

'Learning from the Extremes': transforming rural schools into digital learning and innovation hubs



SUMMARY

'Learning from the Extremes' (LfE) is a European preparatory action (2022-2024) designed to reduce the digital divide in education by transforming rural and remote schools into digitally connected learning and innovation hubs. A 14-partner consortium coordinated by the Greek Institute of Educational Policy supported 123 rural schools in 10 EU Member States through a combination of grants, capacity building and practical guidance. Building on the pilot action, consortium partners are developing the Rural Wings Academy, a network and framework for pre- and in-service teacher training and ongoing support, helping rural schools sustain and scale innovation beyond the project.



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CONTEXT

Many **rural and remote schools** across Europe operate with **weak broadband connectivity, limited devices and outdated digital tools**. Teachers often lack support to use digital technologies pedagogically, while school communities lack access to online content, remote labs or collaborative platforms. This exacerbates territorial inequalities and constrains the role of schools as inclusive, future-oriented institutions in their communities.

'Learning from the Extremes' responded to these challenges by supporting schools in remote areas with low connectivity and limited access to digital educational tools.

OBJECTIVES

- > Reduce the digital gap in remote and rural school communities by improving connectivity, access to devices and use of digital learning tools;
- > Enable students to learn in modern, connected and constructive learning spaces that support active and personalised learning;
- > Support teachers through professional development, mentoring and resources to effectively integrate digital technologies in teaching;
- > Provide school leaders and support staff with tools that simplify management tasks and free time for teaching and learning;
- > Increase access to digital tools for the whole school community, improving communication and collaboration within and beyond the school;
- > Foster partnerships between schools, enabling them to share high-quality teaching, collaborate on projects and build professional support networks.

Themes: Research and innovation; education and training; infrastructure; digital; social inclusion

Countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain

Organisations:

- > Institute of Educational Policy (Greece), public authority
- > Ellinogermaniki Agogi (Greece), academic/research institution
- > Directorate-General for Education, Ministry of Education (Portugal), public authority
- > NUCLIO (Portugal), civil society organisation
- > Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, public authority
- > University of Cyprus, academic/research institution
- > Croatian Academic and Research Network CARNET, public authority
- > Trinity College Dublin (Ireland), academic/research institution
- > University of Jyväskylä (Finland), academic/research institution
- > Bulgarian National Research Network Association, research institution
- > Netcompany (Luxembourg), private business
- > Science View (Greece), civil society organisation
- > ATiT (Belgium), private business
- > Dublin West Education Centre (Ireland), academic institution

Start & end date: 02/2022 - Ongoing

Budget: EUR 2 665 910

Funding sources: EU-funded Preparatory Action 'Increasing access to educational tools in areas and communities with low connectivity or access to technologies' (PPPA-2021-RemoteDigEdu)

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ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

- > In early 2022, the consortium surveyed school leaders, teachers, students and parents in remote areas across ten countries to **map access, needs and practices** in digital education. This diagnostic phase informed the design of the intervention and the **Rural School Innovation Roadmap**;
- > Through that Roadmap, the project strengthened **multi-actor dialogue**, bringing together schools, technology providers, policymakers, universities and research organisations to analyse good practices and identify suitable technical and pedagogical solutions for rural settings;
- > A fair and transparent mechanism allocated around **EUR 1.2 million to 123 rural schools**. Each **school developed its own digital innovation plan**, specifying connectivity upgrades, devices, tools and training needs, with support from project experts;
- > Throughout the duration of the pilot action (2022-2024) participating **schools improved connectivity**, installed devices and platforms, and organised **teacher training, peer exchanges and community events** such as virtual labs, robotic telescopes, online collaborations and family workshops. A dedicated **online portal** supported idea sharing, mapping of school progress and access to resources.



RESULTS

- > The project equipped **123 rural schools in ten countries** with improved connectivity, devices and digital applications tailored to their contexts. Schools reported **improved student engagement and learning outcomes**, linked to richer digital content, interactive activities and cross-border collaboration.
- > Around EUR 1.2 million was directly invested in school-level innovation projects through small grants, leveraging additional local support and resources, benefitting students, teachers, school leaders, parents and local communities. **Innovation levels in schools improved** by an average of around 20%, reaching up to 35% in less digitally advanced schools within just one year. **Teachers' digital competence and confidence were enhanced** through structured training, mentoring and peer collaboration.
- > The Rural School Innovation Roadmap and supporting toolkit developed by the project offered a **practical model for planning and managing digital transformation** in rural schools.
- > The project cultivated a stronger culture of **innovation and collaboration among educators**, with networks and partnerships that continue beyond the project and feed into the Rural Wings Academy. The Academy involves a **continuous support mechanism** through a dedicated portal to support access to training, mentoring and networking so that rural schools can continue their digital transformation journey beyond the initial funding.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > Combining **infrastructure upgrades with pedagogical and organisational support** is crucial – connectivity and devices alone cannot deliver lasting change.
- > Small, flexible grants at school level, coupled with guidance and a clear roadmap, allowed rural schools to design **context-appropriate solutions** rather than one-size-fits-all models.
- > The multi-country consortium brought together public authorities, universities, networks and private actors, bringing about a **rich mix of expertise** and increasing **transferability** across systems.
- > Intensive **teacher training and peer support** addressed disparities in digital skills and proved essential to sustainable integration of technology in everyday teaching.
- > The dedicated portal and community events helped reduce isolation of rural schools, creating **communities of practice** that continue to share experiences and resources.
- > The **Rural Wings Academy** concept is key for long-term sustainability, providing a structured way to extend training, mentoring and innovation support beyond the pilot period.



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