Project Title	**Boosting Smart Specialization and Encouraging Spin-offs in IT across Danube Region**
Call	**Danube Region Programme**
Project number	**DRP0200277**
Coordinator	**ZEDA**
Project duration	**30 months 0 days**
Project website	***https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/spinit***
Specific objective	**Setting up, implementing, and validating pilot measures in IT sector and smart technologies in DR**
Activity	**Next-gen Pilot Projects for Smart Specialization and IT**

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D.2.2.2: Selection of Pilot Projects

Deliverable D.1.2.1 Development of the Framework for knowledge exchange and benchmarking			
Due date of deliverable:	30.06.2025	Actual submission date:	03.03.2025
Organization:	**DEX Innovation Centre, DEXIC**	Author:	Adam Červenka
Status: Final (F) Draft (D) Revised draft (RV)	*F*	Dissemination level: Public (PU) Confidential, only for members of the consortium (CO)	*CO*

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1 Approach and Methodology

The methodology for pilot project selection and implementation within the SpinIT initiative is designed to ensure alignment with the project's overarching objectives, focusing on skills development, digital innovation, and smart specialization. While the Local Action Plans (LAPs) provided valuable insights into regional priorities, it became evident that some proposed pilot actions required further refinement to meet the strategic goals of the project.

To address this, a set of standardized requirements has been established, ensuring that all pilot projects align with the regional S3 strategies, EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), and SpinIT's focus areas. Rather than directly linking LAPs to pilot actions, each partner is encouraged to adapt and refine their pilot projects to meet these criteria. This approach is particularly necessary where pilot actions were not clearly defined or where engagement levels varied among territorial partners.

By implementing this structured methodology, we aim to maximize the impact, scalability, and transferability of pilot projects across the Danube Region, ensuring that they contribute meaningfully to digital transformation and innovation in the participating territories.

The selection of pilot projects for SpinIT is not just about meeting predefined criteria; it is about finding initiatives that inspire, innovate, and align with the project's broader goals of fostering smart specialization and bridging territorial disparities. Building on the knowledge from the **D.1.2.2 Best Practice Report**, this deliverable provides partners with a roadmap to identify projects that address local challenges while capitalizing on transnational synergies. The process involves asking key questions, drawing lessons from successful examples, and building a coherent strategy tailored to each region.

2 Framing the Selection: Where to Start?

When beginning the selection process, partners should consider: ***What are the pressing challenges in your region?*** Local Action Plans (LAPs) serve as the foundation, highlighting specific needs and opportunities. For instance, does your region lack digital infrastructure in agriculture? Or are SMEs in your area struggling with adopting Industry 4.0 technologies? By grounding the selection process in the realities of each region, partners ensure relevance and impact.

From there, partners should evaluate how the **defined Requirements** (D.2.2.1) shape their focus. For example, if the requirements emphasize the integration of AI in small businesses,

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how can this translate into actionable pilot ideas? What industries could benefit the most from such interventions? This step ensures alignment with SpinIT's objectives while maintaining flexibility to adapt to local contexts.

3 Drawing Inspiration from Best Practices

A powerful way to develop pilot ideas is to learn from projects that have already proven successful. For example, **PRAGMATIC**, a precision agriculture initiative, provides a compelling case study. This project integrated IoT, big data, and satellite imaging to help farmers optimize resource use and improve yields. Beyond its technical achievements, PRAGMATIC demonstrated the importance of creating accessible, user-friendly tools that directly address end-users' pain points. As a partner, ask yourself: *Could a similar approach work in our local industry?* If agriculture isn't relevant, what about other sectors where data-driven decision-making could drive efficiency, such as manufacturing or logistics?

Similarly, **LandSense** highlights the value of engaging communities in innovation. Its CropSupport app not only provided farmers with real-time crop monitoring tools but also involved them in contributing data to broader scientific research. This dual benefit of empowering users and advancing knowledge is a model for projects that seek to combine local impact with broader relevance. Partners should ask: *How can we engage end-users as active participants in our pilot projects?* What tools or platforms can facilitate this engagement?

4 Thinking Big: Where Could Innovation Lead?

When reviewing potential pilot ideas, it's essential to think beyond immediate goals. The **AI4SI initiative in Slovenia**, for example, shows how fostering collaboration between academia, policymakers, and businesses can create long-term change. By transferring AI research into practical applications, the project strengthened national competitiveness and paved the way for a cohesive AI strategy. This raises an important question: *Is there a technology or methodology that your region has yet to fully embrace?* Could your pilot project serve as the starting point for broader adoption?

Projects like **Ladies in AI**, an example from Croatia, which focused on equipping women with AI and entrepreneurial skills, also demonstrate the potential for addressing social inequalities through innovation. Partners might consider: *Are there underrepresented groups in your region that could benefit from targeted skills development?* How can technology act as an enabler for social inclusion and economic growth?

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5 Building a Strategy for Selection

The selection process is about balancing inspiration with practicality. Partners should approach this by asking:

1. *Does the pilot idea align with the strategic goals of SpinIT and S3 priorities?*
2. *Is it feasible within the resources and timelines available?*
3. *Does it offer clear and measurable outcomes, such as improved digital adoption or increased competitiveness?*

Partners should also think about scalability and adaptability. For instance, the **Danube Energy+ initiative**, which targeted young innovators to pioneer energy efficiency solutions, created a replicable model for engaging youth in sustainability. Could your pilot idea be scaled to other regions or industries? What structures would need to be in place for this to happen?

Finally, promotion and visibility are crucial. Ask: *How can the results of your pilot project be shared effectively?* Developing a communication plan that includes workshops, reports, and digital outreach ensures that the project's impact extends beyond its immediate participants.

5. 1 Encouraging Collaborative Creativity

Partners are encouraged to think collaboratively, sharing insights and brainstorming ideas that combine regional expertise with transnational perspectives. For example, combining lessons from **PRAGMATIC** and **LandSense** (both from Serbia) could result in a pilot project that applies IoT not just in agriculture but in water resource management, an equally critical area for many regions in the Danube.

Similarly, cross-sectoral collaboration, as seen in projects like **DanubePeerChains** (from Bosnia and Herzegovina), can inspire partners to look for synergies between industries. Could ICT solutions for manufacturing also address challenges in healthcare or education? Asking these types of questions encourages out-of-the-box thinking and maximizes the potential for innovation.

5. 2 Guiding Questions for Partners

To make the selection process more engaging, here's a set of guiding questions:

- *What specific regional challenges does your pilot project address?*
- *What tools or methodologies will you use, and are they accessible to all stakeholders?*

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- *What outcomes do you expect, and how will you measure success?*
- *How can your project be adapted for other regions or scaled for broader impact?*

By combining structured analysis with inspiration from proven initiatives, partners can select pilot projects that not only meet the requirements of D.2.2.2 but also embody the transformative spirit of the SpinIT project.

5. 3 Requirements of the selection based on the D.2.2.1

Pilot projects within the SpinIT initiative must focus on **skills development** in **ICT, AI, AR/VR, Industry 4.0, Edtech, and cross-sectoral collaboration**, ensuring alignment with **regional Smart Specialization Strategies (S3)** and the **EU-Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**. They must deliver measurable benefits, such as increased IT sector employment, and contribute to the long-term objectives of SpinIT.

All pilot projects must be **feasible, well-defined, and completed by June 2025**. They must engage **10 participants (including 3 SMEs)**, develop a **transferable curriculum/methodology**, and be **properly documented and promoted**. Pure application or platform development is not eligible—projects must emphasize education, innovation, and new methodologies.

Projects should integrate **emerging technologies** (AI, IoT, blockchain, big data) and **innovative approaches** (gamification, virtual hackathons) to enhance engagement and effectiveness. Additionally, they must ensure **scalability and transferability**, allowing successful initiatives to be replicated across different regions and sectors.

Practical part - Selection of Pilot projects

A) Based on the Local Action Plans (via D.2.1.4.)

SpinIT_LAP template_FINAL.docx

B) Based on the Best Practice reports

D.1.2.2. Best practice report_FINAL.pdf

C) Based on the Defined Requirements (via D.2.2.1)

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D2.2.1 Definition of requirements for pilot projects in smart specialization and IT sector

Annex 1: Drafting the Pilot Project

Pilot Project Template

1. Project Title

ICT Cross-Sector Traineeship and Mentorship Program

2. General Information

Region/Location: Prague, Czech Republic.
Lead Organization: Evropská rozvojová agentura, s. r. o. (European Development Agency, EUDA)
Key Stakeholders: XX, Charles University, Institute for Regional Development, PRINCEPS Advisory, Czech host organizations within the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs program, Automat, Sustainable Mobility Forum, EIT Urban Mobility - To be confirmed.

3. Impact of the Local Discovery Group workshops

The local workshops facilitated discussions with key stakeholders from the quadruple helix—industry, academia, public sector, and civil society—highlighting the increasing demand for hands-on ICT training, particularly in digitalization, AI, and smart technologies. These discussions aligned with EUDA's expertise as an SME providing tailored consultancy services to Czech entities in managing and implementing European projects across various programs, primarily in education, digitalization, upskilling, and ICT cross-sector collaboration. EUDA also supports entrepreneurial initiatives through the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs program and offers traineeship programs.

The workshops emphasized the necessity of cross-sector collaboration and the importance of providing students with practical exposure to real-world ICT project management and EU-funded innovation projects. Stakeholders who participated in the workshops expressed a strong interest in supporting the implementation of this pilot project, ensuring mentorship and internship opportunities to facilitate the integration of students into the professional landscape.

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4. Project Details

Objective:

To connect university students with professionals from businesses, universities, and NGOs through mentorship and traineeship programs, providing practical experience in digitalization, AI, and smart technologies. The project aims to bridge the skills gap and enhance students' employability in ICT-related fields while also introducing them to EU funding opportunities and project management practices.

Relevance to RIS3 (Smart Specialization Strategies):

The project aligns with regional RIS3 priorities by fostering digital transformation, upskilling future professionals, and supporting smart specialization in ICT. It contributes to the regional innovation ecosystem by strengthening collaborations between academia and industry.

5. Technical Information

Digital and Innovation Tools Used:

The program will leverage digital platforms for matchmaking (websites, databases), project management software, and online training modules to enhance learning experiences.

Trainees will gain hands-on experience in EU projects focused on digitalization, AI, smart technologies, and cross-sector ICT collaboration, including:

- 3D printing
- Smart manufacturing and automation
- AI-driven business optimization
- Digital transformation in SMEs and public sectors
- ICT and emerging technologies

Methodology:

The program is designed to provide students and young professionals with practical experience and skills in digital innovation and EU project work. As part of the program, the trainees will complete and internship and work directly inside the participating companies, universities, or NGOs for a set period, where they will actively contribute to real projects and gain practical

skills in a professional environment.

Preparation:

1. **Engage and secure participation** from businesses, universities, and NGOs interested in supporting digital skills development and receiving trainees.
2. **Match trainees with mentors** to ensure meaningful/personalized guidance and knowledge transfer.

Implementation:

3. **Place trainees directly within participating organizations** for hands-on traineeships, allowing them to work on real tasks and gain exposure to EU projects dealing with digitalization, AI, smart technologies, and cross-sector ICT collaboration (such as 3D printing, smart manufacturing, and AI-driven automation).

4. As part of the traineeship/mentorship program, we will also **deliver an introduction to EU funding and project management**, covering key topics such as:

    - The different types of EU grants (national vs. international)
    - How to identify the right EU programs and funding schemes
    - Understanding the full project lifecycle (from application to evaluation)
    - How to navigate the EU Funding & Tender Portal
    - How to complete application forms and plan project budgets
    - How to find and connect with project partners across Europe

5. **Evaluate outcomes**

At the end of the traineeships and trainings, we will review the experience to see what worked and what can be improved, by gathering feedback from:

This includes collecting feedback from:

- The trainees
- The mentors
- The participating organizations

The goal is to assess the impact of the program and explore how it could be improved, expanded, and repeated in the future.

Innovative Aspects:

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This project uniquely integrates real-world ICT challenges into traineeships and mentorships while also offering insights into EU project management. Unlike traditional internship programs, this initiative emphasizes cross-sector knowledge exchange, hands-on engagement in EU-funded innovation projects, and an introduction to EU funding mechanisms and proposal development.

6. Scope and Impact

Scope: **(**What specific industries, technologies, or sectors will be targeted?) The project targets university students and professionals across industries such as IT, healthcare, manufacturing, and public administration, focusing on digital transformation, AI adoption, and EU project development skills.

Expected Results: (What tangible outcomes will this pilot project deliver?)

- 10+ students matched with mentors.
- 10+ traineeships established with businesses, universities, and NGOs.
- Increased student employability and industry-relevant ICT skills development.
- Enhanced knowledge of EU funding opportunities and project management processes.
- Exposure to AI-driven solutions, smart manufacturing, and digital innovation methodologies.

Who Will Benefit?

- **University students** – Gain practical ICT skills, industry exposure, and EU project experience.
- **Businesses, NGOs, and academia** – Benefit from fresh talent, digital innovation, and strengthened industry-academia collaboration.
- **Policymakers** – Receive insights to shape digital skills and workforce strategies, enhancing regional competitiveness.

7. Timeline

March: Development Methodology/Curriculum and Stakeholder engagement
April: Final development and start of the implementation
May: Training and pilot implementation to be finalized
June: Final evaluation and reporting.

8. Promotion Strategies

Communication Channels:

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Project updates will be shared through EUDA's channels and the social media of participating stakeholders, including SPINIT social media channels. The initiative will be presented at local/regional workshops, relevant academic conferences, and networking events, including the Kick-off Meeting of the Interreg Danube project "Skills4Life. Additionally, reports and key insights will be published to support broader dissemination.

Engagement Activities:

- Organize two hands-on workshop sessions for students/trainees on EU funding and project management.
- Present results at at least one regional and European cross-sectoral event.

9. Scalability and Transferability

Potential for Expansion:
The program model can be adapted for other regions and industries active in digitalization, AI, smart technologies, ICT, manufacturing, sustainability, and EU cooperation.

Replication Opportunities:

- The methodology for mentorship and digital traineeship matchmaking can be replicated in other EU regions, fostering wider ICT talent development.
- Expansion through Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs and other EU-funded mobility programs can facilitate broader participation and impact.

10. Budget (Optional)

Provide an estimated budget and indicate funding sources.

The budget will primarily cover the hourly rates of the personnel involved, including costs related to **Project Management (PM)** and **Financial Management (FM)**.

External expertise?

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Instructions for Submission

Each Partner will prepare the presentation for the consortium to present the pilot idea, proposal, and implementation plan. This plan will be presented in the middle of March (via DOODLE voting results) and later it will be decided if all is planned well, eligible, and

possible to do.

Sample of PPTX: Pilot Presentation Template

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