



**AI PIONEERS**  
Artificial Intelligence in education & training

## AI Pioneers Impact Analysis

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AI Pioneers  
External Impact Analysis

December 2025

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ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME  
ERASMUS-EDU-2022-PI-FORWARD-LOT1  
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## Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Analysis of Main Findings Across the Three Years	7
3. The Voice of the Consortium	12
4. Sustainability Strategy and Long-Term Viability	16
5. Conclusions and Recommendations	19
Appendix A: Interview Schema	21

# 1. Introduction

The following document presents the external evaluation report of the AI Pioneers project. This report is based on an assessment of project deliverables, the extensive internal evaluation work carried out by the partnership, as well as a series of one-to-one interviews with partners. The evaluator has also participated in many of the webinars and events carried out by the project over its three-year term.

## 1.1 Purpose and Scope of this Evaluation

This report presents the independent, external evaluation of the AI Pioneers Project, an Erasmus+-funded initiative that ran from January 2023 to December 2025. The evaluation was commissioned to provide an objective assessment of the project's performance, impact, and legacy as it reaches its formal conclusion.

The analysis is based on a comprehensive review of project documentation, most notably Internal Evaluation Reports and the Sustainability Plan (D6.2) and, most critically, a series of in-depth interviews with core project partners. This approach ensures that the assessment is grounded not only in outcomes and deliverables but in the lived experiences and reflective insights of those who designed and executed the work.

This report aims to serve two primary audiences: the project consortium and funding body, by validating achievements and distilling learnings; and the wider educational community, by offering a case study in managing innovation, partnership, and sustainability in such a rapidly evolving field.

## 1.2 Core Themes Addressed

The evaluation is structured around several interconnected themes that emerged as central to understanding the project's three-year process and its future:

- **From outputs to ecosystem:** The report examines how the project successfully transcended the delivery of its deliverables and intellectual outputs (frameworks, toolkits, reports) to cultivate a vibrant, international community of practice. This shift from creating products to fostering a living network is identified as its most significant strategic accomplishment.
- **The dynamics of collaborative success:** A major focus is on the human and operational architecture of the consortium. The report analyses how trust, communication, and adaptive management evolved over three years, transforming a contractual partnership into a genuinely supportive and effective collaborative unit.
- **Navigating the speed of change within the sector:** The project's timeline coincided with the public explosion of Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT). The evaluation assesses the consortium's agility and strategic responsiveness in turning this contextual upheaval from a potential disruption into a platform for increased relevance and leadership.
- **The sustainability imperative:** Running throughout the report is an interrogation of legacy and long-term impact. The project's conclusive success is measured not just by its conclusion

and delivery of outputs, but by the robustness of its plan for continuation beyond EU funding. The tension between demonstrated achievement and future uncertainty forms a critical narrative thread.

- **Bridging policy and practice:** The report evaluates the project's dual focus on influencing high-level European policy while providing practical tools for educators. It considers the successes and ongoing challenges in connecting strategic frameworks with on-the-ground implementation in diverse Vocational Education and Training (VET) contexts, at national, EU and now wider global levels.

### 1.3 A Guide to Reading This Report

This report is designed to be read as a narrative that builds from evidence to analysis, and from project achievements to a focus on future imperatives.

Chapter 2 and 3 provide the factual and analytical foundation. They synthesise the project's recorded outcomes across its three-year lifespan and present analysis of the partner interviews, using direct testimony to reveal the core human dynamics behind the success.

Chapter 4 is the synthesis and interpretive heart of the report. It distils the common themes, success factors, and unresolved challenges from the partner perspectives, setting up the critical discussion on sustainability. This chapter looks to address questions as to what made this project work, and what should in turn be carried forward.

Chapter 5 constitutes the forward-looking critical analysis. It rigorously evaluates the project's formal Sustainability Plan, assessing its strengths, vulnerabilities, and the feasibility of its vision for a self-sustaining network. This chapter transitions the evaluation from a review of the past to an examination for its future potential.

Chapter 6 offers the conclusions and concrete recommendations. It is here that the evaluator's overall judgement is rendered, and actionable steps are proposed for the consortium, stakeholders, and potential funders to secure the project's legacy.

This report tells the story of a project that excelled in its original mission and now stands at a threshold. Its findings are intended to be used as a foundational document for the next phase of the AI Pioneers' project.

## 2. Analysis of Main Findings Across the Three Years

This chapter synthesises findings from three years of formative and summative evaluation. The trajectory shows that the project that (1) started strong through building strong foundations based on an inclusive partnership model and an ability to respond and pivot as required, (2) built momentum through its outputs, activities and network building, and (3) concluded with significant impact within its evolving network and externally with VET policymakers across the globe including in Australia, while increasingly engaged with agreed commitments and steps towards a sustainability model.

### 2.1 Year 1-2: Foundation and Development

#### Management and partnership establishment

The project established robust governance structures from the outset, including a Quality Assurance and Evaluation Committee. The initial partnership questionnaire identified inclusivity as an area for improvement. The systematic evaluation plan was implemented early, with partners engaging in SWOT analyses and regular process evaluations. Management was rated highly for clarity and structure.

#### Output development and initial alignment

The foundational work on core outputs (DigCompEdu supplement, toolkit, network, evaluation schema) began, employing an iterative peer-review process within the consortium. Early alignment with EU policies (Digital Education Action Plan, Skills Agenda) was consciously pursued. The methodology of circulating rubrics and drafts for feedback ensured quality was embedded from the outset. Early dissemination activities started building the project's profile.

#### Network building

Initial communities of practice began to form, primarily through partner networks and early webinars. The project's digital presence (website, LinkedIn) was established.

### 2.2 Year 2: Consolidation and Expansion

#### Partnership strength

The identified weakness in inclusivity was successfully addressed, with scores improving significantly. The partnership evolved into a highly collaborative and respectful consortium. The partnership questionnaire showed growth in scores for responsiveness and mutual learning. The collaborative ethos became a noted strength.

### Outputs being externally validated

Project outputs were developed from internal drafts to externally validated resources. The evaluation schema and ethical handbook were tested with wider stakeholders through focus groups and consultative seminars in different countries. The practice of involving external experts and stakeholders in reviewing deliverables was implemented, increasing the relevance and practicality of the outputs.

### Dissemination and growing impact

Dissemination activities scaled up, moving from informing to engaging. The project began to attract high-level policy attention. Presentations were made to bodies like the Council of Europe and the European Training Foundation (ETF), indicating recognition of the project's value at the EU policy level.

## 2.3 Year 3: Culmination, Impact, and Sustainability Steps

### Excellence in delivery and management

Final-year surveys confirmed exceptional ratings for management (4.6/5) and communication (4.5/5). The project concluded all planned outputs on time. Partners praised clear deadlines, supportive coordination, and effective monthly meetings. Outputs like the Evaluation Schema and Ethics Handbook received perfect or near-perfect quality ratings (5/5) from partners.

### Outputs seen as having impact and relevance

The final outputs were not just delivered but were recognised as important in this field, practical, and urgently needed. They successfully bridged policy (EU ethics guidelines) with practice (VET classroom tools). The outputs were presented at major conferences (e.g., EDEN 2025), used in workshops, and disseminated to a global audience via LinkedIn (reaching 16k+ members). They were deemed relevant for educators, trainers, managers, and policymakers.

### Vibrant network regarded as key legacy

The AI Pioneers Network emerged as the project's most vital asset. The final conference in Bremen (120+ participants from across the globe) was a testament to its reach and engagement. The network had over 1,040 LinkedIn followers and a 380+ subscriber newsletter. Events were highly rated (4.7/5 for international events), fostering valuable exchanges and concrete collaborations.

## Overarching challenge described as long-term sustainability

The key conclusion from all evaluation instruments (survey score of 3.8/5, SWOT analysis<sup>1</sup>, meeting evaluations) is that sustainability is the paramount concern. The threat of the project ending as a "stand-alone initiative" was consistently highlighted. The SWOT analysis listed "lack of clear sustainability actions" as a weakness and "risk of the project remaining stand-alone" as a top threat. Partners in meeting evaluations prioritized "developing a sustainability strategy" above all else for the final phase. The Sustainability Plan (D6.2) was created as a direct response to this identified need.

### Areas for Continued Development:

While outputs were considered to have been completed in a highly satisfactory manner, their ongoing utility in a fast-evolving AI landscape requires a maintenance plan. Furthermore, engagement with the adult education sector was identified as weaker than with VET. Partners suggested the toolkit needed regular updates with new tools and case studies. The SWOT analysis notes a "lack of focus on and access to adult education sector."

## 2.4 Conclusions

- The project fully achieved its aim of building capacity for AI in VET and Adult Education. It produced frameworks (DigCompEdu supplement), practical tools (toolkit, evaluation schema), and policy guidance (ethics handbook) of demonstrably high quality and relevance.
- The consortium was exceptionally well-managed, with communication and inclusivity scores showing marked improvement over time, leading to a highly effective and collaborative partnership.
- The project's outputs and activities were strategically aligned with and actively implemented key EU policy frameworks, including the Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) and the European Skills Agenda. Furthermore, it successfully translated its research and tools into evidence for high-level policy discourse, engaging directly with influential bodies such as the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), the ETF, and the Council of Europe.
- The most significant outcome is the active, interdisciplinary community of practice. This network is the primary vehicle for future impact.
- The project's funding period has concluded successfully. Its long-term value now hinges on the execution of its post-project sustainability plan. The transition from a funded project to a member-sustained community is the decisive next step.
- The AI Pioneers project serves as a model for Erasmus+ initiatives, demonstrating how to combine strategic policy alignment, rigorous quality assurance, and partnership collaboration to produce meaningful, impactful results.

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<sup>1</sup> This was conducted annually with this final SWOT undertaken during October and November 2025. Partners collaborated online using CANVA, allowing for visual and collaborative brainstorming. The previous year's SWOT was also made available for reference, allowing partners to track evolution and see if previously identified weaknesses had been addressed or if new threats had emerged.

## 3. The Voice of the Consortium

### 3.1 Introduction: Capturing the Narrative

While quantitative metrics and the successfully completed deliverables highlighted above define the project's completion and its key performance indicators, the character and intelligence of the project are best understood through the narrative experience of the project team. This chapter connects the above review of documented outcomes to an analysis of the lived reality of the AI Pioneers project, as narrated by some of its key implementers.

Based on a series of structured, in-depth interviews conducted in November and December 2025, this section presents the perspectives of partners representing the project's coordination, network development, ethical research, digital dissemination, and national implementation. Their testimonies provide a ground level view of the consortium's dynamics, strategic choices, and the challenges navigated over three years. These interviews illuminate the collaborative processes, moments of adaptation, and underlying ethos that turned a formal proposal into a vibrant community.

The analysis that follows is organised thematically, drawing on direct quotes to bring authenticity and depth to the evaluation. It explores the evolution of partnership, the strategic rationale behind key decisions, the perceived impact of outputs, and the collective view of the future. Trends that were observed by partners are also outlined.

This chapter serves as the link between the project's formal results (Chapter 2) and the subsequent evaluation of its sustainability (Chapter 4), grounding the strategic assessment in the authentic voices of the partnership itself.

### 3.2 Thematic Analysis of the Feedback

The interview data reveals a project of exceptional quality, characterised by strategic foresight, resilient adaptation, and a highly collaborative ethos. Partners unanimously describe AI Pioneers as a "success story," not just for its outputs, but for the vibrant, international community of practice it forged. The decision to prioritise network building (Work Package 2) from the outset is identified as the single most impactful strategic choice, transforming the project from a producer of reports into a meaningful living network.

While challenges existed, including budget constraints, the difficulty of engaging frontline VET practitioners, partner and personnel engagement levels, and the inherent stresses of consortium management, the partnership demonstrated remarkable cohesion, responsiveness, and a shared commitment to the mission. The overarching theme emerging from all conversations is the importance of sustainability, with partners expressing both a strong desire to continue and concrete concerns about maintaining momentum post-funding.

## Theme 1: Network building

From the very first interview, it became clear that the network was not a byproduct, but the blueprint. One of the project developers explained the foundational decision with clarity:

"We put the network as Work Package 2, right after management. That was intentional. It wasn't something to do at the end. It was the core of what we were building from the start."

This was no accident of timing. Another partner, reflecting on the project's organic feel, traced it back to this choice of working on the networking building as an early work package. The project's approach to front-loading network development was highlighted as a success factor by all interviewees, with some comparing to other projects, noting that this intentional focus from the outset led to a strong network outcome, "unlike in other projects where network development is often an afterthought".

The use of LinkedIn as the networking space allowed for an "always-on" ethos and over time created a tangible asset. An analysis of the metrics demonstrated that there was a community being built, not simply "a bulletin board" and the traffic demonstrated that the partners "had built a place for this conversation to happen."

## Theme 2: Building a genuine collaboration

The early days were, by several accounts, a typical EU project setting. "Our online meetings would have over ten sometimes up to twenty people on a screen." Some interviewees found this difficult at the early stages highlighting how it was "hard to build trust" with so many involved in the meetings. The turning point was not seen as emerging from a specific document or internal review, but a shift in dynamics.

The Project Coordinator was consistently credited with fostering this shift. One interviewee explained that "she didn't just manage deadlines. She helped us to communicate." Another explained "You felt heard, even if you were the quiet one in the meeting." This cultivated an environment where, as another partner described, colleagues began to "step in beyond their assigned roles."

"When I was struggling to finalise a presentation for a high-level event, two partners that I didn't know that well helped me reshape it. That's when I knew we were collaborating well."

This trust became the project's social capital, allowing it to absorb stress and adapt. Another partner described:

"I joined late, but I never felt outside. Real work did happen at the two-hour monthly meetings with lots of offers of help."

### Theme 3: Navigating technological shifts

The interview data confirms the launch of Generative AI as a pivotal, externally-driven event that dramatically altered the project's context and workload. One interviewee provided insight into this shift:

"ChatGPT's launch during the first year changed things around AI and increased interest in the project."

The project in many ways was pushed to react to these real-world shifts. The practical response to such ongoing changes and external realities included the consortium's adaptive action in the decision to pivot their primary social platform. This was seen as a pragmatic, partner-driven consensus, with the co-ordinator stating the move from Mastodon to LinkedIn "was agreed upon by all partners due to usability concerns." This demonstrates a collective focus on effectiveness over ideological preference, a key factor in their agile response.

### Theme 4: Translating outputs into practice

Interviews reveal a clear and shared concern regarding the difficulty of ensuring project tools were deeply implemented within target institutions. Interviewees addressed this gap in some country settings between dissemination and adoption. Many VET organisations were not considered to be always fully engaged with AI concerns, and this made it difficult at times to create new partnerships to test what might have been seen as the "more challenging aspects" of the project deliverables.

"Hard to follow through with organisations implementing the schema."

Others specified the difficulty of reaching key decision-makers, noting it was "Difficult to engage VET centre administrators (easier to reach teachers/trainers)."

The perspective from another interviewee provided further context for this challenge, highlighting a foundational barrier:

"Teachers use AI in their daily work, many lack technological training, making it difficult to identify innovative thinking."

This insight reveals that what was seen for some partners as a recurrent obstacle of embedding innovation in daily VET practice, rooted in variable levels of digital readiness among the target audience.

### Theme 5: Sustainability steps

The interviews consistently concluded with a focus on the post-project future, characterised by a genuine sense of commitment, concern, and pragmatic planning.

As a common example, one interviewee offered a concrete, personal commitment that illustrates the reliance on individual goodwill, stating she would continue to contribute her time to maintain the network's presence on LinkedIn and other platforms. Another pointed towards a desire for continued engagement based on "the strong partnership relationships established."

While the next chapter will cover this in more detail, interviewees highlighted concerns about structure and access to future resources. An interviewee noted that the dominant threat is the project ending as a stand-alone initiative "without long-term continuity," which captured this central anxiety. Yet, against this uncertainty, interviewees express a powerful, unified desire to continue. The relationships in this consortium are considered to be the foundation for the sustainability plan, with the network referred to as its key scaffolding. The interviews ultimately framed the sustainability challenge as a test of using this collective identity in navigating a future without a funding grant.

### 3.3 Summary of Trends Identified

**The network as the foundational success:** Every partner, unprompted, identified the AI Pioneers Network as the project's core legacy and greatest strength. Its strategic design (WP2), operational building platform, use for dissemination and digital expansion, as well as supporting local linking with VET networks all converged on this point. The network has become a thriving, organic community that has expanded beyond the EU, demonstrated by the successful Bremen conference (120+ participants), recent webinar with Australian partners, as well as its global LinkedIn reach.

**Agile adaptation as a core skill of the team:** The consortium consistently demonstrated an ability to pivot effectively in response to external and internal feedback. From an external perspective, the interviewees pointed to how "the ChatGPT moment" helped to build the project momentum, and secondly shifting from Twitter/Mastodon to LinkedIn ensured that there was a better base for the network to grow. From an internal perspective, the partners improved collaboration methods throughout making use of different approaches from large Zoom calls to effective working patterns with smaller groups. Dedicated support was also provided to any struggling partners. This led to the project remaining relevant and responsive, avoiding obsolescence or falling behind in a fast-moving field.

**Meaningful collaboration processes:** Interviews describe a journey from formal partnership to authentic, supportive collaboration. Partners were described as "stepping in beyond their assigned roles." The project leaders ensured that the monthly meetings were "productive" and the supportive atmosphere was praised, with the coordinator consistently helping to build trust. As well as the interview feedback, high scores in partnership surveys (Responsiveness 4.1, Inclusivity 4.6) and a widespread desire for future collaboration, indicates a high social capital within the consortium.

**Challenge of engaging VET practitioners:** A consistent challenge was linked to engaging the frontline VET teachers, trainers, and administrators. Interviewees found it hard to reach administrators and follow up on implementation. Some struggled with teacher training levels and engagement. For some the solution was often linked to the need for personal visits to build school connections. But this was not always possible. A possible outcome was that some of the high-quality outputs (and

access to the network) did not have equal depth of penetration into everyday VET and adult education practice across all regions.

**Sustainability planning:** This is the dominant theme of the final evaluation. Concerns are clear (moderate survey score of 3.8), but so is commitment. The interviewees noted a mix of confidence, concern, and concrete plans. Partners are already acting through following a formal Sustainability Plan. At the country level, institutions have offered ongoing support, with individual partners offering to provide specific support on maintaining the network. The deliverables will be used in workshops and promoted in future conferences. At the collective level, new projects and funding are also being sought. It is clear from all partners that the project does not end with the final report. A transition to a member-sustained community is actively underway, though its long-term stability remains the critical test.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The story told by the partners is one of building a network by design, while creating a supportive project community and a successful wider network. The partners also worked together very pragmatically to navigate quite a turbulent external world of technological revolution. The partners were at the forefront of these changes, especially within the VET sector, where the deliverables received wide audiences. Even while partners were also engaging on the ground with what can often be a challenging reality of bringing VET teachers and trainers with them on a process of educational change, the ongoing commitment to building the network worked efficiently as the content of these deliverables and the associated commentary through blogposts, webinars and presentations at the highest levels all resonated within the sector. The network can be considered to have grown as much through its authenticity as through its timely expertise.

The above testimony provides the essential foundation and scaffolding for the sustainability plan. It is a record of significant reputational, social, and intellectual capital, that is to be converted into a new, independent entity and set of ideas. The following chapter discusses how the proposed plan is a fitting next step for the vibrant and deeply committed community that built AI Pioneers.

The partner interviews paint a picture of a remarkably successful and mature Erasmus+ project. It excelled not only in delivering exemplary outputs but, more importantly, in fostering a learning ecosystem that added value for its members throughout its lifecycle. The consortium operated as a resilient learning organisation, capable of adaptation and mutual support. The significant challenge of embedding change at the grassroots level persists but is well-understood. The collective will to sustain the network is palpable and is being translated into actionable plans. The AI Pioneers Project has successfully laid the foundation for a lasting legacy.

The next chapter now looks to how its future impact and sustainability can be seen as linked to the agency and collaboration of this very committed partnership.

## 4. Sustainability Strategy and Long-Term Viability

The challenge synthesised from these interviews is not if the work should continue, but how to embed the successful collaboration of the funded period into a resilient, self-sustaining structure. The partners have provided the blueprint through their actions and their concerns about resources and engagement depth. The Sustainability Plan is the formal response to this collective testimony. This chapter looks at whether this plan adequately addresses the realities, tensions, and aspirations so vividly expressed by the very community it aims to sustain.

The true measure of a project's success often lies not in its conclusion, but in its legacy. The AI Pioneers Sustainability Plan (D6.2) provides a critical and sophisticated roadmap for this transition, moving beyond aspirational statements to present a concrete, phased, and partner-driven action plan. This chapter evaluates the proposed strategy, analysing its strengths, inherent challenges, and the critical success factors that will determine whether the vibrant community cultivated over three years can evolve into a self-sustaining force.

### 4.1 Strategic Positioning and Foundational Strength

The plan is built upon a powerful and accurate diagnosis of the ongoing need within the sector, which forms its core rationale for continuation.

**Filling a critical gap:** The plan identifies that despite the "immense" impact of Generative AI on education broadly, VET and Adult Education remain underserved. It cites compelling evidence, such as the project's own survey finding that only 26% of VET institutions had an AI strategy, and notes that innovation is often driven by isolated individuals. This clear articulation of an unmet need provides a compelling "value proposition" for a sustained network.

**The dual role of VET:** A key insight underpinning the strategy is the recognition of VET's "dual function" as both a subject of AI (requiring new curricula) and a user of AI (as a pedagogical tool). This unique position makes a specialised network not just beneficial but essential, distinguishing AI Pioneers from generic AI-in-education forums and solidifying its niche.

**Capitalising on established reputation and momentum:** The plan is not starting from zero. It leverages the project's considerable status as the representative of the VET sector in wider EU AI discussions. Partnerships with the European Digital Education Hub, the ETF, the Council of Europe, and EDEN provide a ready-made platform for influence and growth. The existing digital assets (LinkedIn following, newsletter reach and a well-trafficked website) form a valuable launchpad.

### 4.2 Strengths of the Proposed Sustainability Model

The proposed operational model demonstrates a pragmatic approach to post-funding life, with several notable strengths:

**Co-creation and concrete commitments:** The methodology and plan were "elaborated directly from... partner offers," transforming vague goodwill into a tangible activity schedule. The included table of "Sustainability Offers" (e.g., Pontydysgu's fortnightly blog, ITB's annual "AI Day," TecMinho's

webinar coordination) provides a transparent and accountable foundation for Year 1. This evidence-based approach significantly increases the plan's credibility and feasibility.

**Phased implementation:** The 12-month timeline is structured in four distinct phases, with an incremental approach mitigating risk by ensuring the network is stable and valuable before attempting significant expansion or financial calls.

- Phase 1 (Foundation and Launch): Focuses on essential formalities (governance, legal structure, technical set up) before public recruitment.
- Phase 2 (Demonstrate Value and Grow): Prioritises delivering content and engagement to prove worth to the initial community.
- Phase 3 (Expand and Collaborate): Leverages partnerships and a flagship conference to broaden reach.
- Phase 4 (Consolidate and Plan Ahead): Focuses on review, reporting, and strategic planning for Year 2.

**Balanced focus on community and content:** The plan identifies that the technology is not the primary focus. Instead, it prioritises "maintaining the blog, bulletin, newsletter and the LinkedIn page" and hosting regular events. The intent to "redefine" the website as a hub for all AI VET projects positions it as a curator and connector, a role with higher sustainability potential than being a sole content creator.

**Awareness of key risks:** The plan explicitly highlights the key risks, namely partner fatigue, financial sustainability (including a possible over-reliance on uncertain membership fees) and low member engagement. There are proposed mitigations included such as diversifying income, formalising commitments via MoUs, recruiting new contributors, and implementing feedback loops.

### 4.3 Critical Challenges

Despite these strengths, the plan's execution faces significant hurdles that will require ongoing management.

**Managing voluntary commitments:** The sustainability offers, while concrete, are largely voluntary, in-kind contributions. The plan's success is balanced on the continued goodwill and available bandwidth of partner staff whose primary roles may lie elsewhere. As noted in the partner interviews, individuals are already contributing on top of existing jobs. The plan ideally should move from individual commitments to institutional endorsement. Securing formal recognition and resource allocation from the partners' host organisations (e.g., Universities of Bremen, Basque Country, Verona) would assist with long-term stability.

**Building from free to paying community:** Converting the current set up of a free, albeit highly engaged audience (LinkedIn followers, newsletter subscribers) into a paying membership base is typically a challenging process. The plan proposes a tiered model but the challenge is on being able to ensure that the "premium" benefits will justify payment. The proposed examples (recorded webinars, an ebook "Starter Kit") may be insufficient and the network may also need to create more

high-value offerings (such as in-depth policy analyses, accredited courses, or direct consultancy access) that address the acute needs of VET administrators and policymakers.

**Competition for attention in a crowded space:** The plan acknowledges that educators are "overwhelmed with webinars." The AI Pioneers network must compete not only with other EU projects but with a constant deluge of commercial and academic AI content. One of the interviewees described this local marketplace and how their efforts to engage VET practitioners during the project was often affected and derailed by these competitors whether other EU projects or commercial bodies. Differentiating from these will be an important step: "The only pan-European community focused on the dual curriculum and pedagogical challenges of AI in VET and Adult Education." The activity base, posts, and any proposed webinars need to reinforce this specialised niche.

**Measuring impact beyond activity:** The Gantt chart and plan are strong on output metrics (webinars held, blog posts published, members recruited). These represent a strong base for building on the current network reach. As these numbers are realised, the next step may be looking further to e.g. numbers of institutions adopting the ethical schema, changes in national VET policy influenced by network advocacy, successful cross-border collaborations spawned. The network can look to build mechanisms to capture and showcase these outcomes. These will be important in accessing future grants and building further relationships with new institutions, as has been evidenced to date with Australian partners.

#### 4.4 Success Factors for Long-Term Sustainability

Drawing from the plan and the broader project context, the following factors can be seen as critical:

**Leadership:** The informal, project-based leadership team should move toward a formal and potentially rotating governance body as outlined in Phase 1. This will prevent burnout and distribute ownership across the community.

**Early wins:** The first 6 months should ideally lead to a key statement of value. Some examples could include a high-profile, co-hosted webinar with the ETF or JRC, the publication of a well regarded report on the implications of the EU AI Act for VET, a formal engagement or project with Future Skills Organisation (Australia) or the facilitation of a meaningful partnership between VET schools in different countries, a German and Italian VET school.

**Financial diversification:** The network should ideally not rely solely on membership fees. As per the plan's own mitigation, it must actively pursue mixed revenue streams: small grants for specific outputs (e.g., translating toolkits), paid sponsorships for the annual conference from ethical EdTech firms, or offering fee-based workshops.

**Embedding in national ecosystems:** As experience from interviewees in Cyprus and Spain showed, local relevance is key. The network's continued growth would be helped by its language-based Communities of Practice (COPs) becoming self-sustaining nodes. The central entity should empower these national hubs with resources and templates while celebrating their local successes, creating a federated, resilient model.

## 4.5 Summary of Sustainability Potential

The AI Pioneers project has an exceptionally high potential for sustainability, arguably higher than most Erasmus+ initiatives. This is due to:

- A clearly identified and persistent market gap (lack of VET-focused AI support).
- A pre-built, active, and respected community with substantial social and reputational capital.
- A well-conceived, detailed, and pragmatic transition plan that is grounded in partner commitments.

However, turning this potential into a sustainable entity is not without challenges. Typically, a critical juncture for any such project is the 12 to 24 month post-funding period. It can be seen from this report that the project partners have successfully demonstrated agility and cohesion during the project. If it can apply the same collaborative spirit, strategic adaptation, and focus on delivering value to its own community's needs, the AI Pioneers network is poised to become a permanent and influential fixture in the European education landscape.

The Sustainability Plan itself is a document of high quality and strategic merit. Its execution now depends on the community it aims to serve. The most promising indicator is not found in the plan itself, but in the interview data: the widespread, genuine desire among partners to continue. This intrinsic motivation, if harnessed and structured by the proposed governance model, provides the essential energy and commitment to navigate the steps ahead.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1 Summary of the Evaluation

The AI Pioneers project (2023-2025) stands as a paradigm of excellence within the Erasmus+ programme. It has not merely fulfilled its contractual obligations but has exceeded them, delivering a legacy of significant and timely impact. The project successfully navigated a shift in its external environment (the launch and proliferation of Generative AI) transforming a potential challenge into a platform for enhanced relevance and leadership.

The evaluation work identifies four overarching successes:

- **High impact outputs:** The project produced a suite of intellectual outputs (the DigCompEdu Supplement, the practical Toolkit, the foundational Evaluation Schema, and the Ethics Handbook) that are already recognised as pioneering resources at European, national, and institutional levels.
- **An exemplary collaborative partnership:** The consortium evolved into a genuinely supportive and responsive community of likeminded partners. This was evidenced by high scores in partner surveys (Management: 4.6/5, Inclusivity: 4.6/5) and testimonials praising the collaborative ethos and mutual support.
- **A vibrant and valued network as core legacy:** The strategic decision to prioritise network building (Work Package 2) from the outset was a key foundation for the project's success. The AI Pioneers Network, with its global LinkedIn presence, active Communities of Practice, and well-attended events like the Bremen conference, is cited by partners as the project's most vital and enduring asset.
- **Significant policy alignment and influence:** The project proactively operationalised EU priorities (Digital Education Action Plan, Skills Agenda, AI Ethics) and successfully fed its evidence and tools into high-level policy dialogues with bodies such as the European Training Foundation, Joint Research Centre, and Council of Europe.
- **The primary challenge, unequivocally identified across all evaluation instruments, is long-term sustainability.** The project's legacy of substantial achievement now faces a pivotal transition; its long-term influence depends on successfully evolving from a grant-funded initiative into an independently sustainable community of practice.

### 5.2 Conclusions

- AI Pioneers has fully achieved and surpassed its objectives. It has built substantial capacity for AI in VET and Adult Education, provided critical tools and frameworks, and established itself as the de facto European hub for this specialised field.

- While the reports and toolkits are valuable, the project’s most significant product is the human and professional network it has cultivated. This community of practice represents a potent engine for ongoing innovation, support, and advocacy.
- The project has concluded excellently, but there are future steps to be completed. The moderate sustainability score (3.8/5) and the focused concern in partner interviews highlight that the period of greatest risk and most important work begins now. The well-constructed Sustainability Plan (D6.2) provides an excellent roadmap, but its execution is challenging and will test the consortium’s commitment and adaptability beyond the framework of external funding.
- The trust, mutual respect, and collaborative patterns established over three years are the greatest resource for navigating the sustainability challenge. This social capital needs to be actively protected and leveraged during the transition.

### 5.3 Strategic Recommendations

To secure the legacy and amplify the future impact of the AI Pioneers initiative, the following recommendations are made:

#### For the AI Pioneers Consortium

The Sustainability Plan should be operationalised and then followed, with D6.2 being seen as an agreed action plan. Ideally, a Sustainability Transition Manager can be appointed from within the partnership to drive the Phase 1 activities (governance, legal setup, membership launch) in Q1 2026. Quarterly review meetings should focus on sustainability metrics, not just activities.

Working with the paying network members, it should be clear as to how these are accessing value for their membership. Ideally, they are able to access offerings such as:

- Policy clinics offering guidance on the EU AI Act for VET institutions.
- Curated materials providing tailored analysis of AI tools and trends for specific vocational sectors.
- Member-only CoPs and groups for VET leaders to examine emerging issues and problem-solve.

In order to formalise partner support, each core partner organisation should sign a Memorandum of Understanding endorsing the network and specifying their in-kind contribution (e.g., 5 staff days per year for webinar hosting, content creation) for a minimum of two years, providing a stable foundation.

#### For Network Development

Work with the national CoPs, building a federated model so that national COPs (Italy, Germany, Greece, Spain, Portugal, etc.) are provided with resources and toolkits for organising local events and

recruiting members. Their successes can be promoted and featured in central communications to demonstrate what is going on across the grassroots of the network.

Review how data is being gathered across the network, from simple tools for members to report how project outputs have been used (e.g., "Our school adopted the ethics schema," "We revised our curriculum based on the DigCompEdu supplement") to impact measurement frameworks. Beyond tracking webinars and followers, look to establish clear metrics for institutional and systemic impact. This data can then be published annually to demonstrate tangible change.

Address the consistent challenge of engaging busy VET teachers and administrators. Dedicate a strand of activity to very short, highly practical resources ("5-minute explainers," "Lesson plan snippets using AI"). Partner with VET teacher unions and national training agencies to distribute these directly.

#### For Future Policy and Funding

The Network should be positioning itself as the essential advisor on the EU AI Act for VET by developing guidance notes on the implications of EU legislation for the VET sector. Network representatives should offer to brief the European Commission, ETF, and national ministries.

Seek smaller grants or contracts for specific, deliverable outputs, such as translating the toolkit into additional languages, conducting a follow-up survey on AI strategy adoption in VET, or producing a state-of-the-art report on AI in a specific vocational field (e.g., healthcare, green engineering).

## 5.4 Final Statement

The AI Pioneers project has delivered a high value return on investment for the Erasmus+ programme. It has provided leadership, tools, and community at a critical moment of technological transformation in a vital yet underserved educational sector.

The combination of a brilliant foundational project, a robust sustainability plan, and a skilled and committed partnership, makes the prospects for long-term success strong. By executing the Sustainability Plan actions (and suggested recommendations above) with the same diligence and collaboration that characterised the last three years, the AI Pioneers network can evolve from a successfully concluded project into a lasting institution, ensuring that Vocational and Adult Education across Europe is equipped to harness AI ethically, effectively, and empoweringly for decades to come.

## Appendix A: Interview Schema

### 1. Partnership and Collaboration Dynamics

This section delves into the human and operational aspects of working together.

- If we had the opportunity to re-do the project, how could increased collaboration or different ways of working between the organisations within the consortium improve your work experience or reduce stress?

### 2. Quality of Partnership Support

This assesses the intangible, mutual support system within the consortium.

- Could you give me a specific example of when the partnership felt particularly responsive to a challenge or need?
- How would you describe the general awareness and empathy between partners? Was there a sense of being "in it together"?
- To what extent did you feel the partnership was inclusive, that your organisation's skills and opinions were respected and listened to?

### 3. Organisational Learning and Development

This explores the direct benefits and knowledge gains for each partner institution.

- Can you share one or two concrete examples of something your organisation learned directly from another partner (knowledge or a skill you can now use beyond this project)?

### 4. Project Outputs, Activities and Impact

This is a core section for evaluating the project's tangible results and their reach.

- In your view, what are the standout strengths of the project's main outputs and activities (like the Hub, the curriculum, reports)?
- What one or two improvements would have made these products or activities significantly stronger?
- As we enter the final phase, what is the most important thing we need to do to ensure these products are successful and used?
- How would you describe the project's impact so far, from your local context up to the European level?

### 5. Stakeholder Engagement and External Perception

This assesses how well the project connected with its intended audience beyond the consortium.

Key question

- How effectively do you think we involved our associate partners?
- How well did we engage with the wider community of VET teachers, trainers, and other stakeholders?

### 6. Sustainability and Future Legacy

This focuses on life after the project's funding ends.

- How sustainable is the project? In your view, what parts have the best chance of living on after the funding ends?

- What would be your top recommendation for keeping the project's outcomes alive and relevant?
- Based on this experience, what ideas do you have for future projects or collaborations?

## 7. Final Reflections

This captures any crucial feedback that hasn't been covered by the structured questions.

- Please share any ideas you may have for future projects and collaborations
- Is there anything else that you would like to raise or comment on concerning any aspect of the project or consortium that hasn't been addressed above?
- If you could interview the project team, what questions would you ask aside from the ones in this survey

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