



# ENGINE Newsletter

January 2026 (No. 2)

*Shaping the future of rural  
entrepreneurship and  
innovation through education*



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# Introduction



## Driving Rural Entrepreneurship and Innovation: Project Updates from ENGINE

*Sustainability, multifunctionality, endogeneity, entrepreneurship and innovation are now widely recognized as key drivers of rural development. These elements help rural areas respond to emerging social, economic and environmental trends while addressing challenges inherent to rural contexts. A holistic approach to rural development relies on mobilizing endogenous potential – knowledge, skills and resources – and aligning them with targeted initiatives. In this context, entrepreneurship and innovation are essential tools for unlocking underutilized capacities and fostering locally tailored growth. HEIs can play a crucial role by designing academic programs that bridge education with rural needs.*

*While many EU university programs emphasize entrepreneurship and innovation, they often remain urban-centric, overlooking rural-specific challenges. Hence, there is a clear need for education that reflects the realities of rural regions. The ENGINE project (ENTrepreneurial rural Growth through exchanging of Good practices wthIn Network Education), funded by Erasmus+ (KA220-HED), addresses this gap. It identifies the entrepreneurial and innovation potential of rural regions and reviews current university programs to identify knowledge, skills and competencies gaps. At the heart of the project is EDUPACK – an educational tool designed to strengthen rural entrepreneurship and innovation. By integrating EDUPACK into HEIs curricula, ENGINE aims to equip students with knowledge, skills and competencies they need to drive sustainable rural development.*

*To keep our community informed, we are pleased to present the second issue of the ENGINE Newsletter. In each edition, we share key project updates, partner highlights and regional insights, supporting transparency, knowledge exchange and collaboration across the rural entrepreneurship ecosystem.*

*We invite you to read this issue and continue the journey with us – advancing innovation, entrepreneurship, learning and sustainable rural transformation.*



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# Highlights from the ENGINE Project



## Looking back to move forward

By June 2025, ENGINE consortium successfully completed Work Package 2 (WP2: Rural Development Potential for Innovation and Entrepreneurship), delivering the **Rural Development Potential for Innovation and Entrepreneurship – Analysis Framework** – a practical, universally applicable guide with a clear methodology and tools for identifying rural entrepreneurship and innovation potential. It supports education, strategic planning and community engagement by helping users recognise rural local resources and development opportunities, link them to business-oriented and social entrepreneurial initiatives and identify the key E&I competences needed for their implementation and further growth. In practice, the framework provides a step-by-step approach that enables the development of Rural Development Potential Maps.

Based on this methodology, **Rural Development Potential Maps** were developed for four partner regions: Małopolska, Münsterland, Alto Minho and the Province of Foggia, combining analysis of data and information from available sources (including statistics and reports) with extensive rural stakeholder consultations. These outputs now serve as the analytical foundation for Work Package 3, ensuring that the development of a dedicated course and related educational tools is firmly grounded in real regional contexts and needs.

[Explore WP2 results](#)



Explore WP2 results: access the *Rural Development Potential for Innovation and Entrepreneurship – Analysis Framework* and *Rural Development Potential Maps*



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# WP3

## PREPARING LOCAL LEADERSHIP STAKEHOLDER TOOLKIT

In **June 2025**, the ENGINE consortium launched Work Package 3 (WP3: **Preparing Local Leadership Stakeholder Toolkit**), running until **March 2026**. WP3 focuses on enhancing the teaching of entrepreneurship and innovation (E&I) in higher education by making it more responsive to rural realities and the competences needed to launch and grow business and social initiatives in rural areas.

Building on the insights from WP2 and the Rural Development Potential Maps, partners are working on three interconnected strands:



**reviewing and comparing E&I study programmes** at partner universities using a shared analytical framework, identifying strengths and gaps, and providing recommendations for rural-oriented improvements.



**developing a standardised student profile** to prepare future rural development leaders in entrepreneurship and innovation (E&I)



**mapping rural stakeholders** who can meaningfully support E&I education and be integrated into the teaching process.

The outcomes of WP3 will be compiled into **Intellectual Output 3 – the Local Leadership Toolkit** and will directly inform the development of **EDUPACK** in Work Package 4 (WP4).



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# Key WP3 Outputs to Date



## Formula for Identifying and Evaluating the Teaching of Entrepreneurship and Innovation

The formula introduces a shared methodological framework for WP3 in the form of a **structured set of descriptive criteria**. It helps partner universities **identify, select, analyse and describe entrepreneurship and innovation (E&I) teaching within their study programmes** and it also supports the development of **student profiles** and the **mapping of rural stakeholders** who can contribute to the educational process. Importantly, these criteria are descriptive rather than judgmental – they are designed to capture structured, comparable information without ranking or scoring programmes or comparing teaching effectiveness across universities. The formula is grounded in an extensive literature review and in consultations with academic teachers all four partner universities, ensuring that the criteria are evidence-based and relevant to diverse institutional contexts.

The formula comprises three principal sets of descriptive criteria, each addressing a distinct dimension of E&I education:



Source: unsplash.com



**the study program criteria** – these criteria enable a structured inventory and comparative description of E&I study programmes, with attention to both content and delivery. They encompass the educational area, employed teaching methods, practical orientation, cooperation with the external environment, development of soft skills, cultivation of an entrepreneurial mindset, incorporation of local and regional contexts, adoption of interdisciplinary approaches, integration of entrepreneurship and innovation components and other relevant thematic areas. In WP3, partners apply these criteria through a structured self-assessment of their own study programmes, which then supports the identification of strengths, limitations and gaps and subsequently the formulation of targeted, evidence-based recommendations for strengthening rural-oriented E&I education, especially in relation to rural E&I competence needs derived from WP2 outputs,



**the student profile criteria** – this set of criteria supports the definition of a harmonised competence-oriented student profile. It covers ten key competence areas relevant to rural entrepreneurship & innovation: entrepreneurial competence, innovation competence, rural-context competence, marketing competence, financial and fundraising competence, communication and negotiation competence, sustainability competence, networking competence, digital competence and managerial competence, expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. In WP3, these criteria are used to draft and compare the partner universities' student profiles and to consolidate them into a single, standardised EU-wide Academic Profile of Rural Entrepreneur.



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**the stakeholder criteria** – these criteria are divided into classification and quality criteria. The classification criteria encompass stakeholder type, sector according to the Quadruple Helix framework, role in the educational process, level of involvement, territorial reach and the nature of engagement with the university. The quality criteria include competencies and experience in entrepreneurship and innovation relevant to rural areas, experience in implementing or advising on local or regional development, affiliations with rural contexts underpinned by in-depth knowledge of socio-economic and cultural specificities and the capacity to operate across sectors. In WP3, these criteria are used to systematically analyse and describe the types of external stakeholders that can support E&I teaching in a rural context, both those already cooperating with partner universities and potential future partners.

Together, these three sets of criteria ensure a consistent, evidence-based approach across partners and provide the basis for WP3 standardised outputs that inform EDUPACK development in WP4.



## Academic Standardized Content Plan for Rural Entrepreneurial Education

This deliverable sets out **a clear, shared roadmap for developing harmonised teaching and learning materials in rural entrepreneurship and innovation (E&I) across the ENGINE partner universities**. It is designed to strengthen students' rural-relevant E&I competences by combining solid business foundations with community-oriented, sustainable and place-based perspectives and it also serves as a key input for the development of EDUPACK.

To develop the plan, partners carried out a comparative review of existing E&I study programmes across four partner universities. The analysis focused on degree-granting programmes (Bachelor's and Master's), selecting those explicitly labelled "entrepreneurship" and/or "innovation" in the title and – where such labels were absent – related programmes identified through specific keywords. In total, **19 study programmes across the four universities were examined**, covering both first- and second-cycle (BA/MA) studies.



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### What did the review show?

Across all partner universities, the programmes already provide a solid foundation in core entrepreneurship and innovation knowledge and skills. Many programmes cover the full entrepreneurial cycle – from idea generation and creativity, through planning and financing, to implementation.



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At the same time, the analysis highlighted a consistent opportunity: strengthening rural contextualisation. Areas for enhancement included: greater territorial and sectoral specificity; better integration of rural labour market realities and local business conditions; more emphasis on community engagement and rural heritage-based development; and a more systematic integration of competences linked to rural sustainability challenges and regional development processes. Based on these findings, partners developed shared recommendations to make E&I education more relevant to rural realities.

The findings from the comparative review were translated into **the Academic Standardized Content Plan for Rural Entrepreneurial Education**, organised into five main thematic blocks that follow a progressive learning pathway – from understanding rural context and mindset, through collaboration and operational competences, to digital transformation and sustainability:

- **Foundations of Rural Entrepreneurship and Innovation**
- **Entrepreneurship & Innovation Ecosystems and Rural Collaboration**
- **Management, Finance and Marketing for Rural Initiatives**
- **Digitalisation for Rural Transformation**
- **Sustainability, Quality and Social Innovation**

Overall, the plan provides a coherent and adaptable structure that integrates the partners' recommendations and helps enrich and complement existing study programmes with content reflecting the real needs of entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas, while aligning teaching materials with the expected *Academic Profile of Rural Entrepreneur*.



## Academic Profile of Rural Entrepreneur (Universal EU-wide)

This outcome delivers a harmonised, EU-wide academic profile describing the competences expected from a graduate in Rural Entrepreneurship & Innovation – a future rural leader able to initiate and develop both business and social initiatives that support sustainable rural development. The profile was developed through a comparative synthesis of four partner university proposals, using the student profile criteria from the *Formula for Identifying and Evaluating the Teaching of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* and building on competence needs identified in WP2 Rural Development Potential Maps. The profile describes competences in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, translated into clear learning outcomes. Together with the *Academic Standardized Content Plan for Rural Entrepreneurial Education*, the EU-wide profile serves as a practical reference point for designing the new course content and teaching materials that will be further developed within EDUPACK.



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# Current developments

## Turning WP3 Insights into Actionable Resources for Rural Leadership Education

*This section presents the key ongoing outputs of WP3, focused on translating analytical results into practical, comparable tools.*



### Stakeholders of Rural Growth Database

At this stage of WP3, the ENGINE consortium is working on the *Stakeholders of Rural Growth Database* – a structured resource that identifies and characterises external stakeholders who can meaningfully **support entrepreneurship and innovation education in rural contexts**. The database is being built using the **stakeholder criteria** defined in the *Formula for Identifying and Evaluating the Teaching of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, ensuring a consistent, comparable approach across all partner universities.

The database captures key information such as stakeholder type and sector (Quadruple Helix); potential roles in the educational process; levels and forms of involvement; territorial reach; and relevant experience and competences linked to rural entrepreneurship and innovation (E&I) and local/regional development. Once completed, the database will **complement** the *Academic Standardized Content Plan* and the *Academic Profile of Rural Entrepreneur* by highlighting **who** can help bring these teaching priorities to life in practice. The final database will also inform the next steps in WP4 (EDUPACK development) by supporting the effective inclusion of external expertise in learning activities.



### Next Steps: Local Leadership Toolkit (IO3)

The final activity within WP3, scheduled for **February – March 2026**, focuses on consolidating all WP3 results into one coherent intellectual output: **IO3 – the Local Leadership Toolkit**. WP3 provides not only an in-depth analysis of the current state of entrepreneurship and innovation education, but also a solid foundation for a novel, integrated academic approach to preparing future leaders in rural entrepreneurship and innovation. IO3 will integrate the methodologies and tools developed in WP3 into a practical, step-by-step guide showing how higher education institutions can design and deliver E&I education to prepare future leaders – from reviewing existing study programmes, through defining the student competence profile and a profile-aligned content plan to identifying and engaging relevant rural stakeholders in educational activities.

Importantly, the toolkit is designed to be **transferable and scalable across different higher-education and diverse rural contexts**. Drawing on the experience of partner universities, it offers a structured approach that can be adapted and applied by universities across the EU, helping to strengthen rural entrepreneurship and innovation education and supporting wider uptake of ENGINE's educational solutions.



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# Events



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## Transnational Partner Meeting in Portugal: Aligning WP3 Work

On 1–2 July 2025, the ENGINE consortium met in Viana do Castelo, Portugal, hosted by Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo, for the project's second Transnational Partner Meeting. The meeting marked a key moment in the transition from WP2 to WP3 (running from June 2025 to March 2026), with partners aligning how the next phase of work will translate WP2 insights into concrete educational solutions for rural entrepreneurship and innovation.

A central part of the discussions focused on agreeing a shared, practical approach for understanding what is already taught across partner universities in entrepreneurship and innovation and how this can be better tailored to rural realities. Partners aligned on a common way of describing existing study programmes so that results are comparable across countries, while still reflecting differences in national higher-education structures and terminology.

The meeting also advanced two closely linked strands of WP3 work: partners discussed the approach to defining the student competence profile for the rural entrepreneur as a future local leader who can develop both business-oriented and social initiatives, as well as the approach to mapping stakeholder types that can enrich teaching and learning through real-world expertise.

Overall, the Portugal meeting helped partners align a shared, practical methodology and descriptive criteria for developing WP3 outputs, namely: the Academic Standardized Content Plan for Rural Entrepreneurial Education; the Academic Profile of the Rural Entrepreneur (universal EU-wide); and the Stakeholders of Rural Growth Database. This approach ensures consistency across partners while keeping the results implementable at each partner university.



[Read more on ENGINE' website](#)



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## ENGINE presented at the XXI Conference of the European Rural Development Network (ERDN)

ENGINE presented its initial findings at the XXI Conference of the European Rural Development Network (ERDN), held in Bucharest on 23–25 September 2025. The project was introduced to an international audience of researchers and rural development experts through a presentation by the Italian ENGINE team from the University of Foggia.

The presentation highlighted early results from mapping inspiring social and business initiatives in the Province of Foggia, demonstrating how entrepreneurial education and innovation can drive rural development. The conference provided a valuable platform to position ENGINE within the European debate on sustainable rural development and to build connections with the wider rural research community.



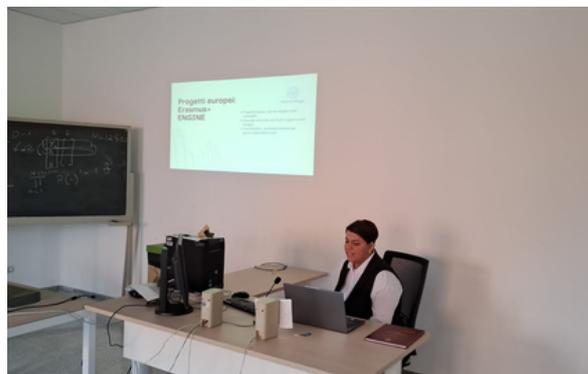
[Read more on ENGINE' website](#)



## A bachelor thesis explores ENGINE's impact on rural development

On 29 October 2025, Carmela Cangì graduated from the University of Foggia with a bachelor's thesis on the Erasmus+ ENGINE project's impact on rural development, supervised by Dr. Fedele Colantuono and tutored by Prof. Mariantonietta Fiore.'

Her research examined how digital tools and rural influencers can support territorial development, highlighting ENGINE's role in equipping young people and local entrepreneurs with skills in digital marketing and social media. Drawing on stakeholder consultations in the Province of Foggia, the thesis offers practical insights into how ENGINE fosters entrepreneurship, innovation, and rural growth.



[Read more on ENGINE' website](#)



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