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Policy Brief



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Abstract	This Deliverable is the 1 st out of 2 Policy Briefs of the Learning from the Extremes (LfE) project. The Policy Brief is based on 1 st year developments of the project, including information and outputs from the surveys of the user needs as well as the conclusion with the strategies to be followed by rural and remote schools in the 10 participating countries. This document also presents the LfE multidimensional approach to thinking about and planning for the future of technology enhanced rural school education by involving all educational stakeholders.
Author(s)	Menelaos Sotiriou – Science View
Contributor(s)	
Reviewer(s)	Richard Harte – TCD, Maria Nika – IEP
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Executive summary

Towards the transformation of remote and rural schools to Learning Hubs of the Rural Community.

Learning from the Extremes: A Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap.

This deliverable refers mainly to policy makers. As such, it includes the main strategies and approaches that are recommended by the LfE project and have already started to be tested in 123 schools of 10 European countries.

In this 1st of 2 Policy Briefs we are including the results of the initial surveys concerning the needs of the remote and rural schools. We will also present how these user requirements have been transformed to recommended strategies and activities in order to improve the innovation level of the schools in remote and rural areas.

The scope of this document is to demonstrate the LfE multidimensional approach to thinking about and planning for the future of technology enhanced rural school education by involving all educational stakeholders.

This document summarizes the achievements of the project, mainly within its 1st year of implementation and presents the main results coming from the policy-oriented deliverables that have been developed. The reader can find links to these deliverables in the References of this document for further reading.

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1 Introduction

Learning from the Extremes (LfE) is addressing inequalities of access to digital education by enhancing inclusion and by reducing the digital gap suffered by school communities from remote areas with low connectivity and with limited or no access to devices, digital educational tools and digital learning content.

The project started in February 2022 and, by its conclusion (January 2024), it aims to offer a vision of what can be achieved with adequate investment in ICT infrastructure, tools and content, along with a detailed **Rural School Innovation Roadmap on how to achieve that vision** – a plan with clear targets, clear priorities, and a management process that ensures continuous feedback and reflection. Learning from the Extremes adopts a multidimensional approach to thinking about and planning for the future of technology enhanced rural school education. This approach is comprised of:

- foresight work involving all educational stakeholders, aiming to identify the probable, possible and desired developments in rural school education in the mid-term future and
- user-driven consultation process with the key stakeholders, to map the directions provided by the foresight activity onto the diverse realities of rural schools in Europe today, assessing the impact of numerous innovative digital solutions and identifying barriers to adoption and wide roll-out.

LfE involves 123 rural and remote schools from 10 European countries (Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Croatia, Ireland, Finland, Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Spain).

All of these rural and remote schools benefit from stronger, more responsive and reliable distance education platforms, online labs and simulations and high-performance web-conferencing and collaboration tools. All schools are already able to share teaching excellence with professional support in the classroom, the school and the region. Students have modern, connected and constructive learning spaces equipped to support engaged, personalised learning. Teachers have already been provided with short-term professional development (through webinars that have been realized since March 2023) and the support and resources they need to integrate digital tools within the learning environment. School communities have access to digital tools and connectivity for effective communication and collaboration through the LfE Community Portal (<https://www.schoolofthefuture.eu/en/lfe>).

2 Learning from the Extremes Approach: Generating Creative Options and proposing Strategies

2.1 The LfE Approach

The LfE project adopts a multidimensional approach to thinking about and planning for the future of technology enhanced rural school education by involving all educational stakeholders. The overall aim of the LfE project is the development of a strategy that will present targeted recommendations on how to increase access to digital education in the EU remote areas and communities that require such support. LfE project has already produced a set of recommendations that are based on the following activities undertaken within the project:

- Analysis of the needs of communities and schools located in remote and rural areas of Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Spain to gain insights related to the barriers and enablers for digital education.
- The provision of funding to rural schools in the above-mentioned countries to help them install the minimum equipment needed for their digital transformation and e-maturity journey.
- Set up targeted consultation and training services to provide the selected schools with technical support, pedagogical guidance, mentoring to access further funding and networking opportunities.
- Analyse the data collected from the selected schools' pilots and experiences to prepare the final recommendations for future actions to support digital education in rural communities.

The strategies proposed by the LfE project in order to achieve the recommended activities are organised around three key thematic areas: a) Organisation and support for rural schools b) Equity and excellence in rural schools and c) Rural schools as community and educational spaces.

For each of the three strategies, specific recommendations are stated to support rural schools so as to embark on their digital and innovation transformation journey. Below, a summary of the main strategies is provided:

- Organization and support for rural schools
 - Installation and effective use of a highly equipped and connected classroom (HECC) model, and investment in opportunities for further development of the school's digital infrastructure
 - Exploitation of professional development opportunities offered by the LfE project and other national and international PD providers
- Support equity and excellence
 - Establishment of a positive school culture and shared vision
 - Promotion and facilitation of differentiated teaching and learning
- Rural schools as community and educational spaces
 - Development of opportunities to connect with local/regional stakeholders
 - Transformation of rural schools into Learning and Innovation Hubs

2.2 LfE Recommendations

Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 present a summary of the LfE recommendations for rural schools in line with the main barriers and opportunities that schools have, and a list of relevant resources to support the e-maturity and innovation in schools. For more details, the reader could see the References and specifically Deliverable D3.2.

Table 1: Strategy of organization and support for rural schools

Organization and support for rural schools	
Digital technology infrastructure	
Recommendations	Resources / Proposing Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good communication with technology providers, access to user manuals and technical support for the instalment and use of the selected digital solutions. • Ethics committee for cybersecurity, protection of sensitive personal data and responsible use of digital technologies. • Awareness system for emerging technologies to sustain and further develop the digital technology infrastructure. • Sustainable funding mechanism for the update and maintenance of the school's digital technology infrastructure. 	<p>Highly Equipped and Connected Classroom – HECC model: https://bit.ly/3q8m5Po (EC 2019)</p>
Professional development for teachers	
Recommendations	Resources / Proposing Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of teachers and school leaders' needs for professional development through self-reflection tools. • Sustainable professional development mechanism (distributed opportunities, dissemination and mentoring within the school environment). • Courses that encourage peer learning for increasing opportunities for collaboration and networking. • Certified open online courses for accreditation and recognition. • Courses focusing on student-centred and innovative approaches to teach with digital technologies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LfE Self Reflection Tool (for School Managers): https://srt.learningfromtheextremes.eu/ (LfE (2022). "Quick Guide on how to use the Self-Reflection Tool) • LfE online training course: https://usavrsavanje.loomen.carnet.hr/login/index.php# • Rural Schools Innovation Academy: http://learningfromtheextremes.ea.gr/ • European School Innovation Academy (ESIA): https://esia.ea.gr/ • Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu): https://bit.ly/3wSxygg (Redecker, C. & Punie, Y., 2017) • SELFIE for Teachers: https://bit.ly/3qaDRSb (Economou, A., 2023) • Digital Competent Teachers for Creating Digital Students (MOOC): https://bit.ly/3pTWYzC • Integrated STEM Teaching for Secondary and Primary Schools (MOOCs): https://bit.ly/3KypmAY and https://bit.ly/3KztKQ3 • Building a School Digital Strategy with the SELFIE Tool (MOOC): https://bit.ly/3CNPxlg

Table 2: Strategy around Support equity and excellence

Support equity and excellence	
School leadership	
Recommendations	Resources / Proposing Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear leadership expectations and values to support the effective use of digital technologies. • Development of a shared vision and a common school strategy. • Leading group to ensure that the use of digital technologies does not violate national and European safety and ethical regulations. • Leading group to ensure the capacity building of all teachers, and lead the achievement of the shared vision. • Guide professional learning by providing opportunities for all teachers. • Teacher’s collaboration for selecting and creating digital content, and reflecting on teaching and learning practices. • Communities of practice for sharing and learning about school leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video about shared leadership: https://bit.ly/3qpCl9y • Online course about shared leadership (provided by the European Schoolnet Academy): https://bit.ly/3RPtQpm
Personalized and inclusive learning	
Recommendations	Resources / Proposing Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use digital technologies to enhance inclusion and equity by providing students with appropriate guidance and support. • Ensure the provision of flexible, differentiated and needs based learning content and activities to all students by elaborating the UDL guidelines. • Ensure that all students who have special educational needs have access to appropriate assistive technologies. • Request specific guidance and advice on pedagogical approaches for using assistive technologies for students with special educational needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UDL guidelines: https://udlguidelines.cast.org/ (CAST, 2018) • Training module about UDL in practice: https://bit.ly/3UayDUn • Collection of online lessons designed based on the UDL framework: https://bit.ly/3U9JJZs

Table 3: Strategy around rural schools as community and educational spaces

Rural school as community and educational spaces	
Connection with local/regional stakeholder	
Recommendations	Resources / Proposing Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate the development and implementation of innovative good practices for digital education through intergroup and ingroup interaction between stakeholders. • Stakeholder meetings for planning, monitoring and assessing joint actions in digital education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LfE community platform with community building tools and networking and mentoring services: https://www.schoolofthefuture.eu/en/lfe

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory scenario development approach to plan and implement for ideal and sustainable conditions for digital education. • School network with external stakeholders to join and contribute with new innovative technology solutions, good practices and creative applications. 	
Opportunities for community learning	
Recommendations	Resources / Proposing Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procurement of digital technology solutions and applications that can serve for lifelong learning for all the members of the rural community. • Horizontal links with the local communities for exchanging support, material and financial help. • Follow the digital transformation path provided by the LfE support and training services to transform the school into a sustainable innovation ecosystem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support, training, mentoring and networking opportunities through the LfE community platform: https://www.schoolofthefuture.eu/en/lfe (Teacher Square and School Square Sections) • Open Schooling Roadmap: A Guide for School Leaders and Innovative Teachers: https://bit.ly/3B8sDTg (Sotiriou, S. et al, 2020)

3 Reflect and Plan: the continuous improvement process

An important first step to take for schools that would like to follow the proposed LfE Approach, is to identify the status of the school unit related to the level of innovation. To do so, the school unit should fill in the LfE Self-Reflection tool, <https://srt.learningfromtheextremes.eu/>.

3.1 Identify the status of the school unit and follow specific strategies and activities

The LfE Self-Reflection Tool was developed to analyse the school community engagement in innovation and e-maturity (based on the already existing and validated OSOS SRT – Sotiriou, M., et al., 2021). The instrument focuses on three identified areas of “growth” – school management, school process, and teachers’ professional development allowing the school stakeholders to describe in detail the current situation in their school in these three areas, and also allows for findings to be utilised to drive future actions and development. Within each area, the school head must respond to statements in a number of sections and therefore identify the current status of their school in terms of innovation and e-maturity. The three areas and some of the corresponding statements are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: LfE Self-Reflection Tool filled out by School heads

Level	Main sectors to reflect
MANAGEMENT	What is the vision and the leadership of the school stakeholders towards the adoption of a changing culture towards openness, innovation and e-maturity?
	What is the overall innovation potential of the school community and to highlight the key factors that can catalyse cultural changes (e.g. development of a shared vision and understanding or development of motivation mechanisms and specific plans for staff competencies)?
	A step-by-step approach for the school heads to define a root of development and to locate the current position of their school in the innovation journey.
PROCESS <i>Identify which process is already in place in the school community and which must be further developed. The instrument is sensitive in highlighting the processes and the mechanisms such as:</i>	the operation of collaborative environments and tools (for content co-creation and sharing)
	how many members of the school community are using them regularly
	adjustments to the curriculum that allow for the implementation of open school activities (as defined in the previous section)
	parents and external stakeholders’ involvement in the open school activities
	procedures in place that are offering opportunities to reflect and debate, communication and feedback mechanisms
TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT <i>The aim of this section of the instrument is to assess to what extent teachers and school staff engaged in the open schooling approach have a holistic view of science,</i>	Teachers are or will be introduced to and offered opportunities to engage in Professional Development opportunities.
	The school will or is already encouraging and supporting collaboration among staff for teaching (e.g. team teaching; sharing

<i>scientific research, and major scientific developments.</i>	of teaching resources) and staff learning. The school is working, or will work, on a team building strategy.
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After the completion of each one of the required sections in each area of the self-reflection tool, the school representative gets a report that includes the answers in each one of the sections as well as the results of the reflection process. The status of the school could be Enabled, Consistent, Integrated or Advanced (Table 5).

Table 5: Status of School

ENABLED	CONSISTENT	INTEGRATED	ADVANCED
Schools that are at an initial stage of incorporating educational innovation in the classroom and beyond	Schools that have achieved a certain level of innovation and openness through specific measures, educational ICT tools, best practices, CPD, but these are still isolated cases without a network of other schools and external partners to facilitate the process	Schools that have achieved a high degree of innovation and openness and they have already established cooperation with community stakeholders and other external partners	Schools that are considered rather extreme cases that offer a glimpse to the open school of the future

3.2 The LfE Self-Reflection Tool

The LfE Self-Reflection Tool (LfE-SRT) is already in operation and the 123 participating rural and remote schools have already used it in order to identify their status. According to their status, they are following specific strategies and developing plans on how to improve their status.

After a period of a specific time period (the proposed one is a whole school year) they fill in the LfE-SRT again in order to measure the improvement achieved (providing a pre and post status measure).

The LfE-SRT is available online, <https://srt.learningfromtheextremes.eu/>, and any interested school can request to register and start the procedure (Figure 1).

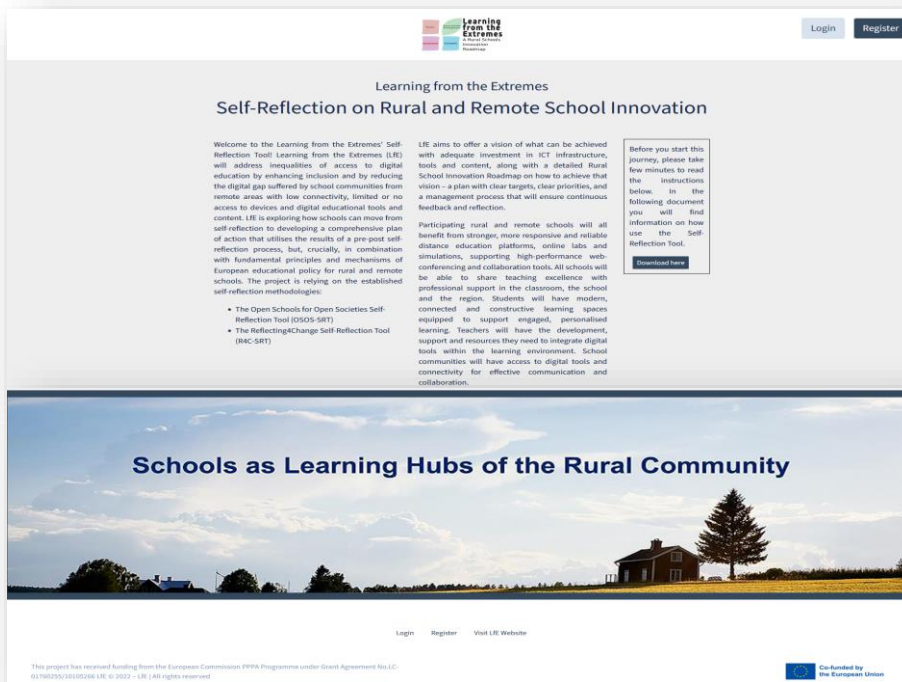


Figure 1: the 1st page of the LfE-SRT

4 Community Building and Support

4.1 Building a network of rural and remote schools

123 schools from 10 countries collaborate, exchange experiences, learn from each other, and create and implement common projects. All of these schools have been included in the LfE Community Portal so as to be able to collaborate and exchange experiences.

The schools are included in the LfE Innovation interactive map that can be found in the Community Portal (Figure 2). Using this map, someone is able to track a specific school and see all the activities that is doing as well as to contact and collaborate with it.

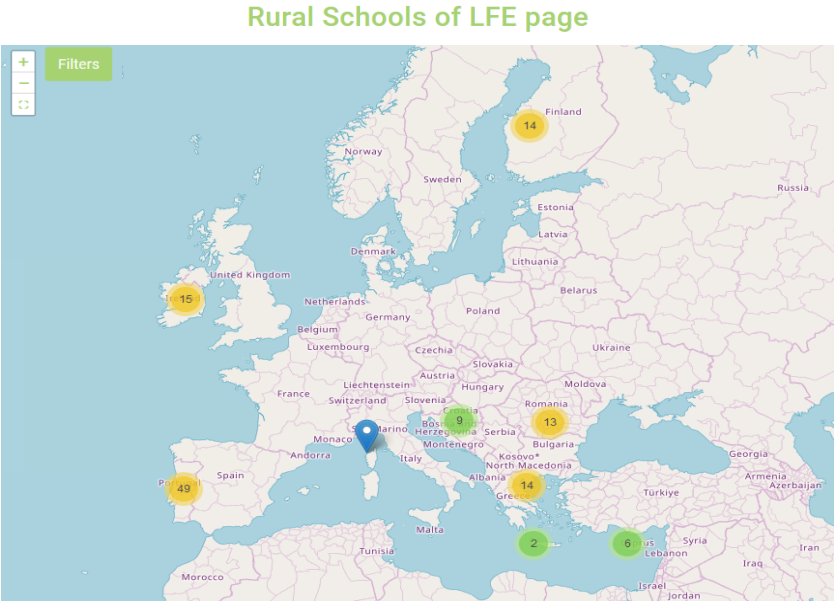


Figure 2: The LfE Innovation Map

4.2 Towards a Rural Schools Community of Users

One of the final outcomes of the Learning from the Extremes project will be a community of users, capable of continuing the support to their school’s innovation journey and prepared to mentor and support new colleagues and other schools within their environment to embark on the same journey. A community of users is not a simple collection of individuals, it is a team of users and drivers of innovation and change in their respective environments. The outcome of Learning from the Extremes will be a community of “change makers”, empowered to continue their school transformation and to bring novelty to their environment through a sustainable chain of mutual support and mentoring scheme. The pillars of such community have to be established from the beginning of the joint actions. These pillars for the creation of this community are illustrated in Figure 3, and further elaborated upon in Table 6.

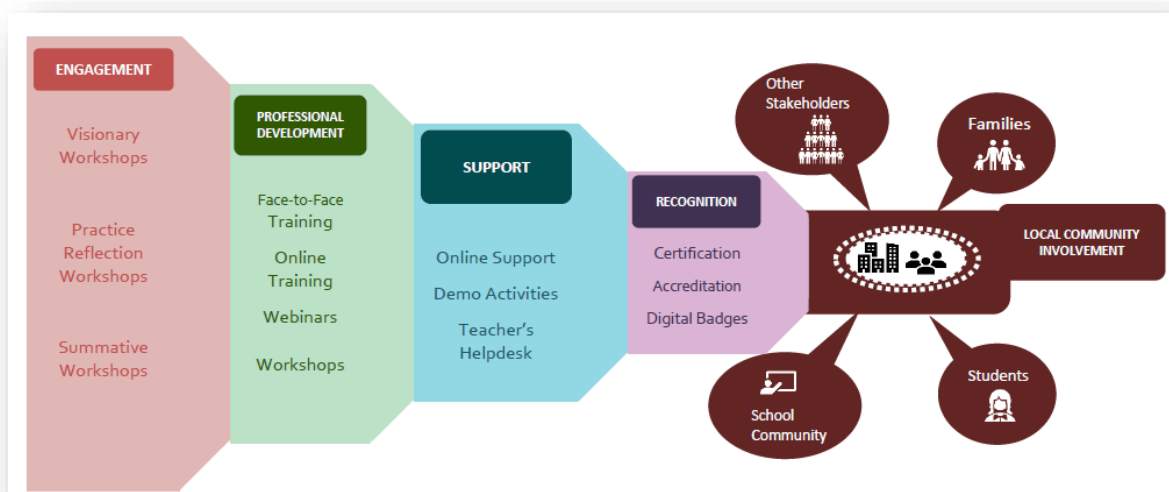


Figure 3: The 5 pillars of community building

Table 6: 5 pillars of community building

ENGAGEMENT	The engagement of the participants is one of the most important moments of the community building effort. It is when their aspirations are heard, where the project presents its solutions, and the joint course of actions is established.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	After a course of actions is established, the professional development opportunities unfold. The training opportunities need to be aligned with the professional development needs of the participants and, in the case of LfE, need to be aligned with the innovation journey envisioned by the school. In the LfE Project this pillar is already in progress and professional development activities are realised (Webinars - https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4YaKfd8ZDuxlVS0N0a5uqTSz17mLCVLu , The LfE Summer School - https://esia.ea.gr/learning-from-the-extremes-summer-school/). Also, the project will establish the School Innovation Academy within 2024.
SUPPORT	A successful professional development is the one that is materialized in the participants' settings. The continuous support to educators after the training episodes will be an added guarantee that the learning of innovative tools, resources and methodologies will reach the students' classroom when meeting new content and experiences.
RECOGNITION	Frequently, there is a great effort on the part of educators to improve their competence profile, to embrace the unknown and transform it into classroom practices. Such efforts deserve proper recognition which acts as a booster on the self-esteem and confidence of the participants.
LOCAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	The involvement of the local community should be part of the whole process. Parents, educators, students, members of the non-teaching staff and all other relevant stakeholders from the community should be a part of the design of the innovation journeys and evaluators of the concrete results. By being part of the overall process, members of the community have a sense of belonging and ownership and are more likely to support the changes being implemented.

5 The proposed LfE whole school approach

5.1 The transformation journey in the Learning from the Extremes project

The Support Mechanism of LfE aims to provide a user friendly and smooth implementation of each school's Journey to Innovation (their transformation journey). The overall process is supported by the various project's activities that rely on the solutions provided in the community platform and the other tools offered by LfE project. The overall work is based on a path that starts with the school's reflection (e.g. from the SRT) followed by a transformation development plan. The overall process is built on a strong participatory model, with consultation and mentoring present during all phases of the school's journey. The success of the projects is not the fulfilment of the proposed strategic plan, it is the innovation taking place, the community emerging from the plan and the continuous transformation of the school vision (Figure 4).

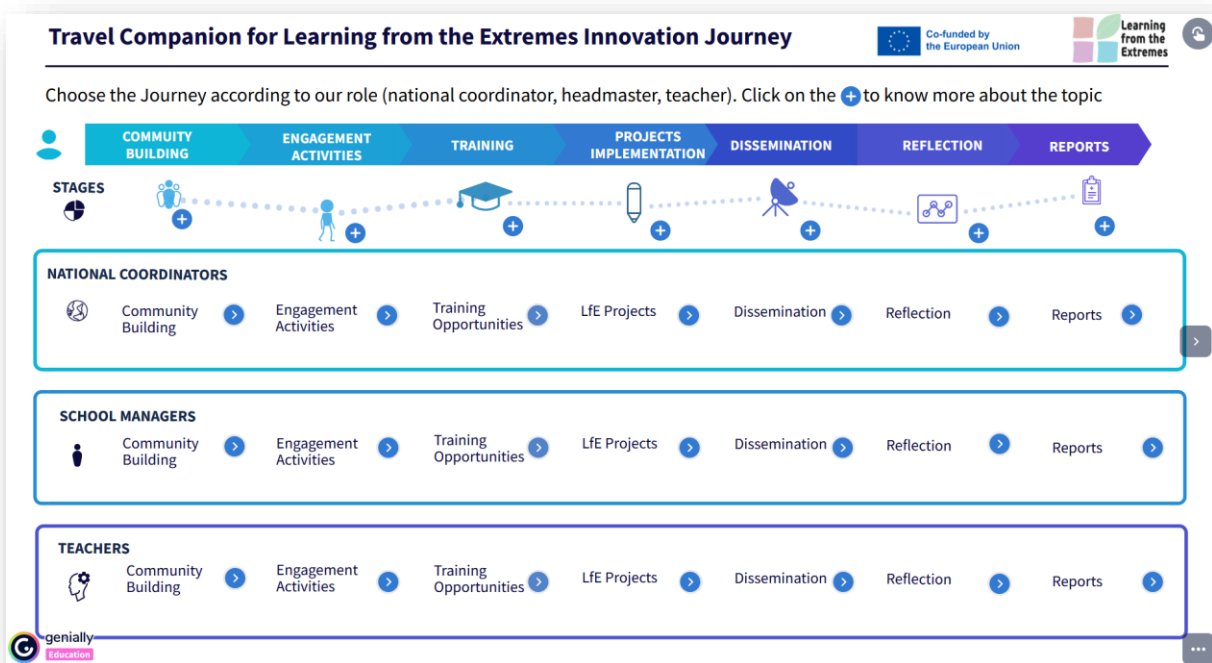


Figure 4: The transformation journey in the Learning from the Extremes project (<https://www.schoolofthefuture.eu/en/lfe/guidelines-tutorials/travel-companion-learning-extremes-innovation-journey>)

The Innovation Journey starts with the preparation of the school's path. A careful exercise of self-reflection and participatory actions with the relevant stakeholders will lead to a strong development plan. The overall process will be supported by national coordinators with a continuous consultation process. Communities will be built around the Transformation Development Plans and support for its materialization will be provided in the form of Continuous Professional Development opportunities. Communities and CPD will be built around the selected Digital Tools by the selected schools. The success stories will be told by the various communities that will emerge within the LfE platform, it will be narrated by the students' projects and the engagement of the community as an overall in the proposed innovation actions. The transformation will occur inside classrooms and will evolve to national and international collaborative actions. These powerful stories will be documented in the Learning from the Extremes roadmap and will be visible in the community platform and the social media of the project. The story will be told in many languages and many Innovative Learning Hubs and the LfE mentors will become beacons for innovation and transformation in their communities.

5.2 The Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap

The outcome of the work will be a list of key features (along with their descriptions) that will act as a reference point for the development of the **Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap**. This will also include a list of the activities that will support the experimentation and development of the digital learning solutions to bridge the digital divide and to increase the access to digital content and tools. Additionally, a framework will be proposed that will provide a useful reference for SMEs, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders who are reaching out to the educational communities to articulate learning outcomes as they develop their tools.

This process will inform future decisions on investments related to access and connectivity in rural areas. The **Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap** will highlight the added value of the *Learning from the Extremes* support scheme for the schools that embark on the digital transformation journey. This parameter has to be also considered in any future plan and investment. The innovation process will be informed from the pilots in the selected 123 rural schools across the whole period of implementation, while at the same time pedagogical and technical guidance and support will be provided to the schools either through the community or centrally from the project team.

The aim of the **Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap**, which is going to be the key outcome of the project, is to give a concrete overview of what is known so far about the implementation of school innovation in general and to incorporate these insights into the proposed transformation journey.

The proposed Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap will be presented in the next LfE Policy Brief at the end of the project (January 2024).

6 Conclusions

In conclusion, a number of successful strategies and approaches recommended by the LfE project have already started to be tested in 123 schools of 10 European countries. All of these rural and remote schools benefit from stronger, more responsive and reliable distance education platforms, online labs and simulations and high-performance web-conferencing and collaboration tools, sharing teaching excellence with professional support in the classroom, the school and the region.

The LfE project adopting a multidimensional approach to thinking about and planning for the future of technology enhanced rural school education has already developed a strategy to present targeted recommendations on how to increase access to digital education in the EU remote areas and communities that require such support.

The Support Mechanism of LfE, through its various activities, provides a user friendly and smooth implementation of each school's Journey to Innovation, based on a path that starts with the school's reflection, followed by a transformation development plan. The overall process is built on a strong participatory model, with consultation and mentoring present during all phases of the school's journey, facilitating innovation.

The **Rural Schools Innovation Roadmap**, as a result key outcome of the project, along with the whole process will inform future decisions on investments related to access and connectivity in rural areas.

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