

THE GUIDEBOOK TO SUPPORT INNOVATION IN ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION IN THE DANUBE REGION

#5 - Expert Mentoring and Coaching

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCIENCE, PRACTICE AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Expert mentoring and coaching provide **tailored guidance to innovators**, helping them strengthen technical, business, and collaborative aspects of their projects¹. They create opportunities for personalised learning and knowledge transfer through direct interaction with experienced professionals. **In the context of ecosystem restoration and NBS, mentoring and coaching are essential to bridge gaps between science, practice and entrepreneurship.**

Across the Danube region, several initiatives demonstrated the value of such support. Programmes like FORESDA (Interreg Danube)² and Restore4Life³ have shown that mentoring plays a key role in accelerating innovation by fostering collaboration between innovators, SMEs and research institutions.

Building on previous experiences, mentoring and coaching emerge as strategic enablers within the innovation ecosystem of the Danube region. They not only support individual innovators but also strengthen connections across sectors and countries, contributing to a more integrated and collaborative environment for nature-based and restoration-driven innovation.

What you will find in this section:



- ✓ An overview of the existing mentoring and coaching programmes in the Danube region for innovation and ecosystem restoration
- ✓ A step-by-step guidance to help innovators in the region access and benefit from expert mentoring and coaching opportunities

MENTORING AND COACHING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE DANUBE REGION

Mentoring and coaching play a strategic role in strengthening innovation capacity and supporting the translation of ideas into practical, scalable solutions. They complement other forms of support such as training or funding by providing personalised, experience-based guidance that helps innovators navigate technical, managerial, and organisational challenges. Beyond individual skill development, mentoring and coaching contribute to building stronger networks, enhancing collaboration, and promoting knowledge transfer across the innovation ecosystem.

The examples presented further down in this section, along with the lessons drawn from the KnowING Intellectual Property Right (IPR) mentoring pilot⁴, highlight **several dimensions of added value** that mentoring and coaching bring to the Danube innovation ecosystem:

- **Capacity building:** Strengthens the skills of researchers and entrepreneurs in areas such as IPR management, technology transfer, and business modelling, supported by EU advisory and technical assistance services (e.g. JASPERS⁵, ELENA⁶, InvestEU Advisory Hub⁷) for project preparation and capacity building.
- **Knowledge transfer:** Facilitates the exchange of expertise and good practices between more and less advanced institutions across the region. Sharing lessons learned and concrete case studies also builds capacity, demonstrates the viability of NBS, and encourages the replication of effective investment models across cities and regions, including through existing EU repositories such as the European Investment fund case studies.

1 Interreg Danube (2019). FORESDA Project – Mutual Learning and Mentoring Workshops. https://interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/52/9bd4cd8ce39041c0617061f313897ed0ae61e756.pdf

2 Interreg Danube (2019). FORESDA Project – Mutual Learning and Mentoring Workshops. https://interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/52/9bd4cd8ce39041c0617061f313897ed0ae61e756.pdf

3 https://www.ceeweb.org/documents/news/9_Mihai_Adamescu_Ecosystem_services_Restore4Life.pdf

4 Interreg Danube (2022) Fostering innovation in the Danube Region through knowledge engineering and IPR management. <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/knowingipr>

5 <https://www.eib.org/fr/products/advisory-services/jaspers/index>

6 <https://www.eib.org/fr/products/advisory-services/elena/index>

7 https://investeu.europa.eu/investeu-programme/investeu-advisory-hub_en

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- **Collaboration and networking:** Encourages cross-sector and cross-border partnerships, linking academia, SMEs, and public institutions.
- **Innovation readiness:** Enhances the ability of innovators to move from idea to market by providing targeted, practical advice.
- **Institutional development:** Supports the establishment of technology transfer offices (TTOs) and reinforces internal mechanisms for innovation management.
- **Regional cohesion:** Contributes to reducing disparities in innovation capacity and creating a more integrated and balanced regional ecosystem.

FIVE STEPS TO ACCOMPANY INNOVATORS THROUGH THEIR MENTORING JOURNEY



This step-by-step guidance is intended to help innovators in the Danube region access and benefit from expert mentoring and coaching opportunities that can strengthen their innovation capacity, accelerate project implementation, and enhance the impact of their work in ecosystem restoration and NBS. It builds on lessons from successful regional initiatives such as KnowING IPR and Danube Life Lines (DLL), which have demonstrated the effectiveness of structured and tailored mentoring schemes for innovators across different sectors.

The guidance is built around **five key steps that accompany innovators throughout their mentoring journey** – from identifying their needs to applying the lessons learned and sharing outcomes within the regional innovation community.



Step-by-step guidance for expert mentoring and coaching

1. Identify needs and objectives

The initial step involves **clarifying the purpose and expected outcomes** of mentoring or coaching. Three complementary areas typically emerge:

- **Technical mentoring**, oriented towards the design, implementation, and monitoring of NBS or restoration actions.
- **Business mentoring**, aimed at strengthening business models, financial planning, or market positioning.
- **Strategic or policy coaching**, supporting governance alignment, stakeholder engagement, and regulatory navigation.

Evidence from the KnowING IPR mentoring pilot shows that requiring participants to formulate their innovation challenges prior to mentor matching significantly improved the relevance and effectiveness of subsequent sessions⁸. This highlights the importance of a well-defined entry point and structured objective-setting at the onset of the mentoring process.

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2. Identify existing mentoring and coaching opportunities

Mapping available opportunities within the region allows innovators to engage with established structures rather than operate in isolation. Notable **examples in the Danube region** include:

- The **FORESDA project** (Interreg Danube) implemented a series of mutual learning and mentoring workshops that connected research institutions, SMEs, and innovation support organisations in the wood-based bioeconomy sector. These exchanges facilitated cross-border transfer of good practices and improved the innovation capacities of less developed regions, highlighting the importance of mentoring for institutional learning and regional cohesion⁹.
- The **KnowING IPR** project designed a structured mentoring programme to help SMEs and higher education institutions strengthen their skills in intellectual property management and technology transfer. Through tailored mentoring sessions and online learning tools, participating innovators improved their business-model readiness and competitiveness, illustrating how coaching can directly enhance innovation uptake¹⁰.
- The **Rising Competencies** project further extended this approach by establishing a transnational mentor scheme for rural entrepreneurs and SMEs in less developed parts of the Danube basin. Its e-platform and peer-learning components enabled participants to gain practical knowledge and connect with experts beyond national boundaries, reducing regional disparities in innovation support¹¹.
- More recently, the **Danube Life Lines Business Club** has introduced one-on-one mentoring and coaching for green entrepreneurs and innovators developing NBS and ecosystem-restoration projects. This initiative demonstrates how mentoring can directly align environmental and business objectives, guiding innovators from concept to market while fostering sustainable economic opportunities in the region¹².

These initiatives underline that mentoring frameworks in the Danube region are most effective when **embedded within broader innovation ecosystems, linking research, business, and public-sector actors across borders**.

Beyond these transnational programmes, innovators can also turn to **regional or national organisations participating in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**¹³. The EUSDR supports a range of thematic Priority Areas—such as innovation, environmental protection, and sustainable development—under which countries and institutions collaborate through National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators, and regional innovation agencies. These structures can provide access to mentoring, technical support, and networking opportunities.

Similarly, EU-funded initiatives like EcoDaLLi¹⁴ contribute to this ecosystem by connecting innovators with experts and living labs that facilitate peer learning and knowledge exchange across the Danube basin.

9 Interreg Danube (2019). FORESDA Project – Mutual Learning and Mentoring Workshops.

https://interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/52/9bd4cd8ce39041c0617061f313897ed0ae61e756.pdf

10 AGEPI (2021). KnowING IPR Project – Partner Progress Report. https://agepi.gov.md/sites/default/files/2022/02/Partner_Progress_Report_6_KnowING_IPR_20210527_090503.pdf

11 <https://keep.eu/projects/29479/Rising-competences-skills-i-EN/>

12 <https://danubelifelines.eu/businessclub>

13 <https://danube-region.eu/>

14 <https://ecodalli.eu/>

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3. Prepare for engagement

A critical determinant of success lies in **adequate preparation prior to entering the mentoring process**. Innovators that systematically assess their innovation maturity, internal resources, and knowledge gaps are better positioned to benefit from mentoring. Clear articulation of project objectives and constraints enables mentors to tailor advice to the specific context.

The FORESDA mentoring workshops demonstrated that **targeted preparation**—through short presentations and diagnostic sessions—**allowed participants to receive more relevant and technically grounded feedback**¹⁵. This finding points to the value of integrating diagnostic tools or self-assessment questionnaires as part of future mentoring schemes.

Preparation materials and templates for innovation maturity assessment or business readiness can often be accessed through regional or EU-funded platforms, including:

- Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) mentoring and training resources¹⁶.
- EUSDR Priority Area 8 (Competitiveness of Enterprises), which provides tools for SMEs and innovation actors to evaluate business potential¹⁷.

Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) in the Danube countries, offering pre-mentoring business diagnostics and innovation audits¹⁸.

4. Establish and manage the mentoring relationship

Effective mentoring depends on the establishment of a **structured relationship between mentors and mentees**, characterised by clear objectives, defined timeframes, and transparent communication channels.

Good practice emerging from the KnowING IPR pilot shows that continuous interaction—through regular online meetings and iterative feedback—was instrumental in **achieving measurable progress and maintaining engagement**¹⁹. The evaluation also pointed to common challenges such as limited mentor availability and varying levels of commitment among participants, suggesting the need for stronger institutional anchoring and resource planning.

Sustaining such structured relationships requires access to **platforms that facilitate communication, scheduling, and documentation**. Innovators can use or adapt **systems already operating in the Danube region**, such as:

- The Danube Life Lines Business Club, which provides a mentoring interface and community of practice for green entrepreneurship²⁰.
- The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) Climate-KIC Accelerator, which includes structured mentoring as part of its support packages for climate-related innovations²¹.

15 Interreg Danube (2019). FORESDA Project – Mutual Learning and Mentoring Workshops. https://interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/52/9bd4cd8ce39041c0617061f313897ed0ae61e756.pdf

16 <https://www.interreg-danube.eu>

17 <https://danube-region.eu>

18 <https://een.ec.europa.eu/about-enterprise-europe-network>

19 Interreg Danube (2022) Fostering innovation in the Danube Region through knowledge engineering and IPR management. <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/knowningipr> <https://danubelifelines.eu/businessclub>

20 <https://danubelifelines.eu/businessclub>

21 <https://www.climate-kic.org/programmes/accelerator>

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5. Consolidate, apply and disseminate outcomes

The final step involves **evaluating the mentoring process, consolidating key insights, and translating them into practical improvements in project design or business operations**. The dissemination of lessons learned—through peer-learning events, innovation hubs, or living labs—ensures that mentoring benefits extend beyond individual participants.

Evidence from the Rising Competences project indicates that **peer-exchange mechanisms helped sustain collaboration among mentees and contributed to broader community capacity-building**²². Embedding mentoring outcomes into organisational routines and regional innovation platforms, such as the EcoDaLLi Living Labs²³, can further enhance knowledge circulation and institutional learning across the Danube basin.

Several **regional and EU-wide initiatives** provide frameworks and platforms intended to support reflection, dissemination, and community exchange with varying levels of activity and effectiveness across initiatives:

- **EcoDaLLi Living Labs:** designed to promote co-creation and mentoring among innovators, researchers, and policymakers in the Danube region.
- **EUSDR Priority Area 7 (Knowledge Society):** supports transitional cooperation in education, research, and innovation and provides a strategic coordination framework at macro-regional level²⁴.

Interreg Danube Transnational Programme – Capitalisation Platform: which aims to facilitate sharing of lessons learned from projects such as FORESDA or Rising Competences to support the uptake of good practices²⁵.

22 <https://keep.eu/projects/29479/Rising-competences-skills-i-EN/>

23 <https://ecodalli.eu/>

24 <https://danube-region.eu>

25 <https://dtp.interreg-danube.eu/>



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