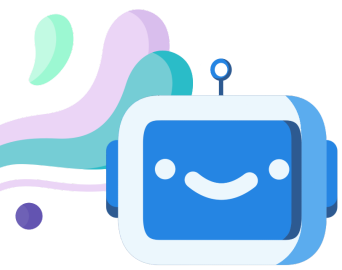
Core actions.

- Offer short evening, blended and mobile formats and reimburse eligible participation or replacement costs where possible.
- Reserve outreach and places for micro-enterprises, sole traders, rural firms, traditional sectors, older workers, low-qualified workers and under-represented groups.
- Use plain language, translated or localised examples and progressive learning routes for different digital baselines.
- Partner with local organisations that already have trusted relationships with target groups.

Primary actors. Regional authorities, VET providers, employer organisations, local development agencies and inclusion partners.

Timing. Apply to all recruitment, funding and delivery decisions from the start.

Suggested indicators. Participation and completion by enterprise size, region, sector, gender and relevant inclusion groups; travel/time burden; dropout reasons; proportion progressing to a supported use case.



P10. Maintain an open B4B community and resource update cycle

Intended outcome: B4B outputs remain findable, credible and useful after project funding ends.

Why it matters. Participants in all countries requested long-term access, regular updates and peer support. Without ownership and version control, AI materials quickly become obsolete.

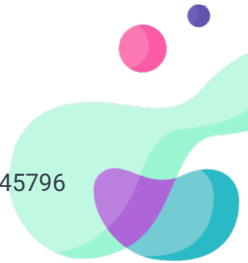
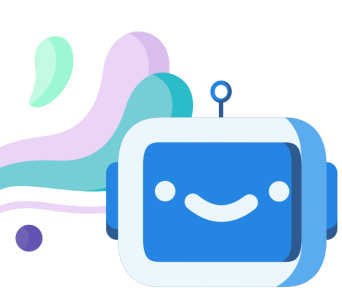
Core actions.

- Assign a named owner and deputy for each resource family, with a review calendar and change log.
- Maintain open access wherever licensing and data protection permit; provide editable formats for localisation.
- Operate a cross-country community of practice with quarterly exchanges and an annual evidence review.
- Archive outdated versions clearly, publish update dates and provide a route for users to report errors or changed tools.

Primary actors. B4B partnership, designated VET hosts, national communities and future associated partners.

Timing. Agree ownership before project closure; continue quarterly community activity and annual formal review.

Suggested indicators. Resources with named owners; percentage reviewed on schedule; active community members; cross-country reuse; corrections resolved; continued access and usage after project end.



F. Policy-level Recommendations

F.1 Policy objective

The policy objective is to make responsible AI capability a normal, accessible component of VET and SME support. This requires more than financing technology. Public systems must build trainer capacity, create recognised learning pathways, connect institutions, reduce access barriers, translate regulation into practice and monitor meaningful outcomes. EU action should provide common language and transferable resources; national and regional action should embed them in qualifications, funding and delivery structures.

F.2 How to read the policy recommendations

The recommendations in this section are identified by the letter R, meaning Policy-level Recommendation. R1–R8 address structural changes that require action by public authorities, qualification bodies, funding organisations, social partners or other institutions with responsibility for VET, skills, SME development and AI governance. Unlike the P recommendations, which focus on direct implementation, the R recommendations concern competence standards, curricula, funding, institutional cooperation, regulatory guidance, monitoring, inclusion and long-term learning infrastructure. Each R recommendation includes the expected policy outcome, proposed mechanisms, responsible levels of governance, timing and indicators.

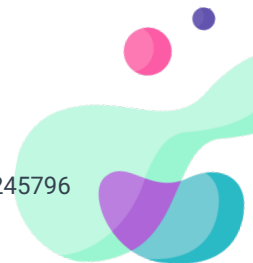
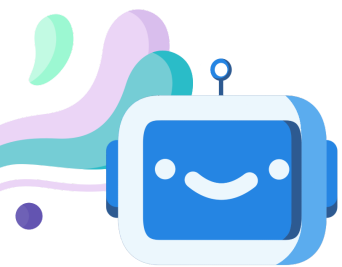
R1. Adopt a common AI competence framework for VET professionals

Intended outcome: VET systems share a clear baseline for the competences needed to teach about AI, use it responsibly and support SMEs.

Why it matters. National reports repeatedly identify the absence of an AI-specific standard for VET professionals. General digital competence frameworks are a strong foundation but do not fully cover business transformation, workplace facilitation and AI governance.

Core actions.

- Develop an EU-referenced framework aligned with DigComp, DigCompEdu, the European approach to micro-credentials and the AI Act.
- Define progressive roles or proficiency levels and map them to learning outcomes, assessment evidence and CPD recognition.
- Require a common responsible-AI core while allowing country and sector specialisation.



- Use the framework to guide trainer recruitment, CPD planning, programme quality and funding criteria.

Primary actors. European Commission and Cedefop as conveners; national ministries, qualification bodies, social partners, VET providers and trainer associations for adaptation.

Timing. EU reference within 12–18 months; national mapping and pilots within 24 months.

Suggested indicators. Framework adoption; countries completing mappings; recognised CPD offers; assessed trainers by level and sector; employer and trainer validation of relevance.

R2. Mainstream AI into VET curricula, qualifications and recognised CPD

Intended outcome: AI competence becomes embedded across relevant vocational fields rather than confined to ICT courses or temporary projects.

Why it matters. Curriculum and qualification updates are slower than technological change. The evidence shows major gaps in traditional and service sectors and limited recognition of short AI learning.

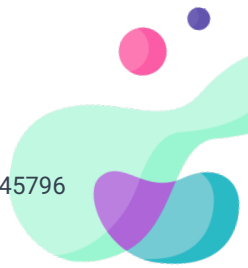
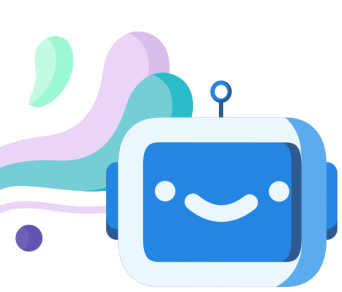
Core actions.

- Introduce cross-cutting AI learning outcomes covering process use, critical evaluation, human oversight, data and ethics in relevant qualifications.
- Create fast-track update mechanisms for examples and elective modules without weakening quality assurance.
- Recognise stackable micro-credentials for trainers and workers and connect them to national qualification or CPD systems.
- Require employer and VET co-design, including micro-enterprise and non-ICT representation.

Primary actors. National ministries, qualification agencies, regional VET authorities, sector bodies, social partners and providers.

Timing. Short-term elective and CPD modules within 12 months; qualification integration over 2–4 years.

Suggested indicators. Qualifications and CPD pathways updated; sectors covered; micro-credentials awarded and stacked; employer participation; learner application of competence in WBL.



R3. Create an accessible AI skills and adoption funding package for SMEs

Intended outcome: Micro and small firms can afford the time, advice and controlled experimentation needed for responsible adoption.

Why it matters. Focus groups described fragmented schemes, complex access and eligibility gaps. Funding technology without skills and guidance can produce unused tools or unmanaged risk.

Core actions.

- Bundle a readiness diagnostic, training voucher, limited mentoring and small pilot grant within one application and support route.
- Finance trainer release time and SME employee participation as well as external costs.
- Use simplified applications and proportionate reporting for small grants; provide pre-application support.
- Reserve funding or apply higher support rates for micro-enterprises, rural areas, traditional sectors and under-represented groups.

Primary actors. National and regional managing authorities, enterprise ministries, ESF+/ERDF and recovery-programme actors, enterprise agencies and social partners.

Timing. Pilot within one funding cycle; evaluate after 12 months and scale based on evidence.

Suggested indicators. Applications and awards by firm size and region; time to decision; training and pilot completion; supported use cases; documented outcomes; additionality and deadweight assessment.

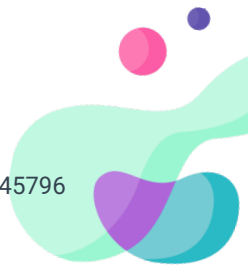
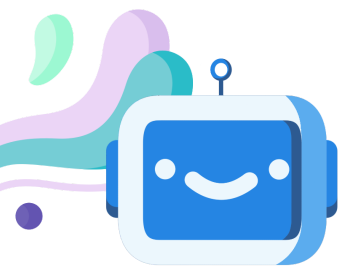
R4. Institutionalise regional VET–SME–AI cooperation hubs

Intended outcome: Education, enterprise support and technical expertise operate through a coherent local pathway.

Why it matters. All countries have relevant actors, but AI-specific cooperation is fragmented. Regional hubs should organise existing capacity rather than create duplicate institutions.

Core actions.

- Designate a coordinating function that links VET providers, EDIHs, chambers, employer organisations, enterprise agencies, competence centres and public authorities.



- Publish a common service map and referral protocol covering training, testing, funding, data protection, cybersecurity and specialised technical help.
- Fund recurring co-design labs, clinics and sector pilots with joint targets and shared monitoring.
- Ensure representation beyond capital regions and major technology sectors.

Primary actors. Regional authorities with national policy support; VET and enterprise actors as delivery partners.

Timing. Map services within 6 months; pilot hubs during months 6–18; establish multiannual agreements thereafter.

Suggested indicators. Active referral agreements; response time; joint programmes; SMEs served; geographic and sector reach; repeat cooperation; reduced duplication reported by users.

R5. Translate the AI Act, GDPR and related rules into practical SME and VET guidance

Intended outcome: Organisations understand their responsibilities and can distinguish low-risk uses from activities requiring enhanced controls or specialist advice.

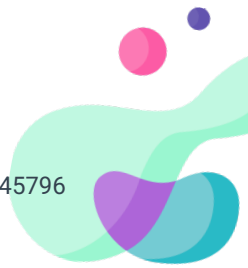
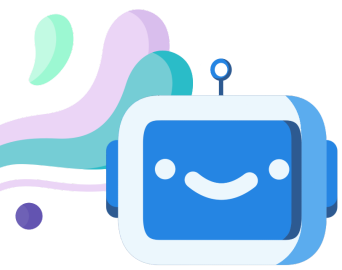
Why it matters. Regulatory uncertainty is a direct adoption barrier. General legal summaries are insufficient for trainers and small firms trying to decide what data may be used, what must be disclosed and who remains accountable.

Core actions.

- Publish plain-language, sector-based scenarios and checklists coordinated by competent authorities.
- Clarify AI literacy expectations, prohibited practices, transparency, high-risk categories, data protection, copyright and procurement in VET and SME contexts.
- Provide a referral or helpdesk route and align messages across authorities, chambers, EDIHs and VET providers.
- Update guidance when implementation rules, case law or supervisory practice change.

Primary actors. National AI competent authorities, data-protection authorities, education and enterprise ministries, sector regulators and trusted intermediaries.

Timing. Immediate and continuous, aligned with the AI Act implementation timeline.



Suggested indicators. Guidance reach and comprehension; helpdesk queries resolved; consistent cross-agency materials; adoption of minimum controls; reduction in self-reported regulatory uncertainty.

R6. Establish common monitoring for AI skills and adoption maturity

Intended outcome: Policy is guided by comparable evidence on trainer capacity, SME maturity, inclusion and outcomes.

Why it matters. Most countries lack direct data on VET professional AI competence, and adoption statistics use incompatible definitions. This prevents targeting and evaluation.

Core actions.

- Define a small common indicator set distinguishing awareness, experimentation, operational adoption and strategic adoption.
- Measure VET professional competence by role, sector and region using assessment evidence rather than self-confidence alone.
- Track training access, responsible-use controls, business outcomes and participation by enterprise size and inclusion group.
- Publish annual national or regional summaries and share anonymised lessons across Europe.

Primary actors. Eurostat, Cedefop and the European Commission for methodological coordination; national statistical, skills and VET authorities for implementation.

Timing. Indicator design within 12 months; baseline within 18 months; annual reporting thereafter.

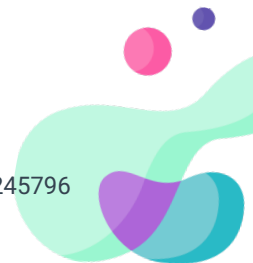
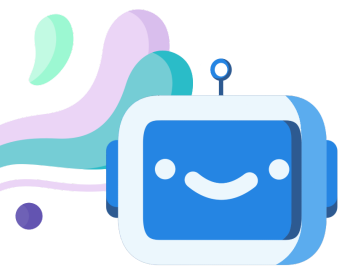
Suggested indicators. Countries reporting comparable measures; data completeness; policy or funding changes linked to evidence; reduction of regional and firm-size gaps over time.

R7. Make territorial and social inclusion an explicit AI policy target

Intended outcome: The benefits of AI-related learning and support are available beyond large firms, technology sectors and metropolitan regions.

Why it matters. National averages can improve while micro-firms, rural areas, low-qualified workers, older workers and under-represented groups fall further behind. Inclusion must be measured and financed.

Core actions.



- Set participation and outcome targets by enterprise size, region, sector and relevant demographic groups.
- Fund mobile, blended and local provision, accessibility adaptations and replacement or participation costs.
- Support local intermediaries to recruit and retain groups that do not respond to generic calls.
- Include bias, accessibility, job quality and worker participation within responsible-AI assessment.

Primary actors. EU, national and regional authorities, social partners, VET providers and local development organisations.

Timing. Apply immediately to programme design and review annually.

Suggested indicators. Participation, completion and outcomes by target group; geographic coverage; accessibility satisfaction; worker consultation; gap reduction compared with baseline.

R8. Fund open, sustainable and vendor-neutral learning infrastructure

Intended outcome: Public investment produces reusable resources and reduces dependence on one project or provider.

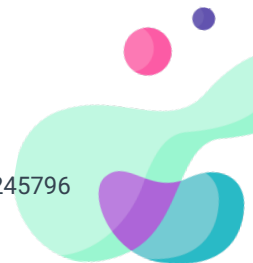
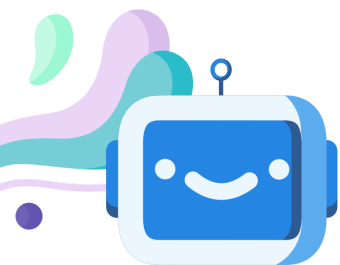
Why it matters. Focus groups want lasting access and affordable tools. AI content ages quickly, while vendor changes and subscription costs can undermine continuity.

Core actions.

- Require funded resources to include editable formats, clear licensing, accessibility, versioning, update ownership and archive rules where feasible.
- Support shared test environments and access to appropriate tools without making training dependent on one vendor.
- Provide multiannual maintenance funding linked to use and quality evidence, not only production of new materials.
- Connect national repositories and communities so validated cases can be localised rather than recreated.

Primary actors. Programme authorities, VET agencies, repositories, public procurement bodies and project partnerships.

Timing. Include in new calls immediately; transition existing high-value resources within 12–24 months.



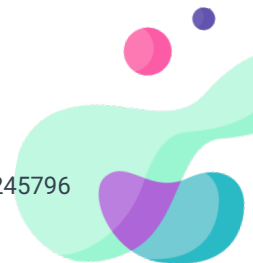
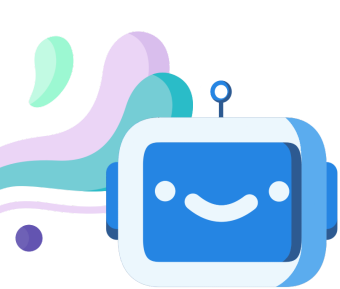
Suggested indicators. Resources with open/editable formats; on-time reviews; cross-border reuse; accessibility compliance; user activity after funding; vendor concentration and exit readiness.

F.3 Policy responsibility matrix

Recommendation	EU role	National/regional role	Delivery-system role	Horizon
R1 Competence framework	Common reference and peer learning	Map to qualifications and CPD	Validate relevance and apply	12–24 months
R2 Curricula and recognition	Micro-credential principles and funding	Update standards and recognition	Co-design and assess evidence	1–4 years
R3 SME funding package	Cohesion and programme incentives	Create simplified funding architecture	Recruit, diagnose, mentor and pilot	6–24 months
R4 Regional hubs	Support EDIH/VET cooperation	Enable and co-fund	Coordinate local pathway	6–36 months
R5 Regulatory guidance	Consistent AI Act communication	Authoritative national guidance	Translate into training and referrals	Immediate/ongoing
R6 Monitoring	Common definitions and comparability	Baseline and annual reporting	Collect implementation evidence	12–36 months
R7 Inclusion	Programme conditionality and targets	Territorial and group-specific funding	Accessible delivery and outreach	Immediate/ongoing
R8 Open infrastructure	Interoperability and reusable outputs	Repositories and maintenance finance	Own, update and localise resources	12–36 months

F.4 Country adaptation priorities

The common policy framework should be adapted through existing national assets. Austria can use its strong employer-linked VET system and institutions such as BFI and WIFI, with additional rural funding. Croatia can connect the modular reform, ASOO, CARNET, Regional



Centres of Competence and EDIHs. France can use OPCO, CCI, CFA, France Compétences and EDIH networks to reach non-ICT sectors and regions outside major hubs. Ireland should connect SOLAS and ETBs with LEOs, EDIHs, Skillnet and the emerging AI regulatory architecture. Italy should mobilise business associations, interprofessional funds, ITS Academies, DIHs/EDIHs and competence centres with a strong southern and rural dimension. Spain should combine a shared national competence baseline with autonomous-delivery through INTEF, FUNDAE, Chambers, EDIHs and reformed VET structures.

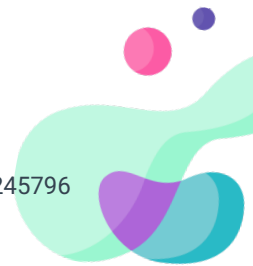
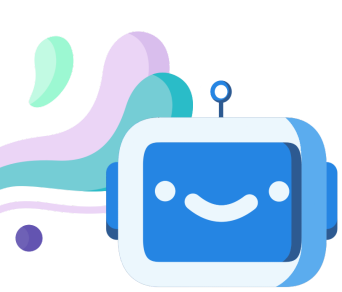
G. Summary and Key Recommendations

G.1 The recommended action package

- The evidence does not support a single isolated intervention. It supports an action package in which competence, enterprise support, governance, collaboration, inclusion and sustainability reinforce one another. The following ten actions should be treated as the minimum coherent package for B4B follow-up and policy dialogue.
- Validate a shared, role-based AI competence framework for VET professionals.
- Establish recognised and protected AI CPD and train-the-trainer pathways.
- Use an SME readiness and use-case scan as the standard entry point.
- Deliver short learning sprints with mentoring and measurable workplace outcomes.
- Provide a responsible-AI starter pack and authoritative referral routes.
- Create sector use-case libraries, co-design labs and AI-focused work-based learning.
- Institutionalise regional cooperation among VET, enterprise and innovation actors.
- Bundle simple funding, advice and pilot support for micro and small firms.
- Monitor competence, adoption maturity, inclusion, outcomes and sustainability with common definitions.
- Maintain open, versioned B4B resources and an active cross-country community of practice.

G.2 Phased implementation roadmap

Phase	Priority actions
0–6 months: establish	Confirm governance and owners; validate competence model; create baseline and readiness scan; prepare responsible-AI starter pack; map national referral ecosystems; select sectors and inclusion targets.

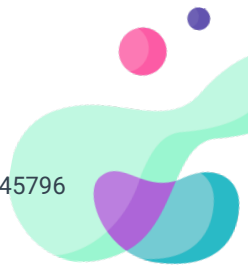
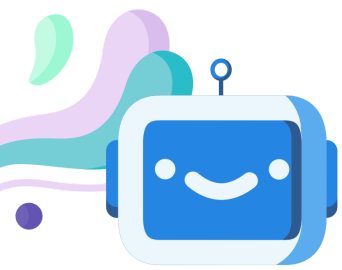


Phase	Priority actions
6–18 months: pilot	Train VET facilitators; run SME learning sprints, clinics and co-design labs; test vouchers or small grants; collect common indicators; revise materials from practice evidence.
18–36 months: embed	Recognise micro-credentials and CPD; integrate learning outcomes in curricula and WBL; establish recurring regional cooperation and funding; publish annual monitoring; maintain open resources.
Beyond 36 months: sustain	Continue communities and clinics; update guidance and cases; scale successful sector models; use monitoring to target gaps and inform new policy cycles.

G.3 Suggested monitoring framework

Dimension	Suggested indicators
Reach and inclusion	Trainers and SMEs participating; enterprise size; sector; region; gender and relevant inclusion groups; completion and dropout reasons.
Competence	Assessed change in AI fundamentals, business transformation, digital pedagogy, responsible AI and facilitation; application within three months.
Adoption maturity	Movement from awareness to experimentation, operational or strategic use; existence of an AI plan, inventory, owner and acceptable-use rules.
Responsible use	Data and risk checks completed; human oversight documented; output verification; procurement/vendor review; incidents and referrals.
Business and learning outcome	Time, quality, error, service or confidence measures selected for each use case; curriculum or WBL changes; decision to stop, adapt or scale.
Ecosystem performance	Active referral agreements; response times; joint activities; repeated cooperation; reduction in duplicated or confusing support.
Sustainability	Resources with owners and versions; reviews completed on schedule; community activity; reuse across countries; continued use after funding.

Measurement rule: Targets should be agreed after a baseline. The project should avoid presenting the number of people trained as the only success measure; application, responsible-use controls, inclusion and sustained outcomes are equally important.



G.4 Main policy message

Europe does not need VET providers to duplicate technology consultancies, nor does it need enterprise agencies to become education systems. It needs a coordinated pathway in which each actor contributes its comparative advantage. VET brings trusted learning, pedagogy and continuity; SMEs bring real processes and implementation needs; innovation hubs bring technical expertise; business organisations bring reach and context; authorities bring standards, funding and regulatory clarity. Policy should make this cooperation routine rather than dependent on individual projects.

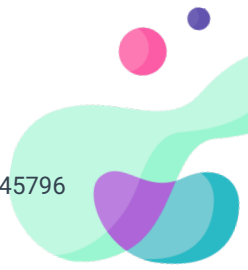
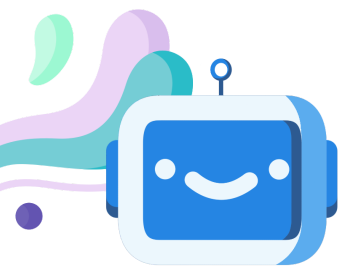
H. Conclusion

The B4B national research and focus groups show that artificial intelligence is already part of SME work, but usually in a fragmented and weakly governed form. The decisive challenge is to turn access to tools into organisational capability. That transition requires people who can interpret technology, connect it to business and learning needs, manage change, protect data, verify outputs and keep humans accountable. VET professionals are well placed to perform this intermediary role, but their competence and institutional connections must be strengthened.

The partnership countries offer complementary lessons. Austria demonstrates the value of strong employer-linked VET; Croatia shows how modular reform can create a timely entry point; France combines ambitious AI policy with a need to reach non-ICT and non-metropolitan SMEs; Ireland highlights the importance of including micro-businesses and integrating enterprise and FET networks; Italy shows the potential of business associations and innovation infrastructures alongside the urgency of territorial cohesion; and Spain shows how a strong digital competence and VET reform base can be extended into an AI-specific support role.

The report therefore recommends a common but adaptable European direction: role-based competence for VET professionals, practical SME adoption pathways, responsible-AI guidance, regional cooperation hubs, inclusive funding, recognised micro-learning, shared monitoring and durable open resources. Implemented together, these measures can help SMEs move from experimentation to confident and proportionate adoption while helping VET systems remain responsive to changing work.

Final recommendation: Use the B4B project not only to disseminate training materials, but to demonstrate and document a repeatable cooperation model linking VET professional development, SME implementation and policy learning.



Annex 1. Primary Evidence Sources

The following project documents constitute the primary evidence base. Full national reference lists are contained in the respective desk research reports.

BFI Burgenland (2026). B4B Desk Research and WP5 Task 2 Focus Group National Report – Austria.

Callidus ustanova za obrazovanje odraslih (2026). B4B Desk Research and WP5 Task 2 Focus Group National Report – Croatia.

Infinitivity Design Labs (2026). WP5 Task 2 Desk Research and Focus Group National Report – France.

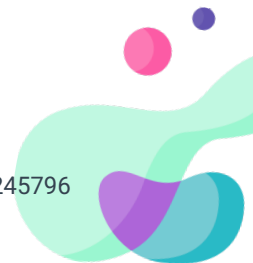
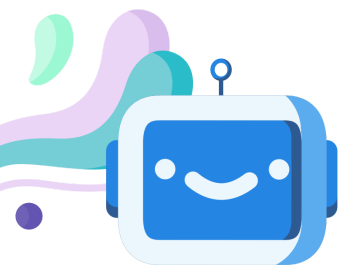
Future in Perspective Ltd (2026). WP5 Task 2 Desk Research and Focus Group National Report – Ireland.

CONFIMI Industria Basilicata (2026). WP5 Task 2 Desk Research and Focus Group National Report – Italy.

Academia Postal 3 Vigo S.L. (2026). WP5 Task 2 Desk Research and Focus Group National Report – Spain.

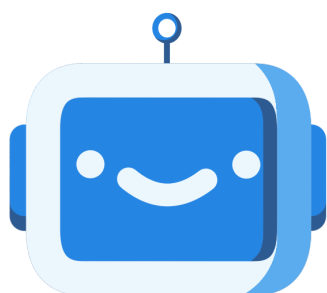
European reference framework

- European Parliament and Council (2024). Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act).
- European Commission (2020). European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.
- European Parliament and Council (2022). Decision (EU) 2022/2481 establishing the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030.
- Council of the European Union (2022). Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.
- European Commission, Joint Research Centre (2022). DigComp 2.2: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens.
- European Commission, Joint Research Centre (2017). European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators: DigCompEdu.
- Cedefop. National VET system and policy resources referenced in the six national desk research reports.



Annex 2. Delivery Checklist for B4B Partners

Area	Completion criterion
Governance	Named owner, partner roles, referral partners and review dates agreed.
Targeting	SME size, sector, region, learner/trainer profile and inclusion priorities defined.
Baseline	Trainer competence and SME maturity measured with definitions recorded.
Learning design	Short, practical, sector-relevant and role-based activities prepared.
Responsible AI	Data, confidentiality, oversight, verification, transparency and escalation controls included.
Application	Each participant produces evidence: a lesson, use-case plan, workflow, policy or reviewed pilot.
Support	Mentoring, clinic and referral routes remain available after the training event.
Monitoring	Reach, competence, application, inclusion, outcome and sustainability indicators collected.
Sustainability	Materials have owners, versions, licences, accessible formats and update dates.
Policy feedback	Recurring implementation barriers are summarised and returned to responsible authorities.



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