

EMPOWER MAGAZINE

SME
CLUSTER
GROWTH
EMPOWERED ENGINEERING



**SUPPORTING
COLLABORATION**
CLUSTER NETWORK
IN FRANCE

**CROSS
BORDER
CLUSTERS**
IN IRELAND

**NATIONAL
EVENT**
BUILDING SUSTAINABLE
SMES IN THE ENGINEERING
SECTOR IN FRANCE

**END OF OUR
JOURNEY**
FINAL MEETING
IN ISTANBUL

It has been a great journey!

After **three fantastic years** the **SME Cluster Growth** project is coming to an end. Even so, the networks, **resources and many of the designed activities continue to evolve**, helping engineering SMEs in our regions to connect, innovate, grow, and internationalise.



SME
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This project is an excellent example of fruitful University-Business Collaboration. It has laid the foundations for sustained collaborations between HEIs and many SMEs, developing profiles that act as boundary spanners, allocating resources and fostering open innovation spaces that lead to more interconnected and collaborative innovation ecosystems.

SME Cluster Growth is also a research-based project and the activities developed during the lifetime of the project have been inspired by and built upon these results. Various reports have also been published based on those outcomes and are available on the project website, e.g., Growth Needs Analysis Synthesis

Report, Regional Growth Needs Analysis Reports from seven partner regions and Good Practice Case Study Collection, specifically from each region. The project has also employed different means of dissemination to maximise the spread of the results and foster the engagement of new actors to ensure the sustainability of the project and its future impact, e.g., website, social media, semestral E-zines and diverse national and international launch events.

Now, we believe it is a good time to take stock of the results, highlighting three main areas of impact: networking, training/consulting, and mobility.

First, the project has expanded SMEs opportunities for interconnected growth in six regions, thanks to the creation of the **Cluster Growth Councils**, which establish collaboration networks and culture for joint innovation in consortium cities and surrounding regions (Malaga, Alcalá de Henares, Bologna, Cork, Istanbul, and Paris). Complementarily, the **interchange of knowledge and experiences** has also been promoted in all the activities carried out throughout the project, joining profiles with the same interests, considering different backgrounds and nationalities.

Second, during the past three years, training and consultancy of both students and SMEs have been core activities. HEIs are an important source of qualified human capital that can be transferred to SMEs to boost innovation. In this sense, we have created a **Student Consultancy Programme** that permits the students to work with the real challenges and needs of SMEs. Also, a **Change of Perspective Programme** has been implemented, to co-create strategic partnerships between SMEs and academia.

Continuous training of SMEs is crucial to cope with growth and internationalisation. In this regard, we launched the **SME Cluster Growth Training Programme**, a course involving external experts in different fields that lead SMEs to achieve their Growth Roadmap goals. A Toolkit is available online

to implement this course in any other region. Also, an interactive **SME Growth Self-Assessment Tool** is available online, to help SMEs gauge their growth capacity across key dimensions. It is also important to highlight that the project offers an international pool of mentors, specialised in different topics related to SMEs growth. The mentor's profiles are accessible on the website and they can be contacted through the project partners.

Thirdly, the international scope of this project has enabled the **mobility of SMEs, both virtually and onsite**, to learn first-hand about diverse innovation ecosystems and expand international networks. Each region offers a **Hot Desk point** to support SME mobility as well as **Facility Sharing Guidelines**, which provide a structure and steps for sharing resources, collaborative research opportunities and learning experiences with other institutions.

All the outcomes are available at the project's website, and you can use them to further enhance SMEs in the engineering sector to innovate and grow!

SME Cluster Growth Project Consortium Members



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National Event on Building Sustainable SMEs in the Engineering Sector in France

Nurturing Responsible
Finance, Brand Image,
Network Collaboration,
and Cultural Alignment

By Elma Demir, Researcher and
Business Development Manager, IMTBS

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are the driving force of many economies, particularly in the technology sector. While SMEs are often associated with innovation and job creation, the environmental impact of these businesses is often overlooked. As the technology sector continues to grow, sustainable practices must be implemented to ensure the continued success of the industry.

To foster mutual knowledge exchange on the subject matters between experts, SMEs and students in the Essonne region, the Institut Mines-Télécom Business School (IMT-BS) organized a national hybrid event on May 25th 2023 consisting of a series of workshops and expert talks.

Clusters in engineering are one way of achieving sustainability in the technology sector. These clusters refer to groups of companies that are geographically close together and share resources and expertise. By working together, these companies can reduce their environmental impact and foster innovation.

While certain practices such as using renewable energy sources and sustainable materials, have been seen at the forefront of environmental change in the technology sector, the social aspects of the sustainability transition are often neglected.

The event revolved around the theme of sustainable organisations which prioritize environmental, social and economic sustainability in their operations and decision-making processes. Experts highlighted that in addition to their goal of operating in a socially responsible, economically viable and environmentally sound manner, sustainable organisations also strive to build long-term relationships with their stakeholders and contribute positively to the communities in which they operate. The event aimed primarily to shed light on four pillars of sustainable organisations: responsible finance, sustainable brand image, the creation of a strong network and collaboration, and aligning organizational objectives with culture.

The lineup of experts and practitioners brought together knowledge and experience in their respective fields



Hubert Saint Olive, independent consultant at the Hadvise and Lecturer at the IMTBS & the Parsons School of Design presented on how responsible finance practices can be integrated into the core operations of businesses, ensuring economic growth while preserving environmental integrity and social well-being.



Marion-Emi Alix, Sustainable Accelerator Manager at the Accélérateur ESS and lecturer – at the HEC talked about business clusters and collaboration and provided suggestions on how to create robust networks and collaboration, which play a pivotal role in building sustainable organisations. By forging strategic partnerships, organisations can leverage collective strengths and resources to address complex challenges and drive systemic change.



Capucine Epagneau, co-founder and CEO of company Petit Côté, shared how aligning goals and culture can foster business sustainability. It is through the fusion of values, purpose, and employee engagement that organisations can embed sustainability deeply within their DNA. By fostering a culture of sustainability, empowering employees to contribute to sustainable initiatives, and aligning individual and collective goals with the broader mission, companies can develop into sustainable organisations.

Julien Héron, CEO of Ab Initio talked about the significance of cultivating a sustainable brand image—one that resonates with the values of conscious consumers, strengthens reputation, and contributes to the overall well-being of communities. He delved into the strategies and communication tools that can enhance brand perception and loyalty, while simultaneously driving positive environmental and social impact.

This webinar is structured in such a way that each expert will present for about 15 to 20 minutes, and after the presentations of our experts, we will provide space for questions from participants, as well as share your own experiences and perspectives. Together, let us discover innovative ways to build sustainable organisations that not only thrive in the present but also pave the way for a brighter, more sustainable future.

The event was organised in the scope of the **SME Cluster Growth project** co-funded by Erasmus+. The project is implemented through collaborative efforts of the University of Malaga (Spain), Crazy Town Oy (Finland), University of Alcalá (Spain), University Industry Innovation Network (the Netherlands), University of Bologna (Italy), Istanbul Technical University (Turkey), Momentum (Ireland), Cork Institute of Technology (Ireland) and Institut Mines-Télécom Business School (France).



Spotlight on a Cross-Border Cluster in Ireland

By Denise Callan, Momentum

Denise
Callan



The **Border Region Manufacturing Cluster (BORMAC)** is an industry-led cluster comprised of manufacturing companies spanning both the **North and South border region in Ireland**. The **specific objective is to position the cluster as a centre of excellence** that is internationally recognised for its expertise and competence in providing **a range of services to the Manufacturing Industry** .

The overall goal is to create a vibrant, collaborative environment by promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and teamwork to achieve more successful outcomes than could be achieved by individual companies working alone.

The cluster members offer specialised manufacturing services across a full range of manufacturing processes across a broad range of industry sectors including precision engineering, automation, robotics, metrology, metal fabrication, press moulding, plastic processing, data systems,

abrasives, SW and PCB design and toolmaking. Collectively they service MedTech, pharma, Electronics,

Construction, Aerospace, Automotive, Power, Wood Products, Data Storage and Plastics sectors. The cluster also includes members from government agencies as well as academic partners from Atlantic Technical University , Dundalk Institute of Technology, Northern Regional College and Southwest College.

Similarly, to **SME Cluster Growth**, BORMAC identified the **key issues and barriers** for its members and developed activities that address four workstreams:

1. PEOPLE



This workstream is focused on attracting the right talent, recruitment, onboarding, retaining, training and upskilling staff.

2. INNOVATION:



The innovation workstream is all about developing collaborative projects to enable business growth and effectiveness through Operational Excellence, Supply Chain, Digitalisation, Industry 4.0 Technology Application, AR, VR, Research & Development and Product Development, Supply Chain Optimisation, Decarbonisation and Sustainable Manufacturing.

3. BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONALISATION:



The aim of this workstream is to increase collaboration between BORMAC members and across the Irish cluster network, in addition to matchmaking and creating connections with both international and domestic clusters.

4. NETWORKING, PEER LEARNING AND PROMOTION:



The fourth workstream is concentrated on developing BORMAC as a brand, promoting its membership and creating opportunities for members to network and learn from each other.



Developing and maintaining good business practices, fostering partnerships and collaborations brings innovation, prosperity and resilience to an organisation. BORMAC is with you on your journey. Key to our success is your success.

Brian Durnin, BORMAC Cluster Manager



SME Cluster Growth has created a toolkit to help SMEs assess their management practices, identify bottlenecks and develop actions towards growth. [Download it now](#) for more insights into your business.

Change of Perspectives UMA – Experiences of University-Industry Collaboration

The Change of Perspective programme at the University of Malaga has been focused on experiences of University-Industry Collaboration



The University of Malaga is the coordinating partner of the European project SME Cluster Growth. During the years of development of the project the UMA team has conducted various training activities for different university profiles, students and academics, bringing them closer to the business reality. At the same time, UMA has also promoted collaboration in the region between SMEs in the technology sector, encouraging their growth and international orientation. In this sense, the university has served as a link between the two worlds, promoting initiatives that connect university and industry. Change of Perspectives is a great outcome of this co-creation.

There are projects that require part of the work to be done at the University and part of the work to be done at the collaborating company. With this criterion, we have identified nine University-Industry collaboration projects to monitor the exchange of experiences between academics and industry.

All projects are developed within the framework of the K-projects initiative supported by the Vice-Rectorate for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship of the University of Malaga. It is an annual initiative and any teacher/researcher of the University who wants to lead a multidisciplinary project integrating students from different areas and collaboration with external SMEs can apply to participate in this program.

The **joint projects** are developed during the year, with the following goals:

- Facilitate the collaboration between the university and the **local innovative ecosystem**.
- Build **networks and relationships with experts**.
- Generate an **understanding of needs**, determining what researchers and students can provide to the SMEs, and how the SMEs can engage with the research, teaching and projects participated by the university.
- **Bring knowledge of business operations closer to university** research groups in order to boost the detection of opportunities.
- Facilitate the **access to diverse resources** in the ecosystem.
- **Expand the scope** of UMA's activities and its **impact** on the local ecosystem.

During the demo days the progress is presented, feedback is provided for improvement and experiences are exchanged among the different groups, favouring networking. Within the demo day held on October 25 and led by Rafael Ventura, coordinator of the SME Cluster Growth project, a roundtable **for the exchange of experiences between academia and SMEs** is organised, to give greater visibility to the experiences of collaboration between universities and external entities.

Five representatives of external institutions participated in the session facilitated by Sofía Louise Martínez, UMA researcher of the project: Gabriela Giménez de la Riva, Coordinator of the Cultural Mediation Service at the Pompidou Center, Malaga; Daniel González González, President of the Fantasía Association in Lagunillas, Málaga; Francisco Lavado Rodríguez, Director of the Simulation and Automation Department of TDK Electronics Components S.A.U.; Mario Sierra Martín, CEO of the agency La Buhardilla del Marketing; Rafael Pérez Aguilar, Chief Engineer of Tecnobus.

The following **outputs of the Change of Perspective** session are highlighted:

- The projects are usually promoted by individuals with an intrinsic motivation and knowledge of both worlds (boundary spanners). In this sense, the University must not only promote a favourable context for the exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge between the university and industry but also detect the profiles that are in this intersection, empower them and provide them with resources to lead these collaborative initiatives.
- External advice from institutions and SMEs is essential for the success of University-Industry projects.
- The development of collaborative projects with SMEs enhances the participation of academics in other events and programs, which in turn allows access to differential knowledge and a greater variety of resources.
- Collaborative projects with SMEs promote the generation of alliances with political institutions and other organizations of great value for the advancement of research, teaching and knowledge transfer.
- The knowledge acquired helps in the design of better training programs to improve the employability and entrepreneurship mindset of university students, as well as the continuous training of researchers and teachers.
- Collaboration between university and industry boosts the generation of reference models. The projects' success enhances the partnership of other academics and SMEs.
- Through collaboration with academics, SMEs get access to qualified human capital that provides inspiration and innovative practices.
- Universities and SMEs must invest in the continuity of the projects over time, allowing them to improve and grow.

Change of Perspectives at UMA has allowed to deepen the relationships developed between the university and industry through the different K-projects, identifying the main outputs generated from the collaboration. This helps to acquire a better understanding of the real impact of the programs

developed and facilitates and supports the implementation of improvements in future initiatives. Getting to know first-hand the perceptions of different actors, through debate and experience sharing, has been very enriching

Learn more about the **SME Cluster Growth Change of Perspective** programme [here](#).



Supporting **SME Growth** through **Collaboration**: Essonne region **Cluster Network** in France

The **cluster network** created in the scope of the **SME Cluster Growth project** has been advising and guiding start-ups and SMEs in the Essonne region to drive their growth. One key success of the cluster network has been the **provision of visibility for start-up and SME managers**, enabling them to participate actively in initiatives and programs designed to foster growth.

The cluster network connects SMEs with experts from the industry who offer valuable insights and interventions tailored to the specific needs of SMEs. This collaborative approach ensures that the general programme is adapted to the realities of French SMEs, challenging roadmaps, and fostering sustainable business models.

The cluster network has established fruitful relationships with universities, particularly with the University of Evry and the University of Paris Saclay. These collaborations have enabled the creation of chairs, providing opportunities for joint development and management. The involvement of researchers contributes not only to their subject matter expertise but also to their ability to facilitate reflective thinking, guiding SME managers throughout their journey. Bridging the gap between universities and SMEs remains a challenge, and efforts are being made to make the university's offerings more accessible and relevant to SMEs' needs. Furthermore, the cluster network aims to facilitate closer ties between universities, engineering schools, and high schools to ensure practical engagement and mutual support between academia and the industry.

By participating in a council, SMEs gain the opportunity to interact with key regional stakeholders and develop a deeper understanding of their roles and

responsibilities in the business development of the region. This engagement opens doors for collaboration, networking, and partnerships, allowing SMEs to tap into valuable resources, expertise, and support. Through the council, SMEs can foster stronger relationships with stakeholders, leading to enhanced cooperation, knowledge sharing, and joint initiatives that contribute to the growth and success of both the SMEs and the region as a whole.

Expanding the cluster network's horizons, discussions have emphasized the importance of benchmarking and observing SMEs' organizational practices in other European countries. By incorporating a reflective dimension, SME managers have gained insights into different operational models, employee profiles, management methods, and commercial dynamics. The cluster network recognises the need for focused visits to successful companies that have developed expertise and best practices within their respective fields. Additionally, segmenting activities and distinguishing between private market and public contract responses allows for targeted learning and knowledge sharing. By highlighting the common foundation of European cooperation, the cluster network cultivates an appetite for engaging in international collaboration and expands the understanding of engineering SMEs across borders.



The following experts have been involved in the **cluster network activities** and **educational programs**:

Pierre-Yves le Daëron is a visionary co-founder of Stratex, a renowned consulting firm specializing in advising SMEs, mid-caps, and large groups. With his deep industry knowledge and strategic expertise, Pierre-Yves plays a pivotal role in guiding businesses towards success. His ability to analyze complex market dynamics and identify growth opportunities sets him apart as a trusted advisor for organizations seeking to navigate the ever-changing business landscape. Pierre-Yves brings a wealth of experience and a keen understanding of market trends, enabling him to develop tailored strategies that drive sustainable growth and foster long-term success. With his unwavering commitment to client satisfaction and a track record of delivering exceptional results, Pierre-Yves is a driving force behind the success of Stratex and the businesses it serves.

Jacques Robert Mouline not only co-founded Stratex but also serves as a key figure responsible for the SME Manager Certificate at HEC. With his vast knowledge and insights, Jacques plays a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of business leaders. His dedication to enhancing management skills and fostering entrepreneurship within the SME sector is instrumental in driving innovation and growth. Jacques's expertise and passion for education make him a valuable asset to both Stratex and the academic community.

Antonia Heriot is a dynamic professional who leads the valorization of research at the UFR Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société Paris Saclay, University of Evry. Her role involves unlocking the potential of research outcomes and translating them into practical applications that benefit society. Antonia's work is instrumental in bridging the gap between academia and industry, ensuring that research findings make a tangible impact in the real world. Her commitment to knowledge transfer and innovation makes her a driving force in fostering collaboration and driving socio-economic development.

Amélia Tiscronia serves as the Operational Director of Scoping, a role that requires her to oversee the day-to-day operations of the organization. With her strong leadership skills and strategic mindset, Amélia ensures the smooth functioning of the company. Her expertise in managing complex projects, coordinating teams, and optimizing operational processes enables Scoping to deliver exceptional results. Amélia's commitment to operational excellence and her dedication to achieving organizational goals make her an invaluable member of the team.

Rodolphe Roy is the CEO of ATS, a position that highlights his visionary leadership and entrepreneurial spirit. As CEO, Rodolphe is responsible for steering the company's strategic direction, driving innovation, and fostering growth. His extensive industry experience and deep understanding of market dynamics allow him to navigate challenges and capitalize on opportunities. Rodolphe's commitment to excellence, customer-centric approach, and ability to inspire and motivate his team make him an influential leader in the industry.

Homeric de Sarthe is a highly respected BFR expert, renowned for his expertise in financial risk management. With a keen eye for detail and a focus on proactive risk assessment, Homeric offers invaluable guidance to organizations in effectively managing and mitigating financial risks. His track record of success, attention to detail, and client-centred approach make him a highly sought-after expert in the field. By leveraging his expertise, businesses can confidently navigate the challenges of today's dynamic financial landscape and achieve their strategic objectives while effectively managing risk.

Baptiste Vernier is a dynamic and innovative entrepreneur, serving as the Co-founder of Minimento. With a passion for leveraging technology to drive positive change, Baptiste has played a pivotal role in the development and growth of Minimento. His visionary leadership and strategic mindset have enabled the company to create innovative solutions that transform businesses and enhance operational efficiency. Baptiste's dedication to harnessing the power of data and analytics, combined with his expertise in software development, position him as a driving force behind Minimento's success. Through his leadership, Baptiste is revolutionizing the way businesses leverage technology to optimize their operations and drive sustainable growth.

Hubert de Saint Olive is a highly accomplished and visionary consultant and founder of Hadvise/Confidens. With a wealth of experience in strategic consulting and business advisory services, Hubert has successfully guided numerous organizations in achieving their goals and driving sustainable growth. His expertise spans across various industries, providing invaluable insights and innovative solutions to clients worldwide. Hubert founded his first company in the retail sector at the age of 19 and more recently created Nuances, an NGO that is currently building a new type of ethical social network. He teaches Quantitative Reasoning and Ethics & Leadership at École des Mines de Paris, SciencesPo Paris (Institute of Political Studies), Paris Dauphine, and Parsons Paris. Known for his sharp business acumen and deep understanding of market dynamics, Hubert possesses a remarkable ability to identify untapped opportunities and develop effective strategies that maximize success. Through his personalized approach, he fosters strong partnerships with clients, working collaboratively to overcome challenges and unlock their full potential.

Lucas Quinonero is a dynamic and visionary leader serving as the CEO of Mobeelity, a cutting-edge mobility solutions company. With his strategic mindset and passion for innovation, Lucas drives the company's mission to revolutionize urban transportation and make cities more accessible and sustainable. His extensive expertise in the mobility sector, coupled with his entrepreneurial spirit, enables him to navigate the complexities of the industry and deliver impactful solutions that enhance the way people move and commute. Lucas's leadership inspires his team to push boundaries and continuously develop innovative technologies and services that address the evolving needs of urban mobility. Through his guidance, Mobeelity is poised to shape the future of transportation and create smarter, more connected cities for everyone.

Todd Davey is an esteemed Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship at the Institut Mines-Télécom Business School (IMTBS) in Paris. With an extensive academic background, Todd is also a visiting researcher at renowned institutions such as Imperial College in the United Kingdom, the Technical University of Vienna in Austria, and the University of Adelaide in Australia, focusing on the subjects of entrepreneurship and innovation. Having previously served as a Senior Manager with Deloitte Australia's Technology Commercialisation Group, as well as being a vital member of an Australian start-up's executive team during its rapid growth in the 2000s, Todd brings a wealth of industry experience to academia. Todd's research endeavors have included being the Project Director of a comprehensive study commissioned by the European Commission, examining cooperation between European universities and businesses. He is the author of the book 'Entrepreneurship at Universities' and the co-editor of the Future Universities Thoughtbook. Additionally, Todd has developed TechAdvance™, an innovative tool for technology evaluation. With a Bachelor's degree in Marketing and Management from the University of South Australia, a master's degree in International Management from Münster University of Applied Sciences in Germany, and a Ph.D. in the field of Entrepreneurship at Universities from VU Amsterdam in the Netherlands, Todd brings a diverse and well-rounded expertise to his academic role at IMTBS.

Thierry Isckia is a highly respected professor specializing in the management of innovation and information technologies in business ecosystems at IMTBS. With a deep understanding of the dynamic intersection between technology and business, Thierry brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to his role. Through his research and teachings, he sheds light on the crucial role that innovation and information technologies play in driving the success and growth of modern organizations. Thierry's insights and guidance enable students and professionals to navigate the complexities of managing innovation in today's fast-paced and interconnected business ecosystems. His passion for fostering a culture of innovation and his commitment to empowering individuals and businesses make him an invaluable asset to the academic community.

Capucine Epagneau is a dedicated and visionary entrepreneur, serving as the Co-founder and CEO of Petit Côté. With her strong leadership skills and unwavering passion, Capucine has successfully established Petit Côté as a prominent player in the industry. Her innovative thinking and commitment to sustainability have shaped the company's mission to provide eco-friendly and ethically sourced products. Through her strategic guidance, Capucine has fostered partnerships with local artisans and suppliers, ensuring the highest quality products that align with Petit Côté's values. Her entrepreneurial drive and dedication to making a positive impact have positioned Petit Côté as a trusted brand that offers customers a conscious and responsible shopping experience.

Marion-Emi Alix is a dedicated professional serving as the Sustainable Accelerator Manager at Accélérateur ESS and Lecturer at HEC. With her expertise in sustainable entrepreneurship, Marion-Emi plays a vital role in fostering the growth and success of social and environmental impact-driven startups. Through her work at Accélérateur ESS, she provides valuable guidance and support to entrepreneurs, helping them develop innovative and sustainable business models. As a lecturer at HEC, Marion-Emi shares her knowledge and passion for sustainable entrepreneurship with the next generation of business leaders, inspiring them to create positive change in the world. Her commitment to sustainability and her ability to empower and educate others make her a valuable asset to both Accélérateur ESS and HEC, driving the transition towards a more sustainable and inclusive economy.

Julien Héron is a dynamic and accomplished leader, serving as the CEO of Ab Initio. With his extensive experience and expertise in the technology industry, Julien drives the company's mission to deliver innovative software solutions that empower businesses. Under his leadership, Ab Initio has established itself as a trusted provider of cutting-edge technologies, helping organizations optimize their operations and achieve their digital transformation goals. Julien's strategic vision and passion for leveraging technology to drive business success have propelled Ab Initio to new heights, earning the company a reputation for excellence and customer satisfaction. His strong commitment to fostering a collaborative and customer-centric approach ensures that Ab Initio remains at the forefront of the industry, continuously evolving and adapting to meet the evolving needs of its clients.

Adeline Leroy Sherman and **Monica Holly Collins** are the visionary Co-founders of Unicorn Institute, a leading institution that operates globally within the realm of applied research and university collaboration. With a deep understanding of university-enterprise collaboration, university engagement, and entrepreneurship at universities, Adeline and Monica have been instrumental in shaping Unicorn Institute's mission to support decision-makers and change agents in solving complex global and local challenges. Their expertise extends to regional innovation systems and their focus on the regenerative economy, fostering innovative ecosystems and entrepreneurial mindsets. Adeline and Monica's leadership at Unicorn Institute encompasses executing pioneering research, developing innovative training programs, and providing evidence-driven consulting services to universities, innovative businesses, and local governments. Their profound dedication has resulted in the creation of holistic solutions, the development of highly skilled professionals, and the dissemination of practical tools, methods, knowledge, and insights. Notably, they prioritize collaboration with universities, recognizing the immense value that research brings to their work.

SME Student Consultancy in Action at MTU, Cork

By Laura O'Donovan, Munster Technological University (MTU)



Laura O'Donovan

*As part of the SME Cluster Growth project, Munster Technological University (MTU) reached out **to engineering SMEs** to identify a challenge to their growth for students to address on a Student Consultancy project. The SME Student Consultancy project is designed to enable engineering SMEs access to student expertise that can provide insights into a current challenge to the company's growth. **Redmond McDonnell, CEO of DesignPro Automation** answered our call. DesignPro Automation is an Irish-owned company based in Limerick offering one of the largest machine build facilities in Ireland.*

Redmond presented **two problems** for the students to work with:

- 01** Difficulty recruiting suitably qualified staff
- 02** Difficulty growing their international market without sales and support in each territory.

DesignPro operates in a very niche space with a modern skillset required such as Automation & Mechatronic engineers, Machine Vision Engineers, Design Engineers, and Project Managers all required to deliver cutting-edge machinery and robotic solutions to its customers. With such a specialised skillset already in high demand, they find significant competition for talent from their own multinational customer base which can offer significant employee benefits. This is difficult for an SME to compete with. The company tries to offer a flexible and innovative working environment, but they do find it hard to compete on purely financial grounds.

A challenge that prohibits international growth is the need for local support on the ground. As a 50-person SME, they cannot yet justify bodies on the ground internationally which provides a stumbling block when delivering machines internationally from a maintenance and support point of view. To enable the further sales of machines and robotic solutions internationally the company is looking for a model that its customers will buy into to overcome the current lack of local support for international machines.



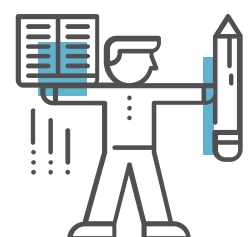
Jane Leonard, a lecturer at MTU worked with two groups of four students, one completing a master's in International Business and another, a master's in Human Resources (HR). These projects were completed without academic credit and tackled with great enthusiasm by both groups. The students travelled to the DesignPro Automation site in Limerick to see the reality of what the company creates and how it operates. They interviewed numerous competitors and industry experts to ascertain what others are doing in this space and also visited a MedTech marketing company in Leuven, Belgium.

The extensive research was clearly on display when the students delivered their findings and recommendations to Redmond McDonnell, the CEO of DesignPro Automation and Sharon Lyons, a marketing executive with the company.

The master's degree in International Business students' Ciara Mahoney, Drashti Oza, Rahul Pandey and Maureen Azubuike presented their findings and recommendations in relation to a global expansion strategy, and supply chain and inventory management.

Masters' students in Human Resources, Wiktor Mazur, Sophie Cooney, Nicole Sim and Maia outlined their findings on the company branding, outcomes of website analysis, their potential candidate journey map and the benefits of accessing graduates.

Afterwards, there was an interesting conversation between the SME representatives and the students, regarding recruitment and retention of skilled workers from Ireland and abroad . They were both very impressive and beneficial presentations.



Approaching the end of the journey: Our final partner meeting was held in Istanbul

The **SME Cluster Growth project**, aiming at empowering SMEs in the engineering sector to ensure their maturation and sustainable growth, is approaching its closing stages. The final partner meeting, **hosted by Istanbul Technical University (ITU)**, was held in **Istanbul, at ITU Magnet** which offers a dynamic atmosphere.

By **Sebnem Burnaz, Istanbul Technical University (ITU)**

Being located in the Technology Development Zone, ITU Magnet attracts late-stage startups with the ambition to grow. Its function is very much in parallel with the major purpose of the SME CG project. Its central location in the ITU campus, proximity to the technology companies at the science park, its know-how acquired from the deep-rooted past of ITU, laboratory facilities, comfortable working environment and innovative services make ITU Magnet a well-known centre for several events and meetings bringing stakeholders of the ecosystem together.

Project members representing the University of Alcalá (UAH), University of Bologna (UNIBO), University of Malaga (UMA), Munster Technological University (MTU), University Industry Innovation Network (UIIN), Institut Mines-Telecom Business School (IMTBS), Crazy Town and Momentum Consulting attended the meeting.

After the welcoming speech, a presentation about ITU and Istanbul's Entrepreneurship Ecosystem was delivered by Dr. Alper Yurttas, from ITU. Then the preparations for the final report were discussed with the guidance of the project coordinator. Each partner gave a presentation on their particular work package along with the completed tasks and those that were nearing completion.

After lunch, we had the opportunity to visit the incubation centre, ITU Seed, located on the ground floor of the main building of the science park. Dr Yunis Ismayil, the manager of ITU Seed, guided us during the visit by showing us inside the centre with working spaces, maker studios, and laboratories and providing useful information about their activities and programs. Dr Ismayil has taken an active role in the Turkish entrepreneurship ecosystem for the last nine years of his career. ITU Cekirdek (Seed) Incubation Center was selected as the "Top Business Incubator" in the World by Sweden-based UBI Global in 2023. Every year the center accepts 500+ startups to its programs and has supported more than 4,200 startups and 9,500 entrepreneurs so far. The total investment received by these startups has reached 150 million dollars, and their valuation to 1.5 billion dollars. We were fascinated to chat with young founders of startups currently located in the incubation center: Harcy working on energy and clean technologies by producing insulation materials from textile waste and WearTechClub innovating in fabric-integrated sensor technology by offering smart activewear integrated into the mobile application which monitors health data, muscle and nerve movements. We left ITU Seed full of inspiration and hope for a better future...

The remaining work packages were presented in the second half of the meeting. The team worked hard using brainstorming and engaging in debates. We came up with a clear framework which can direct us towards the closure report of the project. We believe that hard work and belief in what we do will lead to achieving the intended project results.



Fostering Cross-Industry Connections: The SME Cluster Growth Workshop

By Jose Villagran, UIIN



Jose Villagran

The Irish playwright (and many other things) **George Bernard Shaw** said that

“

If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas

”

This statement, which might seem obvious, contains a powerful truth that we often forget about.

UIIN – supported by the SME Cluster Growth consortium – recently hosted the SME Cluster Growth Cross-industry network and collaboration workshop. This immersive workshop, aimed essentially at exchanging ideas, brought a total of 34 participants, the majority of whom were SME representatives from Spain, Turkey, Ireland, and Finland.

The event served as a melting pot of insights and experiences from diverse business landscapes, regional contexts and sector-specific features.

Exploring trends, changes and challenges

As participants logged in from different corners of Europe, the collective mission for the day was presented: To explore future trends, looming challenges, and potential solutions that could be useful for SME representatives experiencing or

expecting to experience common growth-related challenges. The event kicked off with small group introductions, where participants shared their aspirations for the session.

Identifying Challenges

Using Mural as an interactive tool, the participants worked to identify challenges across four primary domains: Managing Growth, Funding, Engaging with Ecosystems, and Going International.

A voting process then distilled these issues down to **the six most popular challenges** that would set the stage for the second half of the workshop. :

These were:

- Recruiting and retaining staff during growth
- Balancing growth with operational continuity
- Managing increasing costs and ensuring timely payments
- Demonstrating the viability of business models
- Time management and prioritization for stakeholder engagement
- Partner selection and overcoming structural limitations
- Co-Creating Solutions

Participants then delved into discussions about their past experiences and potential solutions to these **six challenges**. In breakout rooms, participants were asked to wear their problem-solver hats and then share their perspectives and learnings from others' experiences, laying the groundwork for future potential synergies.



Some of the solutions and pieces of advice provided by the participants included:

- In terms of recruiting staff, SMEs can seek out smaller/boutique HR companies that may be able to offer recruitment services at more affordable pricing
- To properly manage growth, risk tolerance and acceptance of a certain amount of chaos are required
- Finding technical talent in small regional communities, and ending up offering apprenticeships for internationals to come and providing incentives for talent to stay
- Ensuring an aligned vision among the company leadership is essential to solidify the path towards growth
- Final Reflections

As the event neared its conclusion, participants were encouraged to reflect on their main takeaways and identify peers they'd like to stay in touch with. The closing message was clear: the conversations that started here shouldn't end here.

By fostering a collaborative spirit and providing a platform for shared problem-solving, the SME Cluster Growth cross-industry network and collaboration workshop achieved its goals and sowed the seeds for potential new business relationships and collaborative ventures inside and outside the partner regions.

Building cross-border connections to Finland with a hot desk exchange scheme

By Toni Pienonen, Crazy Town

November 2023 was a landmark month for Crazy Town, as we welcomed innovative entrepreneurs from the SME Cluster Growth project to Finland. This initiative was part of the project's hot desk exchange scheme that offers SMEs across Europe an access to our locations.

Nuria Gomez, representing UAH - University of Alcalá and her startup Efisite <https://www.efisite.com/>, arrived first. Efisite is building a digital marketplace for energy efficiency. We connected Nuria with Finnish programs and clusters, as well as fellow energy sustainability entrepreneurs like Henri Yoki from Exaum. The next visitors from SME Cluster Growth braved the freezing winds to attend Slush 2023, one of the largest startup and tech events in the world. They joined 5000 founders and 3000 investors who had arrived in Finland.

ITU Istanbul Technical University sent **İsmail Bayezi**, a professor, who is working on the idea stage of a spinoff startup around autonomous maritime solutions.

UMA University of Malaga sent **Yara Aceta**, Chief Scientific Officer at Bioherent <https://bioherent.com>, a medical diagnostics startup developing solution for drug allergy verification, now looking for partners to support with market-entry

MTU Munster Technological University sent **Kieran Coffey**, co-founder at MyGug <https://mygug.eu/>, a unique solution that creates energy from food waste. MyGug anaerobic digester system fully integrates into a household/small food business setting

The trio joined Slush's side events and the main event itself, where they met with potential investors and partners. Our role in facilitating connections for these entrepreneurs aligned with the project's mission to provide practical, hands-on support to growth-oriented SMEs.



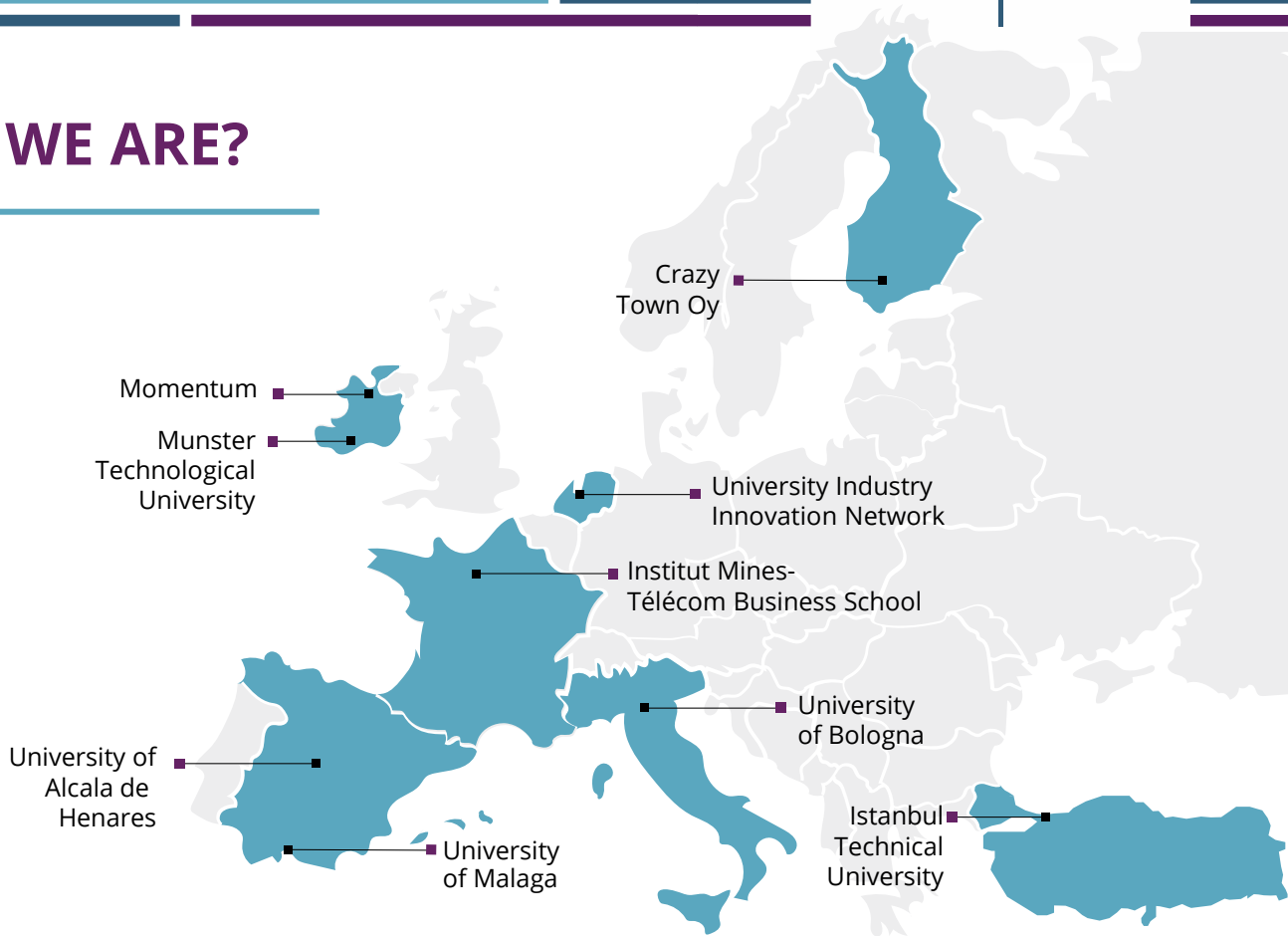


Learning points for others interested in **organizing hot desk schemes:**

- Utilising social capital is key. We were able to quickly connect our international visitors with the Finnish ecosystem and industry players. Thanks to all who responded at short notice and agreed to meet our guests despite their busy schedules.
- As a host, you don't need to organise everything by yourself. Take a look at your local innovation and startup ecosystem calendar for events and bring your visitors along. This offers great content and opportunities with market engagement.
- For short "hotdesk visits" to another country that last for a few days at most, person-to-person meetings are more impactful than access to physical resources like coworking space and the actual hotdesk.



WHO WE ARE?



Follow our
journey here



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