Empowering School Leadership Teams for Innovation (ESLTI Project)

Sustaining innovation in schools

Competence profile for leadership teams

Co-funded by the European Union

2025-1-BG01-KA220-SCH-000353474

ESLTI
EMPOWERING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAMS FOR INNOVATION

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January 2026

Sustaining innovation in schools: Competence profile for leadership teams

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Publisher: New Bulgarian University on behalf of ESLTI project partnership
ISBN: 978-619-233-411-6
January 2026
https://eslti.eu/

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Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them. Project reference: 2025-1-BG01-KA220-SCH-000353474

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Cite the publication as:
Afrikanov, L. (2026). Sustaining innovation in schools: Competence profile for leadership teams. ESLTI project, Project No. 2025-1-BG01-KA220-SCH-000353474. New Bulgarian University.

Co-funded by the European Union

Partners:

Cambridge Schools Association · New Bulgarian University · Inkubator Savinjske regije · CCOO enseñanza · etuce · CDI Asociación

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Introduction

Schools across Europe are expected to innovate continuously. They are asked to introduce new pedagogies, integrate digital tools, respond to changing student needs, and strengthen inclusion and wellbeing, while also meeting accountability requirements and operating under increasing uncertainty. Many schools and leadership teams have gained experience with innovation through Erasmus+ projects or local initiatives. Yet a recurring challenge remains: innovations are often launched successfully, but they do not always become a stable and natural part of school life. When priorities shift, external funding ends, or key individuals leave, promising practices can weaken, fragment, or disappear. As a result, schools frequently experience innovation as a series of short cycles rather than as a long-term capability.

The ESLTI project, running from 2025 to 2027 and supported by the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme, responds to this challenge by strengthening the capacity of school leadership teams to manage and sustain innovation as an ongoing, normal aspect of school development. The project is built on a simple but demanding premise: lasting innovation does not happen through isolated enthusiasm or one-off projects. It requires leadership that can create the right mindset, skills, and structures so that improvement becomes continuous rather than occasional. ESLTI therefore focuses on leadership for change, supporting school teams to plan, implement, and sustain innovation over time, rather than merely reacting to external trends.

A central added value of ESLTI is its transnational learning design. By working across **Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain**, participating schools and leadership teams gain access to diverse experiences and realistic strategies that have been tested in different systems. This cross-country collaboration enables schools to compare how innovation is supported or constrained by context, and to learn from each other about what helps innovations survive beyond initial implementation. Over time, the project aims to build a community of practice of school leaders who share a belief that meaningful change starts from within the school, and who develop the competence to turn this belief into stable organisational practice.

The project partnership is intentionally designed to bridge a common gap in educational innovation: **the gap between educational leadership practice and innovation management knowledge. It brings together two complementary types of organisations.** The first group consists of umbrella organisations that represent school leaders and educators on a large scale, including a national association of schools, an association of school principals, and a major teachers' union. These partners have direct access to school leadership teams and understand their challenges in real settings. They are trusted actors within their systems and play an important role in professional advocacy and educational transformation. At the same time, they are not typically specialised providers of structured training in innovation management. ESLTI strengthens their capacity to act as facilitators of high-quality, targeted professional development focused specifically on sustaining innovation.

The second group consists of organisations with expertise in training, innovation management, and leadership development. The Bulgarian partner contributes strong knowledge in digital transformation and educational leadership, developed through previous projects and practice-based training. The Slovenian partner brings methodologies from entrepreneurship, leadership, and start-up innovation, adapting business innovation models into the context of educational institutions. The Spanish partner, with deep expertise in training and consulting in vocational education and training (VET), expands these strengths into broader school settings and builds training solutions that are relevant for leadership teams working in diverse educational environments. Together, the partnership combines system reach, credibility, and practical innovation management competence, enabling the project to design solutions that are both scalable and grounded.

The motivation for ESLTI is rooted in a shared diagnosis across the three countries: **school leadership teams are critical drivers of school development, yet they often receive limited structured support in innovation management.** While school leaders face increasing pressure to integrate digital transformation, respond to rapid societal change, and anticipate the impact of emerging technologies such as AI, much of the available leadership training remains focused on administrative and operational responsibilities. Within the partnership, this gap has been observed repeatedly through direct work with schools and leadership teams, and it has been confirmed through project needs analysis and stakeholder reflection.

Across Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain, the needs analysis pointed to both shared and context-specific patterns. In Bulgaria, leadership training is often oriented toward legal compliance, governance, and resource allocation, with limited focus on innovation leadership and digital transformation. In Slovenia, leadership policies emphasise pedagogical leadership and quality assurance, but structured training in innovation management and digital change remains limited in practice. In Spain (Andalusia), leadership development frequently prioritises administrative functions, staff supervision, and institutional representation, while preparation for sustaining educational innovation and integrating emerging technologies is uneven and often insufficient. Despite differences between systems, partners identified a common dynamic: innovation frequently depends on short-term projects or a small group of motivated individuals, and schools struggle to embed innovations into long-term strategies and routines. A visible example of this broader pattern is that after periods of accelerated change, schools may revert to familiar practices once external pressure decreases, reinforcing scepticism toward innovation and reducing the likelihood that new practices are sustained.

This publication presents a competence profile for sustaining innovation in schools. It outlines the core capacities that enable school leadership teams to make innovation a stable and continuous part of school life, rather than a short-lived project outcome. The profile is grounded in baseline evidence gathered in Bulgaria, Spain, and Slovenia through an online survey with school professionals, focus groups with school leadership teams, and interviews with experienced innovators. By bringing these sources together, the profile reflects both shared patterns across countries and the practical realities that shape innovation sustainability in different school systems.

Within the ESLTI project, the competence profile serves as a foundational deliverable. It informs the design of the project's training programme for school leadership teams and provides a shared reference point for mentoring and school-based piloting. In parallel, it also informs the development

of the next major output, the School Team Leadership Guide for Sustainable Innovations, which is a separate practice-oriented product. While the training programme will focus on developing and activating these competences through guided learning and application, the Guide will translate them into practical tools, templates, and methodologies that teams can use in their daily work. Readers will find a clear set of competence areas, each described through its meaning and concrete indicators in school practice, showing what sustaining innovation looks like when it is carried by leadership teams and embedded in everyday routines.

The chapters that follow present the research methodology used to develop the profile, synthesised national findings from Bulgaria, Spain, and Slovenia, a cross-country mapping of common patterns and contextual nuances, and the resulting competence framework designed to support sustainable innovation leadership in schools.

Research design and methodology

The competence profile was developed through baseline research conducted in Bulgaria, Spain, and Slovenia within the ESLTI project (2025–2027). The study used a mixed-methods design combining an online survey, one focus group per country with school leadership teams, and semi-structured interviews with selected "visionary innovators". The rationale behind this design was straightforward: sustaining innovation is both a measurable pattern (for example, which competences practitioners rate as most important) and a lived process shaped by context, relationships, and organisational routines, which are best explored through dialogue and reflective accounts. Evidence from the three instruments was therefore treated as complementary rather than competing, with each method providing a different angle on the same core question, namely what enables innovations to become stable, evolving practices in everyday school life.

Two guiding methodological decisions shaped the study. First, the research avoided imposing a narrow definition of "school innovation" at the outset, since innovation is interpreted differently across systems, school cultures, and roles. Second, the survey was designed to capture professional judgement about the importance of competences for sustaining innovation, rather than asking respondents to evaluate their own proficiency, which reduces social desirability effects and allows participation across diverse roles without turning the instrument into a performance appraisal.

Online survey

The online survey served as the main quantitative instrument and was administered in the national languages in the three partner countries. Distribution relied on partner networks and channels connected to school leadership teams and educators, with an initial target of at least 50 respondents per country. The final sample exceeded this target in each context, reaching **265 responses overall**, with 104 responses from Bulgaria, 97 from Spain, and 64 from Slovenia.

The survey combined background information, open-ended conceptual questions, structured competence ratings, and final reflective questions, creating a sequence that supported both comparability and openness. The first section collected background variables needed for statistical interpretation, including respondents' role, school type, country, years of leadership experience, and involvement in innovation projects or initiatives in the last three years. An optional field invited respondents to leave an email address if they wished to receive project updates or invitations to future professional learning opportunities related to school innovation management; this contact information was voluntary and handled separately from the main response dataset.

The second section explored respondents' own understanding of innovation in schools through open-ended questions, inviting personal definitions of innovation, a short example, and an explanation of what it means for innovation to be sustained over time. This conceptual elicitation was

placed before the competence rating section to reduce the risk that predefined categories would shape respondents' interpretation of innovation.

The third section presented a set of statements describing behaviours and qualities associated with sustaining innovation, and respondents rated their importance on a five-point Likert scale from "Not important at all" to "Very important." These statements were not taken from a single existing scale. They were developed by the research team as evidence-informed items, drawing on three inputs: (1) the project's needs analysis and initial partner insights from school leadership practice, (2) recurring themes in established work on educational change and innovation sustainability (for example, alignment with school goals, shared ownership, feedback and adjustment cycles, and conditions that support teacher learning), and (3) iterative review within the partnership to ensure clarity and relevance across the three national contexts.

The items were then grouped into competence areas reflecting understanding of innovation sustainability, knowledge and strategic thinking, skills and collaboration, attitudes and mindsets, supportive environment and school culture, and personal and ethical dimensions. The survey concluded with open reflection questions inviting examples and explanations, including reflections on what helps schools keep results alive after Erasmus+ or local innovation projects. This strengthened the qualitative depth of the dataset and supported triangulation with focus group and interview insights.

Focus groups with school leadership teams

Three focus groups were conducted, one per country, to capture the collective sense-making that often accompanies innovation leadership in practice. Focus groups were chosen because sustaining innovation is rarely an individual act; it is shaped by team dynamics, shared language, and the daily negotiations through which initiatives either become normal practice or remain marginal. Each focus group followed a common 90-minute scenario covering the meaning of sustaining innovation, inspiring innovators, competences that make a difference, and the qualities distinguishing leaders who sustain innovation from those who struggle. A short "three-word exercise" invited each participant to summarise the image of a school innovator who "makes things last," providing concise descriptors that supported later cross-country comparison.

The total focus group participation across countries was 50 individuals, distributed as follows: Spain (25 participants), Bulgaria (18 participants), and Slovenia (7 participants). Each focus group was facilitated by a partner representative and all findings were structured in raw-data reports organised question by question, preserving key expressions, examples, and contextual remarks while postponing interpretation to the synthesis stage.

Interviews with visionary innovators

Semi-structured interviews complemented the survey and focus groups by adding forward-looking perspectives and experience from actors with a strong record of sustaining innovation in education or related sectors. Interviewees included experienced school leaders as well as relevant stakehold-

ers such as NGO leaders, policymakers, researchers, or social and educational innovators, selected for their capacity to reflect on long-term innovation sustainability and emerging trends.

Seven interviews were conducted across the three countries: Bulgaria (4), Spain (4), and Slovenia (1). Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and followed a shared guide covering competences critical for sustaining innovation, major trends and challenges expected over the next decade, priority skills and attitudes for future school leadership, and the kinds of institutional, policy, or network support that best enable leaders to develop these competences. Partners documented interviews through structured notes and illustrative quotes, again prioritising faithful capture of authentic responses over early analysis.

Data synthesis and development of the competence profile

Development of the competence profile relied on triangulation across the three instruments. Survey results were used to identify priority competence areas and patterns across the three contexts, while focus group and interview materials were used to interpret survey patterns, refine competence meanings, and ground the framework in practitioner language and real examples. Country-level evidence was first reviewed separately to retain contextual specificity, and cross-country mapping was then conducted to identify shared competences that appear robust across contexts as well as differences that may reflect national or system-level conditions. This synthesis process led to the final competence framework presented in this deliverable, structured as a profile of essential competence areas that enable school leadership teams to sustain innovation over time.

Ethical considerations and data handling

All research activities were conducted on a voluntary basis, and participants were free to withdraw or skip questions. The survey collected only background information required for analysis, while optional contact details were provided only when respondents chose to receive project communication, and such contact information was handled separately from response data. Focus group and interview data were treated confidentially and anonymised in project outputs, and any recordings or photographs were collected only with explicit consent.

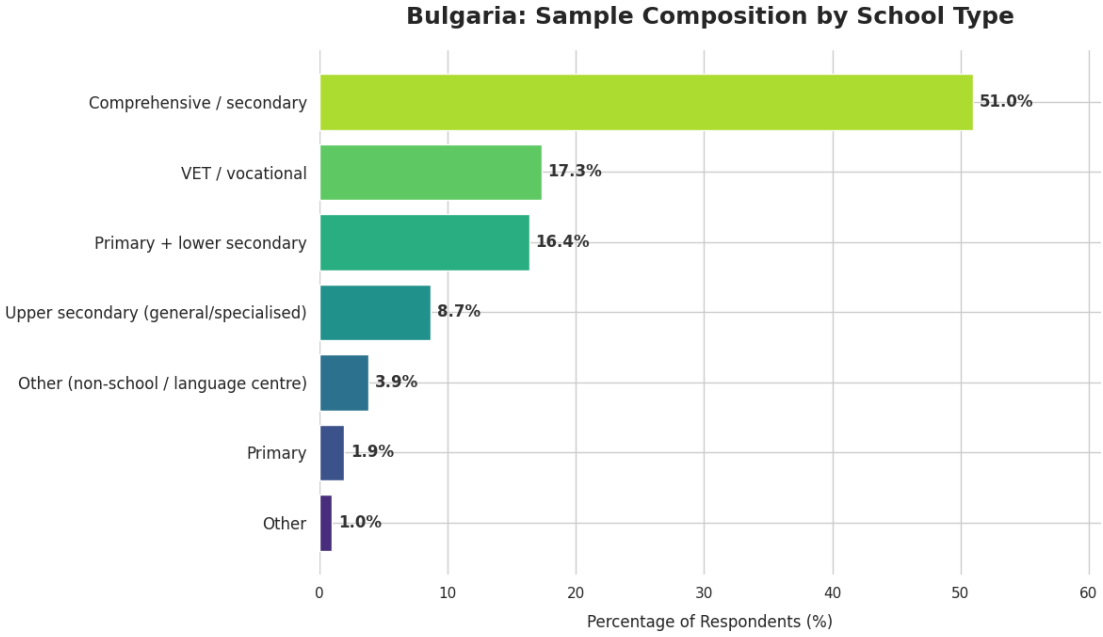
Use of generative AI tools in the research and reporting workflow

Preparation of this competence profile and associated reporting materials was supported by a generative AI tool (ChatGPT GPT-5.2 Thinking mode) used as an assistive instrument in the writing and communication workflow. Support included editing and revising text sections, improving clarity and coherence, structuring chapters and subheadings, and drafting preliminary narrative summaries based on research materials provided by the author, including survey exports, focus group raw reports, and interview notes. Support also extended to the preparation of communication materials such as tables and charts that visualise survey patterns in a clear and accessible manner (using Napkin.AI). Generative AI was further used to support identification and checking of recent sources where relevant, while final selection of references and framing remained the responsibility of the author.

Academic judgement and methodological responsibility remained fully human-led. All analytical decisions, interpretations, and final claims were made by the author (Dr. Lachezar Afrikanov), an academic lecturer and researcher in school educational leadership, and all AI-assisted outputs were treated as drafts requiring critical verification for accuracy, bias, and completeness before inclusion. A second layer of quality assurance was ensured through review and validation by Prof. Elena Blagoeva, a leading academic researcher in school educational leadership, strengthening the credibility and academic robustness of the competence profile. This disclosure is provided for transparency and to document that AI was used in a supportive role within a human-supervised research and writing process.

Bulgaria: country findings

The Bulgarian findings draw on three sources that complement each other: an online survey with 104 respondents (all responses included), one national focus group with school leadership teams (18 participants, online), and four interviews with well-known educational leaders and innovators. Together, these sources give both a broad picture and deeper explanation through real examples and reflection.



The survey respondents are mainly professionals from school leadership teams. School principals (38; 36.5%), deputy heads (36; 34.6%), and senior teachers (23; 22.1%) form the majority, with a small number of respondents in other teaching roles. Schools in the sample represent different contexts. The largest group comes from comprehensive secondary schools (53; 51.0%), followed by vocational schools (18; 17.3%), basic schools (17; 16.4%), and upper secondary gymnasiums (9; 8.7%), with a small remainder from other settings. Leadership experience is varied, including both newer and very experienced leaders, with the biggest group reporting 20+ years (26; 25.0%), and a strong share reporting 1–3 years (20; 19.2%).

Innovation activity is common in this Bulgarian sample. 81 respondents (77.9%) report that they have been involved in an innovation project or initiative in the last three years[1].

[1] In the Bulgarian survey version, the statement "Innovation is a continuous process of learning and improvement, not a one-time project" appears twice in the rating section, while the statement about innovations fading when they depend on one person's enthusiasm does not appear as a separate rating item. In the analysis below, the duplicated statement is treated as one idea rather than two separate ones.

How is innovation defined in Bulgarian schools?

In the open responses, Bulgarian participants describe innovation in a practical way. Most definitions focus on introducing **new or improved approaches** that make learning and school work better, rather than doing something new only for the sake of novelty. Many respondents mention digital tools, yet digitalisation is usually presented as part of a wider picture, not as the only form of innovation.

A typical definition describes **innovation as the introduction of new ideas, methods, or technologies that improve learning quality and respond to current needs.** Another defines innovation as a new approach or practice that supports meaningful student learning. Overall, respondents connect innovation to "value" in school life, such as better learning, stronger engagement, or more relevant education.

The focus group adds an important point: **sustainable innovation** is seen not only as a practice, but **as part of the school's culture and identity.** Participants describe innovation as something that must become normal school work and must also continue developing over time, rather than becoming a fixed routine that stops improving.

What is innovation in practice for Bulgarian schools?

This subsection summarises examples provided in two open-ended prompts, innovations implemented in the respondent's own school (where applicable) and innovations they have seen or experienced elsewhere. Most frequently mentioned types of innovation:

- Teaching and learning methods
- Digital and edtech
- STEM, robotics, makers
- Teacher development, mentoring, coaching
- Wellbeing and school climate

Respondents most often describe innovation through concrete changes in teaching and learning. Typical examples include interdisciplinary lessons, project-based approaches, and structured models such as 1:1 learning. Some answers point to school-wide formats that make learning more visible and experiential, for example thematic learning spaces and "nomadic classroom" type initiatives that organise learning beyond the standard classroom routine.

A second strong cluster is digital integration, described in very practical terms, using platforms for interactive lessons, organising learning through virtual spaces, and applying digital tools in specific subjects. Closely connected are STEM and makers-oriented examples, especially robotics and prototyping, including work with Arduino modules, educational robots, and applied project tasks that lead to tangible products.

Finally, a smaller but meaningful set of answers points to the "people and culture" side of innovation, for example internal sharing of practices, co-teaching formats, and school repositories of good lessons, alongside social-emotional learning and wellbeing-related initiatives. Partnerships, including Erasmus+ and national programmes, appear as an enabling vehicle through which schools access resources, external collaboration, and structured opportunities to test new approaches.

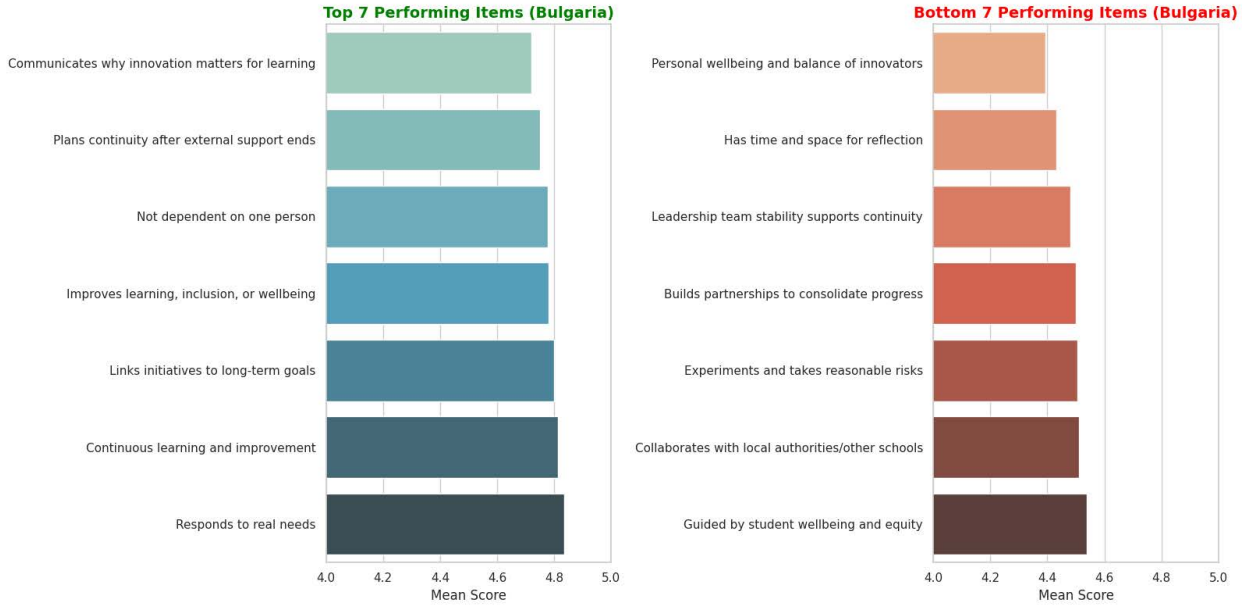
What does “sustained over time innovation” mean for Bulgarian school leaders?

When respondents explain what it means for innovation to be sustained, they describe clear signs that can be seen in school life. **Innovation is sustained when it continues over years, becomes part of daily routines, remains useful and effective, and is carried by the school community rather than one person.** Many responses also highlight that sustainability includes the ability to adapt and improve, not only to repeat the same practice unchanged.

The focus group offers a strong contextual insight: **sustaining innovation is harder when schools are judged mainly through narrow standardised measures such as unified tests.** Participants argue that this can make innovation feel risky, undervalued, or pointless if the system rewards compliance and short-term measurable results more than deeper learning and development. This helps explain why even well-designed innovations can fade.

What competences are seen as most important for sustaining innovation?

Across the 29 rated statements in the online survey, Bulgarian respondents show very strong agreement. Most items are rated as “important” or “very important” by the majority of respondents. This is a useful result in itself, because it shows strong shared understanding about what matters. At the same time, it means that differences between items are not dramatic; many competences are seen as important at the same time.



The strongest rated items focus on meeting real needs, treating innovation as continuous improvement, connecting innovation to long-term school goals, and planning for continuity beyond projects and funding.

The highest-rated statements include:

- innovations last when they meet real needs of students, teachers, or the school community
- innovation is a continuous process of learning and improvement, not a one-time project
- leaders link initiatives to the school's long-term goals
- sustained innovation is successful when it improves learning, inclusion, or wellbeing
- leaders plan how innovation continues after external support or projects end

This pattern supports a competence profile that treats sustainability as purposeful improvement plus long-term planning and school-level embedding, rather than as constant new activity.

A few items receive slightly lower ratings, although they still receive strong support overall. These include: leaders' personal wellbeing and balance as a factor for sustaining innovation; protected time and space for reflection; leadership continuity; partnerships with other schools and community organisations. These results can be read in a realistic way. Respondents recognise the importance of reflection, wellbeing, and partnerships, yet daily school conditions may make them harder to prioritise compared to immediate strategic and learning-related drivers.

When items are grouped into broader areas, the Bulgarian responses give a clear order: the strongest emphasis is placed on understanding what sustainable innovation means and on strategic thinking, followed by collaboration and mindset, while supportive environment and the personal and ethical dimension remain important but slightly less emphasised compared to the top areas.

What leaders and teams who "make innovations last" look like?

The open responses provide a clear picture of how Bulgarian respondents describe successful leaders and teams. The most frequent qualities are not "heroic" characteristics; instead, they describe leadership and teamwork that lasts over time.

Respondents most often mention **teamwork and shared responsibility, clear communication, persistence when initial excitement fades, and a learning attitude that allows adaptation.** Professional competence is valued, but so are trust and the ability to create a supportive climate where people feel safe to try, learn, and improve.

The focus group supports this strongly. Participants often describe innovators not as single "heroes" but as people who create conditions for others to act. **Trust, consistency, resilience, and shared leadership appear repeatedly in their descriptions.** The interviews add another layer. Successful innovators are described as people who keep learning, stay open to new approaches, think critically, and develop their teams in a way that supports long-term change rather than short-term performance.

What keeps people motivated to sustain innovation?

Bulgarian respondents most often link motivation to meaning and support. **Motivation grows when the benefits are visible for students, when leadership supports the work, when colleagues work**

as a team, and when there are opportunities for learning and sharing. Recognition and appreciation matter, but many answers highlight deeper drivers, such as professional satisfaction and a shared sense of purpose.

The focus group adds an important practical point. **Sustainability depends on trust and acceptance from the wider community**, including parents. Participants state clearly that innovation is difficult to sustain when parents see it as risky or temporary, and easier when families trust that it brings real long-term value.

What helps results from innovations remain in practice?

The question about Erasmus+ and local projects gives particularly useful insights on real sustainability actions. Bulgarian respondents most often mention three types of practices that keep project results alive:

- Internal sharing and capacity building, such as training colleagues, sharing methods, and demonstrating practice.
- Embedding in normal school work, where tools and approaches become part of regular teaching and planning.
- Leadership support and follow-through, ensuring continuity and consistent attention after the project ends.

The focus group adds a caution that strengthens this point: investments in infrastructure or new spaces do not automatically sustain innovation if the school does not also invest in people, mindsets, and shared capacity.

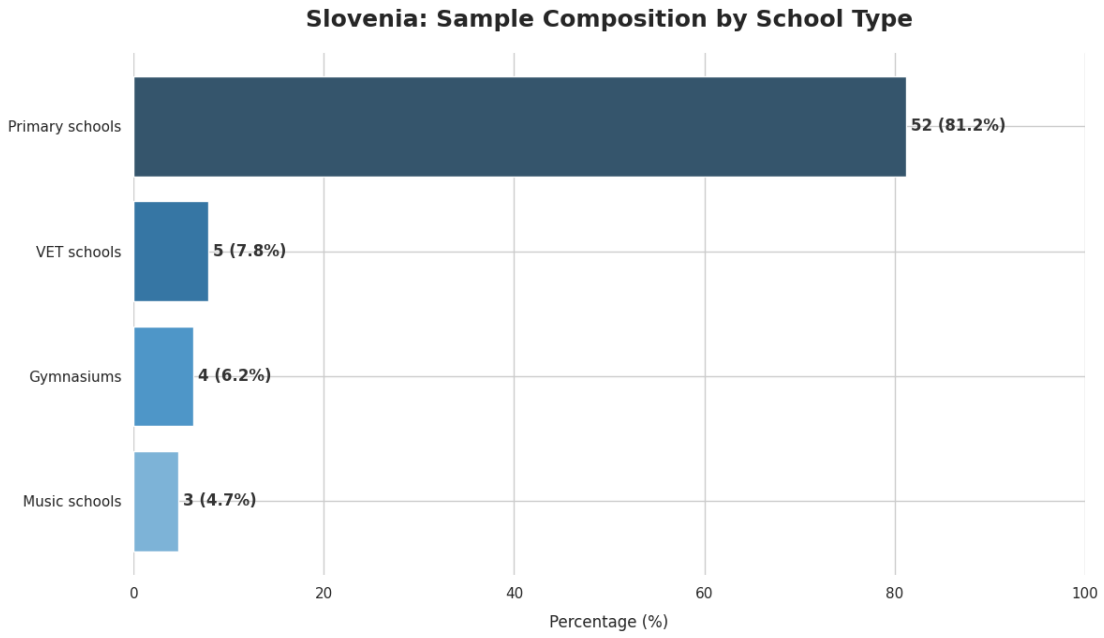
Future pressures shaping sustainable innovation in Bulgarian schools

The interviews give more concrete content to "future change" than a survey item can. Interviewees point to **AI and digital transformation as major drivers**, but they also highlight the risks and responsibilities that come with them, especially ethics, privacy, data protection, and equity. They also note challenges such as **teacher shortages, changing learner needs, and the growing importance of wellbeing and social-emotional skills in school life**.

One strong system-level message appears across the interviews. Sustainable innovation becomes more realistic when schools receive developmental support, such as professional communities, coaching, safe spaces for honest discussion of difficulties, and meaningful use of data for improvement. **Innovation becomes harder when support is mainly perceived as control, compliance, and administrative pressure.**

Slovenia: country findings

The Slovenian findings draw on three sources that complement each other: an online survey with 64 respondents (all responses included), one national focus group with school leadership teams (7 participants, online), and one interview with a well-known educational innovator and project leader. Together, these sources give both a broad picture and deeper explanation through examples and reflection.



Survey respondents are mainly people in school leadership teams. School principals and directors (36; 56.2%) and deputy/assistant principals (18; 28.1%) form the clear majority, with teachers (9; 14.1%), and one missing role response (1; 1.6%). Schools in the sample are mostly primary schools (52; 81.2%), followed by VET schools (5; 7.8%), gymnasiums (4; 6.2%), music schools (3; 4.7%). Leadership experience is varied, with strong representation of early leadership years (1–3 years: 18; 28.1%) and mid-range experience (4–6 years: 15; 23.4%), alongside very experienced respondents (20+ years: 10; 15.6%).

Innovation activity is common in the Slovenian sample. 36 respondents (56.2%) report involvement in an innovation project or initiative in the last three years, while 28 (43.8%) report no such involvement. In addition, 29 respondents (45.3%) provided an email address to receive project updates or invitations to future learning opportunities, which signals interest in continued engagement.

How is innovation defined in Slovenian schools?

In the open responses, Slovenian participants describe innovation in a practical, school-based way. Many definitions emphasise "something new", yet the stronger responses go beyond novelty and describe innovation as a **useful improvement based on reflection, evaluation, and real needs.** Innovation is often linked to changes in teaching and learning, school organisation, and learning culture. Digital tools appear frequently, usually as one pathway for improving practice rather than as the definition of innovation itself.

Several answers describe a clear logic of school innovation: noticing a **need, designing a solution in a small pilot, observing results, adjusting along the way, and then scaling the practice across classes or the whole school.**

The focus group adds an important point: **innovation that lasts is usually connected to school culture and shared routines.** Participants describe a shift from "doing projects" to making new practices part of normal school life, and they underline that staff need to internalise the practice for it to survive.

What is innovation in practice for Slovenian schools?

This subsection summarises open-ended examples of innovation from two prompts, innovations implemented in respondents' schools (where applicable) and innovations they have seen or experienced elsewhere. Most frequently mentioned types of innovation are:

- Digital and edtech
- STEM, robotics, makers
- Partnerships and projects
- Wellbeing and school climate

A large share of Slovenian responses refer to innovation using short labels rather than describing practices in detail. Among the answers that are specific, innovation is most often described as building coherent digital routines that support both teaching and school operations. Examples include digital documentation, online classrooms, purposeful ICT use across subjects, and approaches that connect technology with formative monitoring and digital citizenship.

Innovation is also associated with capacity-building in computational and STEM-oriented learning, including introducing informatics foundations and integrating programming, robotics, and AI elements into teaching, sometimes already in the early grades. Respondents mention practical formats for learning programming with educational robots, alongside broader references to robotics as part of the pedagogical process.

A smaller set of examples highlights innovation through structured cooperation, for example Erasmus+ participation, municipal project work, and school networking aimed at quality improvement. There are also references to safe and supportive learning environments and anti-violence initiatives.

Taken together, these examples suggest that innovation in Slovenia is predominantly framed as digital system-building and capability development, complemented by technology-enhanced STEM learning, and supported by project and network cooperation.

What does “sustained over time innovation” mean for Slovenian school leaders?

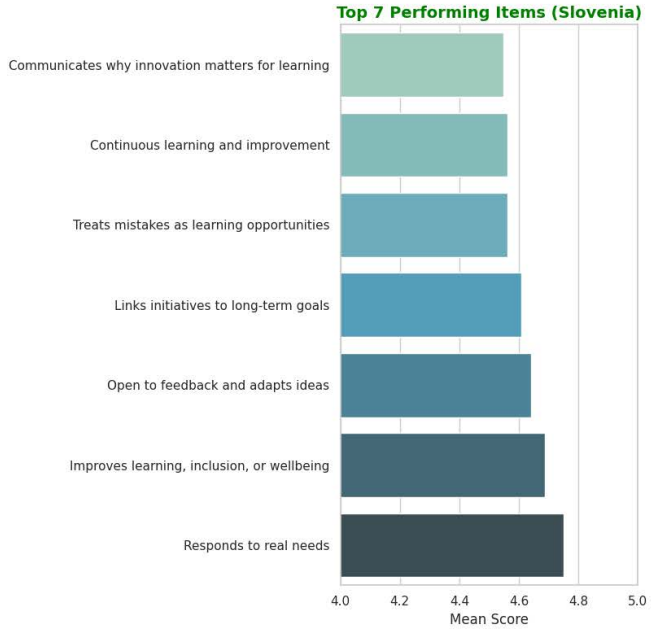
When respondents explain what it means for innovation to be sustained, they describe clear signs that can be observed in school life. Innovation is sustained **when it becomes a stable part of everyday practice, continues after a project ends, spreads beyond the initial group, and remains useful over time.** Many answers also highlight development and upgrading, not only “keeping the same thing”.

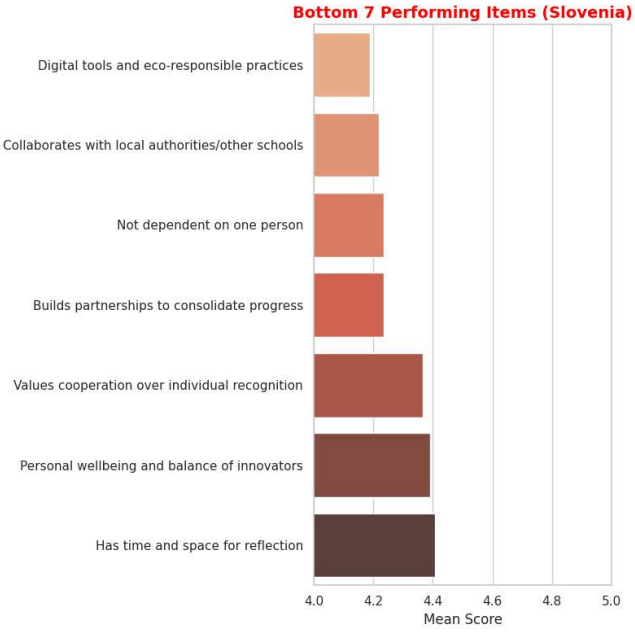
Several respondents mention **transferability and scalability as indicators of sustainability,** meaning that different staff members can apply the practice, or it can be used with different groups of learners. A small number of answers also express scepticism that long-term sustainability is easy in practice, suggesting a perceived risk of “everything being temporary” when priorities change.

The focus group provides a concrete mechanism behind these ideas. Sustainability is described as a project not “dying” after funding ends, but becoming the “new normal”. Participants also note a practical difference between school contexts: larger schools may find it harder to “move the mass” of staff, while **smaller schools can sustain new practices more naturally** when relationships are close and communication is easier.

What competences are seen as most important for sustaining innovation?

Across the 29 rated statements, Slovenian respondents show very strong agreement. Most items are rated as “important” or “very important” by the majority of respondents. This suggests a shared view that sustained innovation depends on a broad set of competences, rather than one or two isolated factors.





The strongest rated items focus on real needs, educational value, learning as a continuous process, and strategic alignment.

The highest-rated statements include:

- innovations last when they meet real needs of students, teachers, or the school community
- sustained innovation is successful when it improves learning, inclusion, or wellbeing
- leaders are open to feedback and adapt ideas when needed
- leaders link new initiatives to the school's long-term goals
- innovation is a continuous process of learning and improvement, not a one-time project

This pattern supports a competence profile that treats sustainability as purposeful improvement, combined with clear direction and adaptation, not as a sequence of isolated initiatives.

Items that receive slightly lower emphasis include: access to digital tools and environmentally responsible practices as a support for innovation; cooperation with local authorities or other schools as a continuity factor; partnerships with other schools or organisations to maintain progress; the idea that innovations often stop when they rely mainly on one person's enthusiasm; leaders' personal wellbeing and balance as a factor for sustaining innovation.

Respondents strongly value the "core inside-the-school" leadership work, while external conditions and some longer-term enablers may feel less immediate, more variable across contexts, or harder to secure consistently.

When items are grouped into broader areas, the strongest emphasis is placed on understanding what sustainable innovation means, followed by attitudes and mindsets, and then knowledge and strategic thinking. Skills and collaboration follow closely. Supportive environment and school culture, and the personal and ethical dimension remain important, but appear slightly less emphasised compared to the top areas.

What leaders and teams who "make innovations last" look like?

The open responses provide a clear picture of how Slovenian respondents describe successful leaders and teams. The qualities most often mentioned are not "heroic" traits. Responses describe **leadership and teamwork that remains steady over time.**

Respondents frequently mention **vision, persistence, and the ability to motivate and connect people.** Openness to learning, willingness to try despite mistakes, and strong communication appear repeatedly. Several answers point to empathy and good relationships as practical leadership strengths, not only as "nice to have".

The focus group adds a useful portrait through its "three words" exercise. Participants describe sustaining innovators with words such as visionary, courageous, persistent, patient, empathetic, motivating, and connecting. These descriptors align closely with survey priorities around commitment, adaptation, and shared ownership.

The interview reinforces the same direction, with strong emphasis on **curiosity, strong conceptual**

foundations, and leadership that reduces fear of mistakes so teachers feel safe to experiment, learn, and improve.

What keeps people motivated to sustain innovation?

Slovenian respondents most often **link motivation to meaning, support, and visible results.** Motivation grows when staff see positive impact, feel leadership support, have time to prepare and reflect, and experience professional growth. Recognition and appreciation appear as additional drivers, including opportunities for development and, in some responses, promotion-related incentives.

The focus group adds two practical points. **Peer-to-peer knowledge transfer is described as a powerful way to spread innovation**, especially when fear of criticism is reduced. Participants also warn that external motivators, such as points for promotion, can sometimes overshadow the real meaning of the innovation and reduce it to formal compliance.

What helps results from innovations remain in practice?

The question about Erasmus+ and local projects gives particularly useful insights for the competence profile, because it focuses on real actions that keep results alive after formal project closure.

- Slovenian respondents most often mention three types of practices:
- Leadership support and active follow-through after the project ends.
- Involving more teachers, sharing learning across the whole staff, and building internal capacity. Embedding new practices in school documents, annual plans, routines, and regular professional learning.

Several answers also highlight practical mechanisms such as regular reporting, monitoring, and checking whether the planned change is still being used and improved. The focus group strengthens this point with the idea of a “helicopter view”, meaning that leaders connect different initiatives so projects become mutually reinforcing rather than separate and temporary.

Future pressures shaping sustainable innovation in Slovenian schools

The interview adds forward-looking detail that complements the survey. Several future pressures are described as particularly important: rapid technological development, including AI, virtual reality, and social robots, alongside the need for strong foundational understanding so technology can be used meaningfully rather than superficially. The interview also highlights a wider challenge around relationships, identity, and social media influence on children, and the need for schools to address these changes in a holistic way rather than “one issue at a time”.

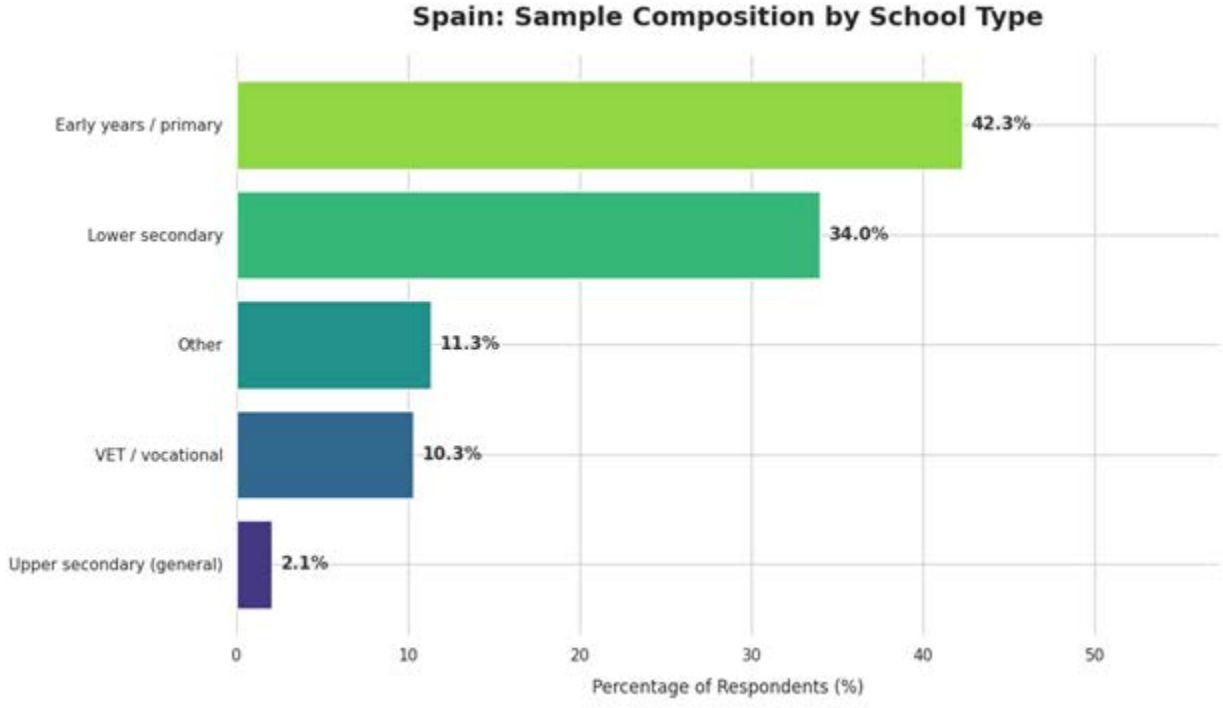
The focus group connects the future theme to practice. Participants mention long-term digitalisation journeys, the growing relevance of AI, and the value of clear indicators for leadership competences that help schools track progress over time.

Spain: country findings

The Spanish findings draw on three sources that complement each other: an online survey with 97 respondents (all responses included), one national focus group with school professionals and members of leadership teams (25 participants, blended format, with representation from several provinces), and four interviews with experienced educational innovators and leaders. Together, these sources provide both breadth (the survey) and deeper explanation through reflection and examples (focus group and interviews).

Most survey responses come from Spain (91 respondents), with a small number of responses submitted from Bulgaria through the Spanish survey link (6 respondents). The Spain chapter focuses primarily on the Spanish context and patterns, while acknowledging this small cross-over.

In terms of roles, the largest group are teachers or tutors with coordination responsibilities (44; 45.4%). School leaders are also strongly represented, including school principals (24; 24.7%) and members of school management teams such as head of studies/secretary (8; 8.2%). A further group selected "Other" (21; 21.6%), suggesting participation from additional school roles that still connect to innovation work.



School types are diverse, with a strong representation from Infant/Primary education (41; 42.3%) and Lower secondary (33; 34.0%), followed by VET (10; 10.3%), and a smaller share from Bachillerato (2; 2.1%), plus "Other" categories (11; 11.3%). The survey includes respondents with leadership experience

across the full range, although 17 respondents did not indicate leadership years, which is expected given that many participants are coordination-level teachers rather than formal school leaders.

Innovation activity is common in this Spanish sample. 57 respondents (58.8%) report participation in an innovation project or initiative in the last three years. In addition, 55 respondents provided an email address to receive project updates or future learning opportunities, signalling strong interest in the topic and willingness to stay engaged.

How is innovation defined in Spanish schools?

Spanish participants define innovation primarily as **improving learning and teaching**, not as novelty for its own sake. In open responses, innovation is described as introducing new or improved approaches, often linked to student needs, engagement, inclusion, and learning quality. References to technology appear, but typically as a means rather than an end. Interview evidence reinforces this framing by stressing that innovation has no value by itself, **it only matters when it serves the growth of learners and strengthens a sense of community.**

The focus group reinforces this orientation. Participants describe **innovation as a reflective process, shaped by questioning routines, listening to learners, and aiming for more meaningful and inclusive learning.**

What is innovation in practice for Spanish schools?

This subsection summarises open-ended examples of innovation from two prompts, innovations implemented in respondents' schools (where applicable) and innovations they have seen or experienced elsewhere. Most frequently mentioned types of innovation are:

- Digital and edtech
- Teaching and learning methods
- Partnerships and projects
- STEM, robotics, makers
- Organisation and leadership processes
- Wellbeing and school climate

Spanish respondents most often describe innovation as a combination of pedagogical approaches and enabling infrastructure. On the pedagogy side, common examples include cooperative learning, project-based learning, gamification, flipped classroom elements, and workshop-based teaching formats that reorganise learning into more active and participatory structures.

Digital innovation is frequently described through concrete practices, such as systematic use of platforms, 1:1 models supported by virtual classrooms and Google for Education tools, and, in a smaller number of responses, explicit references to using AI in teaching. STEM and makers-type innovations appear as STEAM approaches, sometimes linked to wider programmes, and the practical use of tools like 3D design and printing to develop learning content.

Another distinct domain in the Spanish data is organisational change, where innovation is described as redesigning school spaces and routines to support new pedagogies and engagement. Respondents also mention partnership-driven innovation, including outreach to companies for dual VET placements and practice-based learning, as well as projects such as school radio or good-practice exchanges. Wellbeing and coexistence initiatives are also present, including healthy school programmes, mediation structures, and mindfulness sessions involving the wider educational community.

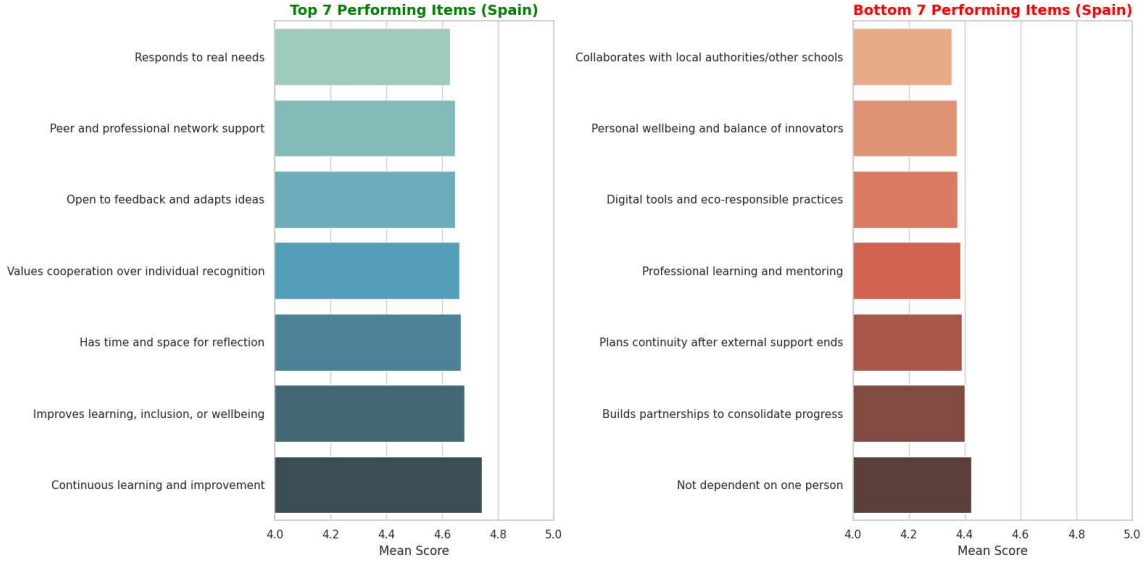
What does “sustained over time innovation” mean for Spanish school leaders?

When respondents describe what it means for innovation to be sustained, they point to visible signs in school life. **An innovation is sustained when it continues beyond initial implementation, remains useful, becomes part of everyday routines, and keeps showing value for learners and the school community.** Sustainability is also linked to the capacity to keep improving rather than simply repeating a fixed practice.

In the focus group, the contrast between successful and struggling innovation is described in practical terms. **Sustained innovation is associated with consistency, long-term vision, shared ownership, and a clear approach to checking progress and improving practice.** Innovations fade when they depend on initial enthusiasm without planning, when people work in isolation, when the focus is on tools rather than learning purpose, or when schools lack a simple approach for evaluation and improvement over time.

What competences are seen as most important for sustaining innovation?

Across the rated statements, Spanish respondents show very strong agreement. Most items are rated as “important” or “very important” by a large majority. Differences between items are present, but they are not dramatic, suggesting a broad shared understanding that sustainability requires a combination of strategic thinking, team capacity, mindset, and supportive conditions.



The strongest rated items focus on sustaining innovation as continuous improvement supported by reflection, learning focus, and collective responsibility. The most highly rated items include:

- innovation as a continuous process of learning and improvement, not a one-off project
- sustained innovation as successful when it improves learning, inclusion, or wellbeing
- time and space for reflection as essential for continuity
- valuing cooperation and collective success over individual recognition
- openness to feedback and routine adjustment, supported by colleagues and professional networks

A notable Spain-specific feature is the very high emphasis on **reflection time and space**, which appears among the top priorities. This suggests that Spanish respondents strongly associate sustainability with having protected conditions for learning, review, and improvement cycles inside the school. Interview evidence adds a complementary emphasis on **strategic foresight**, the ability to anticipate trends, remain flexible under uncertainty, and guide teams with a future-oriented perspective while making careful choices about emerging technologies.

A few items receive slightly lower ratings, while still remaining "important" overall. These include: leaders' own wellbeing and balance; access to digital tools and environmentally responsible practices; cooperation with local authorities or other schools.

This pattern can be read realistically. Respondents strongly value reflection, learning orientation, and collective responsibility, while some structural and system-level supports may be recognised as important but experienced as harder to influence directly.Two interviews also frame sustainability and environmental education, alongside equity and accessibility for all learners, as increasingly central expectations shaping what schools will need to sustain over time, even when these themes are not always experienced as directly controllable at school level.

When items are grouped into broader areas, the Spanish response pattern places the strongest emphasis on understanding sustained innovation as everyday practice and continuous improvement; attitudes and mindsets that support persistence, learning from mistakes, and adaptation; supportive school conditions, especially time for reflection and peer/network support.

What leaders and teams who "make innovations last" look like?

The open responses and the focus group create a clear picture of successful innovation leadership in Spain. Respondents repeatedly describe leadership that builds community and shared ownership, rather than dependence on a single person. This successful leadership also involves strong communication and the ability to unite staff around a clear purpose, along with persistence when enthusiasm fades. Key characteristics include a learning attitude that treats mistakes as feedback, and empathy and active listening toward staff and the school community. Interview evidence sharpens this by highlighting leaders' capacity **to connect emotionally and build alliances** so that innovation becomes widely shared across the community, not owned by a small 'vanguard' or a single champion.

The focus group's "three words" summary captures the tone well: **creative, reflective, persevering.** This reinforces the idea that sustained innovation combines imagination with disciplined learning routines and long-term commitment.

What keeps people motivated to sustain innovation?

Spanish respondents most often connect motivation to visible benefit and shared support. Motivation grows when positive results are seen for students, when leadership teams provide backing, when there is recognition and trust from the community, and when staff feel they are working as a team with adequate resources, time, and professional learning opportunities.

A strong thread is the importance of collective energy: sustainability depends not only on individual commitment but on school conditions that allow people to keep going without burnout and without feeling alone.

What helps results from innovations remain in practice?

The question about Erasmus+ and local projects provides useful practical insights. Respondents highlight several mechanisms that keep results alive:

- embedding practices into the school's formal documents and routines, such as the educational project and staff planning;
- internal sharing and capacity building, including diffusion across the whole staff;
- continued support from leadership and, in some cases, direct support from families or local associations that help sustain resources;
- a sense of institutional pride and belonging linked to successful project experience, which strengthens motivation to continue;

Future pressures shaping sustainable innovation in Spanish schools

The two interviews add a clear future-facing layer. Both interviewees emphasise that sustaining innovation is not only about personal qualities; it depends on a professional culture where reflective inquiry and improvement are normal routines.

They point to **AI and rapid technological change** as a major driver of future pressure, combined with a need for careful reflection to avoid rushed decisions and unstable policy swings. They also highlight broader challenges that shape what schools will need to sustain over time, including equity, student wellbeing, and increasing personalisation of learning.

A distinctive contribution from the interviews is the framing of leadership as "close accompaniment" of the community. Effective leaders are described as people with a realistic and deep understanding of school needs, coherence in communicating why change is worth it, and daily presence and support that makes improvement possible in practice, not only on paper.

Additional interview insights emphasise preparation for a **fast-changing labour market as a growing driver of curriculum and pedagogy choices,** alongside the rising importance of sustainability and environmental education as core learning priorities.

Cross-country findings: what helps schools sustain innovation over time

The cross-country findings are based on a shared research design implemented in **Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain.** Each country combined an online survey with qualitative evidence from a focus group with school leadership teams and interviews with experienced innovators. This approach helped capture both the broad picture of what practitioners consider important and the practical detail of how sustained innovation works in school life. Despite differences in national context and sample composition, the three countries show strong convergence on the core meaning of sustained innovation and on the competences that support it.

Across the three countries, innovation is rarely described as novelty or technology alone. Respondents typically define school innovation as a purposeful change that improves teaching, learning, inclusion, organisation, or wellbeing. Digital tools and AI appear in all three contexts, yet they are usually presented as one pathway among others rather than the definition of innovation itself.

Innovation is also understood as something that needs to fit the school context. Many respondents describe innovation as a response to real needs and value small-scale experimentation, reflection, and gradual strengthening rather than large launches that fade quickly.

Across Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain, sustainability has a clear and practical meaning. Innovation is sustained when it becomes part of everyday practice and routines, spreads beyond one person or one small project group, continues after funding ends or leadership changes, and stays useful through ongoing improvement. Sustainability is therefore not only continuation. It is a continuation combined with shared ownership and learning over time.

Survey ratings in all three contexts show very high importance across most proposed behaviours and qualities. This is a meaningful cross-country result. It suggests that **schools view sustainability as a broad leadership and culture capacity rather than a narrow project-management skill.**

Three shared competence clusters stand out across countries.

Cluster 1: Purpose, needs, and educational value
Sustaining innovation starts with the ability to make good judgement about what is worth sustaining. Leaders and teams describe sustained innovation as rooted in real needs and meaningful educational value. When innovation is clearly connected to improvements in learning, inclusion, or wellbeing, it is easier to defend, strengthen, and institutionalise. When innovation is seen as an extra activity or a trend, it is more likely to fade.

Cluster 2: Strategic continuity and improvement cycles

Across the three countries, sustainability is linked to schools that plan beyond the initial push. Respondents repeatedly describe a practical pattern that keeps innovation alive: setting direction, starting small, checking what is working, adjusting based on feedback, embedding into routines and plans, and spreading the practice across staff and cohorts. Innovations are sustained when schools treat them as continuous improvement rather than one-time delivery.

Cluster 3: People, culture, and shared ownership

The strongest cross-country message is that innovations last when they become collective work rather than personal effort. Leadership is described less as directing change and more as building conditions where teams can own and carry change. Respondents across countries highlight engagement of staff and learners, trust-based relationships, a safe climate for trying and learning, and internal sharing that spreads practice beyond a small group.

Across countries, **motivation to sustain innovation** is not described mainly through financial incentives. Meaning and professional dignity are more central. Three recurring motivators appear consistently: visible benefit for students and learning, support and recognition from leadership and colleagues, and opportunities to learn, share, and feel part of a professional community. External incentives can help, but they can also reduce innovation to formal compliance if they replace meaning and professional ownership. Long-term motivation is stronger when innovation remains linked to educational purpose and shared values, and when staff do not feel they carry change alone.

Innovations are more likely to remain when schools spread learning beyond the project team through internal sharing and capacity building, embed practices into routines and planning, keep improvement cycles alive rather than treating outputs as finished products, and maintain follow-through from leadership over time.

Three forward-looking pressures appear consistently across all countries: digital transformation and AI, growing attention to wellbeing and inclusion, and increasing complexity and overload in schools. These pressures raise the bar for sustained innovation because they create risk of fragmentation and burnout, while also making continuous improvement more necessary than ever. Several contributions also highlight a wider system challenge. Schools are often expected to innovate while operating under strong compliance demands and limited developmental support. Sustained innovation becomes more realistic when schools have access to peer networks, safe professional spaces for honest discussion, coaching-oriented support, and meaningful use of data for improvement, rather than support experienced mainly as administrative control.

While the three countries show strong convergence on what helps innovations last, the evidence also points to several national nuances that shape how sustainability is experienced in practice. These nuances should not be read as fixed national characteristics, but as recurring emphases that appeared in the country data and help explain why innovations may fade or endure under different conditions.

In **Bulgaria**, participants described a tension between the ambition to innovate and a system environment that can be perceived as strongly compliance-oriented. When schools are judged mainly through narrow standardised measures, innovation can feel risky, undervalued, or difficult to justify,

even when leadership teams believe in it. A second Bulgarian nuance relates to the wider school community. Parental trust and acceptance were highlighted as practical conditions for sustainability, especially when innovations challenge familiar routines. Interview evidence also adds a system-level perspective: schools need stronger developmental support, such as safe peer exchange, professional communities, and coaching-oriented guidance, rather than support experienced mainly as control and administrative pressure.

In **Slovenia**, the qualitative evidence placed strong emphasis on internalisation as the turning point between temporary innovation and sustained innovation. Sustainability was described as the moment when a practice becomes the new normal for the staff, not only a project activity. A distinctive theme was psychological safety, particularly reducing fear of mistakes and criticism so teachers can experiment and learn. The Slovenian focus group also highlighted coherence challenges when schools manage many initiatives at once. The "helicopter view" metaphor captured leaders' ability to connect projects and create synergies, reducing fragmentation and supporting long-term direction.

In **Spain**, the evidence places particularly strong emphasis on reflective practice and professional exchange as sustaining conditions. Time and space for reflection were described as key drivers of continuity because they support learning from experience and adjusting innovations so they remain relevant. Networks and collaboration beyond the school also appear as prominent sustaining mechanisms. The interview evidence adds a broader values-based concern about the direction of education systems, including pressures toward narrow measurable outcomes, competition, and inequality. Within this framing, sustaining innovation is not only about keeping initiatives running, but also about protecting educational purpose and social value over time.

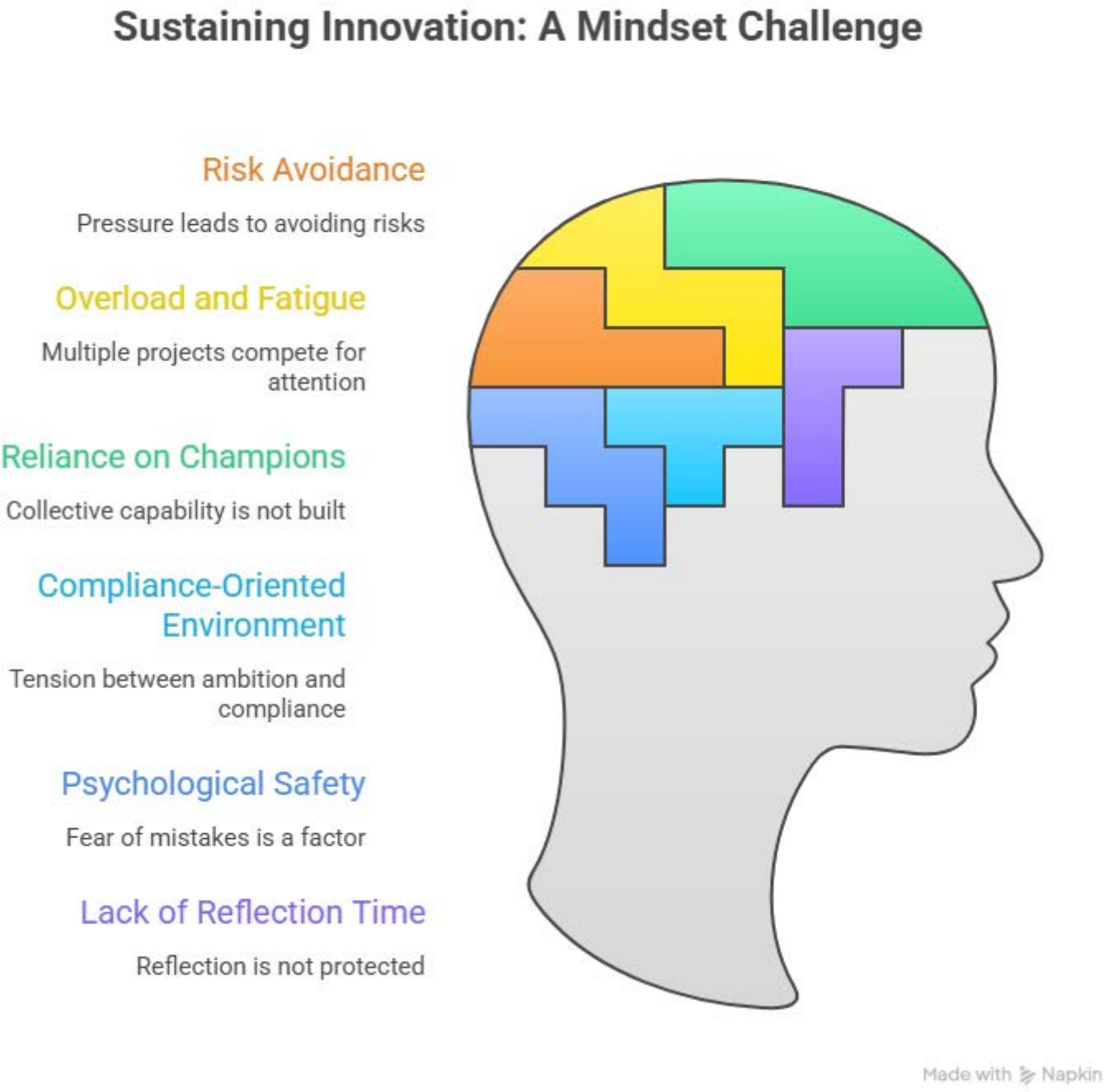
The real obstacle to sustaining innovation?

A striking pattern in the evidence reviewed is that leadership teams across the three countries largely agree on what helps innovations last. Survey ratings are consistently high across most items, and the qualitative data describes very similar "good practice" language. This creates an important interpretation: the sustainability gap is rarely caused by not knowing the right principles. More often, innovations fade because schools struggle to preserve the inner conditions needed to keep applying those principles when daily pressures rise.

In practice, **sustaining innovation requires a deliberate form of mindset work.** It is the capacity to notice the predictable drift back to familiar routines and to respond with learned habits: reframing problems as improvable, staying curious under uncertainty, treating early failure as information, and holding a long-term view when the system rewards short-term compliance. When this mindset is not actively maintained, teams tend to default to three common patterns: risk-avoidance (especially under accountability pressure), overload and initiative fatigue (when multiple projects compete for attention), and reliance on a few "champions" instead of building collective capability.

The country nuances in the report point to these underlying mental models. In Bulgaria, leaders describe tension between innovation ambition and a compliance-oriented environment; in Slovenia, psychological safety and fear of mistakes appear as a decisive factor; and in Spain, protected time

for reflection is strongly linked to continuity. Taken together, these are not separate technical issues. They are signals that sustaining innovation is a **mindset-and-attention challenge embedded in organisational routines.**



Competence profile for sustaining innovation in schools

The main findings presented in the previous chapters lead to a clear conclusion. Across Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain, school leaders and leadership teams are actively engaged in innovation and have experience with innovative projects and school-based initiatives.The recurring challenge is different: innovations often remain dependent on a few committed individuals, stay at the level of temporary initiatives, or fade once external support ends and everyday pressures take over. In all three contexts, respondents describe sustainability in similar, concrete terms. Innovations last when they become part of daily routines, are carried by more than one person, remain connected to real educational value, and continue to develop through reflection and adjustment.

The cross-country findings also clarify what makes sustainability more realistic. Schools sustain innovation when leadership teams select improvements based on real needs rather than novelty, connect them to long-term priorities, distribute ownership across staff, create a safe learning culture, and keep a simple cycle of feedback and improvement alive. Trust, both inside the school and with parents and the wider community, appears as a practical condition for continuity, not as a secondary communication issue. Future pressures such as digital transformation and AI reinforce this message: schools need the capacity to make responsible decisions, protect equity and wellbeing, and avoid fragmented adoption of new tools without clear educational purpose.

On this basis, the following competence profile translates the research evidence into a structured and usable framework. It does not aim to describe every possible aspect of educational leadership. Instead, it focuses on the specific capacities that the evidence repeatedly links to one outcome: **sustaining innovation over time.** The profile therefore complements existing leadership and innovation frameworks by shifting attention from “starting change” to “making change last”, and by recognising that sustainability depends on continuous learning and embedding, not on one-off implementation.

A central conclusion emerging from the research is that sustained innovation is rarely the result of a single “hero leader”. Sustaining innovation also depends on the team’s ability to maintain inner readiness under uncertainty. Across the evidence, what weakens sustainability is rarely a lack of ideas. It is the gradual loss of attention, energy, openness, and reflective learning when everyday pressure rises. For this reason, the competence profile treats reflective sensemaking and staff wellbeing as enabling conditions for good judgement, responsible adoption of new approaches, and persistence over time.

Innovations last when leadership teams create the conditions for staff to engage, experiment safely, learn together, and share responsibility. For this reason, the competence areas are formulated as

capacities of school leadership teams, while also acknowledging the role of teacher leadership and wider participation. In practice, team-based innovation leadership becomes an essential expression of modern school leadership because sustaining improvement is not a separate task. It is part of how schools lead learning and development in a complex and changing environment.

The competence profile that follows serves two functions within this report. First, it provides a clear summary of what the three-country evidence suggests about the main competence areas that support sustained innovation. Second, it offers a foundation for the next stages of the ESLTI project, including training, mentoring, internal innovation labs, and the School Team Leadership Guide for Sustainable Innovations, which will operationalise these competences through practical tools, methods, and school-ready processes.

In order to ensure that emerging competences from the cross country analysis remain relevant for the next decade, we matched findings presented with a global review of emerging leadership trends. This included a 'desk research' analysis of modern educational frameworks (such as the OECD Education 2030) and adaptive management practices from the wider professional world. By looking at how other sectors handle rapid change, using 'agile' methods and data-informed decision-making, we have refined these capacities to help school teams navigate a future of digital shifts and social complexity without losing their core educational focus.

The competence profile describes what effective school leadership teams do to help innovations last over time. It is grounded in evidence from Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain and focuses on sustaining improvement as a normal part of school life. The competences apply to leadership teams, not only to individual leaders, because sustained innovation depends on shared ownership, culture, routines, and collective learning.

Competence area 1 - Innovation focus

Definition. The leadership team identifies real needs and selects only innovations worth sustaining because they improve learning, inclusion, wellbeing, or how the school works. It distinguishes meaningful improvement from short-lived novelty, for example by asking whether an initiative changes daily classroom practice or only adds a new tool or label, and keeps a disciplined focus. It makes space by stopping, simplifying, or postponing work that no longer helps, and explains these decisions clearly to staff.

What this looks like in practice

- **Test** each new idea against real student and school needs, and decline what lacks clear value.
- **Make space** by stopping, simplifying, or postponing other work, so staff are not overloaded.

- **Explain** the purpose in plain language that staff and parents can repeat.
- **Choose** innovations that match the school's current capacity, not only ambitions.

Competence area 2 - Adaptive learning

Definition. The leadership team leads innovation as a learning process, not a one-time rollout. It uses quick feedback and simple evidence, such as classroom observation, short staff feedback, student work, or routine checks, to see what is really happening and to make timely adjustments. It protects what is essential, such as learning goals or inclusion principles, while adapting methods, tools, or pace to fit the school context.

What this looks like in practice

- **Set** short learning questions, for example: "What will we learn in the next four weeks?"
- **Gather** quick feedback from classrooms and routines, not only end-of-term results.
- **Adjust** in small steps, agree who leads each change, and check again.
- **Stop, redesign, or narrow** initiatives that do not work, and explain decisions clearly.

Competence area 3 - Innovation capacity building

Definition. The team ensures staff can do the innovation well in everyday practice. It invests in job-embedded professional learning, not only training events. It builds shared competence so the work does not depend on one person and can continue through staff changes.

What this looks like in practice

- **Build** learning into daily work through modelling, coaching, peer observation, co-planning, and feedback.
- **Develop** internal expertise by giving capable colleagues time and a clear support role.
- **Provide** simple tools that make the practice easier, examples, checklists, templates, shared routines.
- **Spread** know-how across more than one person, so the work survives role changes.

Competence area 4 - Psychological safety

Definition. The leadership team creates a climate where staff can try new approaches, speak up, and learn without fear of blame. It recognises that innovation is emotionally demanding and protects a no-blame learning approach. It manages pace and pressure, for example by limiting how many initiatives run at the same time or slowing implementation when capacity is low, so the work remains doable and does not turn into compliance or exhaustion.

What this looks like in practice

- **Name** openly that change feels uncomfortable, and frame discomfort as part of learning.
- **Review** setbacks without blame, focusing on how the work is organised and what to improve.
- **Invite** concerns early, so small issues are addressed before they grow.
- **Adjust** the pace under pressure by slowing down, simplifying, or re-sequencing the work.

Competence area 5 - Continuity assurance

Definition. The leadership team plans from the start how innovation will continue beyond individuals, projects, or funding. It embeds new practices into everyday routines, for example through shared documentation, agreed roles, and integration into school plans, so they become part of normal school life rather than temporary activities.

What this looks like in practice

- **Align** timetable, meeting rhythms, roles, and basic resources so the innovation fits normal work.
- **Record** key decisions and routines in a usable way, so knowledge is not lost with turnover.
- **Embed** the practice in onboarding, so new colleagues learn "how we do this here."
- **Coordinate** initiatives and keep priorities coherent, avoiding too many changes at once.

Competence area 6 - Community trust

Definition. The team builds trust with parents, learners, partners, and the wider community so the innovation can endure. It communicates clearly and consistently, translates the change into concrete benefits, and listens to concerns as useful feedback. It protects credibility by being transparent about progress, limits, and trade-offs.

What this looks like in practice

- **Translate** the change into concrete benefits for students, using examples, not slogans.
- **Create** channels for input and show what changed as a result of feedback.
- **Communicate** consistently and realistically about progress, limits, and trade-offs.
- **Build** support through early dialogue with key voices and steady follow-through.

Competence area 7 - Future readiness

Definition. The leadership team pays attention to emerging changes, such as AI, digital tools, or social trends, and makes careful choices instead of rushing adoption. It considers ethical, equity, and wellbeing implications, including impact on students, staff workload, fairness, and access, and keeps a long-term view when deciding what to introduce or delay.

What this looks like in practice

- **Scan** what may be coming in the next 3–5 years and discuss what it could mean for the school.
- **Run** small, low-risk trials with clear learning questions, a clear timeframe, and clear limits.
- **Decide** to scale, adapt, or stop based on what was learned, not on pressure or excitement.
- **Check** effects on fairness, inclusion, and wellbeing, and avoid approaches that increase inequality or overload.

From competence areas to learning outcomes

This chapter presents learning outcomes derived from the competence profile for sustaining innovation in schools. The competence profile specifies each competence area through a definition and practical descriptors, and it articulates the underlying knowledge, skills, and attitudes (K–S–A). The learning outcomes below translate that content into observable team performance statements that can guide training design, mentoring conversations, and formative self-assessment.

The chapter uses an outcomes-first format to keep the main report readable and usable. The detailed K–S–A lists that informed the outcomes are provided in Annex A as a transparent learning specification.

Competence area 1 - Innovation focus

Learning outcomes
After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Distinguish between novelty and value in school improvement, using clear criteria linked to learning, inclusion, wellbeing, and school functioning.
- Diagnose a priority need and formulate a clear improvement aim in plain language.
- Use a shared set of simple questions so the leadership team assesses new ideas in the same way.
- Make and communicate a focused decision on what to stop, simplify, or postpone in order to reduce overload and protect attention.
- Align chosen innovations with school values and current capacity, including staff workload realities.
- Maintain disciplined focus when external pressure or trends encourage constant addition of initiatives.

Competence area 2 - Adaptive learning

Learning outcomes
After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Explain improvement as a learning cycle and treat implementation as ongoing learning rather than a one-off rollout.
- Identify which elements of an innovation must remain stable and which can be adapted without losing educational value.

- Set short learning questions and success indicators that are realistic for school conditions.
- Build quick feedback loops using light evidence sources (staff experience, student experience, routine signals) and review them regularly.
- Make small adjustments, assign ownership, and check effects in the next cycle.
- Decide when to stop, redesign, or narrow an initiative based on learning, feasibility, and value, rather than reputation or sunk costs.

Competence area 3 - Innovation capacity building

Learning outcomes

After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Explain why sustainability depends on shared competence and routines, not only on motivation or formal decisions.
- Identify the capability gaps that limit reliable enactment of an innovation and prioritise what matters most.
- Design job-embedded professional learning linked to the innovation, including practice, feedback, and follow-up.
- Build internal expertise by assigning roles, time, and support for coaching, modelling, peer observation, and co-planning.
- Create and maintain simple tools that help staff enact the practice reliably (examples, templates, routines).
- Put onboarding supports in place so continuity is protected through staff changes.

Competence area 4 - Psychological safety

Learning outcomes

After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Describe psychological safety as a condition for learning, speaking up, and early detection of problems in innovation work.
- Identify common safety blockers in school settings (fear of judgement, blame, compliance culture, conflict avoidance) and reduce their impact.
- Establish team norms for respectful challenge, early concern-raising, and no-blame review.
- Facilitate reflection on setbacks that focuses on system improvement rather than individual fault.
- Detect early signs of overload, fear, or silent resistance and respond constructively.
- Adjust pace and sequencing so innovation work remains doable under pressure while learning continues.

Competence area 5 - Continuity assurance

Learning outcomes

After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Explain why sustaining innovation requires embedding into routines, roles, time allocation, and decision-making.

- Anticipate continuity risks (turnover, leadership change, calendar pressure, shifting priorities) and plan simple mitigation.
- Align innovation work with timetable realities, meeting rhythms, roles, and basic resources.
- Agree on the one or two routines that must continue even in busy weeks, so the innovation does not fade away.
- Design practical continuity mechanisms, including onboarding steps, usable documentation, and scheduled review points.
- Coordinate initiatives to avoid too many changes at once and reduce fragmentation and initiative fatigue.
- Clarify responsibility for maintaining the practice over time, including who holds routines and who supports capability.

Competence area 6 - Community trust

Learning outcomes

After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Explain how trust affects sustainability and why trust is built through consistent experience and follow-through, not only communication.
- Anticipate stakeholder concerns (fairness, workload spillover, wellbeing, unclear benefits) and respond credibly.
- Translate innovations into concrete student benefits using examples and plain language.
- Create feedback channels and demonstrate how input influences decisions and adjustments.
- Communicate progress, limits, and trade-offs transparently, including what is being tested and what will be reviewed.
- Build support through early dialogue with key voices and steady follow-through.

Competence area 7 - Future readiness

Learning outcomes

After learning in this area, the leadership team can:

- Describe foresight as preparation rather than prediction, and avoid hype-driven adoption that undermines sustainability.
- Identify trends and weak signals relevant to the school and analyse implications for teaching, inclusion, workload, assessment, and relationships.
- Run horizon-scanning discussions and convert them into practical “what this means for this school” questions.
- Design small, low-risk trials with clear learning questions, timeframes, and limits.
- Agree on a simple rule, such as: we test new ideas in one or two classes first, talk about what we learned, and only then decide whether to use them across the school.
- Make scale, adapt, or stop decisions based on learning and capacity, not fashion or pressure.
- Check likely effects on fairness, inclusion, and wellbeing before scaling and apply safeguards where risks are identified.

Looking forward

This competence profile responds to a recurring challenge identified across Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Spain: schools often succeed in starting innovations, but struggle to sustain them once initial enthusiasm decreases, external funding ends, or key individuals move on. The profile therefore focuses on the capacities that make innovation durable in real school conditions, including purposeful judgement about what is worth sustaining, shared ownership, continuous learning and adjustment, and trust inside the school and with the wider community. It also recognises that future readiness requires responsible decision-making, especially in relation to digital transformation and AI, where ethics, privacy, equity, and wellbeing are essential considerations.

The profile is intended to serve as a shared reference point for school systems, school leadership teams, and organisations that support professional development. It can be used to guide reflection and development planning within schools, to inform the design of training and mentoring programmes, and to support policy discussions about how leadership teams can strengthen long-term improvement capacity. The profile is deliberately written in a way that is applicable across different school contexts, while remaining grounded in practice and expressed in observable terms.

At the same time, the profile should not be read as a compliance checklist or as a formal qualification standard. Competence development in sustaining innovation is gradual and is strengthened through experience, reflection, and support. For this reason, the profile is best used as a developmental framework that helps schools and partners build a common language and clarify priorities, rather than as a tool for ranking or formal judgement.

Within the ESLTI project, this competence profile provides the conceptual foundation for the next stages of work. It informs the School Team Leadership Guide for Sustainable Innovations, which will translate the competence areas into practical tools, templates, and school-ready processes. It also guides the design of piloting activities, where leadership team representatives will apply these principles through internal innovation labs and mentored implementation of at least one innovation initiative per school. Lessons from practice will feed into refinement of guidance materials and the collection of best practices for long-term sustainability.

In this way, the competence profile functions as a bridge between research evidence and practical capacity-building. It clarifies what sustaining innovation requires, supports a coherent approach across partner countries, and provides a stable basis for strengthening school leadership teams so innovation becomes a continuous and embedded part of school life rather than a temporary project outcome.

Annex A. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes informing the learning outcomes

1) Innovation focus

Knowledge

- Understands the difference between novelty and value in school improvement, and why focus matters for sustainability.
- Knows typical drivers of overload (initiative accumulation, unclear priorities, hidden workload) and how they erode innovation.
- Understands the logic of stopping, simplifying, or postponing practices to create room for high-value work.

Skills

- Diagnoses a school need and formulates a clear improvement aim in plain language.
- Uses a simple value test (benefit, feasibility, effort, equity implications) to select or decline initiatives.
- Facilitates a decision on what to stop, simplify, or postpone and communicates it clearly.
- Aligns chosen innovations with school values and current capacity.

Attitudes

- Shows discipline to say no and protect focus, even under pressure or trends.
- Values effectiveness over visibility, and learning value over "being innovative."
- Accepts that stopping work is responsible leadership, not failure.

2) Adaptive learning

Knowledge

- Understands improvement as a learning cycle, not a one-off rollout.
- Knows the difference between essential elements that must stay stable and parts that can be adapted.
- Understands the role of feedback loops, early drift signals, and light evidence sources in schools.

Skills

- Sets short learning questions and success indicators that fit the innovation.
- Builds quick feedback loops (staff, students, routines) and reviews them regularly.

- Makes small adjustments, assigns ownership, and checks impact in the next cycle.
- Decides when to stop, redesign, or narrow an initiative based on learning.

Attitudes
- Prefers intellectual honesty over saving face, and is willing to change course.
- Treats setbacks as information, not as blame material.
- Values continuous improvement over perfect initial design.

3) Innovation capacity building

Knowledge
- Understands why sustainability depends on shared competence, not only motivation or formal decisions.
- Knows effective forms of job-embedded professional learning (coaching, modelling, peer observation, co-planning).
- Understands how internal expertise, documentation, and onboarding protect continuity through staff changes.

Skills
- Identifies capability gaps linked to the innovation and prioritises what matters most.
- Designs a job-embedded learning plan with practice, feedback, and follow-up.
- Develops internal expertise by assigning roles, time, and support for peer learning.
- Creates simple tools (examples, templates, routines) that help staff enact the practice reliably.

Attitudes
- Sees professional learning as core work, not an extra.
- Values shared practice and peer support over heroic individual effort.
- Believes ownership grows through competence and support.

4) Psychological safety

Knowledge
- Understands psychological safety as a condition for learning, speaking up, and early problem detection.
- Knows common safety blockers in schools (fear of judgement, compliance culture, blame, conflict avoidance).
- Understands how pace, workload, and emotional climate affect sustained innovation.

Skills
- Establishes team norms for respectful challenge, early concern-raising, and no-blame review.
- Facilitates reflection on setbacks that focuses on system improvement rather than individual fault.
- Spots early signs of overload, fear, or silent resistance and responds constructively.
- Adjusts pace and sequencing to keep work doable under pressure.

Attitudes

- Treats speaking up as loyalty to the mission, not negativity.
- Takes responsibility for climate and energy, not only for plans and tasks.
- Shows calm, steady behaviour when difficulties appear.

5) Continuity assurance

Knowledge

- Understands that sustainability requires embedding into routines, roles, time allocation, and decision-making.
- Knows typical continuity risks (turnover, leadership change, calendar pressure, shifting priorities).
- Understands what usable institutional memory looks like (clear routines, decisions, examples, onboarding steps).

Skills

- Aligns innovation with timetable, meeting rhythms, roles, and basic resources.
- Designs simple continuity mechanisms: onboarding, documentation, scheduled review points.
- Coordinates initiatives to avoid too many changes at once.
- Clarifies responsibilities for maintaining the practice over time.

Attitudes

- Thinks in "design for continuation," not "deliver and move on."
- Values coherence and stability of routines while still supporting learning and adjustment.
- Sees continuity as a leadership duty, not something left to personal motivation.

6) Community trust

Knowledge

- Understands how trust affects sustainability and how trust is built through experience, not only communication.
- Knows common sources of stakeholder concerns (fairness, workload spillover, student wellbeing, unclear benefits).
- Understands principles of clear, consistent, non-technical communication for parents and partners.

Skills

- Translates innovations into concrete student benefits using examples and plain language.
- Creates feedback channels and demonstrates how input influences decisions.
- Communicates progress, limits, and trade-offs in a credible way.
- Builds support through early dialogue with key voices and steady follow-through.

Attitudes

- Treats concerns as useful information, not resistance to defeat.
- Values transparency over persuasion.
- Maintains consistency and reliability as the foundation of trust.

7) Future readiness

Knowledge

- Understands foresight as preparation, not prediction, and why hype-driven adoption harms sustainability.
- Knows how trends and weak signals can affect teaching, inclusion, workload, assessment, and relationships.
- Understands how small, low-risk trials reduce uncertainty before scaling.

Skills

- Runs horizon-scanning discussions and turns them into practical "what this means for this school" questions.
- Designs small trials with clear learning questions, timeframes, and limits.
- Makes scale, adapt, or stop decisions based on learning and capacity.
- Checks likely effects on fairness, inclusion, and wellbeing before scaling.

Attitudes

- Stays curious and critical at the same time.
- Resists hype and prefers tested value over fashionable solutions.
- Holds responsibility for long-term consequences, not only short-term wins.

ISBN 978-619-233-411-6