Interreg Danube Region

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Back on Track

BACK ON TRACK EDUCATIONAL MODEL

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Project information

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Deliverable No.	O3.2
Deliverable Title	Tested Back on Track Educational Model that boosts the resilience of rural NEETs and develops their basic skills, empowering them to progress to further training and education
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Executive summary

The Back on Track Educational Model is a tested, resilience-centred framework designed to support the (re)integration of rural NEETs into education, vocational training, and employment pathways across the Danube Region.

Context and rationale

Rural NEETs face compounded structural disadvantages, including limited local labour markets, digital access gaps, reduced educational infrastructure, and higher exposure to socio-economic instability. In several regions, minority communities and socially marginalised groups are disproportionately represented among NEET populations. Disengagement from education is often not the result of individual deficits, but of accumulated structural barriers combined with diminished self-efficacy and disrupted learning routines.

The Back on Track model addresses both foundational skill gaps and resilience gaps. It recognises that re-engagement requires confidence-building, manageable learning structures, and relational support.

Model architecture

The educational model is built around seven competence modules (25 hours each), aligned with EQF Levels 3–5. Each module contains three topic blocks with five micro-learning units per block (15–20 minutes each). The design follows principles of:

- Modular EQF-aligned progression
- Scenario-based and real-life oriented learning
- Micro-learning to reduce cognitive overload
- Visible progress tracking and gamified elements
- Mentor-supported learning
- Integration of resilience-building components

The digital learning environment is Moodle-based, incorporating structured completion logic, XP and badge systems, and mobile-accessible design. However, piloting showed that

technical sophistication alone does not drive engagement. Clear structure, short units, and consistent mentoring proved more decisive than playful digital features.

Piloting and validation

The model was piloted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia between October 2025 and February 2026. A total of 51 learners participated, reflecting diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of digital competence.

Results demonstrated:

- Strong learner engagement and an overall completion rate above 80%
- Positive self-assessed improvement in targeted competences
- Increased confidence, improved self-organisation, and greater openness toward further training
- The critical importance of structured mentoring in reducing dropout

The piloting phase also identified challenges related to digital access, onboarding needs, outreach complexity, and localisation requirements. These insights informed targeted refinements of content structure, onboarding processes, mentoring guidance, and technical optimisation.

Transferability and scalability

The Back on Track model is designed for structured replication. Core principles — EQF alignment, micro-learning architecture, visible progression, resilience integration, and mentor-supported implementation — remain constant across contexts. At the same time, adaptation is possible in areas such as language localisation, outreach strategies, mentoring intensity, and module prioritisation.

Implementation can begin at small scale, with one mentor and a limited number of modules, and expand gradually. This makes the model accessible to organisations with varying levels of institutional capacity.

Pathways to further education and training

The model strengthens foundational competences in financial literacy, digital skills, communication, professional readiness, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and

English for work. By rebuilding confidence and stabilising learning routines, it reduces psychological barriers to re-entry into formal training systems.

Rather than directly replacing vocational training, the model functions as a preparatory bridge. It equips rural NEETs with the self-efficacy, transversal skills, and structured learning experience required to progress toward VET, further education, or employment.

The Back on Track Educational Model offers an evidence-based, low-threshold, and scalable solution for rural NEET re-engagement. By integrating digital learning with relational mentoring and resilience-oriented design, it responds to both structural and psychological barriers.

As rural regions across Europe continue to face youth outmigration, digital disparities, and socio-economic precarity, structured and adaptable re-engagement models are essential. Back on Track provides a tested framework that can be transferred, localised, and embedded within diverse rural ecosystems to support young people in moving forward. The model contributes to European objectives related to lifelong learning, youth employment, digital competence, and territorial cohesion, reinforcing the strategic relevance of rural re-engagement initiatives within the Danube Region.

1. Introduction

The Back on Track project, co-funded by the Interreg Danube Region Programme, was initiated in response to persistent socio-economic disparities affecting rural regions across the Danube basin. Many of these regions face structural challenges including limited educational infrastructure, narrow labour markets, digital access gaps, demographic decline, and the outmigration of young people. Within this context, rural young people who are **Not in Education, Employment, or Training** (NEET, Eurofund, 2022) represent a particularly vulnerable group.

The project brings together a transnational partnership of public authorities, regional development agencies, NGOs, educational institutions, and labour market actors from across the Danube Region. Its overarching objective is to foster the (re)integration of rural NEETs into education, training, and the labour market by strengthening their basic skills, resilience, and virtual mobility.

Output O3.2 presents the tested and refined Back on Track Educational Model. It builds upon the conceptual framework developed in O3.1 and incorporates insights from piloting activities conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia. Through iterative testing, feedback collection, and structured evaluation, the model has evolved from a curriculum concept into a validated and transferable implementation framework.

The development of the model was informed by needs assessments conducted within the project, which highlighted the heterogeneity of rural NEET populations and the structural nature of many disengagement processes. In several participating regions, minority communities and socially marginalised groups were disproportionately represented among NEET populations. Digital competence gaps, limited institutional outreach, and fragile self-efficacy were recurrent themes. These findings underscored that re-engagement requires more than technical skills training; it requires confidence-building, accessible learning structures, and sustained relational support.

The Back on Track Educational Model therefore integrates modular, EQF-aligned digital learning with resilience-oriented pedagogy and structured mentoring. It combines micro-learning units, scenario-based tasks, visible progression tracking, and low-threshold onboarding processes to reduce cognitive and psychological barriers to participation. At the same time, it emphasises contextual flexibility, enabling adaptation to diverse rural environments.

This document outlines the pedagogical foundations, structural components, piloting results, identified challenges, refinements, and transferability framework of the tested

model. It positions Back on Track not as a stand-alone e-learning course, but as a scalable and adaptable rural re-engagement framework that can be integrated into vocational training systems, youth support ecosystems, and community-based initiatives.

By linking foundational skill development with resilience-building and structured mentoring, the Back on Track Educational Model contributes to regional efforts aimed at strengthening social inclusion, enhancing training readiness, and reducing long-term disengagement among rural young people.

The Back on Track Educational Model is aligned with key European policy objectives related to social inclusion, lifelong learning, and youth employment. By strengthening foundational competences and supporting re-engagement pathways, the model contributes to the principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, particularly the right to **quality and inclusive education and training**. Its EQF-aligned structure supports transparency and potential integration into national qualification systems, while its focus on digital competence and resilience responds to priorities outlined in the **European Skills Agend**a and the **Digital Education Action Plan**. By targeting rural NEET populations, the model further contributes to territorial cohesion and the **reduction of regional disparities** — core objectives of the Interreg Danube Region Programme.

2. Rural NEETs and resilience gaps

Young people who are **Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET,** Eurofund, 2022**)** between 15-29 years old represent a diverse group whose pathways are shaped by complex interactions between individual experiences and structural conditions. In rural areas of the Danube Region, these dynamics are often intensified by territorial inequalities, limited opportunity structures, and socio-economic vulnerability. While for the Danube Region as a whole there are no numbers, in the EU27 in 2024 there were 11% of young people in NEET status (Eurostat, 2025). In the Danube Region, this number can be considered higher, with the highest numbers in Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (19% and 22% in 2024, respectively).

2.1 Who are rural NEETs?

The term *NEET* refers to young people who are **Not in Education, Employment, or Training.** It is widely used in European and international policy frameworks to describe a group considered at increased risk of long-term social and economic exclusion. While the term functions as a statistical category, it does not describe a homogeneous population. Rather, it encompasses young people with highly diverse educational backgrounds, life circumstances, aspirations, and support needs, as described by the Back on Track project. Understanding this **heterogeneity** is essential when designing educational interventions that aim to re-engage and empower them.

Rural NEETs face intensified risks.

When NEET status occurs in rural areas, the associated risks are often intensified. Rural regions across Europe frequently face structural challenges that shape the life trajectories of young people. Educational institutions, especially vocational education and training (VET) providers, may be geographically distant. Labour markets are often narrower and less diversified, offering limited entry-level opportunities. Public transport infrastructure may be weak or unreliable, and digital connectivity can be inconsistent. In many rural communities, young people observe the **outmigration of peers** who leave in search of education or employment elsewhere, reinforcing a perception that meaningful opportunities lie outside their immediate environment.

Becoming NEET is an accumulation of circumstances

In this context, becoming NEET is rarely the result of a single individual decision or deficit. Instead, it often reflects an accumulation of structural barriers combined with personal experiences of interruption, instability, or discouragement. Rural NEET status must therefore be understood as situated within broader socio-economic and territorial dynamics. Educational disengagement may follow school dropout, but it may also occur after unsuccessful transitions to upper secondary education, failed attempts to enter the labour market, or periods of temporary employment that did not lead to stability.

At the same time, rural NEETs represent a highly **heterogeneous** group. Some are **early school leavers** who struggled academically or socially within formal schooling systems. Others have completed lower or upper secondary education but **face limited employment opportunities locally**. Some young people are balancing **caregiving responsibilities** or early parenthood without adequate childcare support. Others may experience mental health challenges, low self-confidence, or social isolation. **Migrant youth or members of minority communities** may face discrimination and segregation, or additional linguistic or cultural barriers that further complicate their access to education and work. This diversity underscores the need for flexible and differentiated educational responses rather than standardised, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Recent analyses, including those by CEDEFOP (2025), further emphasise that NEETs differ not only in background characteristics but also in their "distance" from education and the labour market. The concept of NEET distance distinguishes between young people who are temporarily disengaged and relatively close to re-entering education or employment, and those who are more structurally detached due to long-term unemployment, early school leaving, social marginalisation, or multiple vulnerability factors. This distinction is particularly relevant in rural contexts, where prolonged inactivity, limited mobility, and restricted institutional outreach may increase the distance from formal systems over time. Recognising varying degrees of distance is essential for designing differentiated support measures that combine skill development, confidence-building, and mentoring according to individual starting points.

2.2 Structural and systemic barriers in the Danube Region

Importantly, contemporary research increasingly challenges deficit-oriented narratives that portray NEETs primarily as unmotivated or lacking ambition. Structural inequalities, regional disparities, and limited institutional outreach play a significant role in shaping young people's trajectories. In rural areas especially, limited exposure to diverse career pathways and reduced access to career guidance services can narrow perceived

possibilities. When young people repeatedly encounter blocked pathways or short-term opportunities that do not lead to progression, disengagement may emerge as a rational response to constrained options rather than as a lack of will.

Within the rural Danube Region, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. The Back on Track needs assessment and piloting activities confirmed that rural NEET populations in participating countries frequently include young people from minority and marginalised communities facing compounded disadvantages related to poverty, discrimination, and limited institutional trust.

Digital exclusion represents an additional structural barrier. In several rural areas, stable broadband access remains limited, and many young people rely primarily on basic smartphones. Beyond infrastructure gaps, digital competencies and confidence levels are often low. Limited experience with structured online learning environments, formal digital communication, and independent platform navigation can further restrict participation in education and training.

Housing is still an issue

Furthermore, education is not always the primary bottleneck in the lives of rural NEETs. Housing instability, financial insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, debt, or precarious employment conditions may represent more immediate challenges. For young people facing unstable accommodation or irregular income, participation in education may not appear as the most urgent priority. Educational disengagement is therefore often a consequence of broader socio-economic vulnerability rather than its root cause.

These structural and systemic factors underline that rural NEET status cannot be reduced to individual motivation or capability. It is embedded in territorial inequalities, limited-service ecosystems, and socio-economic precarity.

Danube Region Disparities

While structural challenges are shared across the Danube Region, their manifestations vary. In Austria, NEET rates are more concentrated in urban contexts and disproportionately affect young people with migrant backgrounds. In parts of Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, Roma communities remain significantly overrepresented among NEET populations due to persistent marginalisation and educational segregation. In Bulgaria, internal rural-to-urban migration reshapes youth trajectories, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, labour market mismatch results in a notable share of higher-educated young people remaining outside employment and training. These variations underline the importance of adaptable and context-sensitive implementation.

2.3 Resilience gaps

Beyond formal qualification gaps, many rural NEETs experience what may be described as resilience gaps. These include diminished self-efficacy, heightened learning anxiety, disrupted learning routines, and reduced trust in institutional systems. After periods of disengagement, re-entering structured education can feel intimidating or overwhelming. Even when programmes are available, psychological barriers may prevent participation. For this reason, interventions that focus solely on technical skills acquisition without addressing emotional and motivational dimensions are unlikely to achieve sustainable impact.

Transversal skill gaps are often intertwined with these resilience challenges. Difficulties in communication, digital literacy, financial management, professional skills or emotional self-regulation may restrict young people's ability to navigate both learning environments and labour markets effectively. Importantly, these gaps are not indicators of lack of potential. Rather, they reflect interrupted learning trajectories and limited access to supportive developmental environments. This also sets high levels of autonomous learning, complex assessment systems, or sustained abstract engagement in a more critical light.

Research increasingly emphasises that deficit-oriented narratives fail to capture the complexity of NEET experiences. When young people repeatedly encounter blocked pathways, short-term employment cycles, or inaccessible training systems, disengagement may represent a rational adaptation to constrained opportunities. Effective educational responses must therefore address both skill development and the emotional and motivational dimensions of re-engagement.

2.4 Strengths and regional assets

Despite structural challenges, rural communities across the Danube Region possess significant strengths. Many rural areas are characterised by strong interpersonal networks, intergenerational ties, and community solidarity. Young people frequently develop practical problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and resilience through navigating complex socio-economic environments with limited resources.

Community solidarity and problem solving are strengths

The Danube Region is also marked by rich cultural heritage, including traditional crafts, agricultural practices, local entrepreneurship models, and community-based knowledge transfer. These cultural assets contribute to identity formation and a sense of belonging,

which can serve as protective factors in young people's development. Heritage-based activities and local production systems may offer pathways for self-employment, micro-entrepreneurship, and sustainable rural innovation.

Recognising these strengths is essential. Educational models must not approach rural NEETs from a deficit perspective, but rather build upon existing capacities, lived experiences, and community assets.

2.5 Implications for educational design

Understanding who rural NEETs are therefore requires a multidimensional perspective. They are young people navigating structural constraints, diverse life circumstances, and often fragile confidence in their own capacities. Effective educational models must acknowledge this complexity. They must create accessible, low-threshold entry points while simultaneously offering structured progression. They must combine skills development with emotional safety and relational support. Above all, they must recognise rural NEETs not as passive recipients of support, but as capable individuals whose potential can be activated when appropriate opportunities, guidance, and encouragement are provided.

Taken together, the realities described above suggest that effective educational models for rural NEETs must be multidimensional. They must lower entry barriers while offering structured progression. They must function under conditions of limited digital access and heterogeneous educational backgrounds. They must address both transversal skill development and emotional resilience. They must integrate mentoring and trust-building elements to counteract institutional disengagement. And they must remain adaptable across diverse regional contexts within the Danube basin.

The Back on Track Educational Model was developed in response to these conditions. It is grounded in the recognition that rural NEETs are capable individuals navigating structural constraints. By combining modular skill development, mentor-supported learning, and resilience-building components within an accessible digital framework, the model seeks to create realistic and empowering pathways toward further training, education, and employment.

3. The Back on Track Educational Model

The Back on Track Educational Model was developed as a structured response to the realities outlined in Chapter. Recognising the multidimensional barriers faced by rural NEETs in the Danube Region, the model integrates pedagogical theory, empirical needs assessment, and iterative piloting into a coherent and transferable framework.

The development of the model followed a systematic and evidence-informed approach. Two core foundations guided its design: a review of established educational models and a comprehensive analysis of the specific needs of rural NEETs identified within the Back on Track project. By combining theoretical grounding with field-based insights, the resulting model seeks to balance accessibility, flexibility, resilience-building, and measurable skill development.

The detailed curricular structure and learning outcomes are documented in the Back on Track Curriculum (Annex 1), while this chapter focuses on the underlying educational model.

Model Development Approach

The design of the Back on Track Educational Model followed the Design Council's Double Diamond framework (2015), ensuring a structured and iterative development process.

During the **Discover** phase, research activities conducted under Activity A1.2 explored the experiences, barriers, motivations, and aspirations of rural NEETs across participating countries. These findings were complemented by a review of relevant educational approaches, including competency-based education, constructivist learning, blended learning, experiential learning, and non-formal education methodologies.

In the **Define** phase, key design requirements were identified. These included flexibility, personalisation, accessibility for learners with limited digital skills, low-threshold entry points, scalability across countries, and suitability for online delivery. At the same time, high demands for self-directed learning and cognitively complex assessment systems were identified as potential exclusion risks and therefore avoided.

During the **Develop** phase, seven modular online learning programmes were created and structured across EQF Levels 3–5. Personas derived from thematic and cluster analysis of the needs assessment data informed scenario design and learner pathways.

The **Deliver** phase consisted of piloting, mentor feedback, learner evaluation, and iterative refinement. The tested and improved components were consolidated into the Back on Track Educational Model presented in this document.

3.1 Pedagogical foundations

The Back on Track Educational Model does not adopt a single pedagogical doctrine. Instead, it integrates complementary elements from established educational approaches in order to address the specific needs of rural NEET learners.

From competency-based education, the model adopts a **clear outcome orientation** and progression logic. Learners advance through structured skill clusters **aligned to EQF Levels 3–5**, ensuring transparency and comparability across contexts.

Constructivist and experiential learning principles inform the **use of scenario-based tasks that connect learning content to real-life situations** relevant to rural environments. The model is particularly influenced by **social constructivist perspectives**, which emphasise that knowledge is constructed through interaction, dialogue, and contextualised experience rather than transmitted passively. Learners actively engage with problems, reflect on experiences, and apply knowledge in practical contexts.

Table 1: Overview of existing educational models and examples.

Educational Model	Description	Examples
Constructivist Model	Learners actively build knowledge by connecting new concepts to prior experiences through exploration, collaboration, and reflection	A project management course where learners plan a mock project, apply concepts like timelines and budgets, and discuss strategies and reflections as a team
Competency-Based Education (CBE)	Focuses on mastering specific skills at one's own pace, with learners progressing only after demonstrating proficiency	An IT support program where learners move on to advanced troubleshooting techniques only after mastering basic tasks like diagnosing hardware issues and software installations
Blended Learning Model	Combines online resources with in-person sessions, allowing students to engage digitally at their own pace and collaborate in face-to-face interactions.	A workplace training program where employees complete online modules on customer service principles and participate in in-person role-playing activities to practice handling difficult customer interactions

Experiential Learning	Focuses on learning through direct experience followed by reflection	A leadership development course where participants lead group activities, manage conflicts, and reflect on their effectiveness in facilitated discussions
Non-Formal Learning (Erasmus+)	Focuses on practical skills and soft skills development through voluntary, flexible activities often in community-based settings	A youth exchange program focused on intercultural communication, where participants engage in collaborative workshops, team-building exercises, and cultural presentations to develop communication and leadership skills

Elements of **blended learning and non-formal education** are reflected in the integration of digital self-paced modules with mentor-supported guidance and reflective and self-assessment exercises. This combination reduces isolation and strengthens accountability while preserving flexibility.

Differentiated instruction principles guide the design of short, modular learning units (15–20 minutes) that reduce cognitive overload and allow learners to progress at their own pace.

The model therefore combines outcome-orientation, experiential relevance, accessibility, and relational support within a coherent pedagogical framework.

3.2 Structural architecture of the programme

The Back on Track programme is organised into seven skill modules, each comprising 3 levels of each approximately **25 learning hours**. These modules address financial literacy, emotional intelligence and self-management, digital literacy, communication and collaboration, problem-solving and critical thinking, professional skills, and English for work. The levels go from beginner levels (e.g. EQF Level 3) to advanced levels (e.g. EQF 5)

Each module is divided into three thematic topic blocks. Within each block, five micro-learning units are designed to be completed within 15–20 minutes. This **modular structure allows for gradual progression, flexible scheduling, and reduced cognitive burden**. A detailed overview of all modules, topic blocks, learning units, learning outcomes, and EQF alignment is provided in Annex 1 (Back on Track Curriculum, Version 3.1.2).

Content is delivered through a mobile-first Moodle platform designed for accessibility under conditions of limited digital infrastructure. The platform structure mirrors the pedagogical logic, guiding learners through clearly sequenced yet adaptable learning pathways.

Persona-based design further strengthens learner relevance. Fictional but research-informed characters such as Amir, Mila, or Réka reflect diverse starting points and life situations, enabling learners to identify with realistic narratives and challenges. The full description of learner personas and their development logic is included in Annex 1 (Back on Track Curriculum and Persona Framework).

3.3 Resilience-Building Mechanisms

A defining feature of the Back on Track Educational Model is its explicit integration of resilience-building elements alongside skills development.

Emotional check-ins at the beginning of modules encourage learners to reflect on their current state and **normalise learning-related anxieties**. Scenario-based tasks simulate real-life challenges, allowing learners to rehearse problem-solving strategies in psychologically safe environments.

Micro-learning units are designed to create frequent success experiences, reinforcing **self-efficacy** and reducing fear of failure. **Guided reflection activities** help learners connect newly acquired skills to personal goals and future pathways.

Crucially, the model incorporates a **mentoring** layer. Mentors provide encouragement, clarification, and emotional support, bridging the gap between digital self-paced learning and relational trust-building. This blended structure addresses both skill gaps and resilience gaps identified in Chapter 2.

4. Piloting and testing

The piloting phase aimed to evaluate both the digital learning environment and the integrated mentoring approach, with particular attention to accessibility for rural NEETs, resilience-building effects, and progression potential toward further education or training.

4.1 Piloting design and implementation

The piloting was conducted over a **four-month period** between October 2025 and February 2026across five participating countries in the Danube Region, e.g. **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Serbia**, involving rural and semi-rural contexts with diverse socio-economic conditions. Participants were recruited through local partners, community organisations, and youth support structures. Special attention was given to reaching young people who were not actively connected to formal education or employment systems.

Across all countries, two modules were piloted at three EQF levels, resulting in six available course levels per language version. Of the 51 participants, 43 learners **completed at least one full course level**, representing a completion rate of **over 80%.** Furthermore, 11 learners, e.g. circa **20%**, **completed all six available course levels** in their respective language, demonstrating sustained engagement throughout the full piloting cycle.

Participants were recruited through local partners, community organisations, youth workers, and informal community networks. In all regions, proactive outreach was required, as many potential participants were not registered with employment services or actively seeking training opportunities. Trust-building through local actors proved essential, particularly in communities with limited institutional engagement. In some contexts, initial face-to-face meetings significantly increased enrolment and early retention. The final cohort consisted of 51 learners whose profiles reflected the heterogeneity described in Chapter 2, including young people from **marginalized communities**, individuals with **interrupted educational trajectories**, **discouraged youth experiencing labour market mismatch**, and participants with varying levels of digital competence.

The piloting followed a blended implementation model. Learners with more extensive formal education backgrounds (generally 12 or more years of schooling) primarily

engaged in self-paced module completion, while learners with fewer years of formal education (approximately 4–5 years) were supported through structured mentor-accompanied learning. Regular mentor interaction, feedback collection through surveys and reflection exercises, and continuous monitoring of engagement patterns were integral components of the process.

Mentors played a central role in supporting learners, clarifying tasks, encouraging persistence, and addressing emotional barriers to participation. Where mentor contact was less frequent, dropout rates increased, suggesting that the relational component of the model plays a decisive role in sustaining engagement. These findings confirm that digital micro-learning alone is insufficient for the target group; mentor-supported scaffolding remains essential.

The relatively high proportion of learners completing at least one full course level indicates that a modular, resilience-oriented approach can successfully re-engage young people who have previously disengaged from formal education systems. Even partial completion represented a meaningful step toward rebuilding learning routines and self-efficacy, aligning with the model's objective of gradual re-entry into structured education and training pathways.

4.2 Learner engagement and completion patterns

Overall, the piloting demonstrated that rural NEET learners are willing to engage with structured online learning when appropriate support mechanisms are in place. Completion patterns varied across countries and individual contexts, reflecting differing starting points, digital readiness levels, and socio-economic stability. During the piloting phase, 51 learners engaged with the programme, resulting in 150 course enrolments and 123 completed courses (completion rate 82%). 43 learners (**82%**) completed at least Level 1 of their module (representing 25 hours of learning). Several learners completed multiple levels, with some progressing through all three EQF-aligned levels within selected modules. 11 learners (20%) completed all 6 available course levels (see Table 1).

Table 1: Course participation and retention by country and level.

Country	Level	Courses Started	Courses Completed	Completion rate
Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA)	L1	24	24	**100%**
	L2	23	23	**100%**

Country	Level	Courses Started	Courses Completed	Completion rate
	L3	22	18	82%
Hungary (HU)	L1	20	18	**90%**
	L2	6	5	83%
	L3	2	1	50%
Romania (RO)	L1	30	17	57%
	L2	3	2	67%
	L3	1	0	0%
Serbia (RS)	L1	7	4	57%
	L2	4	4	**100%**
	L3	4	4	**100%**
Bulgaria (BG)	L1	4	3	75%
	L2	0	0	
	L3	0	0	
Total		**150**	**123**	**82%**

Completion rates were particularly high in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where **Level 1 and Level 2 achieved 100% retention.** In contrast, lower completion rates in higher levels in Romania and Hungary reflect contextual differences in learner readiness and socio-economic stability. These patterns validate the differentiated EQF-level structure of the model.

Completion patterns varied by country and level, reflecting differences in learner readiness and local socio-economic conditions. **Level 1 modules consistently showed the highest retention rates across countries, confirming their suitability as re-engagement tools for higher-distance NEETs. Higher-level modules (EQF 4–5) demonstrated stronger performance among learners with more stable educational backgrounds and stronger mentor support structures.** These findings validate the differentiated, level-based architecture of the Back on Track Educational Model.

Post-course self-assessment data shows strong perceived competence gains. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 81% of learners reported being able to apply new knowledge confidently; in Romania, this figure reached 89%. Even in more vulnerable contexts, such

as Hungary and Bulgaria, nearly half of participants reported confident application of newly acquired skills (see Table 2).

Table 2: Post-course learner self-assessment of competence gains (EQF-aligned modules)

Country	Not Yet	A Little	Yes, Confidently
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0%	19%	**81%**
Romania	2%	9%	**89%**
Hungary	10%	44%	**46%**
Serbia	3%	31%	**66%**
Bulgaria	0%	36%	**64%**

Learners reported immediate real-life application of acquired skills, including submitting job applications, preparing for interviews, creating CVs, organising household budgets, and supporting family members with digital tasks. Several participants initiated entrepreneurial planning processes. These behavioural indicators suggest that the model supports not only knowledge acquisition but practical activation.

Modules that incorporated scenario-based tasks and real-life relevance showed higher engagement rates compared to more abstract content. Short micro-learning units (15–20 minutes) were positively received, particularly by learners with disrupted attention spans or unstable daily routines.

The integration of mentoring proved to be a critical success factor. Learners consistently reported that mentor contact increased motivation, accountability, and confidence. In cases where mentor interaction was limited, dropout rates tended to increase, highlighting the importance of relational support within the model. Across partner countries, mentor reports confirm that relational support significantly influenced retention and completion. Where structured mentoring was consistently provided, dropout rates decreased and learners demonstrated stronger confidence development and sustained engagement.

4.3 Identified challenges

The piloting phase revealed structural and operational challenges that provided important insights for refining the model and strengthening its transferability.

Digital access limitations affected participation in certain rural contexts, particularly where stable broadband connections were unavailable. A significant proportion of learners relied exclusively on smartphones, and in some cases shared devices within households. These conditions reinforced the necessity of mobile-first design and technical simplicity.

Initial onboarding required more guidance than anticipated, especially for participants with low digital literacy or limited prior exposure to structured online learning environments. This highlighted the importance of structured introductory sessions and gradual familiarisation with platform navigation.

Cognitive overload emerged when learning units were perceived as too dense or text-heavy. Learners with interrupted educational trajectories demonstrated higher sensitivity to abstract or extended content. This insight informed subsequent adjustments to content volume, sequencing, and the strengthening of scenario-based elements.

Socio-economic instability, including housing insecurity, irregular employment, and caregiving responsibilities, affected some learners' consistency of participation. These findings confirm that engagement barriers are often structurally embedded rather than motivational in nature, and that flexibility and mentor responsiveness are essential components of effective re-engagement models.

4.4 Model refrainments following piloting

The piloting phase provides empirical validation of the Back on Track Educational Model as a feasible and context-sensitive framework for rural NEET populations in the Danube Region.

High course completion rates (82% overall), differentiated engagement across EQF levels, and strong self-reported competence gains across countries demonstrate that the model effectively balances accessibility and progression. The integration of modular micro-learning, scenario-based tasks, and structured mentoring proved particularly effective in sustaining engagement among learners with diverse starting points.

Importantly, the combined focus on skills development and resilience-building was validated as a coherent pedagogical approach. Participants reported increased confidence, improved self-organisation, and greater openness toward further training or employment pathways. Mentor observations confirmed visible growth in self-efficacy and learning stability.

While contextual adaptations remain necessary for implementation in different national settings, the core principles — modularity, differentiation, relational support, and mobile accessibility — demonstrated transferability across diverse rural environments.

The testing phase therefore confirms the Back on Track Educational Model as a scalable and adaptable framework capable of supporting re-engagement and progression among rural NEET populations.

4.5 Validation of the Model

The piloting phase confirmed that a modular, mentor-supported, resilience-oriented educational model is both feasible and relevant for rural NEET populations in the Danube Region. While contextual adaptations remain necessary for implementation in different national settings, the core principles demonstrated transferability across diverse rural environments.

Importantly, the integration of skill development and resilience-building was validated as a combined approach. Learners not only developed practical competencies but also reported increased confidence, improved self-organisation, and greater openness toward further education or training pathways.

The testing phase therefore provides empirical support for the Back on Track Educational Model as a scalable and adaptable framework designed to re-engage rural NEETs and support their progression.

4.6 The digital learning environment as behavioural and pedagogical innovation

The Back on Track Educational Model is implemented through a mobile-first Moodle-based learning platform (http://en.moodle.backontrack-project.eu/), which was intentionally designed not merely as a content repository but as a structured behavioural learning environment.

The platform architecture mirrors the pedagogical logic of the model. Modules are organised into clearly sequenced EQF levels, topic blocks, and short micro-learning units (15–20 minutes), allowing learners to experience visible and manageable progression. This structure was particularly important for rural NEET learners who may experience learning anxiety or low academic self-confidence.

A central innovation of the platform lies in its emphasis on clear progress tracking and immediate feedback. Learners can continuously monitor their advancement through visual completion indicators, level progression markers, and accumulated achievements. This transparency reinforces self-efficacy and reduces uncertainty regarding learning expectations.

Platform features

Interactive elements were prioritised over passive reading. H5P-based activities, quizzes, scenario simulations, and reflective prompts create active engagement with content. Immediate feedback mechanisms allow learners to correct misunderstandings in real time, transforming assessment into a learning-support tool rather than an evaluative barrier.

Gamification elements were selectively integrated to enhance motivation without trivialising the learning process. The Level Up plugin provides structured progression visibility, while badges and certificates recognise milestones and module completion. These features support incremental success experiences, which are particularly important for learners re-entering structured education after periods of disengagement.

Storytelling approaches and persona-based narratives further contextualise learning within realistic life situations. Rather than abstract instruction, learners engage with relatable scenarios reflecting rural contexts, employment challenges, financial decisions, and interpersonal dynamics.

Surveys and embedded reflection tools allow both learners and mentors to monitor progress and emotional engagement. This continuous feedback loop supports adaptive mentoring and iterative improvement of learning pathways.

Importantly, the platform design prioritised simplicity and usability under conditions of limited digital infrastructure. Mobile optimisation, low-bandwidth functionality, and intuitive navigation were essential to ensure accessibility across diverse rural environments.

The digital learning environment therefore functions not only as a technical delivery system but as a structured motivational and resilience-support framework embedded within the broader Back on Track Educational Model.

Design recommendations

While the platform was designed according to a mobile-first principle to accommodate anticipated rural connectivity limitations, piloting results revealed that a significant proportion of learners accessed the modules via desktop or laptop computers. In many cases, this was facilitated through mentor-organised learning sessions in community centres or partner institutions. This finding suggests that while mobile accessibility

remains important for flexibility, structured access points supported by mentors can significantly stabilise participation.

Evaluation feedback further indicated that **technical reliability, clear completion tracking, and concise, real-life storytelling elements** were more influential for sustained engagement than highly playful or overly gamified features. Learners responded particularly positively to **transparent progress indicators, short and manageable learning units, and scenario-based narratives reflecting real-life challenges**. In contrast, purely playful or entertainment-oriented digital features were perceived as secondary to clarity, relevance, and practical usefulness.

These insights reinforce the model's emphasis on functional clarity and structured progression over technological novelty. The digital environment therefore prioritises usability, transparency, and real-life applicability as core engagement drivers.

Screenshots of the platform interface are provided below for illustrative purposes. Detailed technical specifications are included in Annex 3.

4.7 Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial intelligence tools were selectively used during the development phase to support drafting, structuring of content, and language refinement. In particular, AI-assisted tools contributed to **maintaining a consistent tone across modules, simplifying complex formulations, and ensuring that scenarios were written in a clear, practical, and accessible style** ready for VET application and suitable for learners with diverse educational backgrounds. This supported the creation of short, action-oriented learning units aligned with the resilience-oriented and micro-learning approach of the model.

In addition, customised AI-supported writing assistants (internal chatbots) were developed and used by the project team to support course writing and scenario development. These tools were trained on the pedagogical principles and structural logic of the Back on Track model, helping authors generate consistent, practice-oriented examples while reducing drafting time. The chatbots functioned exclusively as internal co-writing tools and were not deployed as automated learner-facing instruction.

All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, contextualised, and pedagogically validated by the project consortium to ensure alignment with learner needs, cultural context, and educational objectives.

During piloting and feedback collection, particular attention was given to learners' perceptions of AI-generated content formats. Evaluation findings indicated that rural NEET learners responded more positively to authentic, mentor-driven communication

than to highly artificial or overly automated presentation styles. Video avatars and visibly generic AI-generated formats were perceived as impersonal and, in some cases, as lacking credibility or seriousness. Learners expressed a preference for **clear, human-centred explanations and relatable storytelling** rather than technology-heavy visualisation.

As a result, the Back on Track Educational Model deliberately prioritises authenticity, clarity, and human relational support over automated or avatar-based instruction. AI serves as a background support tool in content development, while mentoring, dialogue, and contextual adaptation remain central to the learning process.

This approach reflects a responsible and learner-centred integration of AI: technology enhances consistency and efficiency, but **educational integrity and relational trust remain foundational**.

5. Transferability Framework

The Back on Track Educational Model was designed not only as a project-based intervention but as a transferable framework adaptable to diverse rural contexts across the Danube Region and beyond. The piloting phase demonstrated that while contextual conditions vary significantly between countries, the core pedagogical and structural principles of the model remain robust when appropriately supported.

Transferability does not imply uniform replication. Rather, successful implementation requires a balance between fidelity to core principles and flexibility in contextual adaptation. The following framework outlines essential components, adaptable parameters, and recommended implementation phases to support effective replication.

5.1 Core principles for replication

The following elements constitute the foundational architecture of the Back on Track Educational Model and should remain intact in any replication (Figure 1). These principles form the pedagogical identity of the model and are critical to its effectiveness.

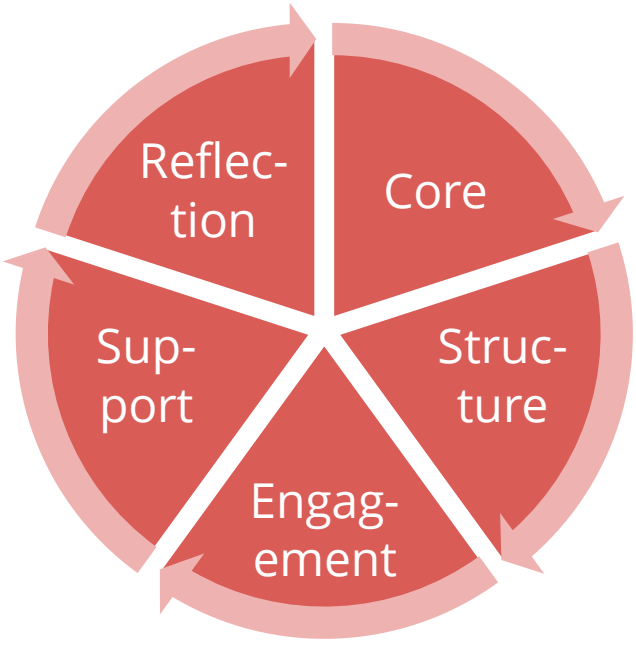

Figure 1: Core principles for replication.

1. **Modular EQF-aligned structure**
   The programme is organised into clearly structured modules aligned with EQF Levels 3–5, enabling differentiated entry points and progression pathways. This differentiation is essential for addressing varying degrees of NEET distance.
2. **Micro-learning units (15–20 minutes)**
   Short, manageable learning units reduce cognitive overload and support learners with interrupted educational trajectories.
3. **Visible progression and clear completion tracking**
   Transparent progress indicators, structured sequencing, and immediate feedback mechanisms reinforce self-efficacy and reduce uncertainty.
   Scenario-based, real-life orientation
   Learning content is embedded in practical, context-relevant scenarios rather than abstract theory, strengthening applicability and motivation.
4. **Mentor-supported learning**
   Relational scaffolding is a central pillar of the model. Digital learning is complemented by structured mentoring to sustain engagement and address emotional barriers.
5. **Integration of resilience-building**
   Emotional check-ins, reflection tasks, incremental success experiences, and guided support are embedded within skill development.

5.2 Contextual adaptation parameters

While the core pedagogical principles of the Back on Track Educational Model should remain stable, the piloting phase demonstrated that effective implementation requires thoughtful contextual adaptation. The following parameters reflect key lessons learned during cross-country testing.

1. Adaptation to NEET distance and readiness level

One of the most significant findings of the piloting phase was the variation in learner readiness across countries and groups. Level 1 modules proved particularly suitable for higher-distance NEETs requiring stabilisation and re-engagement, while Levels 2 and 3 were more successfully completed by activation-ready learners with stronger educational backgrounds.

Future implementers are therefore encouraged to:

- Prioritise Level 1 modules where confidence rebuilding is required.
- Avoid overwhelming highly disengaged learners with higher-level content too early.
- Consider staggered progression pathways rather than parallel multi-level implementation.

This differentiation is essential for maintaining realistic expectations and preventing early dropout.

2. Mentoring intensity and format

The mentoring component proved to be the most decisive engagement stabiliser during piloting. Detailed findings regarding mentoring practices and outcomes are documented in the Back on Track Mentoring Framework. Across countries, mentoring consistently functioned as the key mechanism for sustaining participation, clarifying expectations, and supporting emotional regulation.

Piloting experience demonstrated that mentoring should not be understood as a uniform format. Rather, a combination of individual and group-based mentoring proved most effective. One-to-one sessions allowed mentors to address personal barriers, build trust, and provide tailored guidance. Small group sessions created opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange, shared reflection, and mutual encouragement. The balance between these formats depended on learner vulnerability and cohort composition.

In contexts involving highly vulnerable or high-distance NEETs, more intensive and structured mentor accompaniment was required, particularly during onboarding and early module engagement. Regular check-ins during the first weeks were critical to stabilising participation and reducing early dropout risk. In contrast, activation-ready learners with stronger educational backgrounds were able to progress with lighter-touch mentoring and periodic guidance.

Hybrid mentoring formats (combining online and in-person meetings) proved feasible primarily for Level 2 and Level 3 learners. For Level 1 participants, especially those with low digital confidence or high vulnerability, in-person contact during onboarding and early phases significantly improved retention. Fully digital mentoring without prior relational trust-building was less effective for high-distance learners.

Key adaptation considerations include:

- Ensuring availability of both individual mentoring sessions and structured group reflection formats
- Intensifying onboarding support during the first 2–3 weeks

- Taining mentors in platform access troubleshooting and supporting learners when they have issues with access, loading or following the course
- Adjusting mentoring intensity according to NEET distance and learner readiness

Reducing mentoring intensity without compensatory relational structures significantly increases dropout risk. The piloting phase clearly indicates that mentor-supported scaffolding is not an optional add-on but a structural requirement for effective implementation.

3. Digital access and learning mobility

Although the platform was designed according to a mobile-first principle to accommodate anticipated rural connectivity limitations, piloting revealed that many learners accessed modules via desktop computers in mentor-organised environments. This demonstrates that device type itself is less decisive than the availability of structured access, technical support, and relational guidance.

In several contexts, implementing organisations actively provided digital infrastructure to reduce participation barriers. Learners were supported through access to community-based computer labs, shared devices in partner institutions, or facilitated Wi-Fi connectivity. These measures significantly stabilised participation among learners who otherwise lacked reliable home access.

The piloting phase therefore underlined that digital inclusion must be understood not only as platform design but as ecosystem provision. Successful implementation may require active infrastructural support rather than assuming individual device ownership.

Local adaptation may therefore include:

- Community-based computer lab sessions or supervised learning spaces
- Provision of shared devices or temporary Wi-Fi access where needed
- Structured digital literacy mini-sessions at module start

Across contexts, technical simplicity, reliable functionality, and clear completion tracking proved more influential for sustained engagement than highly playful or entertainment-oriented digital features. Learners prioritised clarity, usability, and real-life relevance over technological novelty.

4. Outreach and trust building

Piloting across partner countries confirmed that outreach represents one of the most critical and challenging components of successful implementation. In several regions,

recruitment required proactive, relationship-based engagement rather than passive online advertising or open calls.

Many rural NEETs are not registered with employment services, are not actively seeking training opportunities, or may express scepticism toward educational programmes. Common initial reactions included concerns such as "*I need income, not education*" or resistance toward digital trainings or institutional programmes as a whole perceived as overly digital or abstract. Overcoming these barriers required active communication of the programme's practical value and realistic benefits.

Organisations implementing the Back on Track model must therefore approach outreach not as a one-time announcement but as a sustained trust-building process. Stable relational entry points are essential. This includes identifying who in the local ecosystem is already trusted by young people — youth workers, community mediators, social workers, NGOs, local associations — and actively collaborating with them.

Key adaptation considerations include:

- Actively promoting and clearly explaining the practical relevance of the programme (e.g., job readiness, finding and accessing available opportunities, financial skills, digital competences).
- Using direct, personal invitations rather than relying solely on open calls or online promotion.
- Organising information sessions in trusted community spaces rather than institutional environments only.
- Establishing stable outreach roles with clearly defined responsibilities and resources.
- Clarifying organisational capacity: who conducts outreach, who provides mentoring, and how implementation events and staff time are financed.

Outreach must be understood as an ongoing support structure rather than a pre-launch activity. Trust-building, follow-up contact, and reassurance during early participation significantly increase enrolment stability.

Without relational entry points and institutional commitment to outreach infrastructure, digital learning opportunities may remain underutilised, regardless of pedagogical quality.

5. Module priorisation and cognitive load

The piloting phase demonstrated that while the full seven-module structure provides comprehensive coverage of essential skill domains, realistic implementation requires

strategic prioritisation. The programme is intentionally broad in order to address financial literacy, digital skills, emotional intelligence, communication, professional readiness, problem-solving, and English for work in an integrated manner. However, deploying all modules simultaneously may exceed the capacity of smaller organisations or overwhelm learners with limited stability.

It is therefore recommended that implementers begin with one or two priority modules aligned with local needs and gradually expand. A sequenced, phased approach proved more effective than broad parallel deployment.

An important structural characteristic of the model is intentional thematic overlap between modules. For example:

- Professional Skills modules integrate workplace communication elements that complement the Communication and Collaboration module.
- Emotional regulation and resilience-building elements are embedded across all modules, not limited to the Emotional Intelligence module.
- Financial decision-making scenarios may intersect with problem-solving and digital skills components.

This transversal integration strengthens coherence but requires awareness during implementation. Organisations should avoid treating modules as isolated silos and instead understand them as interconnected components of a holistic resilience-building framework.

Lessons learned from piloting include:

- Start with 1–2 core modules before expanding.
- Avoid simultaneous multi-module overload.
- Sequence emotionally demanding modules carefully.
- Maintain short, clearly framed learning units.
- Plan realistic timelines based on learner stability and organisational capacity.

“Less but structured” proved more effective than broad parallel deployment.

6. Linguistic and contextual localisation

Localisation of the Back on Track Educational Model requires more than literal translation. The piloting phase demonstrated that youth-appropriate adaptation involves careful attention to tone, clarity, and progressive language complexity.

Effective localisation includes:

- Use of clear, concise language structures, especially for Level 1 modules.
- Gradual increase in conceptual and linguistic complexity across EQF levels.
- Avoidance of youth slang, while maintaining accessible and direct phrasing.
- Adaptation of currencies, price levels, taxation examples, and financial scenarios to local economic realities.
- Adjustment of digital tool references according to regional relevance (e.g., map tools, banking apps, e-government platforms).
- Replacement of city names, labour market examples, and vocational pathways with locally recognisable references.

In rural or less digitalised regions, certain examples (e.g., advanced digital mapping tools or complex online services) may require contextual adjustment to remain meaningful. Conversely, in more urbanised regions, additional digital depth may be appropriate.

Localisation is therefore both linguistic and socio-economic. It requires collaboration between content experts and local practitioners to ensure relevance without compromising structural coherence.

6. Cultural and Labour Market Contextualisation

While the model structure is transferable, scenario examples benefit from local adaptation. References to employment pathways, vocational systems, and common regional challenges increase perceived relevance.

Localisation may involve:

- Adjusting examples to local job markets.
- Integrating region-specific entrepreneurship cases.
- Including culturally familiar scenarios.
- Translating not only language but context.

Relevance strengthens motivation and ownership.

5.3 Recommended implementation phases

Successful replication benefits from a phased implementation approach that integrates preparation, structured rollout, and continuous reflection (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Recommended implementation phases

Phase 1 – Local needs mapping

- Analyse target group characteristics and NEET distance levels
- Assess digital infrastructure and access conditions
- Identify relevant stakeholders (youth services, VET providers, NGOs)

Phase 2 – Partnership and outreach setup

- Establish mentor roles and responsibilities
- Develop trust-based outreach strategies
- Conduct introductory information sessions for potential participants

Phase 3 – Platform localisation and onboarding

- Translate and contextualise modules where necessary
- Train mentors in platform navigation and resilience-oriented facilitation
- Conduct structured learner onboarding sessions, including digital literacy orientation where needed

Phase 4 – Guided implementation

- Launch modules with clear timelines
- Maintain regular mentor contact
- Monitor engagement and completion patterns

Phase 5 – Reflection and iterative adjustment

- Collect learner and mentor feedback
- Identify dropout causes and engagement barriers

- Adjust pacing, mentoring intensity, module prioritisation, or outreach strategies based on observed engagement patterns

This phased approach supports structured adaptation while maintaining core design integrity.

5.4 Minimum Conditions for Effective Implementation

Based on piloting experience, several **minimum enabling conditions i**ncrease the likelihood of successful implementation. These conditions are not intended as rigid barriers to entry, but as supportive guidelines for realistic planning.

Recommended baseline conditions include:

- At least one trained mentor responsible for a small learner group
- Access to digital devices (individual or shared) and stable internet connectivity
- Structured onboarding for learners with low digital literacy
- Institutional commitment for a minimum implementation period of 3–4 months
- Ongoing monitoring and feedback mechanisms
- Availability of 1 Module in a language your learners speak (BS, BG, CZ, DE, HU, RO, SR, SL, SK) (see https://en.moodle.backontrack-project.eu for details)

At first glance, these requirements may appear resource-intensive. However, piloting demonstrated that **implementation can begin at a modest scale**. A small learner cohort, one trained mentor, and structured access to shared digital infrastructure are sufficient to launch a first cycle.

Organisations are encouraged to start with a limited number of modules, focus on one clearly defined target group, and gradually expand as internal capacity grows. Incremental implementation, rather than full-scale deployment, proved both realistic and sustainable during testing.

Where these baseline conditions are met — even at small scale — the likelihood of sustained engagement, resilience-building, and progression increases significantly.

5.5 Access, sustainability and open use framework

The Back on Track Educational Model has been developed with long-term accessibility and replicability in mind. The digital learning platform remains accessible via http://en.moodle.backontrack-project.eu/, allowing institutions, youth organisations, and educational providers to explore and utilise the available modules.

The full curriculum overview, including detailed module structures, EQF alignment, and learner personas, is documented in the Back on Track Curriculum (Annex 1). In addition, the Mentor Guide provides structured guidance for facilitating resilience-oriented, mentor-supported learning processes. The Moodle Guide supports technical replication and adaptation of the platform architecture in alternative institutional contexts.

Together, these resources form a transferable implementation package consisting of:

- The digital learning platform (course content and structure)
- The curriculum framework (learning outcomes and EQF mapping)
- The Mentor Guide (pedagogical facilitation framework)
- The Moodle Guide (technical setup and platform replication instructions)

Organisations wishing to adopt or adapt the model are encouraged to integrate the modules within existing youth support ecosystems, vocational training pathways, or community-based education programmes. The modular structure allows partial implementation, prioritisation of selected skill areas, or full programme deployment depending on local needs.

Long-term sustainability is supported through the model's compatibility with standard Moodle installations, enabling replication without proprietary software dependencies. The open and modular design facilitates localisation, translation, and contextual adaptation while maintaining core pedagogical principles. The consortium partners have agreed to maintain platform accessibility for a minimum period of 5 years following project completion.

6 Pathways to further education and training

The Back on Track Educational Model was designed not only to deliver modular skill development but to function as a re-engagement mechanism that supports rural NEETs in progressing toward further education, vocational training, or employment pathways. The piloting phase confirmed that progression does not begin with formal enrolment in VET programmes, but with stabilisation, confidence-building, and the restoration of learning routines.

The Back on Track Educational Model follows a structured impact logic linking resilience-building with training readiness and progression pathways. The diagram below illustrates the transition logic underpinning the model (see Figure 3).

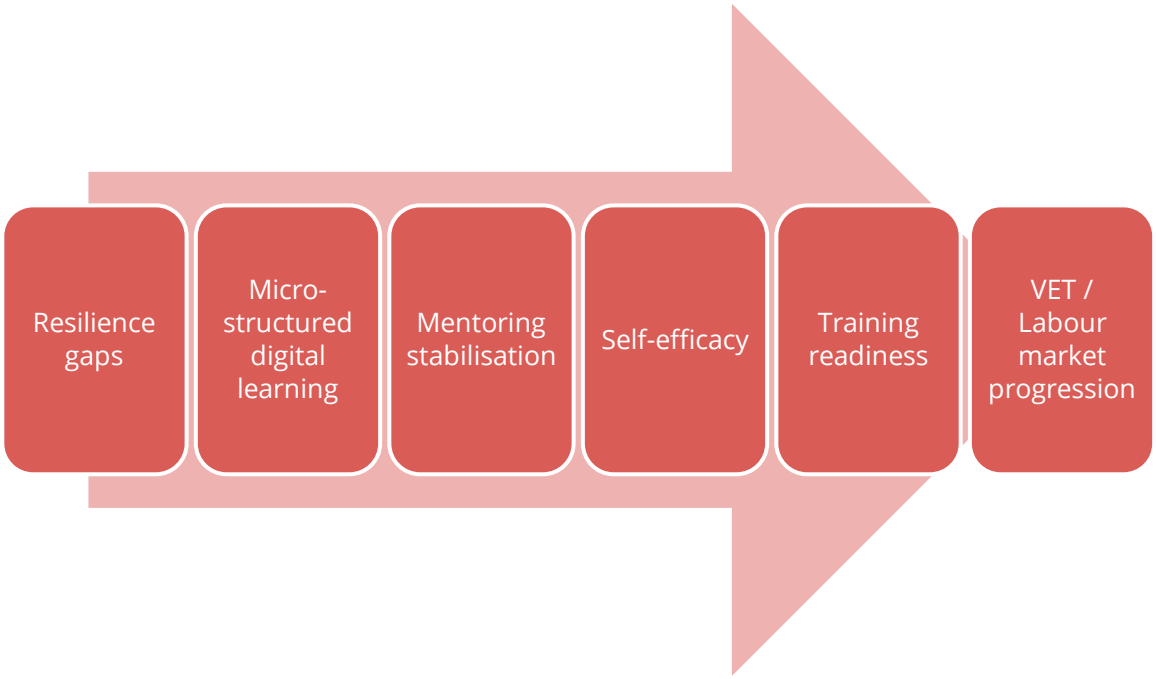

Figure 3: Transition Logic of the Back on Track Educational Model

The model supports this progression through five interconnected mechanisms.

6.1 Rebuilding confidence through structured success

Many rural NEETs experience diminished academic self-confidence due to previous school dropout, unsuccessful transitions, or repeated exposure to structural barriers. The micro-learning architecture of the Back on Track model addresses this challenge directly.

Short, manageable learning units, visible progress tracking, and immediate feedback create incremental success experiences. Learners are able to complete clearly defined tasks within limited time frames, reducing anxiety and avoiding cognitive overload. The accumulation of visible achievements — through completion indicators, badges, and certificates — reinforces a sense of capability.

Piloting results demonstrated that learners reported increased confidence in their ability to complete structured tasks, particularly at Level 1. This confidence-building effect represents a necessary precondition for re-entry into more demanding training environments.

6.2 Strengthening foundational skills for training readiness

The model targets foundational competences that function as enablers for further education and vocational training. These include:

- Financial literacy and personal budgeting
- Digital navigation and online communication
- Professional communication and workplace behaviour
- Problem-solving and structured thinking
- Emotional regulation and stress management
- Basic English for work-related contexts

Rather than focusing narrowly on technical qualifications, the programme addresses transversal competences that increase training readiness. By strengthening these foundational skills, learners are better equipped to navigate application procedures, training requirements, and workplace expectations.

The EQF-aligned structure further supports progression by familiarising learners with level-based competency frameworks, reducing uncertainty about formal training pathways.

6.3 Strengthening self-efficacy and learning stability

Self-efficacy — the belief in one's capacity to act effectively — is a decisive factor in educational progression. The integration of resilience-building components within each module supports emotional regulation, reflection, and self-organisation.

Through guided reflection exercises, scenario-based learning, and mentor dialogue, learners gradually rebuild trust in structured learning environments. Regular mentor contact provides relational reassurance and reinforces persistence during moments of frustration or doubt.

Piloting feedback indicated improvements in self-organisation, time management, and openness toward further education among participants. These shifts represent early but critical indicators of sustainable progression.

6.4 Supporting career orientation and progress pathways

The Back on Track Educational Model integrates career orientation elements across multiple modules. Learners engage with structured reflection tasks, workplace communication scenarios, financial planning exercises, and practical employability skills that increase awareness of vocational pathways and labour market realities.

The modular EQF-aligned structure familiarises learners with level-based progression systems, reducing uncertainty about formal training frameworks. By gradually rebuilding learning routines and strengthening transversal competences, the model increases readiness to enter vocational education and training environments.

While detailed mentoring methodologies are outlined in the dedicated Mentoring Outcome, the educational model itself creates the structural conditions for progression: clarity of competences, visible achievement milestones, and guided reflection on next steps.

The model therefore functions as a preparatory bridge, equipping learners with the confidence and foundational capacities required to transition toward further education, vocational training, or structured employment pathways.

6.5 Creating bridges to VET and further training ecosystems

The Back on Track Educational Model does not operate in isolation. Its transferability framework encourages integration into existing youth support ecosystems, vocational training providers, and community-based education initiatives.

Mentors and implementing organisations play a crucial bridging role by:

- Providing information about available VET programmes
- Supporting application processes
- Recommending suitable progression pathways
- Maintaining follow-up contact where possible

By combining skill development, resilience-building, and relational support, the model creates a stabilised platform from which learners can transition into more formal training structures.

6.6 Contribution to long-term inclusion

The model recognises that progression is not always linear. For some learners, the immediate outcome may not be direct enrolment in formal training, but increased stability, digital confidence, and readiness to engage with support services.

Even incremental steps — such as completing a module, attending regular sessions, or exploring local training options — represent movement toward re-engagement. In rural contexts characterised by limited opportunity structures, these stabilising effects are significant.

The piloting phase therefore confirms that the Back on Track Educational Model functions as a preparatory bridge: it reduces psychological and practical barriers to participation in further education and training while strengthening the foundational capacities required for sustained progression.

7 Conclusion

The Back on Track Educational Model represents a tested, resilience-oriented framework designed to address the complex realities of rural NEET populations across the Danube Region. Developed through needs assessment, structured design methodology, and cross-country piloting, the model integrates pedagogical innovation with practical implementation insight.

The evidence gathered during piloting confirms that a modular, mentor-supported, micro-learning approach can effectively re-engage rural young people who are distanced from education and employment systems. With an overall completion rate of 82% and strong self-reported competence gains across participating countries, the model demonstrates both feasibility and relevance in diverse socio-economic contexts.

At its core, the Back on Track model is low-threshold. Short learning units, clear progress tracking, accessible language, and structured onboarding reduce cognitive and psychological barriers to participation. The integration of resilience-building elements across all modules acknowledges that re-engagement is not only a matter of technical skill acquisition, but also of emotional stabilisation and confidence rebuilding.

The model is scalable because it combines structural clarity with contextual flexibility. Core principles — EQF alignment, mentor-supported learning, scenario-based content, and visible progression — remain stable across contexts, while implementation intensity, outreach strategies, and module prioritisation can be adapted to local conditions. Piloting confirmed that organisations can begin at small scale and expand gradually, making the model accessible even to institutions with limited resources.

Importantly, the Back on Track Educational Model does not function as a stand-alone digital course. It operates as a structured bridge toward further education, vocational training, and employment pathways. By strengthening foundational competences, rebuilding learning routines, and supporting self-efficacy, the model reduces psychological and practical barriers to progression. Its integration within local youth ecosystems further enhances its long-term impact potential.

The challenges identified during piloting — digital access constraints, the need for sustained outreach, mentoring intensity, and localisation complexity — have informed targeted refinements. These adaptations strengthen, rather than weaken, the model's transferability by embedding realism and ecosystem awareness into its design.

As rural regions across Europe continue to face demographic shifts, youth outmigration, and structural inequalities, scalable and context-sensitive re-engagement models are

essential. The Back on Track Educational Model offers a structured yet adaptable solution: evidence-based, resilience-centred, and transferable across diverse rural environments.

In this sense, Back on Track is not only a training programme. It is a framework for restoring educational confidence, strengthening foundational capacities, and creating realistic pathways for rural young people to move forward.

Glossary

BoT	Back on Track
Basic skills	Basic skills mainly refer to basic language literacy and numeracy.
Curriculum (D3.1.2)	A structured set of educational experiences defined by subjects, content, and learning objectives. In BoT a curriculum tailored to the skills and needs (D.3.1.2) of rural NEETs will be prepared. Three groups will be formed, the beginner, intermediate and advanced categories, which will be defined according to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) system. The groups will have a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 10 people. The small group size and the qualification-based classification will ensure that NEETs receive training that is appropriate to their knowledge, skills and competences. The curriculum will be modular and aimed at developing basic and power skills, as well as increasing resilience and employability. The training will consist of 7 modules and the modules will vary in length from 20 to 30 hours per module, depending on the subject.
Digital knowledge transfer methodologies (D3.1.1)	Digital Knowledge Transfer Methodologies refer to the techniques and strategies used to convey knowledge and skills through digital platforms and tools. These methodologies encompass a wide range of approaches, including online courses, webinars, e-learning modules, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration tools. They leverage technology to facilitate learning, making education more accessible, flexible, and scalable. Digital knowledge transfer methodologies often incorporate multimedia content, interactive activities, and real-time feedback to enhance engagement and effectiveness in both formal and informal learning environments.
Educational model (Output 3.2)	An educational model is a conceptual framework or systematic approach used to guide and structure the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational practices and processes. Educational models provide a blueprint for how teaching, learning, and assessment should occur, often based on specific theories of learning, pedagogical goals, or educational philosophies. They help educators plan curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment strategies to achieve desired learning outcomes for students. Examples of educational models include traditional

	classroom-based models, project-based learning, and blended learning models. Developing the BoT Educational Model will require several steps of research, development, testing and improving. The first step is to develop a preliminary concept – based on several hypothesis from research and the defined requirements in the Back on Track project – which will be further developed throughout the activity A3.1. It is developed with updated content and improved methodologies. The model is adaptable, accessible to all Project Pfartners and stakeholders, and will be disseminated in the Danube region through online platforms, educational institutions, employment agencies and other public institutions
European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	A standardized reference framework developed by the European Union to help compare the qualifications and education levels across different European countries. The EQF aims to facilitate mobility for students and workers across Europe by providing a common understanding of the levels of education and training. BoT Educational Model will be set in the framework of the EQF.
Human capital	Human capital refers to competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes) of a person either in professional skills and transferable skills and is *different from social capital (social network, personal and professional contacts to whom a person can reach out).*
Intellectual potential	Intellectual Potential in the context of working with NEETs refers to the inherent cognitive abilities, creativity, and problem-solving skills of young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). Recognizing and developing the intellectual potential of NEETs involves identifying their unique strengths and capacities, often overlooked due to barriers such as social disadvantage or lack of formal education. By nurturing this potential through tailored educational programs, mentoring, and skill development opportunities, NEETs can be empowered to engage in meaningful work, further education, or vocational training, thereby enhancing their future prospects.
Power skills	Power skills refer to soft skills, such as communication, leadership, presentation, conflict management and more,

	and enable a person to interact successfully with others to reach their objectives.
Self-management	Self-management as a course content for NEETs refers to the development of skills that help individuals effectively regulate their own behavior, emotions, and time to achieve personal goals. This includes areas such as time management, goal setting, self-discipline, decision-making, stress management, and personal responsibility. The aim is to equip NEETs with the tools they need to independently manage their daily lives, build confidence, and improve their employability or readiness for further education.
Skills development pilot programme (D3.1.4 / O3.1)	The Skills Development Pilot Programme (O3.1) concludes with a evaluation process (D.3.1.5) involving trainers and participants to gather feedback and assess the effectiveness of the training. Analysis of this feedback will identify strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for improvement. Based on these findings, the Back on Track Educational Model (O. 3.2).

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Annexes

Annex 1 – Full Curriculum (EQF 3–5)

Annex 2 – Mentor Guide

Annex 3 – Moodle Platform Technical Guide (screenshots, navigation, system requirements)

Annex 4 – Evaluation of Piloting

Annex 5 – Implementation Checklist Template

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