

Co-designed validation and accreditation framework

Deliverable 3.4



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Table of contents

<u>Co-designed validation and accreditation framework</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Table of contents</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>1. Introduction</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>2. Preliminary Inputs</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>2.1 European Qualifications Framework (EQF), National Validation Frameworks and the Referencing Process</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>2.2 EU Recommendations and Institutional Assets: Present and Future</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>2.3 ESIC Sectoral Skills Strategy for Social Innovation and Core Curriculum</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>2.4 Findings of the research conducted in Partner Countries (Del. 3.3)</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>3. Strategic Objectives</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>3.1 Intended Change</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>3.2 Potential outcomes</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>3.3 Long-term Impact</u>	<u>18</u>
<u>4. The Framework</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>4.1 Transversal and Specialisation Clusters</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>4.2 From Clusters to Learning Outcomes</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>4.3 Competence clusters and learning outcomes: explanatory framework</u>	<u>21</u>
<u>4.4 Profiles as Applications of the Framework</u>	<u>23</u>
<u>5. A Bottom-Up Pathway for Implementation</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>5.1 Why Bottom-Up Matters</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>5.2 Steps Towards Implementation</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>5.3 Actors and Resources</u>	<u>29</u>
<u>5.4 The Added Value of This Approach</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>6. Conclusions</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>7. Open questions for this living document</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>Annexes – Structure and Purpose</u>	<u>36</u>



<u>Annex 1 - Clusters definitions</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>Annex 2 - Learning Outcomes by Competence, Cluster and EQF Level</u>	<u>42</u>



1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to define a comprehensive Framework and strategy for the development and formalisation of professional profiles in the fields of innovation and the social economy, along with the associated training pathways that support them. At the time the project proposal was drafted, specific occupational profiles had not yet been clearly defined; the project initially identified three broad areas of focus. The detailed definition of these profiles emerged gradually through the early project activities, particularly through Skills Intelligence gathering in WP2, which enabled the identification of both immediate and emerging skill needs within the Social Economy sector, spanning innovation, management, and entrepreneurship. These profiles were subsequently mapped to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), and ESCO classifications. During this process, attention was also paid to the growing relevance of green and digital skills, ensuring that the profiles remain aligned with evolving sectoral trends. Insights were further refined and enriched through co-creation with European Social Economy stakeholders, allowing the project team to integrate diverse perspectives and practical knowledge.

While the ultimate objective of the project is to define the three core professional profiles, the experience of the project revealed that it is equally important to think in terms of **clusters of competences**, both transversal and specific. These clusters, which can be seen as building blocks, allow for greater flexibility and adaptability in defining professional roles and **learning outcomes**. In this sense, the document reflects two complementary lines of thought: on one hand, the three professional profiles have been outlined and will be described in detail in the following chapters; on the other hand, the underlying transversal and specific competences have been mapped and articulated, forming the basis for



learning outcomes that can later be combined, reassembled, and adapted to generate multiple professional profiles, depending on the context and emerging needs.

This dual approach ensures that the framework is not static or rigid. Instead, it can evolve dynamically as new insights emerge from ongoing project activities, pilot implementations, and stakeholder feedback. It also provides a structured way to connect individual competences to concrete professional roles while maintaining a broader, flexible vision that can respond to the evolving social economy landscape. Based on these findings, this document presents a co-designed validation and accreditation framework that aims to align professional profiles with both the practical realities of the sector and the strategic priorities identified during the project. By capturing and organising competences in this modular, cluster-based manner, the project provides a foundation for sustainable, scalable, and adaptable professional development strategies, ensuring that future social economy actors are equipped to meet the challenges of innovation, collaboration, and systemic impact.

The chapters are organised to provide both context and practical guidance. We begin by summarising key elements discussed earlier in the project that are essential to understanding the overall framework. These include: a brief explanation of the European competence framework and its relationship with the national context; references to relevant European Union recommendations; a short overview of the “Sectoral Skills Strategy for Social Innovations”; and a summary of the findings from the D3.3 report.

Following this introductory section, we present a reflection on the strategic objectives of our work. We then move into the core of the document, starting with the chapter titled “The Framework”. This is followed by a section focused on the concrete implementation of the proposed



approach, and the document concludes with a series of final considerations.

This document should be understood as a living document, as its final definition is subject to the outcomes and the ongoing development of specific key actions within the project. Specifically, the realisation of the meeting in Cork, September '25, and the results obtained therein will provide valuable material to enrich and integrate the overall vision. Additionally, the pilots conducted will be instrumental in providing concrete, real-world experience that will further inform and support the document's evolution. Furthermore, since the strategic document Sectoral Skills itself is also a living document, both of these "pillars" will be finalised together in the final phase of the project.

The main updates that the ESIC Consortium intends to introduce in this living document are:

- a more precise and detailed definition of competence clusters and learning outcomes, including their articulation into proficiency levels;
- a graphical visualisation of the framework;
- a method to define, starting from the learning outcomes, operational profiles and their related pathways for further development.

The need to give proper weight to reflection and discussion is also linked to the fact that social economy and social innovation are increasingly prominent topics of interest and debate. However, the project aims to anchor the results and the definition of professional profiles in concrete, useful elements for all individuals involved in the workforce. It is, therefore, in our interest to reflect on the structure of these profiles, avoiding overlaps, and to create a framework that takes into account the real needs and dynamics of the labour market.



2. Preliminary Inputs

This chapter summarises the primary documents, analytical outputs, and policy references that have informed the development of the co-designed validation and accreditation framework. In line with the approach adopted in Deliverable 3.3, these inputs are not treated as static references, but as interconnected elements within an evolving ecosystem of qualification systems, labour market dynamics, and professional practices.

The analysis carried out in D3.3 highlighted that, while all partner countries have established systems for validating and certifying competences aligned with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), these systems remain largely rigid and slow to adapt to emerging professional roles—particularly those related to social innovation and the social economy. At the same time, a growing experimentation with flexible instruments, such as micro-credentials and modular learning pathways, is visible across contexts, albeit with uneven levels of regulation and recognition.

Against this backdrop, this chapter clarifies the key reference frameworks, strategic documents, and empirical findings that collectively shape the ESIC validation framework. Rather than proposing a single top-down model, these inputs support a modular, competence-based, and bottom-up approach, capable of interfacing with national systems while remaining adaptable to sectoral and territorial specificities.



2.1 European Qualifications Framework (EQF), National Validation Frameworks and the Referencing Process

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) constitutes the primary standard reference underpinning both Deliverable 3.3 and the present framework. As highlighted in the comparative analysis of partner countries, the EQF functions as a translation tool that enables comparability between national qualification systems, supporting transparency, lifelong learning, and cross-border mobility.

The EQF Recommendation invites Member States to reference their National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) or qualification systems to the eight EQF levels, based on learning outcomes expressed in terms of knowledge, skills, and responsibility/autonomy. This referencing process—formalised through national referencing reports assessed by the EQF Advisory Group—represents a critical governance mechanism, ensuring consistency while allowing national diversity.

Findings from D3.3 show that all partner countries have completed, or are in the process of completing, EQF referencing. However, the existence of a referenced NQF does not automatically guarantee openness to emerging professional profiles. In most contexts, the inclusion of new occupational categories requires extensive evidence of labour market demand and the involvement of sectoral bodies, resulting in lengthy and complex procedures.

For this reason, the ESIC framework does not aim to replace or bypass EQF-aligned systems, but rather to operate in dialogue with them: structuring competences and learning outcomes in a way that is EQF-readable, while allowing for gradual integration through validation of prior learning, micro-credentials, and modular pathways.



2.2 EU Recommendations and Institutional Assets: Present and Future

The development of the ESIC validation framework is strongly informed by a set of European policy instruments that promote competence-based learning, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and system interoperability.

In particular, the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the 2022 Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials provide a strategic backdrop to the issues identified in D3.3. The comparative research highlighted a widespread but uneven use of micro-credentials across partner countries, often characterised by terminological ambiguity and fragmented implementation.

While micro-credentials are increasingly perceived as a flexible response to rapid labour market change—especially for transversal, managerial, and innovation-related competences—the lack of shared quality criteria poses risks of dilution and reduced credibility. This confirms the need, already stressed in D3.3, for structured frameworks that balance flexibility with transparency, quality assurance, and portability.

From this perspective, ESIC positions itself as a bridging initiative: drawing on EU-level recommendations to propose a coherent competence architecture, while leaving room for national and regional adaptation. The framework thus aligns with broader EU strategies on skills, lifelong learning, and social innovation, without assuming immediate formal recognition within national repertoires.



2.3 ESIC Sectoral Skills Strategy for Social Innovation and Core Curriculum

The ESIC Sectoral Skills Strategy represents a further foundational input, translating policy orientations and labour market insights into an articulated competence model. Structured around transversal and specialisation clusters, the strategy reflects one of the key conclusions of D3.3: emerging roles in the social economy cannot be adequately captured through traditional occupational categories alone.

Instead, the strategy adopts a competence-based logic, in which professional identities are built through combinations of learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. This approach is particularly relevant in a sector characterised by hybrid roles, multi-stakeholder ecosystems, and learning-by-doing trajectories.

The core curriculum and associated micro-credentials are therefore conceived as modular components, aligned with EQF levels but not dependent on the immediate creation of new formal qualifications. This design choice directly addresses the constraints observed in national systems while maximising usability for training providers, organisations, and professionals.

2.4 Findings of the research conducted in Partner Countries (Del. 3.3)

Deliverable 3.3 provides the analytical foundation for the design of the ESIC validation and accreditation framework. Its purpose was to map and compare existing national systems for validation and certification of competences across partner countries, with specific attention to the



relevance, recognition, and feasibility of the professional profiles emerging within the social economy and social innovation fields.

The research combined a structured questionnaire with follow-up interviews and collective reviews, allowing both a systematic overview and a qualitative interpretation of national contexts. The analysis was conducted using the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as a standard reference to assess comparability, alignment, and potential interoperability across countries.

Existence and structure of validation systems

A key finding is that all partner countries have formalised systems for validating and certifying competences, generally aligned with the EQF through National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) or equivalent mechanisms. These systems typically define:

- recognised occupational profiles or professional standards;
- procedures for validation of formal, non-formal, and, in some cases, informal learning;
- public or delegated authorities responsible for governance, assessment, and certification.

However, despite this structural maturity, none of the analysed systems currently includes professional profiles explicitly linked to the social economy or social innovation as distinct categories. Where related competences exist, they are usually embedded within broader domains such as business management, innovation, social services, entrepreneurship, or sustainability, without a clear and coherent professional identity.



Rigidity of occupational categories and barriers to innovation

Across countries, occupational profiles and qualifications are organised in official registers or catalogues that are legally regulated and overseen by public bodies. While these registers ensure credibility, transparency, and labour-market relevance, they also represent a significant bottleneck to innovation.

The research shows that introducing new professional categories is theoretically possible but practically complex. In most contexts, it requires:

- demonstrated and often quantified labour market demand;
- strong involvement of employers' organisations, trade unions, and sectoral bodies;
- lengthy administrative and political procedures.

This rigidity disproportionately affects emerging, cross-cutting roles such as those addressed by ESIC. Social innovation profiles tend to be transversal, hybrid, and context-dependent, making it difficult to reach the "critical mass" usually required to justify the creation of a new formal occupation within national systems.

Partial recognition of ESIC-related competences

Although no country recognises ESIC profiles as such, the research highlights that many of the competences associated with these profiles already exist within other recognised roles. In particular, relevant competences are often found in:

- innovation and change management;
- entrepreneurship and business development;



- ecological and digital transition;
- project coordination and stakeholder engagement.

This indicates that national systems are evolving, albeit slowly, and that existing qualification architectures could potentially be leveraged to support the recognition of social innovation competences, rather than starting from scratch. For ESIC, this insight supports a strategy based on competence aggregation and re-composition, rather than the immediate pursuit of new occupational titles.

Micro-credentials and modular recognition as emerging trends

One of the most significant cross-country findings concerns the growing use of micro-credentials and modular forms of recognition. Interviews and document analysis revealed that:

The term “micro-credential” is increasingly used across all partner countries.

- its meaning, scope, and legal status vary widely;
- in some contexts, it refers to short academic units; in others, to any form of short training or work-based learning.

This heterogeneity creates both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, micro-credentials are widely perceived as a flexible response to rapid labour market change, particularly suited to transversal, managerial, and lifelong learning competences. On the other hand, the lack of shared standards and quality assurance raises concerns about fragmentation, certificate inflation, and reduced credibility.



The findings of D3.3 strongly suggest that European-level coordination is essential to ensure that micro-credentials remain transparent, comparable, and meaningful—an insight fully aligned with the 2022 Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials.

Importance of lifelong and work-based learning

Another recurring finding is the strong relevance of lifelong learning and recognition of work-based experience, especially for roles such as managers, innovators, and coordinators within the social economy. In several countries, validation of prior learning (RPL/VNFIL) exists in principle, but its implementation is uneven and often underused.

This confirms that ESIC profiles are particularly well-suited to competence-based and experience-driven validation pathways, rather than traditional qualification routes based solely on formal education. It also reinforces the strategic value of designing learning outcomes and validation tools that can capture competencies acquired through practice, experimentation, and collaboration.

Entry points for ESIC and rationale for a bottom-up approach

Finally, the comparative analysis identified specific entry points where ESIC-type profiles could realistically be piloted or recognised:

- regional or local validation systems with greater autonomy;
- higher education institutions with flexible curricula;
- vocational or adult education providers experimenting with modular offers;



- sectoral or professional networks open to competence-based frameworks.

Taken together, these findings justify the strategic choice adopted in D3.4: a bottom-up, competence-driven framework, capable of interfacing with national systems without being blocked by their structural rigidity. Rather than aiming at immediate formal recognition, ESIC builds legitimacy through use, adoption, and experimentation—creating the conditions for future institutionalisation.



3. Strategic Objectives

This section outlines the intended changes, expected outcomes, and long-term impact of the Common Validation Framework developed by ESIC. It highlights the rationale for formalising emerging professional profiles in the social economy, focusing on Social Entrepreneur, Innovation Manager, and Social Innovator. By clarifying roles, competences, and responsibilities, the framework seeks to reduce uncertainty for professionals and organisations, support career development and mobility, and foster inclusive innovation. The section also explores the benefits at individual, organisational, and sectoral levels, illustrating how structured validation mechanisms can strengthen skills recognition, promote systemic change, and enhance the strategic role of the social and proximity economy across Europe.

3.1 Intended Change

The Common Validation Framework developed by ESIC addresses a critical gap in the recognition of emerging professional roles in the social economy: **Social Entrepreneur, Innovation Manager, and Social Innovator**. The three profiles will be described in greater detail in Chapter 4. Today, the absence of formally recognised professional categories for these roles generates uncertainty for both employers and professionals. Public authorities, private enterprises, and third-sector organisations often lack clear references for required competences, responsibilities, and positioning within organisational structures.

By formalising these profiles and their associated competences, the framework ensures transparent and consistent definitions that support recruitment, career development, and professional mobility. It shifts the



focus from subjective evaluations of individuals to the objective validation and institutional recognition of roles—contributing to fairer, more efficient, and more inclusive labour-market practices.

Why it matters

The European Commission recognises the Social and Proximity Economy as one of the EU's 14 key industrial ecosystems. It employs **22.9 million people**, represents around **6.5% of EU GDP** (EUR 791 billion), and comprises more than **3.1 million firms**, 99.9% of which are SMEs, including a large share of micro-enterprises and start-ups. While the ecosystem has been severely affected by recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also a sector with **significant innovation potential**—particularly in digitalisation, the green transition, and new business models.

The professional profiles defined by ESIC—**Social Entrepreneur, Innovation Manager, and Social Innovator**—are directly relevant to this transformation.

- **Social Entrepreneurs** can create hybrid business models that integrate social impact with economic sustainability, enabling the development of circular-economy initiatives, community-based services, and locally rooted short-value chains.
- **Innovation Managers** provide the organisational capacity to systematise innovation, addressing the ecosystem's persistent gaps in digitalisation and green skills by planning targeted training, supporting digital uptake, and guiding the green transition of social infrastructures.
- **Social Innovators** foster participatory governance and inclusive approaches, experimenting with social-tech ventures, co-design



processes, and community-driven solutions that strengthen territorial resilience and address local needs.

By embedding these roles into the ecosystem, the Common Validation Framework enhances the capacity of social economy entities to adopt digital and **green innovations**, promote **inclusive participation**, and leverage the opportunities provided by **the Recovery and Resilience Facility** (RRF) and related EU investment measures. In doing so, it positions the social and proximity economy not only as a vital sector for employment and cohesion, but also as **a strategic laboratory for Europe's sustainable and digital future**.

The Common Validation Framework responds to this challenge by:

- providing a shared language for organisations, employers, and policymakers;
- enabling professionals to articulate and validate competences gained in both formal and non-formal contexts;
- supporting the alignment of training systems with labour market needs.

3.2 Potential outcomes

From a political or “vision-level” perspective, a diffuse adoption of the framework would result in the following outcomes:

- **Individual**
 - Recognition of competences acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal learning, enabling professionals to articulate better and communicate their identity.



- Improved ability to orient career development and lifelong learning pathways in alignment with labour market demand.
- Enhanced visibility, confidence, and mobility across roles and sectors, supported by tools for self-assessment and validation.
- **Organisation (social economy entities)**
 - Clarity in defining required competences, responsibilities, and roles within organisational structures.
 - Stronger human resource management through structured competence frameworks, recruitment guidelines, and career development pathways.
 - Capacity to integrate training and innovation strategies into organisational planning, improving service quality and adaptability.
- **Sector (local/regional and European)**
 - Establishment of transparent standards and shared frameworks aligned with European tools (EQF, Europass, ESCO).
 - Greater comparability of competences across territories and organisations, enabling mobility and fostering cooperation.
 - Reinforced recognition of the social economy as a driver of territorial cohesion, innovation, and inclusive growth, in line with the EU's 14 Pillars of Proximity.



On the other hand, from a more technical or operational point of view, an “implementation” perspective, a diffuse adoption of the framework would result in the following outcomes:

- **Individual**

- Access to structured validation systems and competence frameworks that define clear learning outcomes for each ESIC profile.
- Use of guidance and self-assessment tools to plan personalised upskilling and reskilling pathways.
- Formal mechanisms for validating competences gained outside traditional education, strengthening employability.

- **Organisation (social economy entities)**

- Integration of competence frameworks into HR processes for recruitment, assessment, and professional development.
- Implementation of training plans directly linked to identified skill gaps and innovation needs.
- Adoption of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the long-term relevance of staff competences and organisational strategies.

- **Sector (local/regional and European)**

- Creation of repositories and competence databases that support transparency, recognition, and benchmarking.
- Establishment of national or sectoral committees to oversee the evolution of professional profiles and ensure dialogue among stakeholders.



- Advocacy towards national and European institutions to embed the recognition of non-formal and informal learning within qualification systems, promoting a more inclusive and dynamic approach to professional development.

3.3 Long-term Impact

In the medium to long term, the framework is expected to:

- **Strengthen recognition** and formalisation of the three profiles within national classification and qualification systems.
- **Empower experienced** professionals—including those trained in non-formal or informal contexts—by validating competences and reinforcing professional standing.
- **Enhance systemic** capacity for innovation, enabling the social economy to respond more effectively to societal challenges.
- **Promote advocacy** and institutional change, influencing national and European bodies to recognise the strategic value of the social economy and the importance of non-formal learning pathways.
- By combining clarity, usability, and institutional alignment, the Common Validation Framework becomes both **a practical tool** for organisations and individuals and **a strategic driver** of inclusive innovation and territorial resilience across Europe.



4. The Framework

The ESIC framework is built on the idea that competences in the social economy must be both **coherent and flexible**. Instead of limiting itself to fixed professional roles, it identifies **competence clusters** – dynamic groups of interconnected skills that can be adapted and combined in diverse ways. These clusters act as “building blocks” that allow professionals to move across sectors, respond to new challenges, and design their own learning pathways.

4.1 Transversal and Specialisation Clusters

The framework is organised into two sets of clusters:

Transversal competence Clusters – common skills relevant across sectors: **Digital, Personal, Learning, Sustainability, Collaboration, and Ecosystems**. They are closely aligned with European frameworks such as **DigComp, LifeComp, GreenComp, EntreComp, and ESCO**, ensuring comparability, transferability, and recognition across Europe.

Specialisation competence Clusters – advanced skills that define the unique contribution of professionals in social innovation: **Management, Leadership, Operations, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation**. These clusters represent the distinctive added value of ESIC, capturing competences that are not always codified in institutional repertoires but are crucial for addressing today’s social challenges.

This dual structure mirrors the reality of the social economy, where professionals require both a **shared transversal base** and **specialised competences** to act effectively.



4.2 From Clusters to Learning Outcomes

Each cluster is expressed through **learning outcomes**, which describe what a person can do at different levels of mastery. These outcomes can be linked to the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**, enabling their use in curricula, validation of prior learning, and professional development.

The framework serves three main functions:

- a **reference** for curriculum design and micro-credentials;
- a **tool** for validation of competences gained in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts;
- a **flexible guide** for individuals building their professional pathways in the social economy.

Why This Matters

Many competences crucial to social innovation—such as co-design, participatory governance, and hybrid model development—are often invisible in traditional repertoires. By recognising and systematising them, the ESIC framework legitimises these skills and makes them transferable across contexts.

This is not only a technical contribution but also a cultural stance: affirming that the social economy requires its own **language, validation criteria, and professional identity**. At the same time, the framework enriches rather than replaces existing EU references.



4.3 Competence clusters and learning outcomes: explanatory framework

The ESIC competence framework is articulated through a structured relationship between types of competences, competence clusters, and individual competences, as outlined in the previous sections of this chapter. To preserve readability and avoid unnecessary repetition, this section provides an explanatory overview of how clusters and learning outcomes function within the framework. In contrast, detailed definitions and calibrated learning outcomes are presented in the annexes.

Role of competence clusters in the ESIC framework

Competence clusters represent thematic blocks that group related competences frequently mobilised together in social innovation processes. They do not correspond to job profiles, disciplines, or organisational functions, but rather to areas of capability that support action, learning, and decision-making across diverse roles and contexts.

Within the ESIC framework, clusters serve a dual function. On the one hand, they provide a conceptual structure that supports shared understanding and comparability across countries, sectors, and education systems. On the other hand, they offer a practical organising principle for designing learning pathways, assessment approaches, and validation mechanisms without prescribing fixed curricula.

In line with the Sectoral Skills Strategy, the framework distinguishes between transversal competence clusters, which are relevant to all actors involved in social innovation, and specialised competence clusters, which become more prominent depending on role, responsibility, and organisational position. This distinction reinforces the idea that effective



social innovation relies on complementary competence configurations, rather than on the exhaustive mastery of all competences by a single individual.

Function of learning outcomes within a competence-based approach

Learning outcomes translate the competence framework into observable and assessable reference points, expressed in terms of what learners can understand, apply, and reflect on in practice. In accordance with a competence-based approach, ESIC learning outcomes integrate knowledge, skills, and responsibility/autonomy, rather than isolating technical abilities.

The learning outcomes associated with the ESIC framework are intentionally formulated as high-level and adaptable. They are designed to support use across formal, non-formal, and work-based learning contexts, and to remain compatible with national qualification systems and validation procedures. Rather than defining linear learning trajectories, they reflect the iterative, non-linear nature of learning in social innovation, where experimentation, feedback, and contextual adaptation play central roles.

To support progression and recognition, learning outcomes are calibrated across aggregated EQF levels, allowing the same competence to be developed at increasing levels of complexity, autonomy, and responsibility. This calibration strengthens the framework's relevance for education providers, employers, and validation authorities, while preserving flexibility for contextual interpretation.

Reference to annexes



For clarity and usability, the detailed definitions of the competence clusters are provided in Annex 1, while the individual competences and their EQF-calibrated learning outcomes are presented in Annex 2. The annexes form an integral part of the ESIC framework and should be read in conjunction with this chapter to understand its structure, scope, and application fully.

4.4 Profiles as Applications of the Framework

By clarifying the role of competence clusters and learning outcomes, the ESIC framework establishes a shared reference for competence development and recognition in social innovation, without defining fixed occupational profiles. Instead, it supports flexible and context-dependent combinations of transversal and specialised competences that can be mobilised across different roles, responsibilities, and organisational settings.

Building on the Sectoral Skills Strategy, this section illustrates the application of the framework through three recurring professional profiles within social economy organisations: the Social Innovator, the Social Entrepreneur, and the Innovation Manager. These profiles are presented as **dynamic configurations of competences**, reflecting different ways in which the ESIC framework can be operationalised in practice, rather than as mutually exclusive or static job titles.

Social Innovator

The Social Innovator represents the **core transversal profile** underpinning the ESIC framework. This role is characterised by the ability to activate and combine competences across all six transversal clusters identified in the



Sectoral Skills Strategy, with particular emphasis on systems thinking, collaboration, learning mindset, and ethical orientation.

As highlighted in the Sectoral Skills Strategy, social innovation requires the capacity to interpret social challenges as **systemic and multi-level phenomena**, rather than isolated problems. Social Innovators therefore rely heavily on competencies in ecosystem development, stakeholder engagement, and reflective learning. Their contribution lies not only in generating ideas but in **mobilising actors, knowledge, and resources** across sectors and disciplines.

Importantly, the Social Innovator profile is **not confined to leadership or entrepreneurial positions**. Employees, practitioners, educators, and project-based professionals can all act as social innovators by applying the framework to improve services, redesign processes, or introduce new social practices within existing structures. This aligns with the framework's emphasis on **competence portability and progression across EQF levels**, allowing individuals to engage in social innovation at different stages of their professional development.

Social Entrepreneur

The Social Entrepreneur profile represents a **specialised application of the framework** oriented towards the creation, testing, and scaling of socially innovative ventures. While grounded in the same transversal competence base as the Social Innovator, this profile draws more intensively on the specialisation clusters related to entrepreneurship, operations, and implementation.

Within the logic of the Sectoral Skills Strategy, Social Entrepreneurs play a crucial role in translating social innovation into **market-facing or hybrid**



organisational models that combine social impact with economic sustainability. This requires advanced competencies in opportunity recognition, resource mobilisation, risk management, and impact-oriented business modelling.

Compared to other profiles, the Social Entrepreneur typically operates under **higher personal and professional risk**, particularly in early-stage phases. For this reason, the framework supports progressive competence development pathways that integrate learning-by-doing, experimentation, and reflective feedback loops. The competence-based approach allows Social Entrepreneurs to complement their own skill set through team composition and partnerships, reinforcing the Strategy's emphasis on **collective and ecosystem-based innovation** rather than individual heroism.

Innovation Manager in Social Economy Organisations

The Innovation Manager profile reflects the application of the ESIC framework within **established social economy organisations**. Unlike the Social Entrepreneur, this role does not primarily focus on organisational creation, but on **embedding, managing, and sustaining innovation** inside existing structures.

Innovation Managers typically combine transversal competences (such as communication, collaboration, and systems awareness) with advanced specialisation competences related to project management, organisational development, and implementation. As outlined in the Sectoral Skills Strategy, this profile is essential for ensuring that social innovation moves beyond pilot phases and becomes structurally integrated into organisational practices.

This role often operates at the intersection between strategic vision and operational delivery, coordinating projects, facilitating internal change



processes, and aligning innovation initiatives with organisational missions and governance models. In this sense, the Innovation Manager acts as a **translation layer** between the competence framework and concrete organisational processes, contributing to the long-term resilience and adaptability of social economy actors.

Complementarity and progression

Across all three profiles, the ESIC framework supports **non-linear professional pathways**, where individuals may move between roles over time or combine elements of multiple profiles simultaneously. The Sectoral Skills Strategy explicitly recognises that social innovation is a **collective, distributed process** that requires complementary roles rather than isolated profiles.

By grounding these profiles in a shared competence framework aligned with EQF levels and recognition mechanisms, ESIC enables comparability, flexibility, and progression across educational and professional contexts. This reinforces the framework's role as a **strategic reference for education, training, and validation systems**, rather than a prescriptive catalogue of professions.



5. A Bottom-Up Pathway for Implementation

The development of a Common Validation Framework for new professional profiles in the social economy requires careful attention to the diversity of national contexts across Europe. While a **top-down approach**, whereby new profiles are formally integrated into national and regional qualification frameworks, remains the long-term objective, it is not immediately feasible in many countries. In numerous cases, such an approach would entail legislative amendments, the establishment of new sectoral committees, and the formal registration of profiles in national qualifications registers. These are processes that demand significant political consensus from all labour market representatives, administrative resources, and time.

For this reason, the ESIC project advocates for a **bottom-up pathway** as the primary strategy for early implementation, complemented by **policy recommendations** to support eventual top-down adoption. This dual approach enables the framework to generate practical recognition and market value in the short term while laying the groundwork for future formal institutional adoption.

5.1 Why Bottom-Up Matters

A bottom-up approach leverages the capacity of actors already active in the social economy to adopt, test, and disseminate the framework. Rather than waiting for legislative changes, organisations can begin using the competence profiles defined by ESIC to address their immediate human resource needs and strengthen the professional identity of key roles. This approach is also faster in adapting to change – both in general societal dynamics and in the evolving labour market – ensuring that professional profiles remain relevant and responsive. Evidence from the *Research on*



relevant curricula and national and EU strategies, carried out by the ESIC Consortium, shows that this process is already happening naturally in many contexts; through the ESIC project, it is therefore possible to give this evolution a clear European dimension and to provide a structured example that can inspire wider adoption.

5.2 Steps Towards Implementation

The bottom-up pathway can unfold in successive, reinforcing steps:

1- Market Recognition

Social economy organisations at the national and regional levels are beginning to integrate the ESIC competence frameworks into their recruitment, staff development, and training processes. The profiles thus become reference points for identifying skills, drafting job descriptions, and supporting professional growth.

2- Adoption by Networks and Early Adopters

Federations, umbrella organisations, and second-level associations within the social economy promote the use of the framework among their members. At the same time, forward-looking public administrations can act as early adopters, embedding the profiles into pilot training programmes, procurement schemes, or competence validation initiatives.

3- Engagement of Education and Training Providers

Universities, vocational schools, and continuing education institutions are beginning to align their existing modules and curricula with the ESIC framework. In some cases, entirely new courses or learning units on social economy innovation can be developed. Conversely, social economy



organisations may also recognise and validate competences acquired through existing programmes by explicitly linking them to the framework.

4- Towards Institutionalisation

As adoption grows, the legitimacy of the framework strengthens. With a critical mass of organisations, networks, and providers using the ESIC profiles, regional or national authorities are in a stronger position to establish dedicated sectoral committees for the social economy. This bottom-up validation makes it more feasible to pursue the top-down route: integrating the new profiles into official qualification frameworks and enabling formal validation pathways.

5.3 Actors and Resources

Implementing the bottom-up approach requires the mobilisation of a diverse set of actors and resources:

ESIC Partners

Project partners can play a leading role in piloting the framework, developing supporting materials, and facilitating adoption among their networks. They act as first movers, demonstrating the added value of the profiles in real contexts.

European and National Networks of Social Economy Organisations

Umbrella organisations, federations, and alliances can amplify adoption by promoting the framework among their members, endorsing its relevance, and integrating it into training or advocacy initiatives. Their endorsement is crucial to achieving critical mass.

Education and Training Providers

Universities, vocational training centres, and adult education providers can



embed ESIC competences into new or existing programmes. Their participation also enables learners to acquire certified competences aligned with the framework.

Public Administrations

Although systemic reforms may take time, early-adopter administrations can endorse and pilot the framework in procurement requirements, capacity-building schemes, or validation programmes.

In addition to actors, specific resources can strengthen the bottom-up strategy:

Open-Badge System

A digital credentialing system based on the ESIC framework can provide immediate recognition of competencies, even in the absence of formal qualifications. Open badges can be issued to learners, professionals, and organisations that complete relevant training or validation pathways, ensuring visibility and portability of skills.

Advisory and Support Services

A dedicated service desk or consultancy function could assist organisations and individuals in adopting the framework. This may include guidance for professionals seeking validation of competences acquired through prior learning, as well as tailored support for training providers designing modules or programmes aligned with the framework.

5.4 The Added Value of This Approach

This incremental strategy balances pragmatism with ambition. It empowers organisations to act immediately, generates measurable impact on workforce development, and supports the emergence of a shared professional language across Europe's social economy. At the same



time, it gradually reduces the gap between practice and policy, creating the conditions for systemic change.

In this sense, the bottom-up pathway should not be seen as a second-best alternative to top-down reform, but rather as a catalyst: a way of proving the relevance of the ESIC competence framework in the field, while progressively paving the way for full policy integration.



6. Conclusions

This deliverable demonstrates that competence development, validation, and recognition in the field of social innovation within the social economy remain **structurally fragmented** across European contexts. National systems differ widely in terms of formalisation, institutional responsibility, and recognition pathways, while competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning remain under-recognised and lack legitimacy.

At the same time, the analysis clearly shows that social innovation relies on a **distinct and recurring set of competences** that cut across sectors and roles. Transversal competences—such as collaboration, learning, systems thinking, sustainability, and ethical orientation—are consistently central to practice, yet are insufficiently captured by existing occupational standards and qualification frameworks. In parallel, specialised competences in innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership, and management are increasingly required to ensure the continuity, scaling, and organisational integration of social innovation initiatives.

Based on these findings, the ESIC competence framework is not presented as an additional classification tool, but as a **necessary integrative response** to a documented gap. By organising competences into transversal and specialised clusters, articulating individual competences, and calibrating learning outcomes in an EQF-oriented logic, the framework provides a concrete and operational reference that complements existing European instruments while remaining adaptable to national contexts.

The use of professional profiles as applications of the framework confirms that social innovation cannot be reduced to fixed job titles or linear career paths. Instead, it requires **configurations of competences** that evolve over time and across organisational settings. This approach strengthens



comparability and progression without imposing rigid standards, and directly supports education providers, training organisations, employers, and validation bodies in their respective roles.

In conclusion, this deliverable moves the discussion on social innovation competences beyond descriptive mapping towards **structured synthesis and actionable orientation**. It establishes a shared language and reference point that improves transparency, transferability, and recognition, and creates the conditions for more coherent validation and accreditation pathways at the European level in the social economy.



7. Open questions for this living document

Despite the progress achieved, several open questions remain and point to future lines of inquiry and development.

A first set of questions concerns **operationalisation and uptake**. How can the ESIC framework be effectively adopted by education and training providers, employers, and validation bodies across diverse national contexts? What forms of guidance, capacity building, or support are required to ensure consistent and meaningful implementation?

A second area relates to **assessment and recognition mechanisms**. While the framework aligns with EQF principles, further exploration is needed to understand how competence-based learning outcomes—particularly those acquired through non-formal and informal learning—can be assessed, documented, and recognised in a credible and scalable manner.

A third open issue involves the **evolution of competences and profiles over time**. Social innovation is a dynamic field, influenced by social, technological, and policy changes. Ongoing reflection will be necessary to ensure that the competence framework remains responsive to emerging practices, new roles, and hybrid professional trajectories.

Finally, the long-term relevance of the ESIC framework will depend on its capacity to function as a **living reference**, informed by feedback from practice, pilot activities, and dialogue with policymakers at European and national levels. Continued collaboration among project partners and stakeholders will be essential to refine the framework and to strengthen pathways for competence development and recognition in the social economy.



An additional open question concerns **alignment and communication across competence frameworks**. While the ESIC framework is conceptually aligned with existing European references, further work is needed to make this alignment visible and intelligible from a communicative and visual perspective. How can the ESIC framework be represented in ways that clearly relate to other competence frameworks already in use, without generating confusion or duplication?

Addressing this question will require attention not only to conceptual mapping but also to visual language, narrative coherence, and user-oriented communication tools that support uptake by diverse audiences.



Annexes – Structure and Purpose

The following annexes complement the ESIC competence framework presented in this chapter by providing a more detailed and operational articulation of its components. They are designed to support clarity, coherence, and usability across education, training, and validation contexts, without introducing prescriptive curricula or role-specific requirements.

The annexes follow a **three-level logical structure**, consistently applied throughout the framework:

1. **Type of competences** (transversal and specialisation),
2. **Competence clusters** (thematic blocks grouping related competences),
3. **Individual competences and learning outcomes**, expressed in an EQF-oriented logic.

Annex 1 presents the definitions of the competence clusters, clarifying their scope and function within social innovation processes. The cluster definitions provide a conceptual layer that links the overall framework to its practical applications, supporting shared understanding across partners, sectors, and national contexts.

Annex 2 details the individual competences associated with each cluster and their corresponding learning outcomes, calibrated across aggregated EQF levels. These learning outcomes are formulated as adaptable reference points, intended to inform the design of learning pathways, assessment approaches, and validation and recognition mechanisms in formal, non-formal, and work-based learning settings.



Taken together, the annexes strengthen the role of the ESIC framework as a **strategic reference tool** for competence development in social innovation, supporting flexibility, comparability, and progression while respecting contextual diversity and ecosystem-specific needs.



Annex 1 – Clusters definitions

Personal

The Personal cluster groups competences related to the individual dimension of professional action in social innovation contexts. It concerns self-regulation, ethical orientation, and personal sustainability, enabling individuals to act consciously, responsibly, and consistently over time.

This cluster underpins the capacity to engage in social innovation without burnout, misalignment of values, or ethical compromise, and is relevant at all levels of responsibility and across all profiles.

Learning

The *Learning* cluster refers to the ability to acquire, generate, and apply knowledge in dynamic, uncertain contexts. It supports continuous development through reflection, inquiry, experimentation, and feedback.

In social innovation, where solutions are rarely predefined, this cluster enables individuals and teams to adapt, learn from practice, and progressively improve actions and decisions across different EQF levels.

Digital

The *Digital* cluster encompasses competences related to the critical and purposeful use of digital tools, technologies, and media. It supports collaboration, communication, knowledge management, and innovation processes in digitally mediated environments.

Rather than focusing solely on technical proficiency, this cluster emphasises informed, ethical, and context-aware digital practices aligned with social innovation goals.

Sustainability



The *Sustainability* cluster addresses integrating environmental, social, and economic sustainability principles into decision-making and practice. It enables individuals to understand long-term impacts and translate sustainability values into concrete actions.

This cluster reflects the central role of sustainability in social innovation and supports coherence between short-term interventions and long-term systemic outcomes.

Collaboration

The *Collaboration* cluster focuses on the relational competences required to work effectively with others in diverse, multi-actor contexts. It includes inclusion, trust-building, teamwork, and communication as enablers of collective action.

Given the inherently collaborative nature of social innovation, this cluster is essential for building shared understanding, aligning interests, and sustaining cooperation across organisational and cultural boundaries.

Ecosystems

The *Ecosystems* cluster refers to competences needed to understand, navigate, and actively shape social innovation ecosystems. This includes engagement with networks, stakeholders, institutions, and systemic dynamics beyond single organisations or projects.

The cluster becomes increasingly relevant as individuals take on roles involving coordination, brokerage, or system-level change.

Operations

The *Operations* cluster groups competences related to the practical realisation of social innovation initiatives. It covers the ability to design, implement, and manage products, services, and processes within specific



sectoral contexts.

This cluster ensures that innovative ideas are translated into effective, feasible, and context-sensitive actions.

Innovation

The *Innovation* cluster focuses on competences that enable the generation, structuring, and application of new ideas to address social challenges. It supports creativity, experimentation, and the systematic development of innovative solutions.

This cluster applies across different roles but becomes more prominent where responsibility for driving or coordinating innovation processes is required.

Entrepreneurship

The *Entrepreneurship* cluster addresses competences related to opportunity recognition, value creation, and economic sustainability in social innovation contexts. It supports the development of initiatives that combine social impact with viable economic models.

This cluster is particularly relevant for roles involving venture creation, scaling, or strategic positioning within markets and hybrid ecosystems.

Leadership

The *Leadership* cluster refers to competences associated with guiding people, making long-term decisions, and shaping direction in complex, uncertain environments. It supports vision-building, people development, and responsibility for collective outcomes.

Leadership in this framework is understood as a function that can be exercised at different levels, not solely as a formal position.

Management



The *Management* cluster groups competences related to governance, resource allocation, and organisational coordination. It enables the structured and accountable management of people, projects, finances, and legal frameworks.

This cluster ensures stability, compliance, and sustainability of social innovation initiatives over time, complementing more exploratory and innovation-oriented clusters.



Annex 2 – Learning Outcomes by Competence, Cluster and EQF Level

Personal	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Well-being	Recognise fundamental factors influencing personal well-being in learning and work contexts.	Manage personal well-being in demanding professional situations and support team balance.	Design and promote organisational approaches that support sustainable well-being and resilience.
Self-awareness	Identify own strengths, limits, and motivations.	Critically reflect on one's role, values, and behaviour in professional contexts.	Use self-awareness strategically to guide leadership, ethical choices, and professional growth.
Work ethics	Apply basic ethical rules and standards in structured situations.	Make responsible decisions considering ethical and social implications.	Address ethical dilemmas in complex contexts and act as an ethical reference for others.

Learning	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Learning mindset	Engage in guided learning and accept feedback.	Learn autonomously through reflection, experimentation, and feedback.	Foster learning cultures and continuous improvement within teams and organisations.

Research skill	Collect and use information from predefined sources.	Analyse qualitative and quantitative data to inform decisions.	Design and lead research-informed innovation and evaluation processes.
Feedback loops	Use feedback to improve one's own performance.	Design and apply feedback mechanisms for learning and improvement.	Integrate feedback systems into strategic governance and impact management.

Digital	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Digital literacy	Use basic digital tools for communication and learning.	Select and use digital tools critically to support collaboration and innovation.	Strategically integrate digital environments into organisational and ecosystem processes.
Technology specifics	Recognise relevant technologies in the context.	Apply specific technologies appropriately, considering limits and risks.	Assess and govern technology adoption considering ethical and sustainability implications.
Media	Communicate information using basic media formats.	Develop targeted communication and storytelling strategies.	Shape narratives and media strategies to influence systems and public discourse.

Sustainability	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Sustainability orientation	Recognise key sustainability principles and challenges.	Integrate sustainability considerations into decisions and practices.	Anticipate long-term sustainability impacts and guide strategic orientation.
Applied sustainability	Follow sustainability-related guidelines in defined tasks.	Translate sustainability principles into concrete project-level actions.	Embed sustainability into organisational strategies and innovation models.

Collaboration	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Inclusive mindset	Recognise diversity and basic inclusion principles.	Design inclusive practices and address participation barriers.	Promote systemic inclusion and equity through policies and strategies.
Trust development	Build trust through reliable behaviour in structured settings.	Manage trust-based relationships with stakeholders.	Restore and institutionalise trust across complex multi-actor systems.

Teamwork	Contribute to team tasks under guidance.	Coordinate roles and collaborate effectively in diverse teams.	Design and lead collaborative structures across organisations and sectors.
Communication	Communicate clearly in familiar contexts.	Facilitate dialogue and alignment among stakeholders.	Use communication strategically to support system change.

Ecosystems	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Ecosystem development	Identify key actors and networks in the local context.	Engage actively with ecosystems to support innovation initiatives.	Shape and govern social innovation ecosystems at the system level.
Stakeholder relations	Interact appropriately with identified stakeholders.	Manage stakeholder relationships, balancing interests.	Design and steer multi-stakeholder coalitions for systemic impact.
System thinking	Recognise basic interconnections within social issues.	Analyse complex systems and identify leverage points.	Design and guide systemic transformation strategies.

Operations	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Product and service development	Contribute to defined design and testing activities.	Co-design, prototype, and refine solutions.	Lead innovation portfolios and scaling processes.
Implementation	Carry out planned activities under supervision.	Plan and manage implementation processes and resources.	Oversee complex implementation and organisational transformation.
Sector-specific knowledge	Apply basic sector rules and procedures.	Adapt innovation actions to sector-specific contexts.	Influence sector development through expertise and policy input.

Innovation	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Innovative attitude	Show openness to new ideas and change.	Actively propose and test innovative solutions.	Drive innovation culture and strategic renewal.
Innovation process	Participate in structured innovation activities.	Manage innovation processes from ideation to testing.	Design and govern innovation processes at the organisational or ecosystem level.

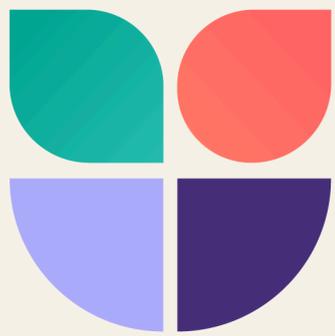
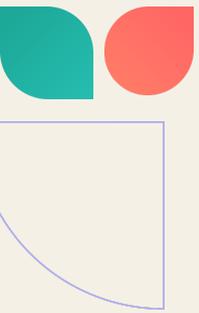
Innovation application knowledge	Apply known innovation tools and methods.	Select and adapt innovation methods to the context.	Develop and transfer innovation methodologies.
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Entrepreneurship	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Entrepreneurial attitude	Show initiative within defined tasks.	Take responsibility for opportunities and risks.	Drive entrepreneurial vision under high uncertainty.
Economic sustainability	Recognise basic economic principles.	Manage the economic sustainability of projects or initiatives.	Design sustainable business and financing models.
Target group acquisition	Identify target groups using the given criteria.	Develop strategies to reach and engage target groups.	Position initiatives strategically within markets and ecosystems.
Entrepreneurial knowledge	Apply basic entrepreneurial concepts.	Use entrepreneurial tools for planning and development.	Shape entrepreneurial strategies and growth pathways.

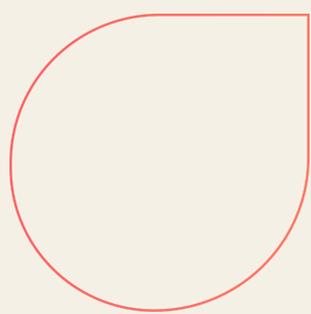
Leadership	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
Long-term decision making	Make decisions with a short- to mid-term perspective.	Balance short- and long-term implications.	Guide strategic decisions with long-term systemic vision.
HR	Contribute to basic people-related processes.	Coordinate and support team development.	Design people development and leadership systems.
Vision and strategy	Understand organisational goals.	Contribute to strategy development.	Define and communicate vision and strategic direction.

Management	EQF 3–4	EQF 5–6	EQF 7–8
HR	Apply HR-related procedures.	Manage HR processes and roles.	Design governance and organisational structures.
Resources and	Support project activities.	Plan and manage projects and	Oversee complex programmes and

Project Management		resources.	portfolios.
Financial management	Follow basic financial procedures.	Manage budgets and financial planning.	Design financial strategies and sustainability models.
Legal knowledge	Apply basic legal rules.	Interpret legal frameworks relevant to activities.	Anticipate legal implications and guide compliance strategically.



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