

Part I – General information

Project: Start Easy

Partner organisation: ECEF

Other partner organisations involved (if relevant):

Country: Belgium

NUTS2 region: Province of East-Flanders

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Part II – Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact: € ~~Investment for Growth and Jobs programme~~
€ ~~European Territorial Cooperation programme~~
€ Other regional development policy instrument

Name of the policy instrument addressed: **Economic Development Policy for East-Flanders 2020-2025**

At the phase of application for participation in the START EASY project, the Economic Development Policy for East Flanders 2013-2019 was selected as a policy instrument corresponding to the project assumptions, which has expired and can no longer be influenced. We were not able to make any policy changes from the former policy plan to the current one. The current Economic Development Policy for East Flanders (2020-2025) will be directly impacted by the activities proposed in this action plan as policy change will be induced through the implementation of new projects and activities directed at young entrepreneurs financed under the policy instrument.

More concretely, the policy change will occur both from a short and long-term perspective. In the short run, the activities described in our action plan, as inspired by the knowledge transfer and good practice presentations within the START EASY project, will include the implementation of completely new projects and activities related to young, creative entrepreneurship and support to start-ups in the leisure economy, which will be financed directly by the Economic Development Policy for East Flanders 2020-2025. We will set-up these activities within the coming year with the help of Start Easy, but we intend to extend them in the years to come if they prove to be successful with financial resources from our current policy plan.

In the long run Start Easy, opened up new perspectives, and will also improve our future **Economic Development Policy for East-Flanders** plan (2026-2031). Every 5 years, our policy plan is revised and some of the experiences and good practices learned during the Start Easy project will shape activities included within the next plan. In concrete, many good practices inspired us to focus on new topics to be included in the future policy plan. While we lack funding under the current policy plan to implement some of these practices in our region, we intend to budget for them in the policy plan for 2026-2031. Examples include amongst others:

- **Startup Fair (Lithuania):** this is a matchmaking event between starting entrepreneurs and mentors, investors, future employees etc.
- **Insieme per il lavoro (Bologna):** this project focuses on vulnerable target groups and their search for a job; participants receive guidance and coaching to perform well in the new job positions acquired.

Based on the current state of knowledge, the policy plan 2026-2031 could include activities and fund new activities such as matchmaking events that unite young entrepreneurs, mentors, and investors. This could help them to further establish and develop their business very quickly. Currently, there are no similar events offered in East-Flanders, so this could be of great value. We could also organise projects directed at vulnerable groups in East Flanders that involve guidance and coaching sessions, e.g. matching certain vulnerable people with a company that wants to offer them a temporary job. During this 'paid internship' they could be offered different classes on 21st century entrepreneurial skills, including creativity, design thinking, communication, critical thinking, collaboration, technology, and information literacy etc. We will have to perform additional analyses on the possibilities to implement these activities, establish the target group and analyse their needs, as well as the resources needed in the new policy plan. Our proposed actions detailed in this document directed at young, creative entrepreneurship and on (starting) entrepreneurs in a vulnerable sector (leisure economy), could benefit from this preparation and the availability of necessary resources to implement them.

To sum up, the current policy instrument will be enriched with the implementation of completely new activities targeted at young entrepreneurs, which will receive funding from the current Economic Policy for East Flanders 2020-2025. Those good practices that require more time or adjustment in order to be implemented in our region and therefore cannot be implemented within phase 2 of the START EASY project, will be included and funded in our next policy plan (2026-2031).

Part III – Details of the actions envisaged

ACTION 1

1. Background and challenges

The region of East-Flanders is well known for its prominence of high schools of arts. The chances that students graduating in one of these high arts schools have the ambition to become an entrepreneur in the creative industry is rather high. Many want to become graphic designers, video editors, artists, or fashion designers and in our region, this often means that they must start a business of their own. Unfortunately, many of them eventually do not become entrepreneurs, they lack concrete guidance on how to start their own businesses or pursue their goals. They often lack adequate background knowledge as entrepreneurship is not taught at school, and for many it is hard to rime their artistic priorities with commercial necessities.

On the other hand, we see that the number of starting entrepreneurs in art, amusement, and recreation is rising in the region of Ghent. Nowadays, there are as many people starting an independent activity as before the pandemic; in 2020, there were 90 new entrepreneurs in this sector, whereas in 2021, 173 artistic entrepreneurs started a business. This shows that East-Flemish artists do want to start a business, and that all initiatives to support them in this are very useful, though rather limited to the region of Ghent and not spread widely enough throughout the province.

During the **study visit in Bologna** at the end of January 2020, we learned about **Creative Keys**, an organisation that helps creative minds to realise their ideas. It is a contact point for creative entrepreneurs who have a business idea but do not know how to realise it. Creative Keys solves organisational problems, looks for funding, creates operational instruments. The organisation makes sure that an idea brought forward by an entrepreneur can be realised without being obstructed by administrative, financial, or bureaucratic problems. In Bologna, culture is more supported and present than in East-Flanders. For this reason, we want to create a community to bring together young, adventurous artists who only need a small boost to make the shift towards their own business, without being frightened of all the administrative burden that this move may entail. It is not possible to create the same kind of organisation in East-Flanders, as it would require a cultural shift that is difficult to induce by a single entity, but the idea and the goals of Creative Keys are perfectly

transferable to the activities that we would like to offer to young entrepreneurs. For example, Creative Keys induces a collaborative culture, where young creatives can develop their skills with each other and with professionals. They deploy an emphatic approach which appears to be very successful in this sector and facilitates knowledge transfer among different actors. They support with the simplification of the administrative processes, define methodologies and strategies for young entrepreneurs and provide access to a network of possible partners and other collaborations. These activities can be performed by ECEF in the East Flanders region and will be included among the portfolio of activities offered to young entrepreneurs.

Next to this Italian good practice, we were also **inspired by the OSS actions in the different regions**. In the Interregional Thematic Workshop organised by the Polish partners, we saw different examples of OSS, such as **Innova Invest** and **Connect Poland Prize**. In East-Flanders, we currently do not have these types of support structures, nor capacity to create this kind of organisations ourselves in the short term. However, the insights we gained help us to improve the portfolio of activities and future projects in our current policy plan, in order to better respond to the needs of young, creative entrepreneurs. In concrete, the START EASY project provided us with valuable insights on the different OSS in the other European regions and its potential for our own region e.g. not only creating a place where starting entrepreneurs can find information on how to start a business, but where they can actually realise the start-up: getting a VAT number, creating a business plan, or being guided through the administration.

In order to take stock of the insights gathered during the START EASY project, we will collaborate with Gentrepreneur and Gents Kunstenoverleg (see stakeholders involved).

These organisations have access to a large network of entrepreneurs since they are closer to the peer group and already deploy a of platform/community that needs to be updated (more info later in the text). Starting, creative entrepreneurs should at least find a roadmap on starting a business, as we see in OSS examples from the START EASY partners.

In addition, we have already executed several new activities targeted at young entrepreneurs funded under the current policy instrument which were inspired directly by the START EAY project.

Together with students, we performed research to assess the concrete entrepreneurship needs, which culminated in an online event where a couple of young (famous) entrepreneurs inspired the audience of last year creative students and other possible future entrepreneurs with their stories. This was the first step in creating a community for young creatives.

In addition, we conducted workshops with key stakeholders and young entrepreneurs in the region. After an extensive brainstorming evening with 15 stakeholders from the creative sector and 15 young people from our target group, it became clear that there is a need for a digital network as well as for physical encounters among the stakeholder groups to share knowledge and experiences. This event gave rise to the creation of **a new community of young, starting entrepreneurs in the creative sector named 'Reach'**. Students chose this name as it is a key word in realising their dream: reaching for their dreams and goals, reaching out, and reaching possible entrepreneurs. The community was born but lacked a solid basis, which was also the reason why Reach could not grow as much as we hoped.

In a response to this problem, ECEF and Gentrepreneur did research into possible platforms and features, enriched by the knowledge obtained during the START EASY project on different platforms offered by project partner regions. We came across Open Creatives, the platform developed by Gents Kunstenoverleg that is currently under development, i.e. the platform is operational, but is not user-friendly and not attractive. It is hard to find the right information, and more importantly, its target audience are entrepreneurs in general, without a specific section targeting starting entrepreneurs. On the current platform, you can find an overview of creative entrepreneurs, you can find all kinds of events and activities of those entrepreneurs, as well as an overview of exhibition and exposition spaces to be rented. Finally, it provides a knowledge centre with webinars, tutorials, learning events etc.

In line with the experiences gathered during the START EASY project and the value added from a community culture, we will join forces with Gents Kunstenoverleg and further develop the Open Creatives platform in line with objectives and necessities commonly defined by the Reach community.

2. Nature of the action

The current 'Open Creatives' platform managed by Gents Kunstenoverleg, provides a collection of all creatives from Ghent and the surrounding area, an overview of exhibition spaces and workshops for creatives from East-Flanders, calls and open calls (e.g. opportunities for creatives to participate in exhibition moments, calls for grants etc.), as well as a general knowledge database (webinars, reports, events).

The Open Creatives platform still suffers from a few problems: it is not user-friendly, not easily accessible for young starters or for someone with a small network and/or small portfolio, it is not very attractive and not sufficiently known by the target audience. In Creative Keys, we found an example of how an attractive, low-key but very open way of

working could look like, which could be transferred to Open Creatives. In consultation with Gents Kunstenoverleg, it has been agreed that we will analyse in detail how the platform can be optimised, the topic of entrepreneurship better explained, and how we can adapt the platform to the needs of young entrepreneurs. Furthermore, we intend to enrich the digital service offers with presentational workshops and activities similar to our services to the Reach community.

In order to achieve this, we want to organise multiple workshop sessions with Gentrepreneur and Gents Kunstenoverleg, the target group (young, starting entrepreneurs in the creative sector) and other stakeholders in order to develop the new, improved Open Creatives platform. The co-creation with the stakeholder community will include various iterations of feedback - adaptations - feedback - adaptations etc. A feature we would like to see realised is a portal on the Open Creatives site that is exclusively directed at young, starting entrepreneurs. The portal would provide them with all the information they need in order to start a business, as well as contacts to the relevant administration to register etc. Next to that, the platform will provide the opportunity to network with other entrepreneurs and/or potential clients through a digital community. The changes to the Open Creatives platform should be realised by the end of 2022.

Once the digital community has been launched and the target group has been properly addressed, we would like to organise physical meetings. In these meetings, entrepreneurs can get to know each other, provide feedback, or find opportunities to work together. Ideally, these real-life events should start with a big launching event for all the stakeholders and the entire target group, during Spring 2023. Below we summarise the activities under our action:

- **Activity 1:** workshops with stakeholders and target group to gain feedback on their needs and challenges
- **Activity 2:** adapt the current platform according to the feedback we gathered during the workshop
 - o (Activity 1 and 2 will be repeated until the platform includes all features indicated by stakeholders).
- **Activity 3:** organisation of a real-life launch event of this online community

3. Stakeholders involved

Gentrepreneur is an initiative of Arteveldehogeschool, UGent and HOGENT (three important academic institutions in East-Flanders) and the city of Ghent. They play an important role in the Flemish ecosystem for young entrepreneurs, and the initiative is supported by the government. The initiative's goal is to stimulate and support entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills, and the target group consist mainly of students, who already decided to start their own business. Together with ECEF, Gentrepreneur is the leading partner in the REACH community.

Many elements make Ghent a vibrant city: tourism, student communities, concentration of higher education institutions and cultural facilities (theatres, libraries, private initiatives etc.) This is also very challenging for the city council, on both social and economic levels. That is where Gents Kunstenoverleg comes in: they stimulate collaborations between the art and cultural sector, but also with other sectors and with the government, on a strategic level and on the long term. Gents Kunstenoverleg owns the Open Creatives platform for creative entrepreneurs. In a mutual collaboration, we would like to adapt and expand this platform to better respond to the needs of the community. The three actions mentioned above will all be coordinated by us (ECEF), Gentrepreneur and Gents Kunstenoverleg.

We work very closely together with different stakeholders within the creative sector in East-Flanders. These partners are Cinema Aalst, Broeikas, AmuseeVous, LUCA School of Arts, KASK, Nerdlab, Graffiti vzw, vi.be, KunstWerkt, Gents Kunstenoverleg, Minus One, to name a few. These partners will help shape REACH even further and continue our efforts in building the REACH community through their expertise and insights. Since creatives often find it too hard to reach out to these organisations, REACH will lower the threshold for them and give them the right contacts. In small groups, they will work on different challenges, such as questions related to:

- How do we offer young creatives a better network?
- How do we help young creatives overcome psychological boundaries of starting their own business?
- How can we help young creatives with building their own business on a practical level?

Once we could find adequate responses to these questions with the help of this collaboration, we will be able to develop and offer a platform that is meets the needs of young, creative entrepreneurs. It will provide all the support structures needed by young entrepreneurs to set up their businesses and see their business ideas thrive.

4. Timeframe

- Activity 1: process of approx. 4 months, starting in Augusts/September 2022 (to be finalised by December 2022)

- Activity 2: process of approx. 4 months, starting in Augusts/September 2022 (to be finalised by December 2022)
- Activity 3: process of approx. 3 months, starting in January/February 2023 (to be finalised by June 2023 at last)

5. Costs (if relevant)

- At least two events: If we want to bring young creatives together on a big event, we require a budget for suitable location, trainers, catering and sound and lighting installations.
- Development of an online platform.
- Communication: photographer, website development, social media.

Estimated: 7500 euro for organising an online platform + 3000 euro for organising events + 2500 euro staff costs

6. Funding sources (if relevant):

The multiannual plan of the province of East-Flanders 2020-2025 Action A000832: ECEF supports and stimulates new and young entrepreneurship – annual budget: 242.802 EUR

ACTION 1

Creating a community for young potential entrepreneurs in the creative industry

Date: 8/03/2022

Signature: _____

Stamp of the organisation (if available): _____

ACTION 2

1. The background and challenges

Studies expect that in the next 10 years, the leisure economy sector will provide 25% of all new jobs. This trend is not visible in the East Flanders region: in 2021, there were 20% fewer starting businesses in the hotel, restaurant and catering industry, whereas in other provinces in Flanders, there was an increase of 6% since 2019. Concretely, in 2019, there were only about 195 starting entrepreneurs in that sector in East Flanders, and in 2020 there were only 154 new businesses.

Leisure economy is more than tourism but also captures culture, sport, and the creative sector, including niche groups such as the gaming industry. East-Flanders offers many possibilities on sustainable growth of the leisure economy, and it is important for the region to see further growth of the leisure economy. This requires more efforts to provide the supporting structures to entrepreneurs in the leisure economy to start a new business.

While the numbers are not (yet) alarming, it is interesting to research the leisure economy in East-Flanders more thoroughly, so as to identify the needs, the successes, the challenges and the possibilities we have in our region. We would like to anticipate further stagnation of the sector in the region and investigate the concrete challenges faced by entrepreneurs and tackle any possible problem from the start. In any case we can conclude that the leisure sector in East-Flanders is rather vulnerable and has been heavily affected by the pandemic.

In Catalonia, we see a lot of **inspiring activities organised by ACCIÓ, the Catalan Government's agency** that promotes business competitiveness in Catalonia. During the pandemic, they developed a lot of good practices to support all kinds of sectors, especially the very vulnerable ones, such as the health care sector. Their Virtual Marketplace connects companies that offer technology, health-related material and production capacity, to counter the consequences of COVID-19. These examples induced us to conduct research on what other sectors in East-Flanders (apart from health care) have been heavily affected by the pandemic, and how we can support them – including the leisure economy. The activities of Catalonia Trade & Invest, Startup Catalonia and ACCIÓ towards young entrepreneurs are focused on internationalisation and innovation, on boosting competitiveness, on identifying options for growth. These are exactly the kind of activities we need to focus on in East-Flanders, specifically in the leisure economy. The insights we gained during the START EASY project on the way they work gave us new perspectives and possibilities that we would like to transfer to our region.

First, we have to map the situation of the leisure economy in East-Flanders, so we can better respond to the needs of the sector. Once we have done this, the results from this research will help us setting up coaching sessions for start-ups in the leisure sector. To elaborate and structure these sessions, we have been inspired by the **Mazovian Start-Up Accelerator**. The focus of the practice is the acceleration of start-ups. As a result of the acceleration program, entrepreneurs gain new skills, competences as well as mentoring support, which allows them to gain feedback, and better refine their business ideas. These activities accelerate the development of their companies or business projects and increase the chances of implementing the proposed solutions on the market. The target sector of the Mazovian accelerator is not the leisure economy, but this good practice can be easily implemented in any sector and in any region. We do not have the capacity to create an equal kind of accelerator in East-Flanders at this current moment, since the requirements and resources to set this up are too complex, but there is room in our policy instrument to add new projects and activities towards this target group in order to better support them. The inspiration we got from the Spanish and Polish partners have been tremendously useful in this, even though their target sectors differ from the sector we would like to focus on. For example, we would like to organise coaching activities (as they do in Mazovia), so that entrepreneurs can further develop their competences. We would further like to connect companies and subsectors of the leisure economy (as they do on the Virtual Marketplace in Catalonia), so that these creative collaborations can find innovative solutions. Lastly, we would like to map the options for growth of the sector (as they do in Catalonia Trade & Invest, Startup Catalonia and ACCIÓ).

2. Nature of the action

A first step under the proposed action is to develop a definition of the leisure economy that captures all relevant elements, actors, possible subcategories (e.g. tourism, sports, culture etc.), and factors. To develop this definition we will have to interview both the governmental departments and the companies in the sector. We will research in literature, and we will contact other governing bodies in other provinces how they established their definition. Once we have collected relevant information and synthesized available knowledge to inform our definition, we will ask the responsible governmental departments of each subcategory to name between 5 to 10 ambassadors of each subcategory, who will be interviewed in order to collect additional information on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and challenges of each subcategory. This additional information will help us to compare the needs of the different subcategories and investigate their mutual relationships. The Virtual Market Place in Catalonia proves that connecting companies operating in a vulnerable sector can create innovative solutions to perform better and develop stronger. Our research will allow us to identify less obvious links and combinations in the sector that are relevant.

As a next step, we will define at least 5 best practices of governing organs that are actively working on the leisure economy. These best practices will come from other regions. The START EASY project inspired us to learn from and transpose other good practices to our region, but none of the Start Easy partners specifically addressed the leisure economy, which means that we will have to expand our search for good practices in the leisure economy to other regions. It will be important to know if it is possible to implement possible best practices in our region on an organisational level, as well as from a financial perspective. The data and information collection foreseen will allow us to gather all relevant information in a single report and provide a full overview of the leisure economy in East-Flanders. By further analysing these results with the input from the interviews, we will be able to identify the concrete needs of the sector as well as the support structures that need to be implemented. This will create possibilities for new initiatives for the start-ups in the leisure economy e.g. in the form of coaching activities (such as provided by the Mazovian Start-Up Accelerator).

Next, we will also organise a stakeholder focus group with representatives of each subcategory, both from public and private organisations. The participants will help us to map the leisure economy in the sector and allow us to gather feedback from the stakeholders. We were inspired from the Mazovian Accelerator, which proves that this feedback collection is a very important element, which should be included this in the process.

The results of the study, the outcome of the interviews, the inspiration by the 5 best practices and the feedback from the stakeholder workshop will lead to new actions towards (starting) entrepreneurs in the leisure economy. All our findings will be presented in an inspiring networking and matchmaking events planned for Spring 2023.

Mapping the challenges of the sector and gathering first-hand experiences from relevant stakeholders will clarify the challenges of starters and provide inspiration to the coaching events we want to organise in the Spring of 2023. We plan to organise at least three sessions in which we guide and support young entrepreneurs, tackle their problems and showcase concrete tools to apply in their business. The content of these sessions will be informed by the concrete findings achieved during the different activities and corroborated by the stakeholders during the feedback iteration processes.

The following activities are foreseen under this action:

- **Activity 1:** Defining “leisure economy” and possible subcategories in East-Flanders
- **Activity 2:** Identifying 5 to 10 ambassadors for each subcategory, conduct interviews and find links and possible collaborations to solve their problems
- **Activity 3:** Identifying and defining at least 5 best practices of other governing regions
- **Activity 4:** Organising a stakeholder workshop
- **Activity 5:** organising a matchmaking and networking event to present our findings and solutions

All these activities will eventually open the pathway to create new activities and projects that can be implemented in the + next policy plan (2026-2031). It will allow us to better target our activities and respond to the concrete needs of (new) entrepreneurs in the leisure economy.

3. Stakeholders involved

- **Province of East-Flanders (with its different departments)**
- **Tourism East-Flanders**
- **Horecace Unizo: this is an interest group within UNIZO** (a very important entrepreneurship organisation specifically directed to hotels, restaurants, catering; to better support the HORECA sector and to offer better services.

These are umbrella organisations for different subcategories within the leisure economy of East-Flanders. They will provide the ambassadors we want to interview, and they will also give us their insights within their segment. Of course, they will also be part of the stakeholder group, and they will help us trying to find the lesser obvious links between companies and subsectors.

ECEF will organise all activities. The organisations mentioned above will provide help and feedback, but we will oversee the organising and implementing all activities and the events.

4. Timeframe

- **Activity 1:** process of approx. 1 month, starting in August 2022 (to be finalised by mid-September 2022)
- **Activity 2:** process of approx. 2 months, starting in August 2022 (to be finalised by the end of September 2022)
- **Activity 3:** process of approx. 4 months, starting in September 2022 (to be finalised by the end of January 2023 at last)
- **Activity 4:** process of approx. 4 months, starting in October 2022 (to be finalised by the end of February 2023 at last)
- **Activity 5:** process of approx. 5 months, starting in January 2023 (to be finalised by June 2023 at last)

5. Costs (if relevant)

5000 euro for the launch event, 8000 euro for staff costs

- activity 1: staff cost 1000 euro
- activity 2: staff cost: 3000 euro
- activity 3: staff cost: 2000 euro
- activity 4: staff cost 1000 euro
- activity 5: staff cost 1000 euro

6. Funding sources (if relevant):

The multiannual plan of the province of East-Flanders 2020-2025 Action A000832: ECEF supports and stimulates new and young entrepreneurship – annual budget: 242.802 EUR

ACTION 2

Mapping the leisure economy in order to find solutions to tackle the pandemic

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Stamp of the organisation (if available): _____