Interreg Aurora

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DEFINING SUSTAINABLE CROSS-BORDER PRACTICES FOR INNOVATION DEVELOPMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE ARCTIC AREA

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Introduction

This report has been prepared as a part of ELSA *Engaging learning for sustainable Arctic* -project. It provides a summary of the data collected during the project and presents the key themes emerging from the material. The findings are relevant for the planning of ELSA lifelong learning courses and may also be relevant for other stakeholders interested in the development of Arctic region. The ELSA courses will be designed for higher education students, career changers and highly educated unemployed professionals.

The report draws on interviews, desk studies, surveys as well as a workshop involving ELSA partners. The data were collected from teachers, guidance counsellors, entrepreneurs, cross-border service experts, and other regional actors across the project area. In addition, the project team reviewed regional development strategies and gathered insights from previous projects related to the Arctic and cross-border context. Part of the data gathered focused on existing practices within ELSA higher education organisations, including pedagogical approaches to innovation learning and methods used in career guidance. The experts of Cross-Border Services were interviewed, and entrepreneurs were invited to share their cross-border experiences through interviews and a survey. Together, these activities helped the project team develop a broader understanding of cross-border collaboration, innovation education, career development and entrepreneurship in the Arctic context.

As the number of survey respondents and interviewees was limited, the findings should be considered indicative rather than representative of the whole project area. However, the material provides useful insights into the themes, experiences, and development needs that can support the planning of ELSA lifelong learning courses.

The ELSA project (09/2025 - 08/2028) is funded by Interreg Aurora, the Regional Council of Lapland, the Norwegian Barents Secreteriat and Troms County Council. The leading partner is Oulu University of Applied Sciences, and the other partners are the University of Lapland, UiT the Arctic University of Norway and Sør-Varanger Utvikling.

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1. Arctic understanding

Understanding the operating environment is essential for developing relevant practices in the private, public and third sectors. This is particularly important in the Arctic context, where regional conditions, long distances and cross-border dynamics shape both opportunities and challenges. According to the Regional Council of Lapland (2023), Northern Sweden and Northern Norway are active cooperation partners for Finnish Lapland, and closer cooperation with them and the other Nordic countries is growing in importance. The Regional Council of Lapland (2025) also notes that long distances and limited public transport connections shape everyday life in Lapland by affecting social interaction and opportunities for participation. Although these examples focus on Finnish Lapland, many of the characteristics, including long distances, sparse population and the importance of cross-border connections are relevant across the wider ELSA project area in northern parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Finland's strategy for Arctic Policy (2021) frames the Arctic not only as a challenging environment, but also as a space for expertise, sustainable business and new economic opportunities. The strategy states that circular economy, new economic principles and technological solutions can create entirely new business opportunities, and it additionally highlights the need to facilitate and increase cross-border cooperation and dialogue in the Arctic region.

For ELSA project, Arctic understanding provides the context for developing relevant learning opportunities and cross-border cooperation for the students in the region. It is essential to recognize both the practical challenges of the project area as well as its strengths.

2. Employment situation, mobility and future labour demand

According to an interview conducted with Cross Border Services, labour mobility in the project area is currently directed mainly from Finland towards Sweden and Norway due to Finland's higher unemployment rate and continuing demand for labour in the northern parts of the neighbouring countries.

According to Statistics Finland (2026), the unemployment rate in Finland was 11.9 % in May 2026, compared with 10.7. % in Lapland and 12.1. % in North Ostrobothnia. According to Statistics Sweden (2026) the unemployment rate in Sweden was 8.7.% in April 2026. In addition, The Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2026) reported a registered unemployment rate of 6.7. % for the first quarter of year 2026. According to Cross Border Services interviewed for ELSA desk studies, labour market differences are also visible between individual municipalities, with relatively low unemployment in some industrial and mining municipalities in Sweden. According to Statistics Norway (2026), the unemployment rate in Norway was 4.8. % in April 2026. Regional variation is also evident in Norway.

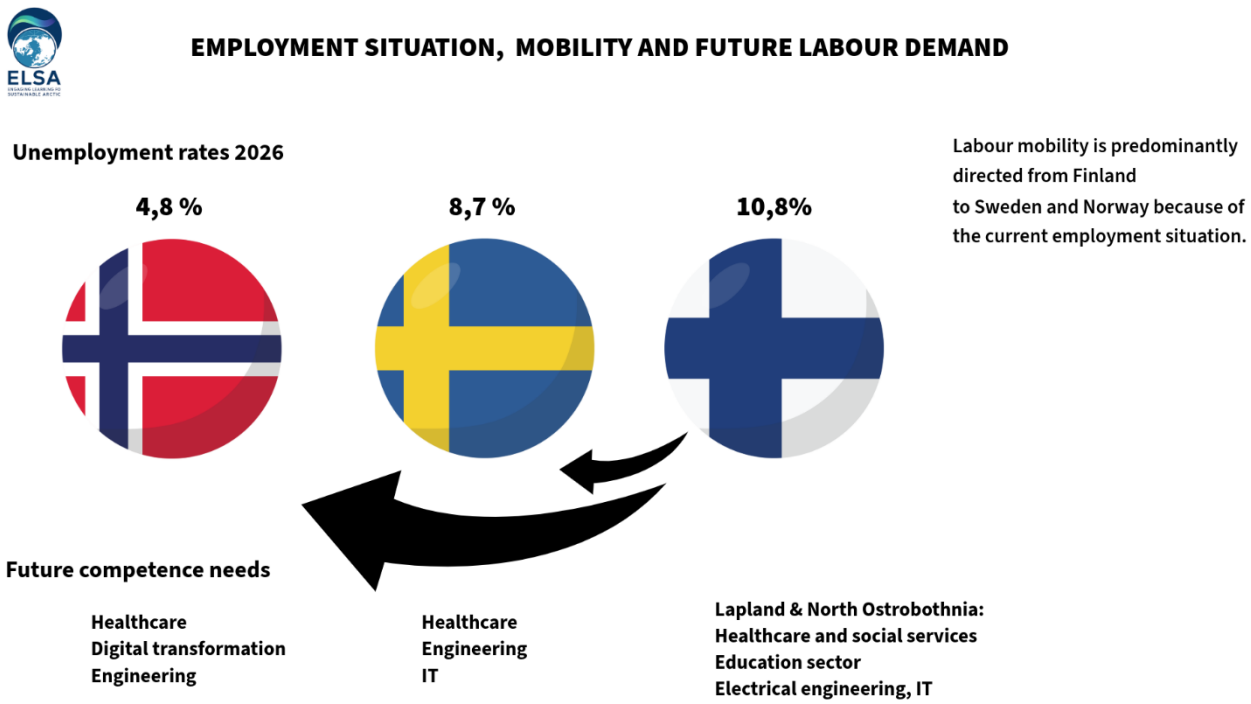


Figure 1. Employment situation, mobility and labour demand in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

In Finland, KEHA Centre's short-term Labour Force Barometer (2026) points to partly different occupational profiles in Lapland and North Ostrobothnia. In Lapland, future labour needs are concentrated mainly on services, tourism, care, transport, sales and technical occupations. From the perspective of highly educated people the most relevant needs are seen in nursing and early childhood education. North Ostrobothnia demonstrates a broader demand for highly educated professionals. Anticipated needs are particularly visible in IT, healthcare, social services, education and electrical engineering. Relevant occupations include network specialists, systems administrators, social work specialists, nurses, psychologists, early childhood teachers and electrical engineering experts.

According to the Occupational Barometer of Swedish Employment Agency (2026), occupations with favourable five-year prospects include occupational therapists, dental hygienists, IT security specialists, veterinarians, biomedical analysts, electrical engineers, power engineers, nurses, systems analysts and IT architects. Labour demand for highly educated professionals in Sweden is concentrated in healthcare, engineering and IT.

According to Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (2026), future labour demand in Norway is expected to be strongest in healthcare, digital transformation and engineering. An ageing population is increasing the need for healthcare and welfare services, while the digital and green transitions are strengthening demand for ICT, technology and engineering professionals. The Vestre Varanger survey conducted by the ELSA project team in Norway identified similar competence needs, those related to early childhood education, healthcare, civil engineering, AI and digitalization, but also planning, finance, marketing, tourism, project management, language skills, diversity and inclusion.

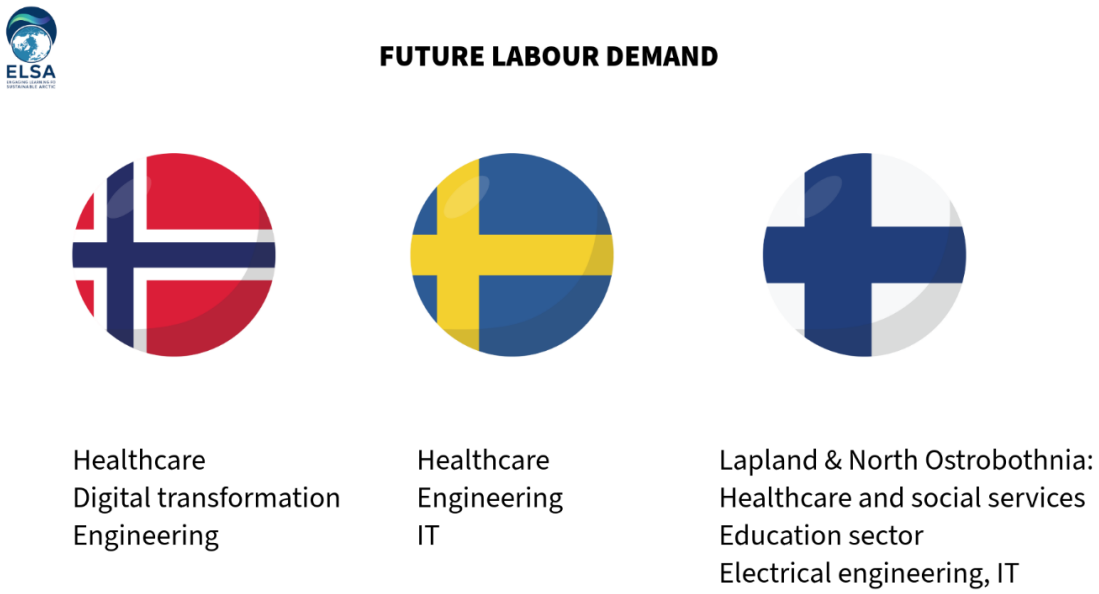


Figure 2. Future labour demand in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

3. Cross-Border collaboration, networks and support services

The data gathered for ELSA project consists of different surveys and interviews as well as desk studies in Norway and Finland. In this section of the report, cross-border collaboration and the importance of networks and support services are highlighted.

3.1. Supporting cross-border competence through education

According to the interviews conducted with teachers in the Finnish partner organisations, cross-border cooperation between Finland, Sweden and Norway could be further developed. There is a need for shared projects, real-life assignments, innovation activities, and language and cultural competences. Students need skills that enable them to work across national borders in an international environment. According to the gathered data successful cross-border collaboration depends on strong networks, personal relationships, cultural understanding as well as clear structures for cooperation.

Multidisciplinary and multicultural collaboration is seen as an important driver of innovation. Bringing together students and professionals from different fields and countries can introduce new perspectives, help transform ideas into practical solutions and form new connections. Strong cooperation between educational institutions, companies, startup ecosystems and regional stakeholders is essential.

3.2. Northern Norway as a cooperation partner to Finland

According to the interview with an expert in BusinessOulu, Northern Norway was described as a natural gateway to the Norwegian market for Finnish companies. Shared cultural characteristics, mutual trust and close relationship between Finnmark and Finland enable cooperation. Finnish companies that begin their collaboration in Northern Norway may gain connections to clusters and business networks, which can later support expansion to other parts of Norway.

Norwegian clusters play an important role in business and innovation cooperation. They bring together companies that other relevant actors within sectors such as energy, mining, fisheries, maritime industries, health technology, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals and technology. According to the interview data, participation in Norwegian clusters has helped Finnish companies gain access to Norwegian markets, networks and sector-specific contacts. From the perspective of ELSA project, clusters could be used to bring authentic cross-border cooperation cases into teaching and to develop learning modules linked to real Arctic business examples. Face-to-face meetings, shared events and practical cooperation are important for building trust and turning contacts into partnerships.

3.3. Entrepreneurs' perspective on cross-border collaboration in practice

The 11 qualitative interviews for entrepreneurs and business representatives operating cross-border show that cross-border cooperation is practical rather than theoretical. Businesses cooperate across national borders to gain access to competence, markets, networks, logistics, knowledge, and new ways of working. Finland was consistently described as an important cooperation partner, both as a market and as a source of competence and inspiration.

The interviews also show that cross-border cooperation is sector-specific. Consultancy and engineering businesses need access to specialised expertise. Tourism businesses benefit from joint destination development and Finnish logistics experience. Waste management depends on cross-border treatment systems, as one of the interviewees, Rune Larsen, points out: "*Would have been very expensive to transport the waste within Norway because of the long distances southwards*". Seafood and export businesses rely on international markets, logistics and customer adaptation. Construction and infrastructure businesses use cross-border establishment, subcontracting networks and export development to access larger Nordic markets.

Regulations, customs, administration, currency and the relationship between the EU and Norway were identified as central barriers for cooperation. These factors do not necessarily prevent cooperation, but they make it more time-consuming and complex. Companies mainly address these challenges through networks, local partners, trust, experience, local company structures, advisory services, stronger language competence and flexible problem-solving. Interviewee Kai Kaarlejärvi's description of the international business environment as "*absolutely fantastic*" illustrates how cross-border work is also experienced as professionally rewarding, while

interviewee Anne Wikan's statement: "*Nature knows no borders"* underlines why Arctic issues must often be understood across national borders.

In addition to the interview data, entrepreneurs' perspectives on cross-border cooperation were collected through a survey. The survey focused on cross-border collaboration practices and development needs among entrepreneurs and company leaders operating in the Arctic region. Six respondents answered the survey, five from Finland and one from Sweden.

The respondents viewed the Arctic location, sustainability, Arctic conditions and the green transitions as business strengths and opportunities. Indigenous perspectives and local culture appeared to be less consistently integrated into business activities. Among the survey respondents, cross-border cooperation was generally associated with new ideas and changes in business practices. Digital technology was seen as a strong enabler of collaboration, and respondents expressed confidence in their competence to innovate internationally. Arctic conditions were also largely considered to support the development of innovative solutions.

Networking and relationship building emerged as the most critical competences for successful cross-border cooperation, followed by language skills and knowledge of foreign legislation. Finance and economics, digital competence and project management were also identified as relevant competences.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to identify the most important success factors for increasing cross-border cooperation in the Arctic. The four responses particularly highlighted the importance of networks and active participation in networking opportunities, such as events and fairs. Collaboration, an understanding the needs and operating environments of different countries and the sharing of knowledge and experiences across borders were also identified as important factors.

In the survey, 86% of the respondents selected networking and relationship-building as critical competences for successful cross-border cooperation, followed by language skills (71%), and knowledge of foreign legislation (57%).

Due to the limited number of responses, the survey findings cannot be generalised to represent the views of a wider range of entrepreneurs in the Arctic region. However, the survey and interview data support each other by highlighting similar themes, particularly the importance of networks, language skills, knowledge of regulations and practical opportunities for cross-border interaction.

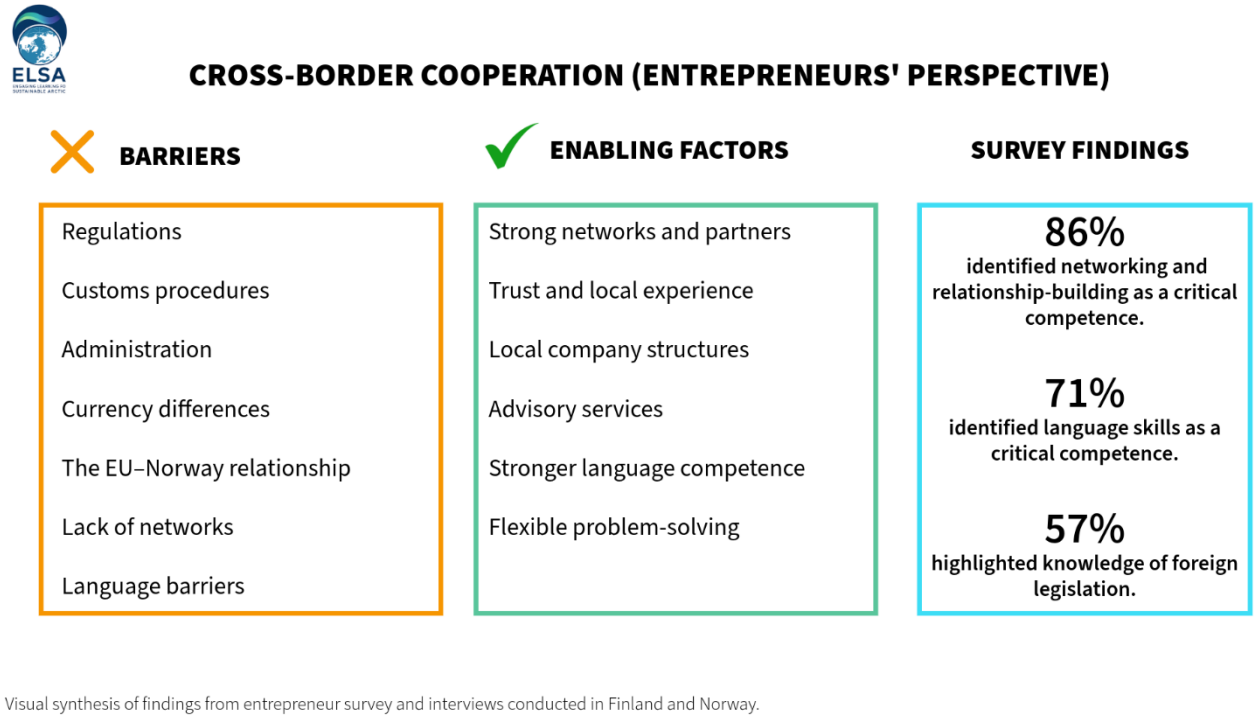


Figure 3. Cross-border cooperation from the entrepreneurs' perspective.

3.4. Cross-border Support Services

As part of ELSA project, an interview with representatives of Cross Border Services was conducted to gain practical insights on cross-border mobility. The North Calotte Cross-Border Advice Service operates under the Nordic Council of Ministers and supports mobility between Finland and Sweden and between Finland and Norway. The service assists individuals, employers and companies by providing information, guidance and referrals related to cross-border work, recruitment, entrepreneurship and mobility. It also identifies recurring cross-border problems, reports them and contributes to efforts to remove administrative barriers.

Cross-Border Services help jobseekers find employment in neighbouring countries and support employers in cross-border recruitment. The guidance may cover employment opportunities, language requirements, job advertisements, interviews and practical questions related to working in one country while living in another. Entrepreneurs and companies can also receive guidance on establishing operations in another country and identifying the relevant authorities and business support services.

The interview answers emphasise the value of personalised and dialogue-based guidance. Many clients do not initially know which questions to ask, and their situations may involve several issues. Timely and accurate information therefore plays an essential role. Incomplete information can lead to administrative or financial difficulties. Strong expert networks enable clients to be directed to the appropriate authorities and services. Regular, open information sessions and cooperation with educational institutions increase awareness of cross-border employment opportunities.

4. Skills and competences

This section of the report examines the skills and the competences needed to work, innovate and collaborate in the Arctic region. It brings together globally recognised future skills, Arctic-specific competence needs identified through the ELSA data, and the results of the ELSA project team's workshop. This section also considers both shared competence needs and the specific needs of jobseekers, career changers and aspiring entrepreneurs.

4.1. Globally relevant future skills in the Arctic context

The Future of Jobs Report 2025 identifies several core and emerging skills expected to become increasingly important globally by 2030. Many of these skills can be considered relevant in the Arctic region as well, including artificial intelligence and big data, technological literacy, resilience, flexibility and agility, curiosity and lifelong learning, talent management, creative thinking, leadership and social influence as well as analytical thinking.

In addition to these skills, several ELSA data sources, including teacher interviews and entrepreneur survey, point to competence needs that receive less attention in the global *Future of Jobs Report* but are particularly important in the Arctic setting. One core competence across the ELSA data is networking. In a sparsely populated and cross-border environment, networks, personal relationships and trust can support access to employment, business opportunities, innovation activities and long-term partnerships.

Multilingual competence is another important difference between the ELSA findings and the global perspective presented in the *Future of Jobs Report*. Although multilingualism receives limited attention in the *Future of Jobs report,* both the teacher survey and the interview with Cross Border Services indicate that language skills are essential for cross-border collaboration in the Arctic region. English is widely required in international working environments, while proficiency in Swedish or Norwegian can become important when an individual is seeking employment or a business partner in the neighbouring Nordic countries.

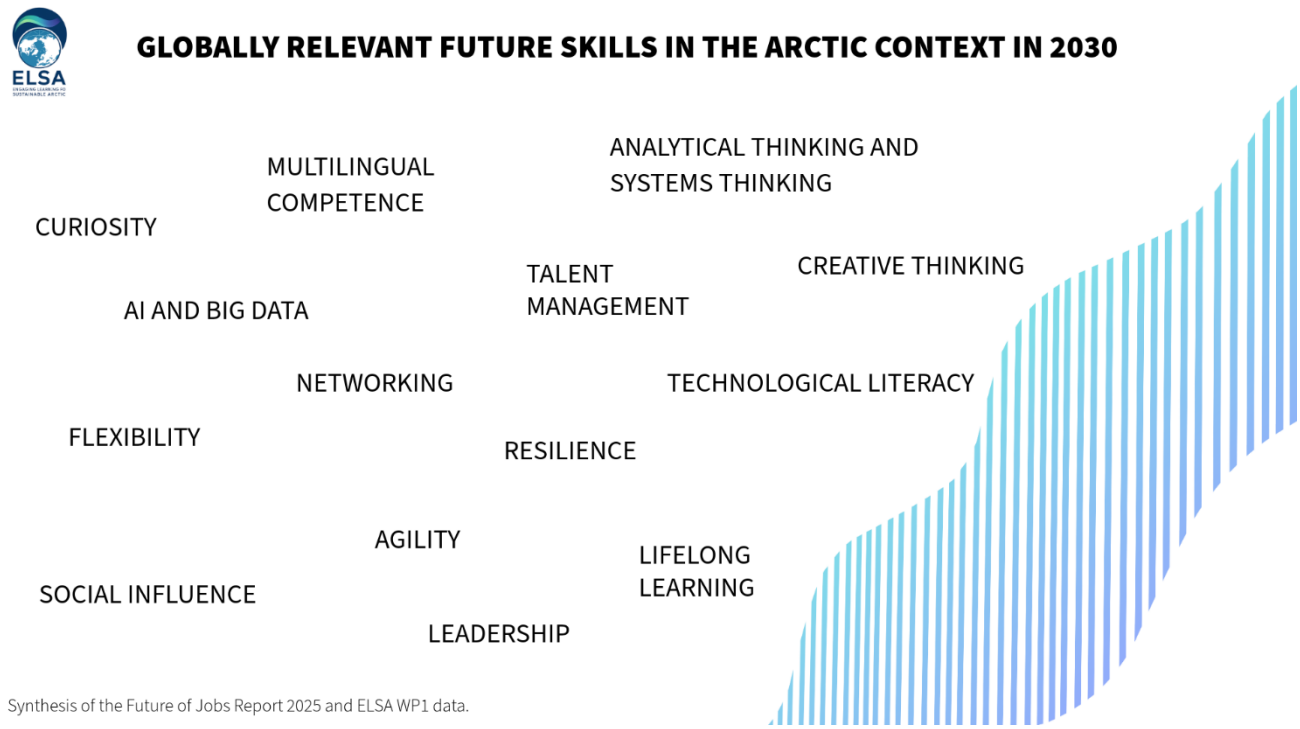


Figure 4. Globally relevant future skills in the Arctic context in 2030.

4.2. Identified skills for Arctic Innovators

As the ELSA project aims to develop lifelong learning courses related to sustainable business development and Arctic innovation, it is important to understand the needs of the intended participants. The project team developed the Arctic Innovator as a shared concept for the future learners of the ELSA courses. As part of the project activities, three thematic personas were developed during a project team workshop to support course design: finding a job, changing careers and becoming an entrepreneur. The personas helped the project team to explore different competence needs while considering the specific characteristics of the Arctic region. Based on the collected data in the ELSA project area and the results of the workshop conducted by the project team, Arctic innovators need a combination of technological, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills.

Competences supporting cross-border mobility and collaboration emerged across several parts of the ELSA data. Both the interviews with cross-border service experts and the answers in the teacher survey identified language skills, particularly English and the Nordic languages, as important. Openness and curiosity support effective collaboration. In the ELSA teacher survey, technology and artificial intelligence, innovation methods and tools, communication, pitching and presentation skills and practical ability to work in international teams were mentioned as important competences. Technological skills should be connected to the Arctic context. This means paying attention to remote locations, accessibility and digital tools that enable cooperation.

The ELSA project team's workshop identified resilience, flexibility and lifelong learning as key Arctic competences. These skills strengthen learners' ability to adapt to a changing labour market, new working environments, cross-border opportunities and uncertainty. The workshop discussions also pointed to the importance of courage and strong self-leadership skills, including ability to recognise one's own strengths.

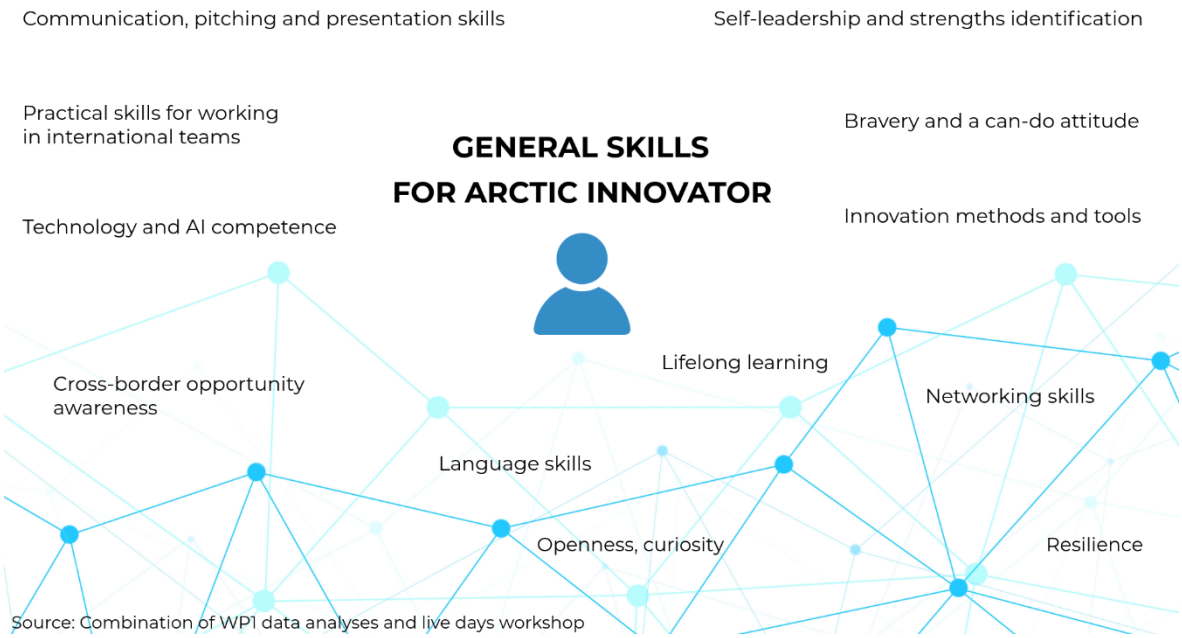


Figure 5. General skills for Arctic Innovator.

While several skills were considered relevant across all target groups, the ELSA team also identified target-group-specific competence needs during the workshop. The main target groups of the project are higher education students entering the labour market, unemployed professionals with higher education degrees and individuals seeking new career opportunities. In the workshop, these target groups were approached through three thematic personas: finding a job, changing careers and becoming an entrepreneur. Students and unemployed professionals were grouped under **the finding a job** persona because both are seeking employment. **Career changers** were considered separately because changing career direction may require some reassessment of one's skills and competences. **Becoming an entrepreneur** was included as a separate persona to explore whether entrepreneurship requires specific competences that differ from those needed when finding a job or changing career.

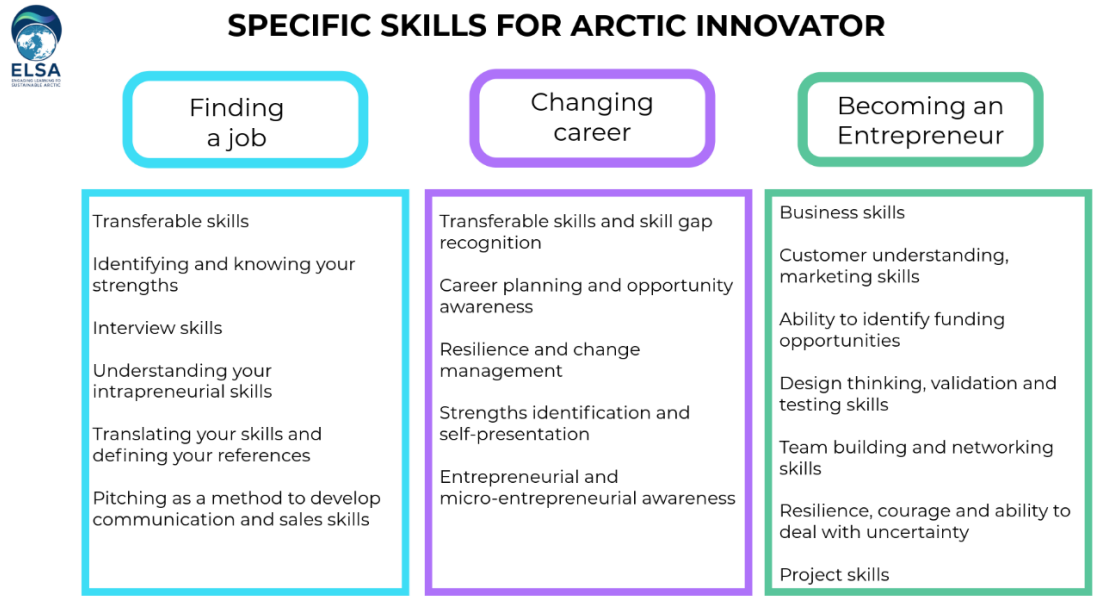
For people finding a job, the identified competence needs include recognising transferable skills, understanding and communicating one's strengths, understanding one's intrapreneurial skills and identifying relevant references. Pitching can also help jobseekers present their skills effectively while strengthening their communication and sales skills.

For people changing careers, the identified competence needs include recognising transferable skills and identifying potential skill gaps, as well as strengthening career-planning skills and awareness of available opportunities. Other important matters are resilience, change-

management skills, recognising and presenting one's skills and developing awareness of entrepreneurship and micro-entrepreneurship.

The third persona represents a person who is aspiring **to become an entrepreneur**. Identified skills for this persona include business and marketing skills, customer understanding, the ability to identify funding opportunities, and design thinking. Other important matters include validation and testing skills, team building and networking, project management, resilience, courage and ability to deal with uncertainty.

Some competence needs overlap across the three personas, while others are specific to a particular pathway (finding a job, changing careers and becoming an entrepreneur). The personas do not represent distinct project target groups but provide a practical way to explore different situations within the target groups.



Source: Combination of WP1 data analyses and ELSA team live days workshop

Figure 6. Specific skills for Arctic Innovator.

5. Career Guidance in the project area

This section summarises the findings of the desk studies and interviews. In Finland, qualitative data were collected through nine interviews conducted by Oulu University of Applied Sciences and the University of Lapland aimed for career counsellors and focusing on the current practices used in these two organisations. In Norway, the analysis was based on an overview document describing the career guidance landscape in Finnmark, including publicly funded services, institutional providers and national digital tools. As the Finnish material provides practice-based information and the Norwegian material offers a broader system-level perspective, the findings are not nationally representative but provide a basis for identifying promising practices and

development needs relevant to the integration of career guidance tools into ELSA lifelong learning courses.

Across the Finnish and Norwegian material, career guidance appears as a structurally established and multi-channel support system primarily focused on study progression, career orientation, and transitions to working life. In both contexts, entrepreneurship is recognised but not systematically integrated as into career guidance as one option for the future working life. Guidance often functions as a gateway to further entrepreneurial support services rather than a space for deeper exploration of the entrepreneurial pathway. The material also suggests that digital platforms provide an important foundation for guidance (especially in the Norwegian context), but that guided reflection, dialogue and interaction remain essential in guidance. In addition, cross-border labour market opportunities, Arctic mobility and cross-cultural dimensions are not yet seen as part of career guidance even though these could be considered relevant in the Arctic region.

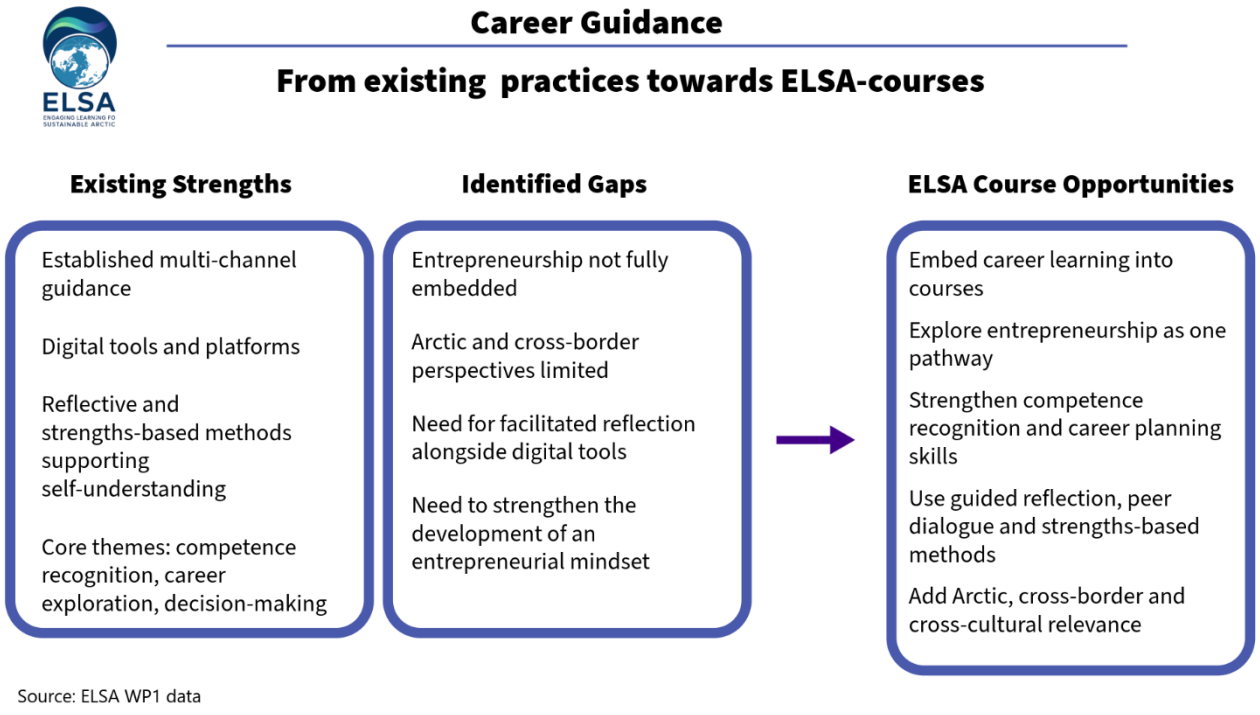


Figure 7. From existing career guidance practices towards ELSA-courses.

The guidance practises identified in the Finnish and Norwegian material provide a useful foundation for ELSA lifelong learning courses. The material highlights the value of reflective, strengths-based and discussion-based approaches. Methods that support self-understanding, competence recognition, career exploration, peer reflection and decision-making are therefore worth considering when planning the courses. While digital accessibility is essential, digital tools could be combined with facilitated interaction.

ELSA courses could include guidance methods that support Arctic innovators in building their careers and identifying opportunities in the region. In addition, learning activities and reflective practices can

encourage students to explore entrepreneurship as a possible career path. From a regional development perspective, the courses could help students develop the competences needed to work across borders in international settings in the Arctic region.

6. Innovation and entrepreneurship learning in the Arctic region

The purpose of this section is to understand and analyse the pedagogical methods and models currently used in the partner organisations to teach innovation development and entrepreneurship. The findings are based on interviews conducted with teachers in the Finnish partner organisations, and background information on existing practices in Finland. The Norwegian material is based on a regional mapping of existing courses, learning programmes, methodologies and experiences related to innovation and entrepreneurship learning in Eastern Finnmark and Northern Norway.

Innovation and entrepreneurship education in the Arctic region is built around practical learning, multidisciplinary collaboration, and real-life challenges. Based on the Finnish data, it is essential to aim for the development of an entrepreneurial mindset, rather than solely focus on business creation. The entrepreneurial mindset includes creativity, initiative, problem-solving, adaptability and collaboration skills.

Based on the teacher interviews, a key factor is learning by doing. Students can benefit from combining theoretical knowledge with experimentation, project-based work, company assignments, hackathons and design sprints. These approaches can make learning more engaging and help students develop innovation, business, and communication skills.

Several educational practices were identified as particularly useful and transferable methods in innovation learning across institutions and countries. These include design thinking and user-centred innovation processes, multidisciplinary teamwork, experimentation, prototyping and iterative development, pitching and peer feedback, startup hubs and open innovation environments, arts-based creative methods, AI-supported learning and collaboration and awarding of study credits for entrepreneurial activities.

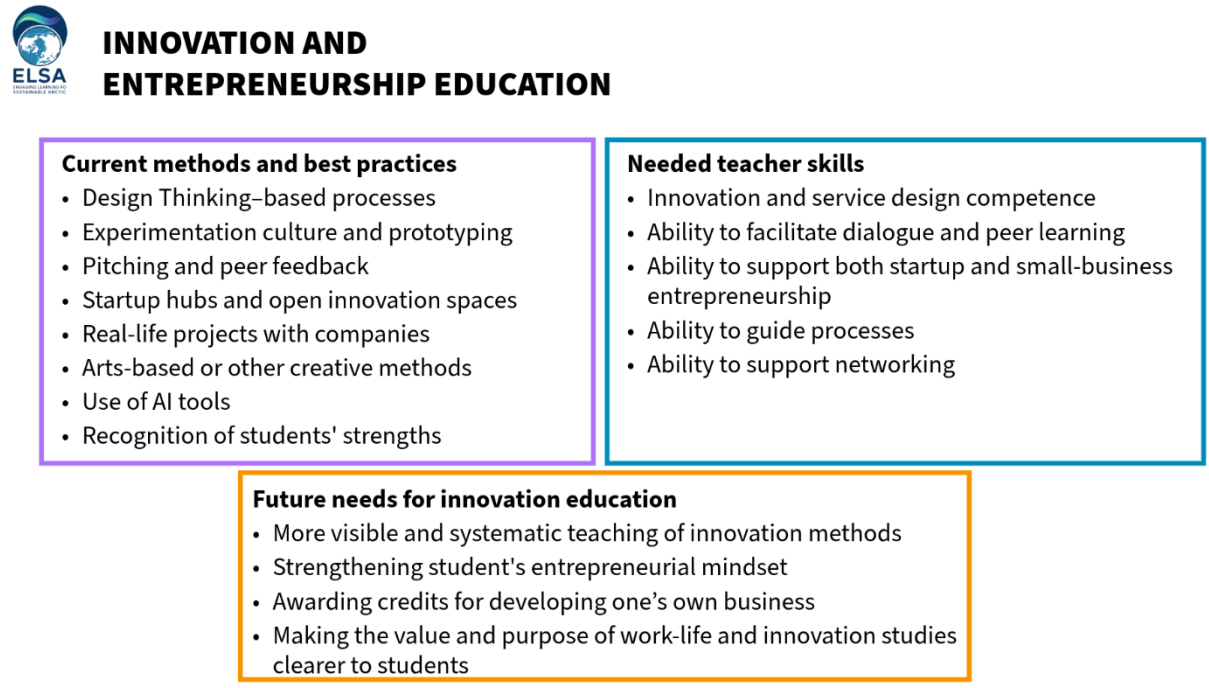


Figure 8. Best practices of innovation and entrepreneurship education in the project organisations.

Because of long geographical distances, digital tools and blended learning models are particularly important in the Arctic context. Combining online learning with face-to-face interaction can increase accessibility and supports cross-border collaboration among students and teachers.

The findings suggest a shift in the teacher's role from the traditional lecturing towards coaching and facilitation. Teachers can support students in developing their own ideas, testing solutions, and learning through experience.

Overall, the material gathered from partner organisations highlights experiential learning, coaching-based teaching, multidisciplinary collaboration, digital learning environments and the Arctic perspective as important elements in the development of innovation and entrepreneurship education in the Arctic region.

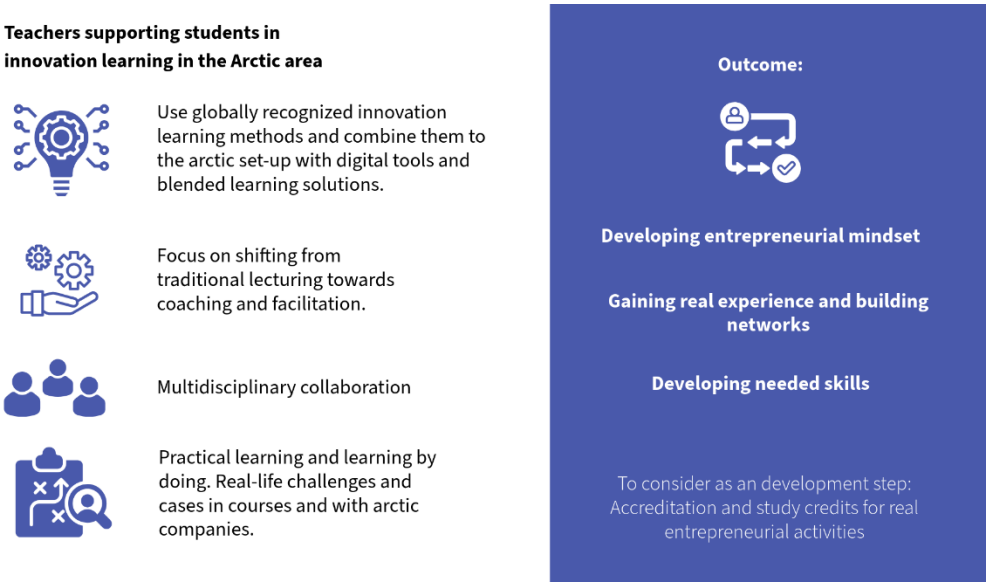


Figure 9. Teachers supporting students' innovation learning in the Arctic project area.

7. Summary

The material reveals several interconnected themes that are important for learning and cross-border collaboration. The Arctic context shapes how people live, work and do business, as long distances, sparse populations and geographical conditions create both challenges and opportunities. At the same time, AI and digital technologies can increase accessibility, support collaboration and enable new ways of working.

According to the material, several factors can create barriers to cross-border collaboration, including differences in foreign legislation, administrative practices, limited access to information and language barriers. Across the material networking, trust and cooperation emerge as essential for building connections and creating new opportunities across borders. Language skills and cultural understanding support communication, relationship-building, and awareness of local business practices. In cooperation between Finland, Sweden and Norway, knowledge of Swedish or Norwegian alongside English can be particularly valuable. Cross-border advisory services can help employees, businesses and entrepreneurs navigate the differences between national systems, find the relevant information and take the first steps towards cross-border collaboration.

When it comes to innovation and entrepreneurship education and career paths, the ELSA material suggests that learning through real-life cases can be beneficial and that multidisciplinary teams can drive innovation. Coaching-based approaches to teaching can support learners in developing their ideas, while learning by doing may strengthen practical learning. Career guidance methods, reflection exercises and a range of guidance tools can help develop self-awareness and career planning, while an entrepreneurial mindset is considered an essential future competence.

The project explored general and specific skills for future Arctic Innovators participating in the ELSA lifelong learning courses. Some of the general competences are recognized in the global Future of Jobs report as well, including creativity, lifelong learning and the use of AI. Other competences appear particularly relevant in the Arctic context, including multilingual competence and networking.

Lifelong learning in the Arctic context benefits from practical solutions, cross-border collaboration and recognition of the specific features of the Arctic area. Together, the presented themes in this report provide a useful foundation for planning the ELSA lifelong learning courses and adapting them to the needs of the Arctic project area. The findings may also offer useful insights for teachers, career counsellors and education developers working in the Arctic region.

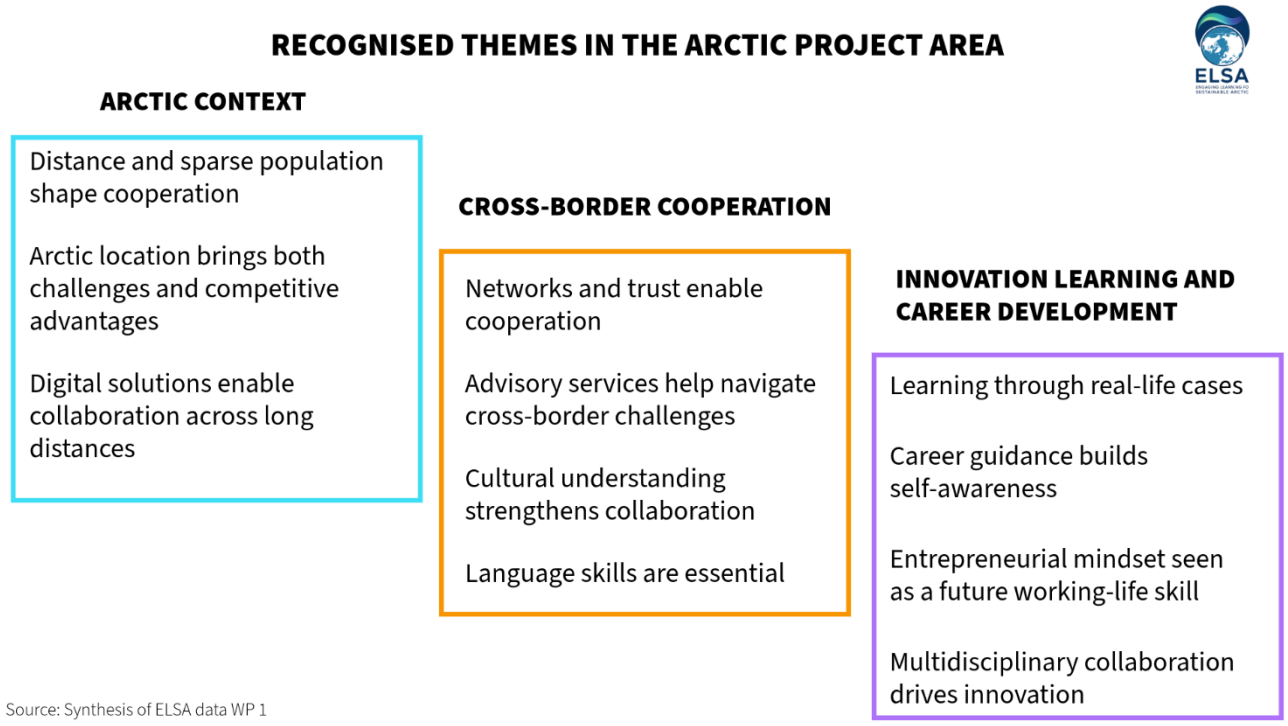


Figure 10. Recognised themes in the Arctic project area.

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Internal ELSA data:

Surveys: a survey for entrepreneurs in Finland, Sweden and Norway. The Vestre Varanger survey in Norway on regional strengths, challenges, recruitment and competence needs in Eastern Finnmark.

Interviews: Interviews for teachers and guidance counsellors in the Finnish partner organisations, entrepreneurs, experts in Business Oulu and Cross Border Services.

Desk studies: Living and working in Finnish Lapland, Norwegian desk study about Career Guidance, Norwegian desk study about Innovation and entrepreneurship education, Norwegian desk study about living and working conditions in Øst-Finnmark.

ELSA project team workshop: exploring three thematic personas from the target groups.

USE OF AI:

Microsoft Copilot was used as a supporting tool for organising and categorising information, summarising existing material, and improving the structure, wording, and English-language clarity of the report. The project team is responsible for the interpretations, conclusions, and final content of the report.

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