

D5.2 Policy Recommendations For Policy Makers

Initiate

Generate



Apply

Collab



Connect

Collab

Initiate

Generate

Generate

Grow

Apply

Connect



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Wow



Connect

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Initiate



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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The EU's DeepTech sector, covering transformative fields like advanced materials, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing, has substantial potential to advance Europe's position in the global economy and technology landscape. Despite this promise, DeepTech startups within the EU often struggle with limited cross-national collaboration and knowledge sharing, which in turn affects their impact on Europe's competitiveness. Incubators and accelerators play a vital role in addressing these challenges by providing essential resources, connections, and mentorship. Drawing insights from recent OECD data and the AccelerAction EU project, as well as best practices from Estonia, France, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden, this report outlines strategies to enhance the effectiveness of these support structures for DeepTech innovation within the EU.

Diversity within DeepTech sectors is another critical area of focus of this deliverable. This point has been one of the main objectives of the AccelerAction programme through which cross-sectoral collaboration and innovation were encouraged. Such model of sectoral diversity not only enhances innovation within each field but also promotes interdisciplinary projects, generating synergies across different technology areas. The EU could benefit from incentivising such interdisciplinary efforts, fostering innovation networks that connect fields as varied as biotech, quantum computing, and AI.

As experienced through the AccelerAction project, aligning incubator and accelerator initiatives with broader EU policy objectives, such as sustainability and regional development, can lead to more balanced growth across the Union. By embedding such goals within the EU's startup support framework, the Union could drive not only economic growth but also social and environmental progress, creating a more inclusive and resilient innovation ecosystem that reaches across all member states and regions.

Gender inclusivity remains an important area for development within Europe's DeepTech ecosystem. While progress has been made, women continue to be underrepresented in EU entrepreneurship, especially in technology-driven fields. Targeted support is essential to address this disparity. Financial support, mentorship programmes, and partnerships with the private sector could significantly enhance resources available to women-led startups, reducing structural and cultural barriers, such as gender biases in funding. A more inclusive approach would help harness the full potential of Europe's talent, bolstering innovation across the board.

Europe's DeepTech ecosystem stands to benefit immensely from a policy framework that emphasises coordination, inclusivity, and global orientation which are all fostered and at the centre of the AccelerAction project. By supporting internationalisation, sectoral diversity, high-quality incubator staff, and gender inclusivity, the EU can position itself as a world leader in DeepTech innovation, creating significant economic and social benefits that resonate across the Union. Through these targeted improvements, Europe can foster a robust and interconnected DeepTech ecosystem that not only meets the needs of its diverse member states but also makes a lasting impact on the global stage.

2 INTRODUCTION

European DeepTech startups—which can be defined as innovative firms in sectors like advanced materials, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing—are increasingly central to Europe's economic and technological future, however they are often isolated realities that don't communicate or participate in efficient knowledge transfer efforts on the pan-European level, minimising EU-level connectivity and the Union's competitiveness in a globalised world.

Accelerators and incubators play a crucial role in nurturing innovative startups, and DeepTech is no different, providing not only essential resources and infrastructure but also connections to vital social and financial networks within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. With this awareness, the AccelerAction project was planned to intervene in providing further support to these start-ups hubs. In particular, while implementing measures which were already considered as effective in assisting those hubs, through the direct observation and contact with incubators and accelerators, it was possible to identify other best practices, and consequently, new policy recommendations which may enhance both the incubators and accelerators system. In this perspective, measures which can guarantee long-term project sustainability and which involves the creation of public-private partnerships were prioritised. For example, through the establishment of the AccelerAction virtual DeepTech ACT, a virtual space was created with the objective of fostering capacity building and networking among acceleration ecosystems players, facilitating cross-fertilization and of generating the needed knowledge for a more balanced business activity across EU. Such platform, responds to heterogeneous needs but both incubators and accelerators, that although, often used in interchangeable terms, actually serves different functions.

Starting with **defining** the main topic of discussion: business incubators are commonly described as shared office-space facilities designed to offer their resident startups a strategic and value-enhancing intervention system—known as business incubation—comprising monitoring and tailored business assistance. This system is structured to integrate and manage resources with the goal of promoting the successful development of new ventures, while simultaneously minimizing the costs associated with potential failures.. Through the provision of (1) access to physical infrastructure, (2) administrative and office services, (3) financial resources, (4) process-oriented support, and (5) networking opportunities, incubators enable new ventures to progress, mitigate the risks associated with the liability of newness, and significantly enhance their chances of survival (Schwartz, 2013).

Most recently, accelerators have emerged as an evolutionary model of incubators, accounting for about 8000 accelerators worldwide, with accelerator-related investments reaching well over \$50 billion in 2018 (Gliedt et al. 2018) demonstrating their effectiveness in venture assistance also thanks to the success of well-known accelerated startups (e.g., Dropbox, Airbnb, Twitch, etc.). Brad Feld (2012) speaks of a full-on start-up revolution that will be expressed as every urban area soon becomes able to support its own accelerator.

This deliverable draws on **successful practises in EU countries** such as Estonia, France, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden to offer targeted recommendations for strengthening Europe’s DeepTech landscape based on recent OECD data from 2024 and **the experience of the AccelerAction EU project (2022–2025)**. The main focus is the promotion of EU-level policies that can enhance the effectiveness of incubators and accelerators, with a specific emphasis on internationalisation, funding models, coordination, and the development of high-quality support services for diverse and highly specialised projects.

3 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EU COUNTRY MODELS AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS

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. Such centralisation in the EU context could involve a regional coordinating body to guide and resource DeepTech hubs across Europe, fostering a cohesive environment for incubators and accelerators that work towards shared goals, attract global talent, and enhance regional competitiveness.

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. To reinforce this trend, the OECD recommends that national governments should integrate internationalisation support within accelerator programmes, providing resources and guidance to early-stage startups entering global markets. Additionally, expanding initiatives like visa schemes, tax breaks, and funding opportunities across the EU would enhance Europe's appeal as a hub for DeepTech innovation going beyond the 27 countries to Asia, Africa and the Americas.

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 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. Therefore, EU 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 across Europe.

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.

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. Establishing regional hubs outside metropolitan areas could help drive local economic growth and improve access to entrepreneurial resources across diverse locations as well as empowering rural areas.

Based on these insights and the AccelerAction experience in the project, the following recommendations could strengthen Europe's deeptech accelerator ecosystem. First, establishing a **Pan-European coordinating body** could standardise support and best practices across national incubator and accelerator networks, promoting goal alignment across borders. **Expanding resources** for **internationalisation** within accelerator programmes would also help DeepTech startups navigate global markets, while startup visas, tax incentives, and funding opportunities for foreign talent could be promoted EU-wide. Specialised training programmes for accelerator staff would enhance their technical expertise, enabling them to guide startups in advanced technology sectors. Additionally, policymakers could encourage **sectoral diversity** and collaboration by funding interdisciplinary innovation challenges and joint ventures. Finally, adopting a **project-based funding approach**—prioritising long-term funding for specific projects rather than for institutions themselves—would offer startups a solid foundation for growth. Aligning startup support policies with EU sustainability and regional development goals would further extend entrepreneurial opportunities across Europe, generating cross-sectoral benefits for society and the economy.

4 THE ACCELERACTION EU EXPERIENCE

The AccelerAction EU project has made substantial contributions to addressing the disparities in Europe's innovation landscape and formulating targeted policy recommendations. As shown by WP2 and WP4 reports, respectively, "Strategic Discovery Process: assessing gaps & challenges and co-designing the new service programme with a special focus on gender equality acceleration" and "Main Findings on the EU-NAP Implementation", coordinated action on different levels -national, regional and local- is auspicated to foster the growth and scaling of start-ups. In such growth process, incubators, accelerators, and various forms of 'company-builders' play a crucial role. However, the uneven development of innovation 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. 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. In order to reduce such geographical imbalance, in the framework of the Pan EU-NAP (Networked Acceleration Programme), enacted especially in WP4, AccelerAction has adopted a multi-layered approach which could address the unique need of each stakeholder group, as it brought together startups, accelerators, policymakers, business innovation agencies, and educational institutions to co-develop solutions. Moreover, as shown by the startups' positive feedback in the EU-NAP framework, the project was actually able to reach a diverse range of regions and provided tools to enhance market access also to businesses in less-connected areas. To further mitigate such geographical imbalances, policies must focus on strengthening Europe's 'modest' and 'moderate' innovation ecosystems. Enhancing their attractiveness for international businesses would encourage operations beyond major hubs and unlock the potential of untapped local ecosystems. The AccelerAction project has been instrumental in bridging these gaps by implementing initiatives designed to foster pan-European connectivity and knowledge exchange.

At its core, AccelerAction is built around the previously mentioned EU-NAP model, which aims to foster growth and innovation across the European DeepTech ecosystem. This model supports:

1. **A virtual ecosystem** called DeepTech ACT - that facilitates matchmaking among start-ups, investors, accelerators, policy makers, and other stakeholders throughout Europe.
2. **Access to free training materials** tailored to diverse groups, including entrepreneurs, investors, and policy professionals.
3. **A three-month immersive acceleration programme** (GROW exchange programme) focused on skill-building, networking, and international market expansion for DeepTech startups, that includes **xchange opportunities** allowing start-ups from emerging ecosystems to visit established innovation hubs (and vice versa) , fostering peer learning and know-how transfer.

The project's structured approach, involving initiatives like the Discovery **Roundtable series**, has been pivotal. By engaging key stakeholders to identify needs and propose solutions, the project has garnered valuable insights into the DeepTech ecosystem across Europe. Furthermore, the **GROW Exchange programme**, which facilitated cross-border interactions for 10 start-ups from Ireland, France, Romania, Portugal, and Austria, underscored the practical benefits of collaboration and knowledge sharing.

The feedback collected from these activities, coupled with research undertaken during the project, directly informed the development of targeted policy recommendations. A notable outcome of this comparative analysis is the proposal to establish a **Pan-European coordinating body**. This entity would aim to standardize support mechanisms and best practices across national incubator and accelerator networks, promoting strategic alignment across borders.

The conclusions drawn from the four **Roundtable series**, described in the AccelerAction Deliverable 2.2 "Strategic Discovery Process", played a critical role in validating and strengthening the project's theoretical foundations and the following policy recommendations. These events brought together a diverse array of stakeholders, including start-up founders, investors, policy makers, and representatives of accelerators and incubators, from across Europe. Discussions during these sessions highlighted the pressing need for greater standardization and alignment in support systems across EU countries. Participants emphasized that while national ecosystems exhibit unique strengths, the lack of cross-border synergies often results in fragmented innovation efforts.

The roundtables also underscored the importance of **tailored support for emerging ecosystems**. Stakeholders repeatedly pointed to the value of initiatives like those offered by

AccelerAction—such as virtual matchmaking platforms and exchange programs—as critical tools for leveling the playing field. These conclusions reaffirm the need for a dual approach: empowering modest and moderate innovation ecosystems while simultaneously enhancing cross-border connectivity to promote a unified and robust European innovation landscape. Furthermore, drawing upon “bottom-up” feedback received during the roundtables, AccelerAction tried to implement measures which could adequately respond to the specific needs expressed by start-ups as well as investors. Indeed, understanding the needs on both sides is fundamental for the comprehensive enhancement of the ecosystem. For example, during the WP4 Collab Event for Deep Tech Investors, the issue of co-investing in the early stages of start-ups development emerged. This was particularly important to the investors’ side –given that they would benefit from spreading the risk with partners–, but it was also fundamental for start-ups’ interest –given that they would probably get easier and earlier access to fundings, if investors are in a better and safer condition. Therefore, engaging also the investors’ side was a leap forward to further understand the critical points of the ecosystem, and consequently, draft more effective recommendations at EU level. Also in this case, adopting a flexible and receptive attitude –while working with start-ups as well as with investors– was the key to effectively providing support to the involved businesses, especially when it comes to access to fundings, markets and other resources.

A more holistic approach aligns seamlessly with the overarching objectives of AccelerAction, which has emphasized the crucial importance of European collaboration. . By facilitating a cohesive framework for **cross-border cooperation**, AccelerAction highlights the critical role of coordinated efforts in transforming Europe’s diverse innovation landscape into a more equitable and integrated ecosystem.

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Summing up all that was discussed through the comparative analysis and experience of AccelerAction, D5.2 puts forward the following points to be taken into account as policy recommendations for the improvement of accelerators and incubators on a 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 allows

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 operating expenses. This ensures 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 that serves the 27 countries equally.
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 EU, establishing a **Pan-European coordinating body** could standardise support and best practises across national incubator and accelerator networks, promoting goal alignment across borders.

All these measures are identified as crucial for the future development and enhancement of incubators and accelerators. These policy recommendations are based on the successful results of implemented schemes in different EU countries. Consequently, where there are adequate conditions, the adoption of such measures should be a priority. Indeed, it is only through the provision of the appropriate financial and non-financial support that entrepreneurial systems can thrive and continue to innovate. As remarked by the comparative analysis from the latter section, it is exactly in those countries where institutions' intervention and support is stronger, that entrepreneurs find fertile ground to concretise their business projects.

Finally, gender inclusivity and fairness should not be an afterthought, the EU has the chance to implement impactful policies to include women in the stride to a more connected innovation ecosystem from the start, which would bring economic value as well as social advancement in equality. Policies that include affordable childcare, support to financial literacy and training programmes in schools and universities on entrepreneurship and business leadership are some examples of practices that could be beneficial towards this issue. Indeed, although the situation has improved in the last decade, however, gender

discrimination in the upper-secondary education institutions and subsequently, in the workplace, still persists. Therefore, while enhancing the efficiency of accelerators and incubators, institutions should also look at the impact of their policies in fostering women participation in entrepreneurship. Indeed, as pointed out in Chapter 4.1, women are subject to competitive disadvantage compared to men right from the beginning, so to say, when it comes to obtaining fundings to initiate their startups and this is an immense obstacle that can prevent the growth of female-led enterprises. Also, some studies (Strohmeyer & Tonoyan, 2005) showed that occupational segregation still exists in this field and, although incubators and accelerators provide advanced infrastructures indifferently to men and women, they may still vertically integrate women in lower working positions, consequently, they remain highly gendered environments (Brush et al., 2010). However, when women achieve a leading position in start-ups, they often outperform their male counterparts given the different approach to business that they show ("Statistics Show Women", 2019). Moreover, factual results demonstrate that they are able to create more revenues and higher job growth (Mehta, 2024). Nevertheless, especially, focusing on the DeepTech sector, the gender imbalance is still alarmingly evident. Indeed, less than a tenth of DeepTechs are founded by all-women teams and only 15% are founded or co-founded by women (Nowshin, 2024). Again, this data is a spontaneous consequence of the low rate of women's presence in STEM academic courses and of gendered education.

Thus, it is clear that in order to tackle the gender gap problem in the European society as a whole, a leading and innovative sector such as the entrepreneurship one cannot be overlooked. As a result, it should be considered as a priority and urgent need to address those obstacles which create differences in the investors' treatment towards male and female entrepreneurs. To conclude, the inclusion of women in this field may bring not only economic but also significant social benefits. It is a matter of broadening the range of action of institutions and create a more inclusive environment that can really enhance the tools at the disposals of entrepreneurs.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Europe's DeepTech ecosystem requires a coordinated and comprehensive policy framework that builds on best practices from leading strong, innovating, EU countries and EU-level projects focused on strengthening innovation and entrepreneurship such as AccelerAction, which precisely underlines the importance of cross-border collaboration and coordinated efforts at a pan-European level.

The comparative analysis offered in this deliverable, shows that various best practices are shared by culturally and geographically highly different countries. This demonstrates the expendability and wide applicability of such measures also in non-similar conditions. This is not to say that such practices are universally applicable, but that they offer a valuable departure stage to develop a more efficient and well-functioning start-ups ecosystem which can perhaps be enlarged to all European countries in order to be competitive on the global market.

By promoting internationalisation, prioritising sector diversity, investing in high-quality staff training, and aligning with broader policy goals, Europe can create an environment where DeepTech startups thrive. Through these targeted policy recommendations, the EU can enhance its position as a global leader in DeepTech innovation, creating lasting economic, social, and environmental benefits. Furthermore, an extra-effort should be put in maximising the reduction of the gender gap problem which hinders the entrance and growth in the sector of female entrepreneurs. It is only through the implementation of such targeted measures that the European start-ups ecosystem can grow in a sustainable and inclusive way for all and be well-integrated in the larger European social and legislative framework.

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