



# MenSI

Mentoring for  
School Improvement

## D1.6 Final project report

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28<sup>th</sup> February 2023



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# 1. Introduction

This final public report of the MenSI project (Deliverable 1.6) aims to provide an overview of the project, its key results and lessons learned. The document is divided into five main sections: a short description of the project and its background, the project methodology and approach, lessons learned at the policy level, lessons learned at the school level and overall conclusions.

All public project deliverables can be found within the project's website via the following link:

<https://mensi.eun.org/results>

## 1.1 About MenSI

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Transferring and scaling innovation related to digital technologies in school education is an ongoing policy challenge for Ministries of Education (MoE) across Europe. At individual teacher level, peer-to-peer networking and mentoring – an experienced teacher guiding and supporting a less experienced one – are effective mechanisms for career-long professional learning. However, at whole-school level, such approaches are less widespread despite the evidence for their potential.

The Mentoring for School Improvement (MenSI) project was a 28-month Coordination and Support Action (November 2021 – February 2023) funded by the European Commission H2020 programme. Its aim was to explore new approaches to *school-to-school* mentoring that entails holistic, active collaboration between two or more establishments for specific purposes, such as professional development, to overcome isolation or overall organisational improvement. The project started by recognising that such mentoring often takes place through school networks but that there can be large differences in outcomes, depending on factors such as whether participation is voluntary or compulsory, instigated externally ('top-down') or internally ('bottom-up'), or recognised and supported in varying degrees by education authorities. Key issues in the MenSI project were to understand better how specific 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches work and to explore different incentives and rewards that can motivate schools to become and remain engaged in whole-school peer learning.

To address these issues, between November 2021 and February 2023 MenSI carried out a pan-European investigation into how different approaches to whole-school mentoring can support the mainstreaming of innovative digital teaching practices in primary and secondary schools. MenSI leveraged the results of several previous projects concerned with mainstreaming innovative use of ICT in schools and particularly built on the outcomes and lessons learned from the earlier EU-FP7 [Living Schools Lab](#) (LSL) project (2012-2014), which provided support to school clusters via 'regional hubs'. In MenSI project partners formed and observed work in a new set of school clusters and also



leveraged the network of innovative learning labs and learning spaces that are part of the current European Schoolnet [Future Classroom Lab](#) initiative.

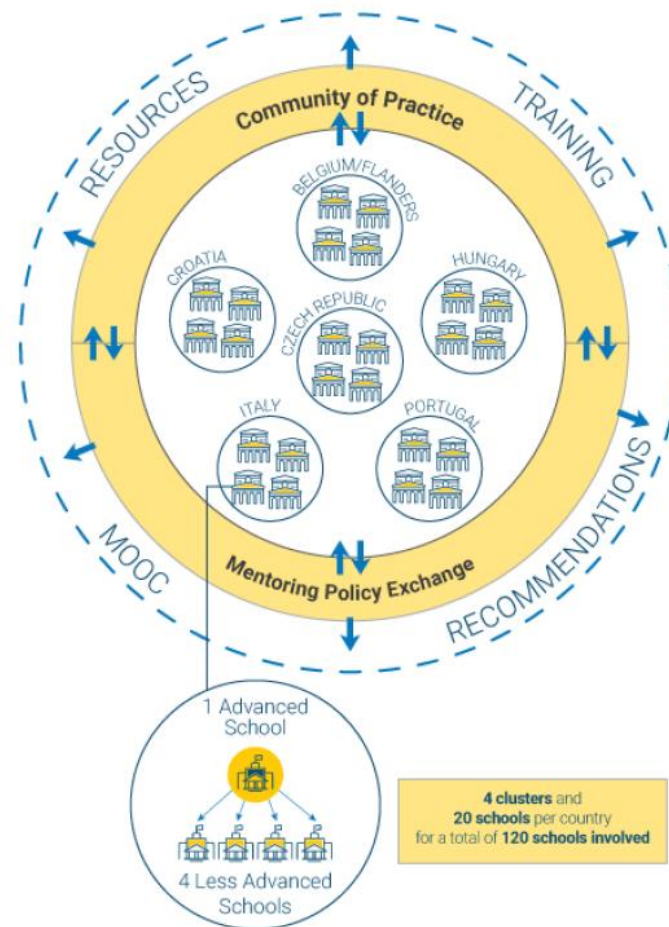


Figure 1: MenSI network structure

Involving Ministries of Education (MoE) in six countries (Belgium-Flanders, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Portugal), MenSI created a network of 24 Mentor Schools working with some 100 Mentee Schools during the project (see Figure 1). Table 1 presents the list of Ministries of Education or delegated institutions involved in the project.

Table 1: List of partners

Partner	Acronym	Country
EUN Partnership	EUN	Belgium
INDIRE	INDIRE	Italy
MINISTERIO DA EDUCACAO E CIENCIA	MEC	Portugal
MINISTARSTVO ZNANOSTI I OBRAZOVANJA	MZO	Croatia
OKTATASI HIVATAL	OH	Hungary
DUM ZAHNANICNI SPOLUPRACE	DZS	Czech Republic
HET GEMEENSCHAPSONDERWIJS	GO!	Belgium
BRUNEL UNIVERSITY LONDON	BUL	United Kingdom



During the project schools experimented with a variety of mentoring approaches, both top-down and bottom up. Activities at local and national level included observation visits, online support, peer-to-peer exchanges between subject teachers, workshops and the use of tools to assess digital strengths and weaknesses and identify areas for development. Communities of practice were created in which both mentor and mentee schools learnt from each other. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were very limited opportunities for the planned face-to-face meetings and workshops (all pan-European workshops had to be switched online), school visits and classroom observations, obliging schools to explore new approaches to mentoring and using digital technologies, and work online for professional learning, discussions and support.

### 1.1.1 Project objectives

The key objectives of the MenSI project were to:

1. Investigate school-to-school mentoring theory and practice including the strengths, weaknesses and related costs of different mentoring and school peer-to-peer learning models.
2. Create and animate a network of over 120 Mentor and Mentee Schools to pilot a range of approaches to addressing policy challenges.
3. Analyse the effectiveness of whole-school mentoring approaches applied by network schools to support mainstreaming of ICT and address policy challenges in partner countries.
4. Offer evidence-based recommendations and guidelines for the cost-effective coordination of school clusters through different approaches (top-down, bottom-up, virtual, etc.).
5. Create a community of practice and professional development opportunities for a wider group of school staff and an exchange mechanism for policy makers.

### 1.1.2 Project timeline & Work Packages

The project had seven Work Packages (WPs):

- WP1 – Management
- WP2 – Document and analyse whole-school peer-learning models
- WP3 – Mentoring Network Building and Support
- WP4 – Experimenting with different whole-school mentoring approaches
- WP5 – Documentation and analysis of mentoring practice
- WP6 – Dissemination and sustainability
- WP7 – Ethics requirements

A schematic version of the project's timeline and its work packages can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2: MenSI timeline

## 1.2 Background to the project

There is now an extensive body of research which suggests that mentoring can be an important change agent towards higher quality education systems throughout teachers' careers, from initial teacher education, induction of newly qualified teachers, and their different, and changing, roles during their professional life. While there are other ways to help teachers develop professionally, including formal courses, various types and duration of face-to-face and online training (workshops, conferences, on-site presentations) and self-initiated learning, research indicates that mentoring has particular value and impact, perhaps partly because "to be effective in producing profound, lasting change, professional development interventions have to be prolonged. The most effective professional development lasted at least two terms - more usually a year (or longer)."<sup>3</sup>

In initial teacher education (ITE), for example, "good-quality mentoring, backed up by effective quality assurance and communication within ITE partnerships, is vital to creating and delivering a quality curriculum. In partnerships which performed well against research indicators, work had been done to improve the teaching skills of mentors as well as trainees. In higher-scoring partnerships, course leaders and partner providers worked together to deliver a "well-sequenced" curriculum that put the trainee's development at its core, rather than prioritising the needs of the partner and settings".<sup>4</sup>

New approaches to mentoring have particularly been important within teacher induction programmes that have proliferated over the last two decades. Hobson, for example, cites several studies which suggest that "mentoring may be the single most effective method of supporting the professional development of beginning teachers" and that "a growing body of evidence also

<sup>3</sup> Teacher Development Trust (2015) Developing Great Teaching Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development. [Available from: <http://tdtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/DGT-Summary.pdf>]

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-education-curriculum-research/building-great-teachers>





suggests that teachers who are mentored are less likely to quit teaching.”<sup>5</sup> Other researchers have reported that “there is a growing body of resources on how to select, train, and support mentors; how to set goals and assess outcomes; and how to define and spread best practices in mentoring.”<sup>6</sup>

In Shanghai, China, mentoring has a whole-school (if not whole-system) dimension rather than individual: “By creating school cultures of active collaboration, where teachers give and receive skilled mentoring, coaching and feedback on their teaching and are able to advance to leadership roles in the school and district, Shanghai has created a cadre of self-confident and self-reflective teachers focused on continuous improvement”.<sup>7</sup>

Such a holistic approach (also found in Singapore) is not widespread in Europe and even one-to-one mentoring is still the exception not the rule. The 2018 TALIS findings<sup>8</sup> reveal that on average only 38% of teachers have some form of mentoring once they start teaching and only 22% have an assigned mentor across OECD countries.

At the same time, however, there is a growing perception that mentoring is not a ‘magic bullet’ and that top-down mentoring initiatives will not in themselves lead to transformative change in schools. As Hargreaves and Fullan go on to suggest, “any formal mentoring policy can easily degenerate into acts of restructuring (adding formal roles) without re-culturing (altering the capacity of teachers).”

When one looks more closely into mentoring theories, what also comes across very clearly is an on-going vigorous debate about how to scale different mentoring approaches and particularly the different views on whether voluntary, bottom-up mentoring is more effective than mandated, top-down mentoring processes. On the one hand there appear to be many instances where mentoring will simply not happen unless it is a top-down process that is formalized or even mandated – and paid.

At the same time, there is the unresolved challenge that: “To what extent voluntary mentoring relationships can be successfully formalized (in reality regulated) depends on many variables. The personal connection between mentors and mentees is not replicable and, moreover, organisations typically treat mentoring as an ‘add-on’ responsibility. This approach contradicts the sustainability goals of a mandated mentoring agenda.”

The picture is further complicated by the fact that multiple-level mentoring reforms can “resemble a management makeover of schools dependent upon overloaded personnel” and “while envisioned

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<sup>5</sup> Fostering Face-to-Face Mentoring and Coaching, Andrew J Hobson, The SAGE Handbook of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Edited by Sarah Fletcher and Carol A. Mullen, 2012

<sup>6</sup> Mentoring in the New Millennium, Theory into Practice, Vol 38, Number 1, Winter 2000, Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan  
<sup>7</sup> [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global\\_learning/2014/04/lessons\\_from\\_shanghais\\_professional\\_learning\\_system.html?c  
mp=ENL-EU-NEWS3](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global_learning/2014/04/lessons_from_shanghais_professional_learning_system.html?cmp=ENL-EU-NEWS3)

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2019), TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en>



democratically as change agents, practitioners can be subjected to doing even more labour without compensation”.<sup>9</sup>

Against this background, the European Commission Horizon Programme 2020 call for this project was very timely as it focussed on both top-down and bottom-up mentoring approaches, with the requirement for proposals to explore different incentives and rewards that would motivate schools to become engaged as mentors. The call also resonated with earlier projects and work that European Schoolnet and its supporting education ministries had been engaged in relating to the mainstreaming innovative pedagogical practice in schools.

In line with the call requirement to “build on and involve existing networks, ‘multiplier’ structures and regional hubs to mainstream change”, the MenSI project particularly leveraged the results from the two-year Living Schools Lab project<sup>10</sup> and EUN’s on-going European Schoolnet Academy<sup>11</sup> and Future Classroom Lab<sup>12</sup> initiatives.

### 1.2.1 The Living Schools Lab (LSL) project

The Living Schools Lab project, 2012-2014, was a top-down, incentivised participation initiative aiming to meet a policy challenge to increase schools’ overall digital capacity. LSL project partners (some participating in MenSI as well) put in place a multi-layered network or ecosystem across 12 countries involving, not only ‘vanguard’ schools, but also schools, classes and individual teachers at less advanced levels of ICT implementation. The project built a network of teachers collaborating on the effective use of ICT in schools. To build the network, two Advanced Schools and five Advanced Practitioner Schools were selected by partners in each country. The network promoted a whole-school approach to ICT use, scaling up best practices in the use of ICT between schools grouped into two levels of technological proficiency:

- Advanced Schools: where technology is embedded in teaching and learning across the whole school; and
- Advanced Practitioner Schools: where technology is only partially embedded within the school.

### 1.2.2 Future Classroom Lab

From the beginning the MenSI project was designed to be part of a ‘family’ of related projects whose results are sustained and exploited under the umbrella of the EUN Future Classroom Lab (FCL) initiative. Established in January 2012 as part of the European Schoolnet office in Brussels, the FCL provides an inspirational, fully equipped, reconfigurable teaching and learning environment that challenges teachers, school leaders, policymakers, EdTech companies and other stakeholders

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<sup>9</sup> *Mentoring: An Overview*, Carol A. Mullan, The SAGE Handbook of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Edited by Sarah Fletcher and Carol A. Mullen, 2012

<sup>10</sup> <https://fcl.eun.org/lsl>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://fcl.eun.org/>



to rethink the role of pedagogy, technology and design in classrooms and schools. Since it opened, the FCL has had an unexpected impact regarding the extent to which it has inspired and motivated teachers and school leaders across Europe to set up their own version of a learning lab or reconfigurable learning space based on the FCL model, frequently with minimal or no support from educational authorities. In the final year of the project, MenSI has sought to learn from this “bottom-up” mainstreaming of the FCL concept and model by involving some schools that had been inspired to set up a Future Classroom Lab (FCL) or “learning lab” that utilizes elements of the FCL approach. By doing so, it was hoped that the project would be able to better understand what motivated these schools to set up their own learning labs and to see whether some incentives/rewards/support could help them to provide mentoring to other schools. At the time of writing this report, an International School Exchange Meeting has been scheduled in Lisbon to take place on the 16-17<sup>th</sup> February 2023. Mentor, mentee and learning labs will come together to discuss the projects outcomes, its exploitation potential and links to other ongoing FCL initiatives.

### 1.2.3 EUN Academy

The European Schoolnet Academy (EUN Academy)<sup>13</sup> is a shared teacher professional development initiative between European Schoolnet and its member MoEs. The objective is to help develop a bottom-up mainstreaming process through widespread adoption by teachers and school leaders of innovative pedagogical approaches that are piloted and explored within different projects developed by EUN. The EUN Academy was launched in 2014 in response to the need to scale up K12 professional development opportunities for teachers and to help schools respond to the growing number of challenges they face in their classrooms. Over the last eight years the annual European Schoolnet Academy programme has offered massive open online courses (MOOCs), which are entirely free of charge and open for anyone to join, with no limit to the number of participants.

Developing a MOOC in the LSL project was not an option as the EUN Academy was in a very early stage of development. In MenSI the project’s main output for mass dissemination is a MOOC titled “Beyond Networking” (D6.4)<sup>14</sup> which was launched in October 2022 under the EUN Academy. This online course provides training in whole-school mentoring and promotes the MenSI results to a large community of school leaders and teachers, as well as to a wider audience of policy makers in regions and other interested stakeholders (see section 2.1.1).

### 1.2.4 SELFIE

SELFIE (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational technologies)<sup>15</sup> is a free tool designed to help schools embed digital technologies into teaching,

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/courses/course-v1:MenSI+MentoringSchools+2022/about>

<sup>15</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/schools-go-digital\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/schools-go-digital_en)



learning and assessment. SELFIE was developed based on the European Commission framework on promoting digital-age learning in educational organisations.

As part of their tasks within the MenSI project, school clusters were invited to explore new tools that are available to schools in Europe (including the EC's SELFIE school self-assessment tool and new approaches to online mentoring). In order to obtain a picture of where schools were positioned at the beginning of the project (their e-maturity), they were all invited to complete the SELFIE questionnaire in their language. At the end of the project, all schools were invited to resubmit the SELFIE survey, with the aim of helping them objectively determine to what extent attitudes to and use of digital technologies in the school as a whole had changed.

MenSI has also collaborated and supported the SELFIE team at the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) in its efforts to collect the initiatives (e.g. MOOCs, guidelines for the construction of action plans, pedagogical tool kits...) and put them together in order to make them available to the larger public. For this purpose, the operational plans developed at the level of MenSI have been particularly aligned with Erasmus+ projects such as SHERPA<sup>16</sup> and ASELFIE. In this regard, the project was also closely involved in the preparations and development of the SELFIE Forum<sup>17</sup> that took place on 7-8 October 2021. Further elements or collaboration with SELFIE are described in section 4.2.3.

### 1.2.5 Covid-19 Pandemic

The challenges presented to schools and education systems as a result of the Covid pandemic have had a considerable impact of the implementation of the MenSI project and the activities developed by the network of school clusters. Responses to Covid necessitated changes from traditional teaching as the principal mode of instruction and, in particular required school- and system-wide adoption of on-line teaching and learning. In a similar way, all pan-European face-to-face project activities had to be switched online; this included not only the consortium meetings for project partners but also the two mentoring workshops that were organised for schools. In order to allow a timely implementation of the project, both the online training course and the first mentoring workshop were designed to develop the mentor schools' capacity in designing and planning their mentoring activities. The second workshop, provided an opportunity for the mentor schools' coordinators and a representative group of the mentee schools to virtually get together and exchange about the different mentoring practices, discuss the initial findings from the WP5 analysis of how the school clusters had been operating and support the finalisation of the Whole-School Mentoring MOOC. Further details about the adaption of the pan-European school workshops may be found within the project deliverables in the resources section of the website: <https://mensi.eun.org/results>.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://sherpa4selfie.eu/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.selfieforum.eu/>



## 1.3 School-to-school mentoring: a European perspective

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An early task in the project was to provide partners with an overview of school-to-school mentoring<sup>18</sup> and to outline possible evidence-informed approaches to implementing it in the project, together with evidence from research about success factors and risks.

School collaboration can take the form of networks, clusters or partnerships. Goals are varied and include: supporting horizontal decision-making and solving complex problems; sharing responsibilities and creating synergies between stakeholders; promoting knowledge-sharing and the dissemination of practice and enabling innovations to evolve more quickly; enhancing the professional development of teachers and supporting capacity-building in schools; and optimising the use of time and resources. An important benefit of collaboration and networking is to share information, resources and expertise and to jointly produce an output that no single organisation or person can achieve in isolation.

Evidence is thin for the positive impact and influence of such activity on student progress and outcomes. There is a higher degree of confidence within the literature as to the influence of school-to-school collaboration on teachers and teaching, and this was a focus of much of the activity in the MenSI project.

The European Commission (2018)<sup>19</sup> distinguishes three types of school collaboration: for educational governance; **bottom-up** (informal teacher social networks and resource-sharing platforms at some distance from national policy making on a peer-to-peer basis between schools); and **top-down** policy or practice incubators.

Across the range of bottom-up school to school networking is the notion of a self-improving system in which schools support themselves and each other to raise standards of teaching and learning and address educational issues in a horizontal partnership, where the rationales are democratic exchange, and mutual stimulation and motivation, rather than top-down reforms.

In top-down partnerships, schools work together to innovate, test and experiment, often in the context of pilot projects or initiatives, with specific policy challenges, such as school improvement, teacher competences, new approaches to teaching and learning (including digital technology use), small and isolated schools. Despite their prevalence, such centrally driven initiatives may not be the most effective way to facilitate sustainable collaboration between schools.

Whatever the type of collaboration between schools or their motivation, cooperation is enhanced if schools see themselves as **learning institutions** in which both teachers and learners are learning

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<sup>18</sup> <https://mensi.eun.org/news/details?id=6209800>

<sup>19</sup> European Commission (2018), Teachers and school leaders in schools as learning organisations: Guiding principles for policy development in school education  
[https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs4-learning-organisations\\_en.pdf](https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs4-learning-organisations_en.pdf)



and developing. A learning school is generally part of a network with other schools, thereby enabling co-construction of educational progress.

**Mentoring** of individual teachers, particular early career teachers, is widespread, effective and well researched. Mentoring between schools however, on a whole-school basis, is less widespread and little researched. Research suggests that school improvement through partnership and professional dialogue is compelling but in practice there are pitfalls and barriers that often hinder or prevent meaningful collaborative activity.

Three research findings are particularly important for the MenSI project. First, reflection promoted by effective mentoring encourages a collaborative learning culture in organisations. Second, mentoring may be more influential when it aligns with the context of an organisation, and when it is part of a wider professional development programme. Third, organisational support and strategic planning should be a priority for school leaders when developing mentoring activities; they should promote a learning and collaborative culture, providing a framework for implementing mentoring.

However, there are areas where research evidence is thin, in particular how to sustain cooperation and networking between schools, through for example incentive and reward schemes and evidence of how specific incentives or rewards have enabled mentor (as opposed to mentee) schools to see a tangible return on their additional workload.

There are six key **challenges** to school mentoring: time and workload pressures; the requirements of the mentor/coach role; understanding and expectations; gaining the commitment of the workforce; the profile of the workforce; and workplace culture.

The report outlined twelve key messages from research to MenSI partners as they embarked on school-to-school mentoring:

- Professional development is fertile ground for school-to-school collaboration
- Strong and committed leadership is essential for coordination, shared responsibility and capacity building.
- Participants need to have status and skills and clear roles and responsibilities to sustain the intervention.
- Trust and clear communication are important conditions for success.
- A clear plan of action is essential, as well as well-defined and robust structures and processes.
- There should be a clear purpose, mission and community values.
- Goals should be agreed and shared, even if difficult to establish.



- Bring in new members and changing external contributors and facilitators over time.
- Ensure the digital infrastructure is in place to enable individuals to contribute.
- Convey a positive message: show that the additional workload associated with the collaborative activity will have dividends.
- Establish trust and cooperation from the outset, particularly if there is no history of collaboration between schools.
- Schools need to be carefully and contextually matched and sensitive to perceived power imbalances.



# 2. Project methodology and approach

## 2.1 Creating a network of Mentor and Mentee Schools

The project created a network of **24 mentor schools and 96 mentee schools** which worked in clusters, each comprising one mentor school working with four mentee schools. Each country had four clusters. across the 6 project partner countries.

National Coordinators appointed by each of the ministries in the project provided first-line support to the participating schools. This pilot schools were formed into regional hubs, or clusters of schools, to collaborate and build peer-mentoring relationships around whole school approaches. The schools/teachers were supported by National Coordinators from the education ministries or the organisations representing them in the project, who facilitated meetings and moderated a local community of practice/blog/Facebook group to exchange practice on an on-going basis. Meetings were held on average once a term, either virtually or face-to-face to overcome location and time constraints. These elements are described in further detail as part of Deliverable D4.1.<sup>20</sup>

The network of schools was supported centrally, with a pan-European community of practice. The Mentor Schools were formed into groups based around common interest themes, such as overcoming rural school isolation, increasing the uptake of STEM subjects and personalising teaching and learning. The MenSI coordinator (at a Pan-European level), European Schoolnet, together with the National Coordinators, facilitated online meetings between these groups to share their practice, first amongst themselves and then with the rest of the network through a series of on-line learning events, workshops and school visits.

The engagement process was documented in detail in Deliverable D3.2 “Teacher community and support infrastructure”<sup>21</sup>, submitted in May 2021. This document presents the school support

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<sup>20</sup> D4.1 – Report on Regional Hub Mentoring Approaches:

[https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D4.1\\_Report+on+Regional+Hub+Mentoring+Approaches.pdf/41f9c38c-a284-b9e9-d37b-e59c3197eac1?t=1673436923472](https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D4.1_Report+on+Regional+Hub+Mentoring+Approaches.pdf/41f9c38c-a284-b9e9-d37b-e59c3197eac1?t=1673436923472)

<sup>21</sup> D3.2 – Teacher community and support infrastructure:

<https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D3p2-Teacher-Community-Infrastructure/ac8b4678-132a-45ca-b486-1cfd59b26b5e>





mechanisms developed by the project at national level by partners and at the European level by EUN.

## 2.2 Supporting the mainstreaming of ICT

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Led by DGE (Ministry of Education Portugal) and involving all ministries and European Schoolnet collectively, the 24 Mentor schools supported the mentee schools to innovate with ICT more broadly and/or to use ICT to address different policy challenges such as: specific challenges faced by small/rural schools (particularly at primary level); schools with socially disadvantaged students; schools seeking to implement more personalised pedagogical approaches; schools with low take-up of STEM. Each Mentor School had a degree of flexibility in terms of how it chose to work with and mentor its cluster of less advanced schools. The process involved a mixture of observation visits<sup>22</sup>, varying levels of online support, peer-to-peer exchanges between subject teachers, workshops and the use of tools (SELFIE) to determine schools' digital strengths and weaknesses and identify areas for development. As a result of the exchanges with MenSI schools, National coordinators also emphasized a co-learning, community building mentoring approach in which both advanced and less advanced schools have lessons to learn from each other. A range of support mechanisms were implemented, including not only direct support from the national coordinators, but also online professional development for participating schools, workshops and tools, platforms and communities that MoE already had in place for school collaboration and peer exchange.

### 2.2.1 International workshops and online training

The key pan-European training activities developed by the MenSI project have been the following:

#### *Online training*

This introductory course targeted the staff (both teachers and school management) of the 24 Mentor Schools who led participants in the school clusters. The course was structured as a 3-week online training in the months of September-October 2021. Participants learnt about different approaches to mentoring to support the mainstreaming of innovative pedagogical practice involving digital technologies in teaching and learning. More specifically, the course objectives were:

- To learn about school-to-school mentoring theory and practice including the strengths and weaknesses of different mentoring and school peer-to-peer learning models.
- Based on best practice and evidence, to successfully coordinate school clusters through different approaches (top-down, bottom-up, virtual, etc.).

The online training received 92 enrolments and 73 participants received the final course certificate.

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<sup>22</sup> Face-to-face visits at the national level were launched in some countries during fall 2021 but mostly took place in 2022.



## Mentoring workshops

Throughout the project, two face-to-face workshops were organised by European Schoolnet that included a mix of school leaders and teachers in the MenSI schools. Due to the ongoing pandemic situation, it was agreed by all partners to transform the first workshop into an online workshop that took place on the 16-17th November 2021. The report of this workshop is included in Deliverable D3.3 Report of First Schools' Workshop which was published in December 2021. The second mentoring workshop was also hosted online on 17-18 May 2022. This meeting targeted both mentor and mentee school and a full report was delivered as part of Deliverable D3.4.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Mentoring workshop

Both the online training course and the first mentoring workshop were designed to develop the mentor schools' capacity in designing and planning their mentoring activities. The online training course, the first training event in the series (described in Deliverable 3.5), was a mini-MOOC entitled "*Launching MenSI - Practical Introduction to School-to-School Mentoring*". The course aimed at providing an overview of different mentoring approaches (top-down, bottom-up, virtual, etc.) and skills to the 24 mentor schools in the national school clusters.

The first mentoring workshop followed up this course and aimed to provide an opportunity for representatives of the 24 mentor schools to get together and build a shared vision of whole-school mentoring that could support the mentor schools to design their own mentoring operational plans.

Regarding the workshop structure, it was divided into two days which were divided into two parts each:

Day 1: the first part of the workshop focused on action planning and the co-construction of a Theory of Change that could guide and support mentor schools' in designing their own mentoring operational plans; the second, focused on strategies that could make whole-school mentoring work and support mentee schools on their transformational journey.

Day 2: the first part illustrated the features of the newly released SELFIE Pedagogical Innovation Assistant Toolkit (SELFIE PTK) and covered the seven steps that can assist schools using the SELFIE tool to plan improvement-oriented actions based on the results of their SELFIE report; the second part focused on the activities that mentor schools could initiate to optimize the process of monitoring and documenting progress within their school cluster.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Mentoring workshop

The second mentoring workshop was organised during the second half of the school mentoring activities for a mix of mentor and mentee school representatives from Flanders (Belgium), Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy and Portugal, where a network of 24 mentor schools (4 per country) and 96 mentee schools (16 per country) had been experimenting innovative approaches to school networking and peer-to-peer learning since September 2021.



This provided an opportunity for the mentor schools' coordinators and a representative group of the mentee schools to: exchange on the different mentoring practices; discuss the initial findings from the WP5 analysis of how the school clusters had been operating; and support the finalisation of the Whole-School Mentoring MOOC, scheduled for November 2022.

Participants had the chance to:

1. Evaluate the project status in terms of overall impact of whole-school mentoring for school improvement: actions implemented and achieved goals.
2. Share the first findings and experiences of best practice in school networking and peer-to-peer-learning within the MenSI clusters.
3. Discuss and share ideas on how to ensure the continuity of the project over time and further expand the network of partner schools.
4. Learn about the dissemination tools to document successful whole-school mentoring experiences and promote active contribution to the MenSI online community and the final MOOC.

The online training received 92 enrolments and 73 participants received the final course certificate.

### *Whole-School Mentoring MOOC*

The dissemination and sustainability actions of the project included the creation of a final project MOOC. The *"Beyond Networking: School-to-School Mentoring for Digital Innovation"* course was designed around the experiences of the school cluster in six countries who applied a range of mentoring models (e.g. advanced-less advanced, peer-to-peer) for school improvement.

During the four course modules, participants learned about both theoretical and practical aspects of mentoring and peer networking and received advice, guidelines and suggestions from experts and peers concerning how to effectively animate a community of practice and organise whole-school mentoring activities across schools. By the end of the course, participants:

- Had a deeper understanding of models of school-to-school mentoring
- Learned about strategies to set up and animate activities across a group of schools
- Were familiar with a range of digital tools to support collaboration and innovation
- Became part of an informed and supportive community of practice
- Found potential partners for school-to-school collaborative activities.

The mix of countries in the project ensured that the results can be adapted and used in countries not represented in the project. Particular attention was paid to producing tools and outcomes that can be easily adapted to local contexts and which support skills' transfer at pan-European level. The final version of the MOOC is an Open Educational Resource (OER) and the content is available under the 'Attribution-non-commercial-share alike' Creative Commons License, allowing anyone interested to freely remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially. In this way, the project's outputs targeting practitioners contribute to much wider capacity building. The MOOC



course will remain open and be promoted through the project website (remaining itself available for three years), FCL website and at the European Schoolnet Academy (<https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/>).

### *International School Exchange Meeting*

At the time of writing this report, an International School Exchange Meeting has been scheduled in Lisbon to take place on the 16-17<sup>th</sup> February 2023. The goal is to offer the opportunities for MenSI schools to exchange face-to-face, discuss the project's lessons learned and further define the strategies for collaboration in the future. In this regard, representatives from the mentor schools, mentee schools (from all countries) and the MenSI learning labs have been invited to attend the meeting. This exchange will also include a visit to one of the MenSI school clusters in Portugal, *Agrupamento de Escolas Fernando Casimiro Pereira da Silva*.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.3 Investigating school-to-school mentoring theory and practice

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Schools in the six countries involved in the project experimented over a full school year with a variety of whole-school mentoring approaches that utilised both top-down and bottom-up management and support mechanisms. This included examining to what extent new approaches to whole-school mentoring could: help mainstream innovative use of ICT in schools and also address specific policy challenges within the different countries. In this regard, the ministries involved in the project (policymakers working at both national and regional levels) have benefitted from the guidance of European Schoolnet and suggested actions to promote adoption of mentoring and whole-school approaches to digital pedagogies.

The main focus for all the participating countries was to support the mainstreaming of innovative digital teaching practices in primary and secondary schools and to promote innovative use of ICT more generally across the whole school. In addition, each partner country aimed to further experiment and address specific policy or curriculum challenges at a national level that had been identified by the ministry partners and highlighted in the open call for schools. The national priorities included:

- Flexible learning spaces,
- Small/rural schools,
- Personalization of learning,
- Uptake of STEM and robotics,
- Socially disadvantaged students.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://aefernandocasimiro.wordpress.com/>



The project also aimed to focus on exploring new approaches to online mentoring and the use of digital technologies for this purpose. In fact, this aspect gained in importance and was much more critical to the successful delivery of the project than was originally foreseen. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures in force during the project's timeframe, the MenSI school clusters were faced with many unforeseen challenges. For example, in all countries there were fewer opportunities for face-to-face meetings and workshops, school visits and classroom observations, which resulted in schools relying more on online opportunities for professional learning, mentoring, exchanges and support.

A specific task was dedicated to exploring the potential impact of different incentive and reward schemes for mentor schools along with the factors that motivate mentee schools to participate in the project school clusters. Ministries of Education (MoE) in the partner countries provided the 24 mentor schools with a range of different incentives in recognition of the considerable amount of work and degree of commitment that they made as mentors. Particular attention was given to identifying scalable funding modalities and incentives as well as to exploring different types of incentives and rewards to encourage mentor schools to mainstream their innovative practices and to motivate mentee schools to participate in school-to-school mentoring.

In the earlier LSL project, there had been quite limited possibilities to provide mentor schools with small honorariums in recognition of the additional workload occasioned by their work with less advanced schools. At the beginning of the MenSI project all mentor schools received a cash incentive of 4.000 Euros to fund different activities in their cluster. Mentee schools received non-cash incentives mostly regarding the paid transport and coverage of catering costs for school visits and meetings, but also the public recognition as part of a pan-European network of mentoring schools<sup>24</sup>. Overall, school participation had other benefits such as:

- Learning about school-to-school mentoring and how to carry it out in practice.
- Sharing practice and expertise with schools and teachers within school clusters, country and Europe.
- Engage further with specific topics based on national policy priorities.
- Being part of the Community of Practice at national and European levels, to share ideas and examples of methodologies, activities, and resources.
- Taking part in professional development activities, e.g., webinars and workshops (online & on-site)
- Contributing to the project's outputs such as the MOOC, recommendations and guidelines targeted to other schools and policymakers.

In Hungary, however, a hybrid approach was explored as the MoE decided that instead of only mentor schools receiving cash incentives, both mentor and mentee schools should receive financial incentives for their participation.

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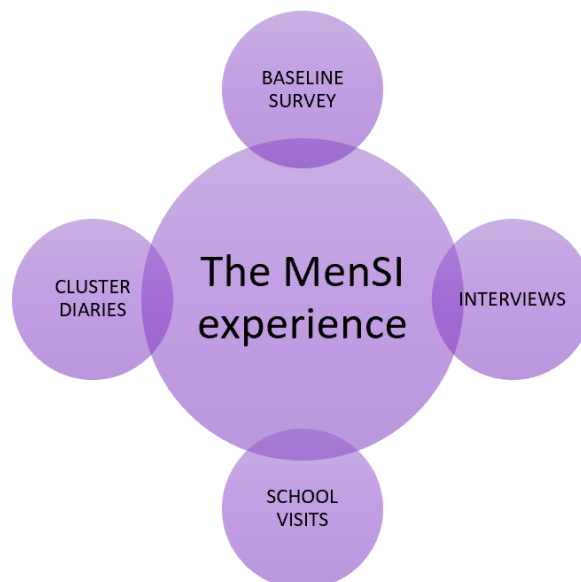
<sup>24</sup> <https://mensi.eun.org/schools>



National coordinators were appointed in each country to help build and facilitate the network and to support schools as they explored different whole-school mentoring approaches. National coordinators used tools, platforms and communities that MoE already had in place for school collaboration and peer exchange and also invited experts in different fields related to national priorities and organized expert webinars or workshops for all the participating schools.

## 2.4 Offering evidence-based recommendations

Four sources of evidence enabled a picture to be developed of the 'MenSI experience' - which is a phrase used to capture the way that participating Mentor Schools and their clusters responded to the project's intention to mainstream innovation by spreading the advanced ICT-based teaching practices to a wide circle of schools in each country.



*Figure 3: MenSI research instruments*

### 2.4.1 Baseline Survey

The instruments developed to monitor and observe the progression of schools within the project sought to do this by undertaking progress-monitoring and observation across four 'experience domains': these comprise whole-school-, teacher-, mentoring and student- experience aspects of MenSI. The overarching dimensions of ICT (which is referred to variously as digital technology or digital learning) and 'Policy Challenges' (referring to those contemporary or emergent issues at a pan-European or Partner Country context) are recognised as informing and contributing to the operational context of schools: these underpin consideration of each experience domain.

The four 'experience domains' reflected on the content of the SELFIE tool. In addition, a set of baseline questions was built around the literature review of school-to-school mentoring in a European perspective, an output of WP2. The same themes echo those in the original MenSI proposal. Each had either direct or inferred connection with the adoption of ICT practices in schools.



Overall, 40 questions were identified, comprising Whole-School Experiences (10 Questions), Teacher Experiences (10 questions), Student Experiences (10 questions) and Mentoring Experiences (10 questions). The survey questions connected with the observation template being generated for school visits, by using similar thematic fields to explore ground-level practices in mentoring using digital approaches.

## 2.4.2 Interviews

Concurrent with the questionnaire survey of whole-schools, teachers and students, online interviews were conducted by Brunel University with school leaders and/or lead practitioners. Both instruments contain important thematic synergies. The interviews allowed an extended conversation based on these aspects and were illustrated by detailed ground-level, user-generated narratives.

The purpose of these 1:1 interviews was to determine the key characteristics of schools which define them as 'leading-edge' schools in the field of mentoring, associated with how they have established and enhanced a whole-school approach to ICT deployment and use.

In addition, practitioners contributed extensively to the development of illustrative 'case studies', results of which have been included in Deliverable D5.2.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.4.3 School Observation Visits

The observation visits to schools, which were postponed until May 2022 due to COVID restrictions and complemented with 'virtual visits', were also undertaken by Brunel University who targeted an Advanced School within the partner countries in order to more fully document their approach to mentoring less advanced schools and investigate relevant issues emerging from the interviews and from analysis of the cluster diaries generated in WP4, based on an outline provided by WP5 project partners. Observation visits were designed so as to minimise disruption to school routines and to be mindful of any increase in teacher workload.

## 2.4.4 Cluster diaries

An important part of the MenSI project was the development of 'Cluster Diaries'. This is a way of enabling groups of schools (both Mentor and Mentee Schools) to collect together information to show how mentoring approaches were being adapted, developed and used. The information gathered was subsequently used in defining some illustrative case study examples of mentoring practice, for wider dissemination.

The Cluster Diary approach adopted by MenSI recognises that national responses to mentoring and associated activity may vary from one country to country; it also accommodates differences

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<sup>25</sup> D5.2 – Effective whole school mentoring: evidence from MenSI:  
[https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D5.2\\_Final+report+%28Part+C%29\\_20221130.pdf/33831a29-5899-bca6-7685-66b9e9275a56?t=1669980291078](https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D5.2_Final+report+%28Part+C%29_20221130.pdf/33831a29-5899-bca6-7685-66b9e9275a56?t=1669980291078)



between individual schools within the same country. The tool developed was therefore a flexible way of ensuring that these important differences could be recognised and made more visible to stakeholders.

## 2.5 The MenSI platform and the Mentoring Policy Exchange

The MenSI website, created as a sub-website of the European Schoolnet's [Future Classroom Lab platform](#) is available in English and open to all visitors. It will be maintained after the end of the project under the umbrella of European Schoolnet's independently funded Future Classroom Lab by being offered as an on-going service to policymakers and the mentoring school community. The website is naturally the public window of the project and includes general information about the project, news articles, resources, and information on the policy exchange. It supports the promotion and dissemination of the project outcomes and activities.

It was also essential to MenSI to create a sense of community among the website visitors and users who shared similar interests. In this regard, the website enabled schools to demonstrate and share directly their experiences by offering interactive features and a place to 'meet' with all the MenSI participants from other countries. The principle was that all (or most) of the website content is available to anyone, increasing findability of the site in general and its content in Internet search engines. For specific activities users need to register and login, but the registration is open and free to all (using EUN Open login).

Another key element of MenSI was to provide ministries with opportunities to collect, document and compare cases of both successful and unsuccessful whole-school peer-learning mentoring approaches. Following models successfully applied in previous EUN projects, the project consortium extended its outreach by inviting additional ministries of education and other relevant stakeholders to participate in MenSI as unfunded Advisory Members. Unfunded means they were unable to receive project funding under the terms of the contract with the European Commission. The MenSI Advisory Members included representatives of:

- Ministries of Education
- Regional and municipal education authorities
- Organisations working in the area of school-to-school mentoring
- EU-funded projects of relevant topic
- Private organisations

The MenSI project also extended its reach by inviting relevant ministries and regional authorities to participate in the project's Mentoring Policy Exchange Mechanism. By adopting this "policy-connected approach", MenSI developed a new space for discussion open to educational policymakers working at both national and regional level. As well as the online platform, this new forum will continue to be offered as an on-going service to policymakers after the end of the project under the EUN's Future Classroom Lab initiative.





# 3. Lessons learned

This section of the Report outlines some of the key lessons learned by the consortium to support mentoring programs into the future. The lessons themselves come from the school and policy participants and were gathered during a variety of feedback activities such as the baseline survey, semi-structured interviews, school observation visits and cluster diaries in the country partners involved.

## 3.1 School level

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### 3.1.1 Overall lessons

#### *What was learnt in MenSI, and what are the views of participating teachers?*

- **There is no ‘one size fits all’ model for school-to-school mentoring.** How schools best worked together, whether top down or bottom up, depended on their context and capabilities. When this was taken into account, results were positive.

*“We share the successful things but then need to consider that it might not work in different schools. Talking with other teachers is a good way of making sure that what we do is going to work...it's problem-solving to make sure that we choose correctly.”*

- **Activities work best if they are a mixture of online and face-to-face.** A blended approach enabled more frequent and shorter interactions to take place, and these were preferred to all-day workshops. Because of the pandemic, teachers had the competences and resources to meet online; it also narrowed the gaps in digital competence levels between mentor and mentee schools.

*“My best times have been when we have met up with other schools. Even in the informal times there is often a strong feeling that proper learning is taking place.”*

#### *Incentives / rewards that were particularly effective and appreciated:*

The project did not find evidence that mentoring will fail to happen unless it is a top-down process that is formalised or mandated - and even paid. The provision within MenSI of some direct financial support to mentor schools may have been useful in facilitating networking and exchange activities within the school clusters but it did not appear to be a strong motivating factor in ensuring that mentoring activities were sustained throughout the project. The following incentives/rewards were more regularly cited as being particularly effective:



- **Being given time to engage in digital professional development.**

*“Our approach is systematic for the whole school, based on a needs analysis which we do every year to find out what the gaps are.”*

- **Receiving software licences, equipment and other resources.** This allowed schools to plan and have resources available when needed.

*“Our allocation is very open, so that everyone in the school knows that they can get support. We try to respond to the resource needs of several teachers at once, so that we get good value.”*

- **Education system recognition.** When an education system embeds recognition of individuals, schools, or clusters as part of a valued national reward system, engagement and motivation are more easily maintained.

*“I think it is essential that as an AS (Advanced School) school we recognise the effort put in by the teachers to this. They've kept going and deserve some kind of statement to highlight their involvement”*

- **Career advancement** by having specific role descriptors for teachers leading in the digital space. Some mentor schools had posts such as Head of Digital Learning, with a role that included professional learning.

*“We have some roles which are officially recognized as linked with ICT. That's the way it has been organized. But also, there are a few teachers here who have a lot of expertise so that they'll be the ones who can help out teachers who don't seem to be connecting to our way of working.”*

### **Enabling factors for individual schools and teachers:**

The evaluation revealed three key enablers:

- **Leadership at school and cluster level.** When a school leader was involved, the commitment, investment and motivation of staff were high.

*“Our head teacher supports us and is inspirational, even if she is not really an ICT expert. We get such a lot of support from her.”*

- **Developing a shared digital vision.** Giving the vision a high profile and significance had positive outcomes for mentee schools.

*“Our school is very clear in saying that we want all our children to have 21st century skills, so the project has meant a lot. It has been an obvious extension of what as a school we have as our aim. We want to make citizens of today and tomorrow.”*



- **Having a whole school digital policy.** Teachers rated the existence of a policy for ICT as an important factor in promoting effective and sustained digital practices across the curriculum. Examples were often shared and discussed between schools.

*“We are all sharing the same way forwards and the policy we have is like an itinerary that we can check...it doesn't matter whether you are very experienced or higher in status, the policy is shared by all of us.”*

Other enabling factors are:

- **Making time.** Feedback repeatedly mentioned time as a barrier to effective adoption of new material, skills and learning methods. Time was deemed crucial to practise the skills learned, time to plan effective lessons, time to share successes and failures.

*The diaries that countries kept were vital tools in understanding the pressures of time in an already crowded curriculum for teachers. Switching to a new method of learning takes time and this was repeatedly highlighted in project countries.*

- **Changing mindsets.** Moving to using digital tools and skills as an integrated method of instruction rather than a bolt-on to existing pedagogy calls for a fundamental reorientation of thinking and practice.

*Some of the diary extracts from countries such as Croatia demonstrated the difficulty teachers were having in switching to a fully digital learning approach. COVID-19 has helped this and positive green shoots are emerging from the MenSI experience.*

### **Enabling factors for school clusters:**

The evaluation revealed three key enablers:

- **Having a common theme.** Mentor schools encouraged their cluster to agree on an ICT-related issue in the curriculum or in their teaching which each participant recognised as important within their setting. This process enabled attention to focus on getting the starting point right and on identifying gaps in knowledge or competences during subsequent cluster activities.

*“We had a lot of energy and purpose right from the start...we were all on the same topic but had different experience and levels. It was very intense, but I think we all found it stimulating.”*

*'Unless there is evidence about what our needs are it doesn't bring us benefits to be involved. The requirements of each school in the group (cluster) are different, so this is very important'*

- **Setting a reachable goal.** Establishing a cluster objective which connected to a concrete outcome which would have direct and immediate impact in a school situation was viewed as a factor which helped the participants maintain momentum during the project. It also was a contributing factor to an absence of competition and an emphasis on collaboration.



*“At first I was a bit disappointed. I thought that we aimed too low, especially as I think I'm quite aware, digitally speaking. But it meant that all of us were on the same page and this made us a good unit.”*

- **Receiving funding and resourcing.** One of the indicators of a mentor school was its capacity and capability to develop ICT across the whole school. These schools were well resourced to do this because it was an underpinning principle in its vision or mission statement.

*“We were amazed at the amount of different ICT things we were able to use, even if it was unlikely that our school would ever be able to afford to purchase some of the things.”*

Other factors are:

- **Learning from peers.** Seeing an effective and replicable approach, an intervention, a use of digital tool by a colleague in an authentic context in another school is a powerful motivator for change.

*'...having a real school example of an approach that worked was necessary. What this did was to make things relevant to us because we can see ourselves how the aim translates into an actual event'*

- **Tackling resistance.** A valuable lesson learned was about the power of people opposing change. No matter how good an intervention might be, there will always be those who find reasons to resist it. The lesson is for schools and clusters to plan for how they will address these individuals so as not to derail the process for others. The use of collective knowledge was a powerful tool for schools to share ideas and strategies on how to bring these people along on the journey.

*With data from the f2f interviews as well as the diaries countries kept, participants from the Czech Republic, Croatia and Portugal commented on the support of the mentor school leaders to assist them in moving staff into a more positive mindset and how to maintain motivation.*

- **Sharing and collaborating.** The influence of teachers sharing practice to improve student outcomes cannot be underestimated. Collaboration and co-operation towards a shared goal demonstrated very positive developments for the students, the individual teachers, the school and indeed the cluster.

*Teachers developed a valuable, and sustainable, network of like-minded digital adopters to use as sounding boards, critical friends and advisers.*

### 3.1.2 Tips for schools

As part of the Whole-School Mentoring MOOC and the MenSI video animation, a set of tips on how to create regional mentoring hubs were developed (see Table 2). These tips are the outcome of the discussion with Mentor and Mentee schools during the different online trainings (WP3) and the analysis via WP5.



Table 2: Tips for schools

### How to create regional hubs for whole-school mentoring

<b>Planning your mentoring approach</b>	A shared conceptual framework and common vision about mentoring is the starting point to help networked schools talk about and shape change processes, adopt strategies and use current innovations to strengthen their community of practice.
<b>Sharing your mentoring vision and mission</b>	Create opportunities for all partners involved in your school network to reflect together on the importance of sharing a common vision and speak the same language, so that everybody can actively participate in the mentoring activities and feel a sense of belonging to a community.
<b>Co-constructing your mentoring action plan</b>	Initiate professional dialogue with each partner school in your network to identify their real needs and co-construct your mentoring action plan.
<b>Prioritising themes to be addressed in whole-school mentoring</b>	Focus teamworking and peer-exchanges in your network on a selected number of themes related to digital innovation and active learning methodologies such as, for example: personalized learning, project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, formative assessment and learning scenarios using digital tools and resources.
<b>Disseminating best practices</b>	Create regional hub meetings to bring schools together to spread good practice and provide opportunities for closer mentoring and collaboration between schools.
<b>Creating training and coaching opportunities for teachers</b>	Show how you have concretely managed to exploit the full potential of digital technologies and content for teaching and learning and empower teachers in the mentee schools by providing models and examples that are easy to follow and implement in their own classrooms.
<b>Customise your mentoring activities</b>	Recognise the diversity of schools - each one is unique and what works in one school may not work in a different setting. So, be ready to adapt your mentoring action plan to meet the real exigencies of the schools in your network.
<b>Promoting self-awareness and self-assessment in schools</b>	Both mentor and mentee schools work best when they understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Consider using the SELFIE tool to support mentee schools in assessing their digital competence and to develop their own plan for school improvement.
<b>Monitoring progress</b>	Collect data on your mentoring practice through peer reviews and school visits, surveys and questionnaires that can help you monitor progress in the mentee schools and help you formulate recommendations about possible improvements.
<b>Helping other schools to grow</b>	Identify areas of strength and expertise within each mentee school that can support your project. Make sure that school leaders and experienced, enthusiastic teachers at the mentee



	schools are actively involved in the planning and implementation of mentoring activities.
<b>Act as guide</b>	<p>Create opportunities for both mentor and mentee schools to learn from each other.</p> <p>Remember that it is all about sharing without imposing.</p>

## 3.2 Policy level

- The top three enablers of whole school mentoring identified in the evaluation report are executive support, distributed leadership and teacher training.
- In education systems with strong central direction, policy makers were able to decide whether to adopt either a top-down or a bottom-up model to initiate school mentoring projects. However, even if policymakers started with a top-down format, a more blended approach emerged once activities began. Choice, ownership and contextual relevance were key factors in encouraging participation and ensuring the longer-term success of the mentoring programme. Narrative evidence, drawn from four datasets, suggests that the most successful mentoring in schools and between schools occurs when there is a mix of top-down and bottom-up and the two are mutually inclusive. In these circumstances, ministry influence (i.e. top-down) is as vital a catalyst as knowledge of operational arrangements within a school (i.e. bottom-up).

*‘We benefit from knowing that central support from the Ministry and expertise is available to us...which we draw upon to a good level...whilst we make the mentoring fit the needs that we identify in the schools we are working with’.* Advanced School practitioner

- Incentives offered in the MenSI project assisted policymakers in recruiting schools at the beginning of the project. They ranged from the very fact of participation in an EC-funded project and the opportunity to work with other schools, the chance – and time – to experiment without major risk, to receiving funding and digital resources. Evaluation evidence shows that both mentor and mentee schools in each of the participating countries recognise the importance of recognition for undertaking additional professional development in mentoring. Although schools said they needed, and appreciated, financial support towards mentoring activity costs, either in whole or in part, there was a widespread narrative across the project that intrinsic rewards – notably an opportunity for supported professional learning on a self-identified theme relating to learning and teaching – was a fundamental driver for teacher involvement as well as being viewed as an intrinsic reward or outcome.

*‘In order for MenSI to be viable for us we must not be disadvantaged financially. That just takes money away from something else and makes a tension’.* School leader in a cluster {mentee} school.



*'As a whole the teachers here placed a lot of value on getting a big chance to develop their knowledge...this gave them satisfaction, so they thought that MenSI was very worthwhile'.*

- It would be advisable to consider how to incentivise and reward mentor schools, for example, by giving them the opportunity to visit schools abroad and then sharing their experiences, by organising workshops that will be educational and enriching for the mentor schools.
- Distributed leadership (leading at all levels of the school) featured strongly in MenSI and enabled leadership capacity building in an organic, less intrusive manner. This approach received positive support from all country participants and was a feature they found enabling.
- Using the SELFIE tool to assess schools' digital capabilities and readiness was, despite some users' difficulties using it, effective in pinpointing strengths and weaknesses across each school and promoting school improvement. It enabled targeted competence development of individuals and groups of teachers, as well as linking it to meeting student needs.
- Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) played a key role in the mainstreaming of mentoring practices. The MenSI MOOC (*Beyond Networking: School-to-School Mentoring for Digital Innovation*) extended at large scale the overall outreach to schools in a wide spread of countries across the EU (and beyond), supporting capacity building with stakeholders and target groups in these countries. Scheduled as a final project outcome, it allowed for the lessons learned by the mentoring hubs and key highlights coming from the Mentoring Policy Exchange to be incorporated into the course planning. 95% of the participants agreed that they will use the ideas and examples presented in the course (see section 4.2.1).
- When an education system can embed recognition of individuals, schools, or clusters within an established, well-known and valued national reward system, engagement and motivation of participating schools was more easily maintained.
- There is no common starting point for school-to-school mentoring. It is contextual, determined by, among other factors, the capacity, skills, knowledge and resources available to schools and the education system as well as the degree of autonomy of schools.
- COVID-19 impacted on all policymakers involved in the project. The planned face-to-face dialogues, meetings and workshops were impossible owing to restrictions imposed during the pandemic, resulting in all clusters adopting a range of virtual mentoring strategies. Involvement in the MenSI initiative enabled policymakers to learn first-hand about such new ways of working alongside their schools and clusters. Digital tools were used to work collaboratively to adopt and adapt traditional approaches to more digitally enabled processes. Data gathered during the project show the usefulness of these hybrid or blended approaches in mentoring activities.



*'There is not much chance of [e-mentoring] being mainstreamed on its own without a lot of direct support from our teachers.'* School leader of a Cluster School

*'Covid has increased our up-take of e-learning to make sure that we keep pace, and it has opened-up a lot of new possibilities'.* Teacher in a mentor school:

- In all cases, however, evidence indicates that virtual mentoring is most effective when supplemented by strategically timed face-to-face encounters. Moreover, as the MenSI project ran for the duration of the pandemic, the opportunity to visit schools was very limited, if not prohibited. Anecdotal evidence suggests that online conferencing is an unsatisfactory alternative to face-to-face for lesson observation and seeing other teachers demonstrate new techniques.

*"We are of the opinion that face-to-face meetings are much more effective in terms of being able to see direct educational activities in action."* Policymaker

- The mentoring models in MenSI demonstrated the possibilities of more empathetic and collaborative approaches to digitally supported, system wide change. For example, participants from schools in Portugal acknowledged the value of close dialogue with policymakers and their solution-focused approach.
- Policymakers in partner countries were able to make use of the evidence from schools and clusters in the project presented attractively, succinctly and persuasively, such as videos, poster presentations. Making use of marketing and communication techniques to mediate the results with the wider education system, they helped engage other schools and disseminate the benefits of whole school mentoring to promote school improvement and improve student outcomes.
- Across the range of school networking models in the project, particularly bottom-up ones, emerges the notion of a self-improving system. In it, schools support themselves and each other to raise standards of teaching and learning and address educational issues in a horizontal partnership, where the rationales are democratic exchange, and mutual stimulation and motivation, rather than top-down imposed reforms.





# 4. Impact, Exploitation and Next Steps

The project was designed to maximise impact in two ways: on schools and education ministries participating in project activities and through wider dissemination actions. Impact was expected to be both quantitative (numbers of countries/policymakers and schools/practitioners receiving project outputs, networked and exchanging best practices) and qualitative (improvements resulting from the digital innovation actions, whole-school approach to implementing ICT, policymakers provided with guidance on mainstreaming an innovation culture). The following section summarises the concrete actions developed by the project and those planned for an effective exploitation and sustainability of the MenSI outcomes.

## 4.1 Expanding the network

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The project has developed a network of 24 mentor schools (4 per country) and 96 mentee schools (16 per country) which is an essential part of the Community of Practice. As described within the Final Exploitation Plan (Deliverable D6.7)<sup>26</sup>, the project will continue engaging teachers through open CPD events (MOOCs, webinars, small training events, online discussions, etc.) which will be promoted through the MenSI public website and the FCL social media channels.

The six ministry of education partners have all established mechanisms to reach, raise awareness and influence other policymakers, regional authorities, teacher educators and school leaders, and classroom teachers; these include websites, social media channels, newsletters, events and networks that are coordinated under the MenSI Community Platform. This approach was defined within the Communication and Dissemination strategy (Deliverable D6.1) and completed with sustainability plans at the national level presented as part of the Final Exploitation Plan.

MenSI has also benefited by using **existing social media channels**: EUN's and partners' channels. EUN uses its corporate channels, as well as the Future Classroom Lab (FCL) and other project-specific channels (when relevant). Partners promote MenSI and its dissemination materials nationally, where needed in local languages.

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<sup>26</sup> D6.7- Final Exploitation Plan:  
[https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D6.7\\_Final+Exploitation+Plan\\_FINAL.pdf/98a94457-a692-0918-fe6f-1e54ca5e6d67?t=1669980288888](https://mensi.eun.org/documents/6165483/6209396/D6.7_Final+Exploitation+Plan_FINAL.pdf/98a94457-a692-0918-fe6f-1e54ca5e6d67?t=1669980288888)



Table 3 indicates the social media used by the project and their outreach:

*Table 3: EUN channels & partners outreach*

	CONTENT	METRICS	FREQUENCY
<a href="#">EUN Facebook</a> (27K) <a href="#">FCL Facebook</a> (8,7K)	Blog post, publications, educational resources, quotes, videos, testimonials, live events	Impressions, post likes, comments, shares, engaged users	4-8 posts / month
<a href="#">EUN Twitter</a> (25,4K) <a href="#">FCL Twitter</a> (4,4K)	Polls/ ask a question, blog post, publications, educational resources, quotes, videos, testimonials	Impressions, engagements, retweets, post likes	4-10 posts / month & Retweets from EUN, partners
<a href="#">EUN LinkedIn</a> (5,6K)	Blog post, educational resources, videos, testimonials	Post impressions, post likes, comments, shares	1-3 posts / month
Partners' social media	Blog post, educational resources, videos, testimonials		Recommended 2-5 per month

## 4.2 CPD and training

### 4.2.1 Beyond Networking: School-to-School Mentoring for Digital Innovation

CPD has been a very relevant component of the MenSI project. The *MenSI Whole-School Mentoring MOOC (D6.4)* provides training in whole school mentoring and promotes the MenSI results to an open community of school leaders and teachers, as well as to a wider audience of policy makers in regions and other interested stakeholders. Its content was based on the project results and on the feedback of the participants from the dedicated online training for mentor schools (see *Deliverable D3.1 Online training*<sup>27</sup>).

Hosted on the European Schoolnet Academy platform in the months of October/November 2022, the 5.5-week “Beyond Networking” MOOC registered a total of 995 enrolled participants from 50 different countries. Of these, 614 people (62%) participated in the MOOC and 186 participants completed the course and received a course certificate (31%)<sup>28</sup>.

The course targeted teachers of any subject and level, school leaders, digital learning coordinators and professional development providers interested in exploring innovative whole-school mentoring

<sup>27</sup> <https://mensi.eun.org/results>

<sup>28</sup> The average rates for the EUN Academy in 2022 were 61% for engagement and 39% for completion.



approaches and networking strategies between teachers and schools through sustained and objective-driven exchanges within communities of practice.

The course was designed around the experiences of schools in six countries participating in MenSI who have been applying a range of mentoring models (e.g. advanced-less advanced, peer-to-peer, top-down, bottom-up, etc.) within 24 MenSI clusters, each made up of one mentor and four mentee schools.

### Learning objectives

- Have a deeper understanding of models of school-to-school mentoring
- Learn about strategies to set up and animate activities across a group of schools
- Be familiar with a range of digital tools to support collaboration and innovation
- Be part of an informed and supportive community of practice
- Find potential partners for school-to-school collaborative activities.

To evaluate the course results, two surveys were conducted respectively before (pre) and after (post) the course. According to data collected via the pre-course survey, the majority of course participants were secondary school teachers, female and 36 years old or older. 30% of respondents were mentoring at the time they were taking the course; 36% of respondents had at least 1 year of experience as a mentor. The most relevant results are the following:

- 100% rated the overall value of the course as “Good” or “Very good”.
- 89% would recommend this course to a colleague (Agree or Agree strongly).
- 95% Agreed that they will use the ideas and examples presented in the course.
- 100% indicated self-evaluated competence related to the course topic had improved.

The final version of the MOOC has been added as Open Educational Resource (OER) and the content is available under the ‘Attribution-non-commercial-share alike’ Creative Commons License, allowing anyone interested to freely remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially. In this way, the project’s significant outputs targeting practitioners contribute to much wider capacity building. The MOOC course will remain open and promoted through the project website (remaining itself available for three years), FCL website and at the European Schoolnet Academy (<https://www.europeanschoolnetacademy.eu/>). Some of the education ministries in the project are also considering the possibility of re-using the MOOC resources by integrating them in their teacher Continuous Professional Development platforms and the Armenian Ministry of Education has also shown interest for the possibility of translating and reusing the OERs via the collaboration with the Advisory Members (see above the section dedicated to 1.2.4 SELFIE).

## 4.2.2 Future Classroom Lab courses & guidelines

EUN has been running successful face to face courses at the Future Classroom lab for more than a decade and, after the hiatus due to the pandemic, it has resumed them without major changes to the training programme. Now, with the opportunity to draw on the expertise and knowledge



collected by the MenSI project, EUN is looking at reshaping the courses programme, and exploring how to offer training opportunities (both face-to-face and online) on school-to-school mentoring and peer learning for school innovation. The potential target market will be policymakers in national ministries and, especially, regional and local education authorities who, even more so than their national counterparts, are well placed to implement and support K12 mentoring hubs that are in close geographic proximity and who can more easily coordinate schools that have greater possibilities for face-to-face mentoring activities.

### 4.2.3 Exploitation of the project outcomes

The Consortium Agreement identifies ownership or IP rights in relation to any foreseen results from the project, together with mechanisms to deal with IPR claims that arise during the project in respect of unforeseen results. However, the project has favoured open-source modalities for the exploitation of major project deliverables such as the *Report: Effective whole school mentoring: evidence from the MenSI project (D5.2)*; the *Whole-School Mentoring MOOC (D6.4)*; and the *Final brochure (D6.8)*. Generally, the exercise of IP restrictions over access to project results has been kept to a minimum to maximise potential exploitation of the outcomes and publications.

The EUN Academy portal is a service provided by the EUN Partnership aisbl. Except where stated otherwise, content made available on this site either by EUN or its users is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike International<sup>29</sup> (CC BY-SA 4.0) license.

All the project's OERs and other freely available MenSI resources will continue to be disseminated within EUN's network of 34 Ministries of Education (see section 4.4 regarding the Mentoring Policy Exchange Mechanism).

## 4.3 Advisory members

Following models successfully applied in previous projects, the project consortium has extended its outreach by inviting additional ministries of education and other relevant stakeholders to participate in MenSI as unfunded Advisory Members. Unfunded means they are unable to receive project funding under the terms of the contract with the European Commission. The following organisations (see Table 4) are active members of the MenSI Advisory Board:

Table 4: MenSI Advisory Members

Organisation	Country
National Centre of Educational Technologies - Ministry of Education	Armenia
Ghent University, 'Teacher Education & Professional Development'	Belgium

<sup>29</sup> <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>



Organisation	Country
Croatian Academic and Research Network - CARNET	Croatia
ZS Dr. E. Benese – Cakovice	Czech Republic
Masaryk University	Czech Republic
Centrum Robotiky	Czech Republic
Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Attica	Greece
Dublin West Education Centre	Ireland
Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per l'Emilia-Romagna	Italy
Associazione EPICT Italia - European Pedagogical ICT Licence	Italy
European Training Organization	International
iHub4Schools	International
Top You Up	International
Another Step	Portugal
Centro de Formação Sá de Miranda - Braga	Portugal
Faculdade de letras da universidade de lisboa	Portugal
Instituto de Educação da Universidade de Lisboa	Portugal
Foundation Tempus	Serbia
Institute for Contemporary Education	Serbia
JOINT RESEARCH CENTRE - European commission	Spain
CEA Alto Guadalentín	Spain
Ministry of Education. INTEF	Spain
Jacobs Foundation	Switzerland
IRIS Connect	UK/Republic of Ireland



One of the side effects of the conversation with the Advisory Members, is the initiative to set up a collaboration between the European Training Foundation and a SELFIE led action for an Armenian implementation of the self-assessment tool within the dimension of school-to-school mentoring. This project, coordinated by the Distance Learning Department at National Centre of Educational Technologies of Armenia, has developed capacities of online teaching for 23 Mentor Schools throughout the country where teachers of the Mentor Schools are teaching online to more than 3500 learners of rural areas schools. The final goal is to cooperate with the SELFIE initiative to assess digital competencies within Armenian schools.

The Advisory Members will be kept informed following the end of the project regarding the activities proposed for MenSI schools and as part of the MenSI Policy Exchange Mechanism.

## 4.4 The CoP and the Mentoring Policy Exchange

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Since it opened in 2012, the EUN Future Classroom Lab has been developed as a self-sustaining initiative that is not dependent on project funding. For example, FCL Lead Ambassadors in 15 countries are currently nominated and supported by education ministries and annual fees from over 30 industry partners are an important part of the FCL economic model. Ministries participating in the Interactive Classroom Working Group (ICWG) which operates under the FCL umbrella also pay an annual fee to fund recommendations and guidelines related to specific policy challenges that they mutually wish to address. A number of ICWG guidelines (e.g. BYOD for Schools: Technical Advice for School Leaders and IT Advisers) have also been developed with the assistance of funding from FCL industry partners.

The MenSI project has extended its reach by inviting relevant ministries and regional authorities to participate in the project's Mentoring Policy Exchange Mechanism. By adopting this "policy-connected approach", MenSI has developed a new space for discussion open to educational policymakers working at both national and regional level. This new forum will continue to be offered as an on-going service to policymakers under the EUN's independently funded Future Classroom Lab initiative.

The Policy Exchange Mechanism is currently composed by the MenSI Advisory Members and by two key EUN Ministry of Education Working groups<sup>30</sup>: the Small and Rural Schools Interest Group and the Interactive Classroom Working Group<sup>31</sup>. These two groups include representatives from EUN's 34 Ministries of Education and policy makers from the regional education authorities who took part in the FCL Regio and EDU Regio projects<sup>32</sup>.

Following the model developed for existing EUN ministry working groups, the Mentoring Policy Exchange includes both regular online and face-to-face meetings. In this regard, it provides a forum

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.eun.org/about/working-groups>

<sup>31</sup> <https://fcl.eun.org/icwg>

<sup>32</sup> <http://fcl.eun.org/fcl-regio>



within which project partners can exchange on MenSI findings and recommendations with ministries and other Advisory Members interested in the project's work. Ministries supporting this new mechanism may also seek to involve and obtain support for additional / future work on whole-school mentoring from the 30+ industry partners currently supporting the Future Classroom Lab.

The project's sustainability plan together with the end of project key messages was presented during the Mentoring Policy Exchange meeting at Eminent 2022<sup>33</sup>, European Schoolnet's annual conference in cooperation with the Department of education of Ireland, taking place in Dublin, on 6th and 7th of December 2022. As a result of EMINENT discussions, a central policy exchange mechanism is currently being discussed at the level of EUN that would put together the different Working Groups and offer the possibility for MoEs to offer/attend discussions and webinars from a single and more efficient instrument. See section 4.5 for further information.

For further information about the MenSI Advisory Members and the Policy Exchange Mechanism, please visit the following section of the project's website:

<https://mensi.eun.org/mentoring-policy-exchange>

## 4.5 A pan-European network of expert mentor schools

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It remains a challenge to sustain pan-European networks of expert teachers and schools after the end of the life span of EU projects. Some of the key factors that have made it difficult to maintain school networks include the low involvement of head teachers and school leaders plus the fragility of networks that are sustained predominantly by one or two enthusiastic teachers per school. In this context, however, EUN detects positive signs that increasing numbers of school leaders are looking for new ways to develop whole school use of ICT and move beyond a situation where there are only pockets of innovative ICT use in a small number of classrooms by a limited number of highly motivated, expert teachers.

As we approach the end of the MenSI project, it is nevertheless important to recognise that school-to-school mentoring is still a relatively overlooked issue in terms of the competing priorities that demand the attention of policy makers and school leaders in a post-Covid, K12 landscape. Mentoring more generally also still remains something of a 'niche' topic in many countries. Accepting this situation, the consortium understands and will also promote MenSI as a project that supports new approaches to "collaborative networking" and which provides a set of practical mentoring methodologies that enable ministries to move forward with helping their schools develop as "learning organisations".

In this regard and as discussed within the previous section of this report (4.4), EUN and the project partners are currently discussing, whether the mentoring approaches and tools developed within the project could be promoted more effectively to a wider audience under the umbrella of a more

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<sup>33</sup> <https://mensi.eun.org/mentoring-policy-exchange/-/blogs/mensi-workshop-at-eminent-2022>



wide-ranging FCL Policy Exchange mechanism that not only takes forward the project’s findings on mentoring but is also focused on a broader range of complementary strategies for implementing whole school use of ICT that is supported by a pan-European network of expert schools. Table 5 presents a synthetic summary of the overall strategy and its objectives:

*Table 5: Strategy and objectives*

Main assets	How they would be maintained?	Strategic contribution
<b>Network of mentor schools &amp; Innovative Learning Labs</b>	Upon their full agreement and consent, the MenSI participating schools will be integrated in an improved community of Innovative Learning Labs and Mentor Schools, under the Future Classroom Lab umbrella.	Establish and progressively enlarge a pool of centres open to experimentation and innovation, which will contribute to the development of the EmpowerED ecosystem in Europe by participating in networking and capacity building activities together with other schools, authorities, EdTech representatives and associations.
	This community will be structured and animated by the Future Classroom team and will be offered the possibility to contribute to, and benefit from, the networking and capacity building activities implemented within the newly started (Feb. 2023) EmpowerED project <sup>34</sup> .	In the short term, such centres will also be invited to participate to the activities related to the Acceleration of the educational solutions of the most promising EdTech companies selected within the European Digital Education Hub.
	The Interactive Classroom Working Group will also be involved in the co-development of the renewed community of learning labs and innovative schools.	After the first iteration, two additional rounds of acceleration and testing will take place until spring 2024. Such short testing and mentoring activities offer to schools the opportunity to further reflect on positive integration of technology in the classroom, and to companies to better tailor and develop their solutions to the needs of the sector.
		Structure, nurture and animate, mentoring and peer learning activities among schools across Europe to foster whole school innovation, EdTech and ICT solutions deployment. This contribution is expected to be integrated in an enlarged and improved community of practice for schools and training centres, currently gathering self-sustaining Innovative Learning Labs. <sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> EmpowerED – *thriving Edtech ecosystem for better learning*, is a newly started project coordinated by European Schoolnet and funded by the EC Digital Europe programme, to leverage existing but still loosely coordinated EdTech ecosystem groups in order to establish and animate a new European EdTech Community for exchange, dialogue and collaboration.

<sup>35</sup> <https://fcl.eun.org/fcl-network-labs>





Main assets	How they would be maintained?	Strategic contribution
<b>Policy exchange mechanism (and central unit)</b>	<p>EUN will seek to continue offering a policy exchange mechanism to its key stakeholders, namely national, regional and local authorities interested in school mentoring. While the offer would be extended to the stakeholders' community, certainly the EUN working groups as well as the FCL Ambassadors<sup>36</sup> will be the first beneficiaries and will contribute to the animation of such efforts.</p>	<p>Support public authorities in piloting and establishing better school to school mentoring mechanisms, providing them with examples, case studies, reports and findings from the MenSI project.</p>
	<p>The scope of the policy exchange mechanism will, however, expand to cover school innovation more broadly, while preserving the school mentoring component as a successful crosscutting approach to transformation and improvement.</p>	<p>Elaborate and debate on the main factors of school innovation and improvement, focusing especially on mainstreaming the effective and pedagogically sound integration of ICT and EdTech in the classroom and in the school. This line of work will also potentially feed into the ecosystem to be established by the above-mentioned EmpowerED project.</p>
		<p>Based on the interest raised and eventual demand for focusing the activities of a central unit on specific sub-topics related to mainstreaming ICT in education, EUN will consider the organisation of capacity building events and opportunities for school leaders and decision makers that responds to their actual needs and expectations. Such opportunities may be offered by or within either the Future Classroom Lab ecosystem or the EmpowerED project.</p> <p>Organisation of open debates and strategic seminars on cutting edge or controversial topics related to school innovation and edtech. As one of the main strategic objectives of the Future Classroom Lab is to work more on emerging technologies and their impact on education.</p>

<sup>36</sup> <https://fcl.eun.org/fcl-ambassadors>



Main assets	How they would be maintained?	Strategic contribution
<p><b>School-to-school mentoring and Continuous Professional Development</b></p>	<p>The expertise developed by the MenSI project in terms of peer learning and school-to-school mentoring, as well as the training materials and resources collected and produced, will be integrated in the course offer of the Future Classroom Lab and the European Schoolnet Academy. In fact, an integration of the two platforms, one offering face-to-face courses and the other offering Massive Open Online Courses will be explored. Integrating the training material and methodology on whole school to school mentoring within the FCL offer.</p>	<p>The expertise of the project and the developed training modules will be included in the current face-to-face course offering, making the training experience more meaningful and impactful for the participants.</p> <p>As mentioned in section 4.2.2, the Future Classroom Lab training offer to teachers is under assessment and re-development.</p> <hr/> <p>EUN will consider offering specific capacity building activities tailored to the needs of national and regional public authorities, building on the results of the MenSI project.</p> <p>Specific courses could be provided also to school leaders and teachers for them to become more confident and knowledgeable school or pedagogical mentors. The latter may be integrated also in the activities of the EmpowerED project, under which EdTech companies, Accelerators and Incubators, decision makers and experts, will be paired with education professional experts in the exploitation of ICT and EdTech for teaching and learning.</p> <hr/> <p>Integrating the knowledge collected by MenSI in terms of rewards and incentive for mentor schools and teachers into the overall EUN CPD offer, may lead to better engagement of international cohorts of teachers and school leaders in both online and face-to-face training programmes offered.</p>

The above strategy will also be discussed during the International School Exchange Meeting in Lisbon. A report of this final project meeting will be presented during the final project review and made available to the public via the MenSI project’s website.



# 5. Conclusions

The DT Transformations-21-2020 call for proposals in November 2019 specified that *“The action will also include bottom-up, regional grassroots actions that support the situated take up of ICT and ICT-based practices between schools with various levels of technological proficiency.”* As such, the call aligned very well both with the work previously done regarding “regional hubs” under the Living Schools Lab (LSL) project where co-ordination was essentially top-down and also with the concept of bottom-up mainstreaming of innovation as demonstrated via ‘self-starter’ learning labs that have been inspired by the European Schoolnet Future Classroom Lab initiative (see sections 1.2.1, 1.2.2).

There were, however, a number of open questions, including some arising from the earlier work in the LSL project, that MenSI particularly aimed to address. For example:

- It was anticipated during the MenSI proposal development that mainstreaming of whole school mentoring practice might be enhanced if school clusters were not reliant solely on top-down coordination and support, although it was unclear how the optimum blending of top-down and bottom-up approaches could best be achieved.
- The LSL project recognised that there was a significant increase in the workload of mentor schools but there was no opportunity in the earlier project to explore how different forms of incentives and rewards could help maintain the commitment of lead schools in the regional hubs.
- It was anticipated that greater use of online mentoring in MenSI might be cost effective and provide more flexibility in terms of how mentoring was organised but it was unclear whether reduced opportunities for face-to-face mentoring and networking would have negative consequences.

In addition to the specific lessons learned in section 3, the project believes it is important to highlight the following key conclusions from MenSI:

## **Bottom-up and top-down mentoring**

During MenSI we have learned that talking about top-down and bottom-up mentoring may not be that helpful and that this dichotomy can even be problematic if applied to how mentoring is organised. While in some countries, National Coordinators have communicated that the top-down approach has been more predominant, the overall discussions with partners and school representatives indicated that whole school mentoring in school clusters depends on a mentoring approach (and the corresponding planning) that is understood as a negotiated procedure between mentor and mentee schools and a form of collaborative networking based on democratic exchange and mutual stimulation and motivation, more than mandated top-down actions.



## **Role of incentives and rewards**

During the proposal development we noted the vigorous on-going debate about how to scale different mentoring approaches and particularly the different views on whether voluntary, bottom-up mentoring is more effective than mandated, top-down mentoring processes. In many instances there are even claims that mentoring will simply not happen unless it is a top-down process that is formalized or even mandated – and paid.

However, the MenSI project did not find evidence that this was the case. The provision within MenSI of some direct financial support to mentor schools may have been useful in facilitating networking and exchange activities within the school clusters but it did not appear to be a strong motivating factor in ensuring that mentoring activities were sustained throughout the project. Other incentives/rewards that were more regularly cited as being particularly effective included: receiving software licences, equipment and other resources; being given more time for digital professional development; education system recognition; and career advancement.

## **Role of online mentoring**

COVID-19 impacted on all policymakers and schools involved in the project. The planned face-to-face dialogues, meetings and workshops were impossible owing to restrictions imposed during the pandemic, resulting in all school clusters adopting a range of virtual mentoring strategies. Involvement in the MenSI project enabled policymakers to learn first-hand about such new ways of working alongside their schools and clusters. Digital tools were used to work collaboratively to adopt and adapt traditional approaches to more digitally enabled processes. Data gathered during the project show the usefulness of these hybrid or blended approaches in mentoring activities. In all cases, however, evidence indicates that virtual mentoring is most effective when supplemented by strategically timed, face-to-face encounters.

## Coordinator



## Partners



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