AccelerAction
Connecting European DeepTech Innovators

https://acceleraction.eu/

Insights from the *AccelerAction* project for the Western Balkans Innovation Agenda.

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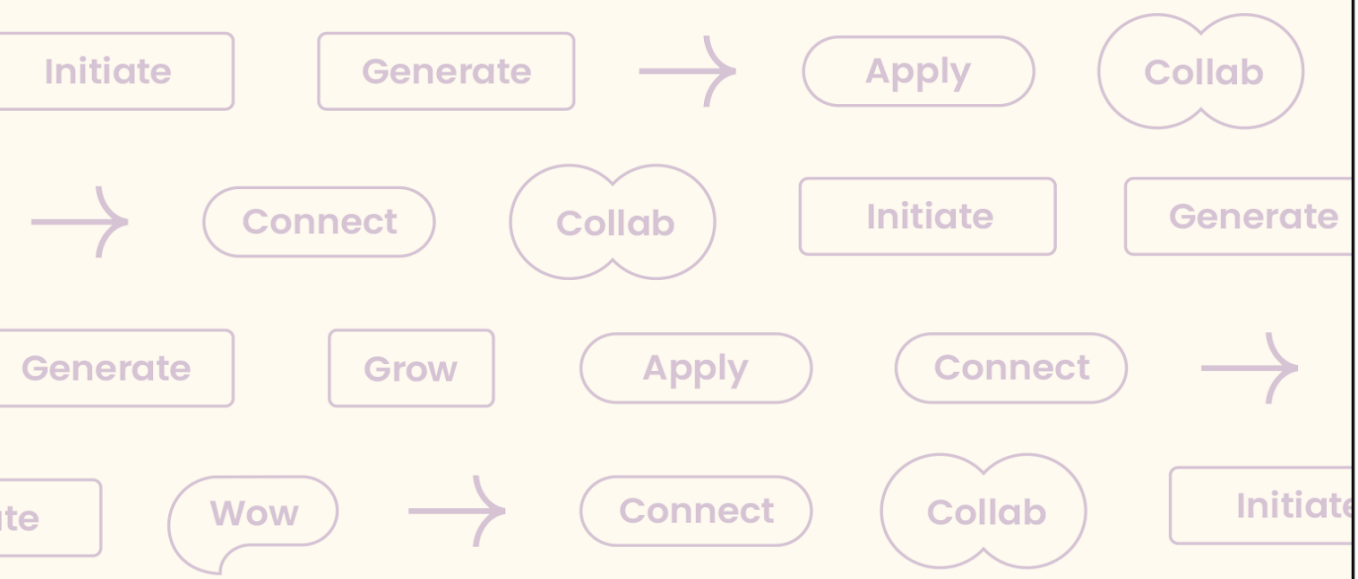

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The AccelerAction project[1]

Incubators, accelerators and different types of company-builders are at the centre of flourishing startup ecosystems and play a crucial role in providing start-ups with growth support; and transnational collaboration is key to the sustained development of the European startup ecosystem. However, Europe's diverse innovation landscape presents significant challenges, particularly the geographic gap between better-connected innovation ecosystems ("strong innovators" and "innovation leaders") and less-connected ones ("modest" and "moderate" innovators). Startups in better-connected ecosystems benefit from access to more local accelerators, greater funding opportunities, and higher-quality business support services. In contrast, startups in less-connected ecosystems face limited resources, resulting in fewer scale-ups, unbalanced business activity, and unequal employment opportunities across regions.

Building on this backdrop, the **mission of the AccelerAction project was to contribute to creating more connected and efficient innovation ecosystems** and fostering a more balanced distribution of business activity across Europe by supporting the scaling of companies, encouraging innovation, and stimulating cooperation among national, regional, and local innovation actors. To achieve its objectives, the AccelerAction consortium included partners from countries considered strong innovators (FR, AT, IE), and from moderate/emerging ones (IT, PT, GR, RO). With a **focus on the DeepTech sector**, the project developed a Benchmarking Tool; a Pan-European Networked Acceleration Programme, co-designed by business acceleration entities from less connected ecosystems and innovation hubs; as well as a virtual ecosystem to connect DeepTech players, boost innovation and reduce fragmentation. The project enhanced business acceleration services, strengthened connectivity, and promoted gender equality across all activities and outputs.

Western Balkans Innovation Agenda

Some of the results of the AccelerAction project can provide a valuable **input for the Western Balkans Innovation Agenda,** particularly in relation to **innovation ecosystems and capacity building in the DeepTech sector**. While the project focused on the EU DeepTech innovation ecosystem and recommendations primarily target EU-level policies, specific elements and insights can be adapted to address the needs and context of the Western Balkans. The relevant project results include: (1) **Policy Recommendations** and (2) the **Pan-European Networked Acceleration Programme, designed to enhance the DeepTech ecosystem** through collaboration, knowledge sharing, and sustainable growth.

[1] https://acceleraction.eu/. The AccelerAction project, funded by the Horizon Europe Programme, within the European Innovation Ecosystems pillar, was implemented from September 2022 to February 2025

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Policy Recommendations[2]

The **DeepTech sector**, covering transformative fields like advanced materials, robotics, blockchain, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing, has the **potential to significantly boost Europe's global competitiveness** but startups face barriers such as resource access and limited cross-border collaboration. **Incubators and accelerators play a vital role** in addressing these challenges, nurturing startups, providing not only essential resources and infrastructure but also connections to vital social and financial networks within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Yet their impact can be amplified by aligning support structures with EU policy priorities, including sustainability and regional development. Insights from the AccelerAction project highlight the need for long-term funding, fostering collaboration over competition, addressing gender disparities, and standardizing performance metrics. By prioritizing inclusivity and strategic coordination, it is possible to unlock untapped talent, drive balanced innovation and achieving meaningful economic and societal outcomes.

Comparative Analysis of EU Country Models and the Role of Governments:

- **Establishment of centralised bodies to o coordinate incubator and accelerator activities**

  According to the OECD report "Policies for Business Incubation and Acceleration" (2024) a shared characteristic among leading EU countries is their establishment of centralised bodies to coordinate incubator and accelerator activities, rather than rely on the single entity itself. In countries such as France, Portugal, and Sweden, robust public networks support a cohesive entrepreneurial ecosystem. For example, France has implemented special visas, tax incentives, and funding schemes to attract global talent and foster a vibrant startup culture. Similarly, Sweden's National Incubator Programme (NIP) acts as a central hub for networking, facilitating both national and international partnerships. This centralised approach promotes alignment with a nation's strategic goals, creating an ecosystem in which public and private accelerators can co-exist and collaborate effectively.

- **Early Internationalisation**

  Another key strategy in geographically smaller EU countries, such as Estonia and Ireland, has been early internationalisation driven by topographical constraints. Startups in these nations often target global markets from the outset, receiving essential guidance on navigating international challenges from accelerators. France, too, as previously mentioned, has developed internationally appealing policies, including startup visas and tax incentives, to attract foreign entrepreneurs and encourage cross-border collaboration.

- **Availability of specialised, well-trained support staff to offer tailored guidance to startups**

  Successful ecosystems also emphasise the importance of specialised, well-trained support staff. In Sweden and Estonia, for instance, incubators and accelerators employ highly qualified staff with deep knowledge across various fields, enabling them to offer tailored guidance to

[2]For the complete and detailed documentation, please refer to:
- Policy Recommendations (Public Deliverable): https://acceleraction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/D5.2-Policy-Recommendations-for-Policy-Makers.pdf
- Published Policy Brief: https://leap.luiss.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/PB4.25-Policy-Recommendations-for-an-Interconnected-European-DeepTech-Ecosystem.pdf

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startups. Estonia's incubators, for example, focus on matching startups with mentors who have expertise in specific technological domains, helping these businesses to develop specialised products and address technical challenges. Learning from this successful practice, governments could support training programmes for an incubator and accelerator workforce with expertise in emerging tech fields, as well as granting access to mentoring sessions by experts in the public and private sectors, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of startup support.

- **Incentivize sectoral diversity within incubators and accelerators**

  Sectoral diversity within incubators and accelerators also enriches the innovation ecosystem, as seen in Portugal and Sweden. The Swedish National Incubator Programme (NIP) promotes collaboration among startups in diverse industries, facilitating cross-pollination of ideas and creating innovations with potential cross-sectoral benefits. Public policy should be encouraged to incentivise this diversity by offering grants for interdisciplinary projects and encouraging incubators to foster a dynamic, innovative environment with broad economic and societal impacts.

- **Linking incubator and accelerator policies with broader societal goals, such as environmental sustainability and regional development**

  Sweden also demonstrates the value of aligning incubators and accelerators with broader national goals, such as sustainable development and regional economic growth. By fostering regional hubs and science parks that support local innovation, Sweden has built an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem that extends beyond major cities. EU countries could adopt similar alignment strategies, linking incubator and accelerator policies with broader societal goals, such as environmental sustainability and regional development

Considering these examples from leading innovating countries and their approaches to DeepTech innovation, it becomes evident that **active government involvement is essential to foster a thriving ecosystem. Policymakers should prioritize targeted support for training programmes** that equip incubator and accelerator professionals with the up-to-date expertise needed to guide startups in emerging tech fields, complemented by mentoring opportunities from public and private sector experts. Public policies should further **incentivize diversity by funding interdisciplinary projects** and encouraging incubators to **cultivate dynamic environments** that drive innovation with significant economic and societal benefits. Additionally, **linking incubator and accelerator policies to overarching societal goals, such as environmental sustainability and regional development,** will ensure that the DeepTech sector contributes meaningfully to long-term, inclusive progress.

The AccelerAction EU project has researched the disparities in Europe's innovation landscape in order to formulate targeted policy recommendations. Incubators, accelerators, and various forms of 'company-builders' undoubtedly play a crucial role in all European ecosystem regardless of the level of innovation. However, the uneven development of DeepTech ecosystems across Europe has created significant challenges. Start-ups in well-connected regions benefit from superior access to local accelerators, funding opportunities, and high-quality business support services.

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In contrast, those in less-connected ecosystems often face limited resources, compelling many to relocate to established hubs. This geographic imbalance hinders scale-up opportunities, disrupts equitable business activity, and creates disparities in employment and economic development. Delving deeper into the issue, a key topic that has been identified concerns:

- **Gender balance in incubators and accelerators**
  First, the participation of women in accelerator entrepreneurial programmes is notably limited, reflecting the broader underrepresentation of female founders and invested startups. This disparity stems from cultural and social barriers that hinder women's access to resources such as funding and mentorship. However, accelerators lacking female leadership demonstrated reduced effectiveness in accessing customers and partners, underscoring the need for tailored inclusion strategies, including mentoring programmes for female entrepreneurs. Accelerators that implement initiatives directed at women, including mentorship and appropriate financial tools, achieve higher investment success rates and improved access to critical networks. The inclusion of women in the DeepTech entrepreneurship field can generate not only economic benefits but also significant social advantages. Institutional efforts to create a more inclusive environment, alongside tailored support mechanisms, will enhance the tools available to all entrepreneurs and promote a balanced, innovative ecosystem. This is especially pertinent in the DeepTech sector, where gender imbalance remains alarmingly evident: less than 10% of DeepTech startups or established businesses are founded by all-women teams, and only 15% are founded or co-founded by women (Nowshin, 2024).

EU-level policy

The findings and conclusions drawn from the AccelerAction project underscore the necessity of a dual approach that not only strengthens modest and moderate regional, local and national innovation ecosystems but also fosters cross-border connectivity to cultivate a cohesive and resilient European innovation landscape. Summing up all that was discussed through the comparative analysis and experience of AccelerAction, the following points are proposed to be taken into account as policy recommendations for the **improvement of the DeepTech innovation ecosystem on an EU-level, expanding European interconnectivity:**

1. **Long-Term Funding Commitments:** To build strong networks and a reputation within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, public funding programmes should provide at least three years of financial support for incubators and accelerators. This duration would allow them to plan strategically and establish themselves effectively, while also reducing administrative burdens related to frequent funding applications.
2. **Selective Funding for Impact**: National funding programmes should prioritise incubators and accelerators with proven track records, strong ecosystem connections, and core competencies. Less experienced incubators can receive smaller grants and capacity-building support to enhance their performance and integration within the ecosystem.
3. **Focus on Programme Expansion, Not Overhead**: Funding should specifically target incubation and acceleration programme improvements and expansions rather than core

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operating expenses. This ensures that funds directly benefit start-ups and scale-ups, keeping incubators focused on client support over securing operational funding.

4. **Tailor Funding to System Needs:** Recognising that each incubation and acceleration ecosystem has unique challenges, funding programmes should address specific bottlenecks by, for example, allocating resources for sector-specialised activities, mentorship, or internationalisation support.
5. **Promote Collaboration Over Competition**: Funding programmes should encourage cooperation by favouring joint applications or consortia, reducing competition for limited resources, and fostering a more cohesive entrepreneurial ecosystem.
6. **Align with Broader Policy Goals**: Public funding for incubators and accelerators should be aligned with national and regional policies, complementing broader entrepreneurial and economic priorities for greater coherence and impact.
7. **Establish Coordinated Networks:** Governments should create formal networks of incubators and accelerators to encourage collaboration, resource-sharing, and peer learning. These networks should facilitate strategic alignment, host capacity-building activities, and foster connections with investors and large corporations. Membership criteria and regular events can help maintain active engagement and a cohesive community.
8. **Implement Quality Standards and Labels**: To ensure credibility and quality within the ecosystem, governments should introduce a certification or quality label for incubators and accelerators that meet specific standards. Building the reputation of these labels within the entrepreneurial ecosystem can enhance credibility for both incubators and their clients, fostering trust among investors, customers, and ecosystem partners.
9. **Develop Performance Measurement Frameworks**: In order to address the lack of comparable data on incubator and accelerator performance, governments should establish standardised performance metrics. These frameworks should require periodic data collection from incubators on core activities, client outcomes, and ecosystem impact, while minimising administrative burdens by focusing on essential metrics. This data supports evidence-based funding decisions and helps start-ups identify programmes that best fit their needs. The standardised performance metrics should also be coordinated at the EU-level in order to have comparable data.
10. **Create High-Profile Focal Points**: Governments should promote visible hubs or focal points within the incubation system, co-locating numerous start-ups, support programmes, and ecosystem actors. These hubs foster resource-sharing, enhance networking opportunities, and raise the profile of the incubation ecosystem, establishing a collaborative environment that supports start-up growth and innovation. Circling back to the main goal of AccelerAction, establishing a Pan-European coordinating body could standardise support and best practises across national incubator and accelerator networks, promoting goal alignment across borders.
11. **Tackle gender fairness in DeepTech**: The EU should prioritize policies that promote gender inclusivity in entrepreneurship by addressing systemic barriers. Key actions include affordable childcare, financial literacy programmes, and training in entrepreneurship-oriented skills from an early age. Targeted initiatives should increase women's access to funding, leadership roles,

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and STEM education to balance representation in sectors like DeepTech. These measures will drive economic growth, social equality, and innovation.

12. **Capacity building**: focus on sustained support for training programmes that equip incubator and accelerator professionals with up-to-date knowledge and skills especially in disruptive GPTs and new tools and best practices.
13. **Ecosystem networking for access and synergies:** The EU should, building on the AccelerAction experience, establish a European accelerator network that will facilitate access of startups and scaleups, as well DeepTech SMEs across Europe. The aim would be to reduce the time and cost of access to markets, partners and funding. The EU could subsidize the networking services provided by the accelerators, at both ends, launching and receiving startups across Europe. The European Acceleration Network would cooperate with the European Enterprise Network in meeting the needs of industry and creating new markets for DeepTech. There is also scope for learning from the experience of the EEN.

Pan-European Networked Acceleration Programme (EU NAP)

The AccelerAction project designed and implemented a pan-European Acceleration Programme (promoted as "CONNECT") **to enhance the European DeepTech ecosystem through collaboration, knowledge sharing, and sustainable growth**. This comprehensive programme is designed to address the challenges and opportunities in the European DeepTech landscape, focusing on startups, accelerators, investors, policymakers, and educational institutions.

Central to the rationale behind the programme is the understanding that innovation thrives in environments characterized by connectivity and exchanging knowledge, ideas, and resources. By fostering such an environment, the EU-NAP seeks to catalyse a more uniform development across European DeepTech ecosystems, as it connects "strong innovators" and "innovation leaders" with less-connected ones ("modest" and "moderate" innovators). This initiative creates channels through which emerging ecosystems can access the resources, knowledge and networks that are often the privilege of more established tech hubs. In doing so, it aspires to level the playing field, offering regions the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from Europe's collective technological expertise.

Moreover, the EU-NAP is underpinned by a commitment to gender equality, recognizing its vital role in driving comprehensive and effective innovation. By integrating gender equality into its core strategy, the EU-NAP aims to break down barriers and cultivate a diverse and inclusive innovation ecosystem. This focus on gender equality is more than social responsibility - it is a strategic imperative, acknowledging that diverse voices and experiences are essential for fostering creativity and driving meaningful innovation.

Key elements of the programme include:

1. **Engagement with Stakeholders**: EU-NAP brought together startups, accelerators, policymakers, business innovation agencies, and educational institutions to co-develop solutions.

2. **Customized Acceleration Strategy**: Designed to support emerging ecosystems, the programme provides a flexible structure catering to the needs of local players, such as investors and accelerator programme managers.

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3. **Programme Components**: The EU-NAP framework (named **CONNECT** for promotional purposes) is centered on three primary components:

- **Initiate Library**: A digital resource library offering case studies, frameworks, and articles on topics like DeepTech funding, diversity, and sustainability. This library serves as a critical knowledge repository to empower stakeholders in decision-making and strategic planning.
- **Collab Events**: provided a platform for peer-to-peer mentoring and collaboration, fostering dynamic exchanges between startups, investors, and accelerator/incubator managers. These virtual sessions were designed to address key challenges faced by stakeholders and included masterclasses, mentoring circles, and group discussions. The events emphasized actionable knowledge, including strategies for early-stage investments and ethical considerations in innovation.
- **GROW Programme**: A three-month immersive acceleration initiative focused on skill-building, networking, and international market expansion for DeepTech startups. The programme integrates weekly challenges, monthly meetups, and international exchange experiences to ensure practical learning and ecosystem engagement.

The EU-NAP methodology was crafted through extensive research and collaborative consultation, engaging 116 organizations from 32 countries. This inclusive approach ensured that the programme addressed the unique challenges and opportunities of the European DeepTech ecosystem while prioritizing sustainability and gender equality. By leveraging the strengths of each consortium partner, the programme successfully bridged gaps in the European innovation landscape, delivering a cohesive and impactful experience. The collaborative efforts of the consortium partners ensured that EU-NAP was both adaptable and responsive to the needs of its stakeholders.

Elements from the programme design and the lessons learned from its implementation could serve as valuable input and a model for replication in Western Balkan countries.

More detailed information about the programme design and findings from its implementation can be accessed here:

- https://acceleraction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/D2.3-Pan-EU-Networked-Acceleration-Programme-EU-NAP.pdf
- https://acceleraction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/D4.1-Main-Findings-on-the-EU-NAP-Implementation.pdf

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