



Strengthening Knowledge Transfer Capacity in European Universities: The KTSOftSkills Project

University of Bologna, Italy

Abstract

The KTSOftSkills Project, coordinated by the University of Bologna through an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership, addressed the need to strengthen soft and transversal competences among knowledge transfer professionals in higher education and research organisations. The initiative developed a structured training framework, self-assessment framework and toolkit focused on communication, negotiation, networking, collaboration and related skills that support effective university–industry engagement. Piloted across European partner contexts, the programme received positive participant feedback and exceeded its qualitative performance targets. Its modular resources, dissemination activities and online tools support wider adoption across different institutional contexts, while the pilot experience underlines the importance of interactive and face-to-face elements for soft skills development. The case illustrates how structured professional development can strengthen knowledge transfer capacity and contribute to more effective innovation ecosystems.



Authors: Elisa Villani, Natalya Sharovatova

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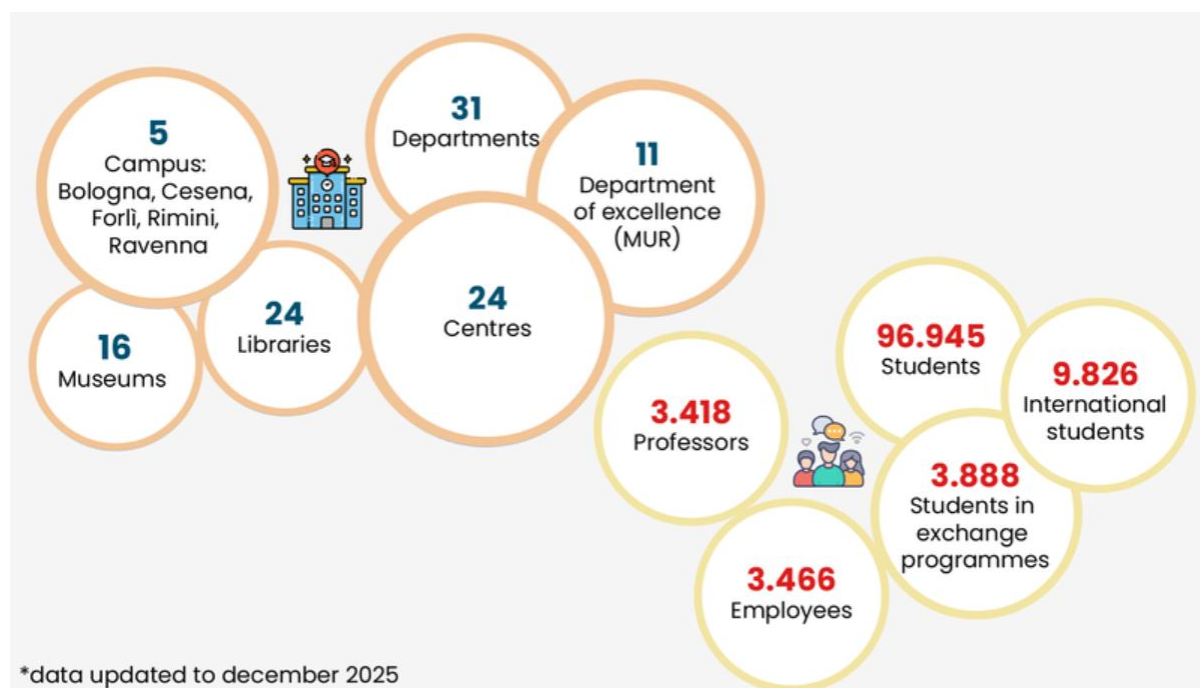
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Institutional Profile

Founded in 1088, the [University of Bologna](#) (Alma Mater Studiorum- Italy) is recognised as the oldest university in the Western world and is one of Europe's leading research-intensive universities. Operating across five campuses in the Emilia-Romagna region, the university combines a long academic tradition with a sustained **commitment to innovation, internationalisation, and societal engagement** (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA IN FIGURES



Source: [The University of Bologna in Figures](#)

The University of Bologna has developed an **integrated innovation ecosystem connecting education, research, entrepreneurship, and collaboration with external stakeholders**. Through interdisciplinary research, partnerships with industry and public institutions, and active participation in European programmes, the university contributes to **regional development** and to **addressing major societal challenges**.

The university operates at significant scale across education and research, including **substantial participation in European competitive funding programmes**. Innovation support structures, entrepreneurship initiatives, and knowledge transfer activities further strengthen its capacity to translate research outcomes into societal, cultural, and economic value (see **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**).

FIGURE 2. COMPETITIVE FUNDING PROGRAMMES**EUROPEAN PROGRAMMES (1/1/2021-31/12/2025)****>165 mln € HORIZON EUROPE (2021-2027)**

- 308 projects signed: 118 coordinated, 26 of which are ERC
- 2.700 partner involved, more than 750 of which are private

>22 mln € OTHER EUROPEAN FUNDING

- INTERREG (2021–2027): >3 milion euros; 12 projects funded, 1 of which as coordinator
- LIFE (2021–2027): >5 milion euros; 14 projects funded, 3 of which as coordinator
- Other European calls for proposals: >14 milion euros; 112 projects funded, 36 of which as coordinator

>3,5 mln € JOINT INITIATIVES

(JPI, ERANET, PRIMA, Co-founded European Partnerships)

Source: [University of Bologna Brochure 2026](#)

Introduction and Rationale

Across Europe, universities are increasingly expected to generate societal and economic value through effective knowledge transfer and structured collaboration with industry and other external stakeholders. Professionals working in **Knowledge Transfer Offices (KTOs)** function as intermediaries between academic researchers and external partners, facilitating the translation of research results into practice.

While technical training in intellectual property management, licensing and research commercialisation is well established, the **development of soft and transversal competences has received comparatively less systematic attention**. Yet skills such as **communication, negotiation, networking, and stakeholder management** are critical to navigating complex collaborative environments and sustaining long-term partnerships.

The need to strengthen these competences provided the impetus for the **KTSOFTSKILLS project**, a European initiative designed to make soft skills development more systematic, practical, and transferable across knowledge transfer practice.

Initiative Description

[The KTSOFTSKILLS – Soft Skills for Knowledge Transfer project](#) was implemented as an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership¹ (Key Action 2 of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide) coordinated by the University of Bologna (December 2022 to November 2025). The initiative aimed to design and deliver a **structured training framework** dedicated to the **development of soft skills among knowledge transfer professionals** working in higher

¹ Call 2022 Round 1 KA2/KA220-HED – Cooperation partnerships in higher education, Project n. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000089663

education institutions and research organisations. By addressing this competence dimension, the project sought to **enhance the relational and organisational capacities** required for **effective university–industry collaboration** across diverse **European contexts**.

The framework addressed competences essential for effective collaboration in multi-actor innovation environments. Rather than focusing on technical transfer procedures, the initiative concentrated on the relational and organisational dimensions of knowledge transfer practice that enable universities to work more effectively with businesses, public institutions, and wider society.

The project combined research-based competence mapping, practitioner engagement, and structured resource development within a European collaborative framework, ensuring that the training design was evidence-informed, validated by practitioners and adaptable across institutional contexts.

KTSOFTSkills Project Consortium

The project was implemented by a **transnational consortium** combining academic research expertise, practitioner experience in knowledge transfer and professional training design expertise. This multi-actor configuration ensured that the training framework was both theoretically grounded and applicable.

The University of Bologna, represented by Prof. Elisa Villani from the Department of Management, provided academic leadership and coordinated the overall project implementation. Additional partners from **Finland, Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands** contributed complementary expertise in experiential learning, stakeholder engagement, practitioner validation, and sector-wide dissemination, as well as contextual adaptation (see Table 1). Roles were distributed according to institutional strengths to ensure the integration of research-based analysis, professional practice, and instructional development throughout the project lifecycle.

TABLE 1. CONSORTIUM'S ROLES IN THE PROJECT

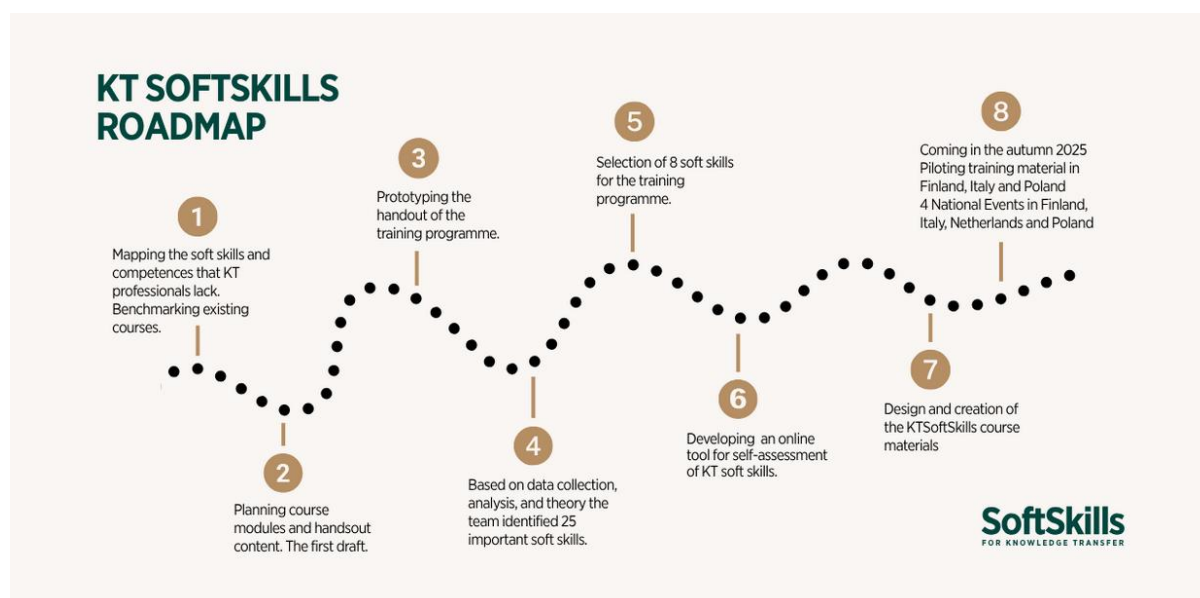
Consortium Partner	Country	Institutional Profile / Expertise	Role in the Project
University of Bologna (Coordinator)	Italy	Academic research in innovation & management	Project coordination, research design, methodology, overall project management.
ASTP Proton (ASTP)	Netherlands	European KT professional network	Practitioner validation, international dissemination, accreditation.

SOPU ACADEMY (SOPU)	Finland	Innovation & training organisation	Soft skills training design, negotiation expertise, learning methodologies.
Helsinki THINK COMPANY	Finland	Entrepreneurship society of the University of Helsinki	Entrepreneurial ecosystem facilitation, co-creation programmes, community engagement.
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY (JAG)	Poland	Higher education institution	Soft skills framework development, training validation, stakeholder engagement.
NETVAL (NETVAL)	Italy	KT network / training body	Training dissemination, stakeholder engagement activities.

Programme Design

To operationalise its objectives, the consortium adopted a **phased design approach**. The project began with a **mapping** and **benchmarking exercise** to identify soft skills gaps within the European knowledge transfer landscape (see **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**). The roadmap reflects the sequential logic underpinning the initiative, demonstrating how research-based analysis informed competence selection, which in turn guided the creation of training materials and dissemination activities.

FIGURE 3. KTSOFTSKILLS PROJECT ROADMAP



Source: [KTSOFTSKILLS website](#)

Based on this analysis, **eight priority skills** – communication, teamwork, networking, negotiation, socio-cultural awareness, contextual awareness, problem-solving, and personal development – were selected for targeted development. The selection was informed by relevance to collaborative practice, cross-institutional applicability, and practitioner validation. Together, they provided the **thematic structure of the training framework**.

The programme consisted of **eight modules**, each dedicated to one skill. Depending on participants' needs, modules lasted from **half a day to a full day**. In the pilot phase, a shorter format was tested across three countries, with the full programme delivered over four days. A total of **49 participants** took part – **22 in Krakow**, **8 in Helsinki**, and **19 in Bologna**.

The pilot explored different delivery formats. Although the main format was face-to-face, several modules were also delivered online. Feedback was systematically collected from participants and trainers through:

- structured evaluation questionnaires assessing satisfaction, perceived relevance and learning outcomes;
- qualitative feedback sessions and debriefings;
- facilitators' reflections on programme flow, timing, and participant engagement.

Building on the identified priority competences, the consortium produced the training materials, learning resources and validation mechanisms that were subsequently tested during the pilot phase. The programme incorporated iterative feedback processes to ensure practical relevance and adaptability.

Evidence from Pilot Implementation

Overall, feedback from the pilot phase was generally positive. Survey responses collected in Italy, Poland and Sweden indicated that participants particularly valued the complementarity of the modules, the interactive learning environment and the practical relevance of the topics addressed. Selected examples of participant feedback are presented below:

- The modules were complementary and offered a broad perspective on knowledge transfer, approached from an unusual angle.
- The learning environment was positive, and both the topics and the way they were addressed were engaging.
- The modules were useful in raising awareness, structuring reflection, and highlighting the importance of managing emotions in work interactions and beyond.
- Participants noted that various strategies and solutions were already in use, but not always with the necessary awareness to improve their application or recognise their limitations. The role-playing exercises were seen as particularly useful.

- Participants highlighted the interactive nature of the course, the opportunity to test ideas in practice, and the value of discussing current topics that are not often addressed in everyday work settings.

Impact, Success Factors, and Performance

The project contributed to strengthening the professional capacity of participating organisations by introducing structured approaches, tools, and frameworks for the development of soft and transversal competences in knowledge transfer (KT).

Internal Impact

Internally, the initiative supported the establishment of more **systematic professional development pathways** for KT staff, contributing to the professionalisation of KT roles within higher education institutions and intermediary organisations.

The project also enhanced institutional capacity through **evidence-based insights** that informed staff development strategies, internal training activities, and organisational practices related to KT. Participation in interviews, validation exercises, and pilot activities enabled KT professionals to develop a more reflective understanding of their role as facilitators between academia, business, and society. Participants reported increased capacity to recognise, articulate, and apply key competences, including communication, negotiation, leadership, systems thinking, and the management of uncertainty.

In addition, the transnational collaboration strengthened the ability of partner organisations to **work across institutional and cultural contexts**, **adopt shared methodologies**, and **co-design training solutions** with long-term relevance for KT ecosystems.

External Impact

Externally, the project contributed to **advancing European and international discussions** on the role of interpersonal and relational competences in effective knowledge transfer processes. By addressing a recognised gap in KT professional development, the initiative provided a reference point for the further professionalisation of KT practice and the integration of soft skills into training and accreditation frameworks. National and European knowledge transfer associations contacted the project coordinator to request presentations on the training experience at dedicated online events, invite contributions to training programmes and seek advice on designing soft skills training within their own organisational contexts.

At the local and regional levels, the project contributed to strengthening KT ecosystems by improving the quality and inclusiveness of collaboration between universities, businesses, public institutions, and wider society. The project outcomes have informed local training

initiatives, institutional capacity-building activities, and strategic reflections on KT practices in several partner countries (Italy, Poland, and the Netherlands).

At the European level, the project contributed to **cross-institutional learning and exchange of practice** among partners, while contributing to broader **European priorities** related to innovation ecosystems, interconnected higher education systems, inclusiveness, and societal impact.

The project also demonstrated **international relevance** through engagement with **global KT communities and professional networks**, including organisations such as [ASTP](#) and [NETVAL](#). The open and scalable nature of the project outputs supports their adaptation beyond Europe, contributing to wider international efforts to strengthen the effectiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness of KT practices.

Success Factors

A central success factor of the project was its explicit focus on competences that are widely acknowledged as important but insufficiently addressed in conventional training programmes. By formalising soft skills development within a structured framework, the initiative provides institutions with practical guidance for integrating these competences into professional development.

The **composition of the consortium** also contributed to project effectiveness. The integration of academic research, practitioner networks and training design expertise ensured both conceptual rigour and practical applicability.

Finally, the **phased project structure** – from analysis to dissemination – supported coherence and progression throughout implementation.

These success factors are reflected in early signs of external interest and uptake. Although organisations can implement the training programme autonomously, making comprehensive tracking difficult at this stage, several organisations have contacted the project coordinator to request further information on how soft skills **modules** could be adapted for their own organisations or institutional contexts. In one case, an Italian university invited the coordinator to contribute a soft skills module to a broader training programme for KT professionals. The project has also continued to attract attention through **professional networks**, including an invitation to present the project and **its training approach** in an online webinar organised by ASTP.

Performance against targets and delivery

Taken together, these signs of uptake complement the project's formal performance evidence, which shows that the initiative met or exceeded several of its original targets.

The project exceeded its qualitative performance targets across the main evaluation indicators. Against an anticipated **satisfaction target** of 70%, 91% of knowledge transfer

professionals rated the training programme above 5/10, highlighting its relevance, modular design, and practical applicability.

The **self-assessment framework** also surpassed the same target, with 88% of participants reporting satisfaction and noting its usefulness for evaluating skills and identifying areas for further development.

Satisfaction with the **training programme toolkit** reached 89%, again above the 70% benchmark, with trainers and organisations valuing its clarity, practical guidance, and contribution to standardisation.

The results also indicated interest in the continuation of the programme. The share of participants intending to **enrol in future iterations** reached 50%, doubling the anticipated target of 25%. In terms of project delivery, all deliverables were completed on schedule or with only minor delays, remained within budget and met the expected quality standards.

Overall, these results suggest that the initiative met its operational requirements while demonstrating a high level of relevance, acceptance, and potential for further uptake among its target groups.

Project Results and Learning Outcomes

Project Results

The KTSOFTSKILLS project developed a dedicated **soft skills training programme, toolkit, and supporting resources** to enhance the professional competences of knowledge transfer practitioners working in higher education institutions and related organisations across Europe.

The project also generated **supporting resources**, including an **Investigation Report** analysing existing training provision and identifying competence gaps, as well as a **Self-Assessment Framework** and **Training Programme and Toolkit** designed to help practitioners evaluate and develop their soft skills profiles (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. KTSOFTSKILLS PROJECT OUTCOMES

 KT SoftSkills Investigation Report: The specific needs and benefits of enhancing KT professionals' soft skills will be defined by collecting already existing training experiences designed for KT professionals	 KT SoftSkills Self Assessment Framework and Report: A set of soft skills will be pre-tested and validated by KT professionals and experts through interviews and focus groups, along with a self-assessment framework that measures to what extent KT professionals own and use soft skills	 KT SoftSkills Training Programme and Toolkit: Based on the data collected with the reports, a training programme will be created to improve the soft skills of KT professionals and to help them succeed in their job
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Source: [KTSOFTSKILLS website](#)

In addition, the consortium developed structured learning resources comprising teaching slides, practical exercises and thematic modules covering areas such as personal development planning, networking strategies, and collaboration management. Made openly accessible through the project's [Results](#) section, these resources were designed to support both individual learning and institutional professional development, thereby extending the project's value beyond the immediate partnership.

Together, these outputs provide a **transferable framework** that higher education institutions and other organisations can adapt to strengthen the relational, organisational, and collaborative dimensions of knowledge transfer practice. In this respect, the project contributed not only to the development of individual competences, but also to broader institutional capacity-building within innovation and knowledge exchange ecosystems.

Dissemination and uptake data further indicate that the project exceeded several of its original dissemination targets by mid-January 2026. The figures show that the project reached **6,026 knowledge transfer professionals** against a target of **3,000**; **1,626 higher education institutions** against a target of **1,000**; **4,532 businesses** against a target of **3,000**; and **7,642 other organisations** against a target of **1,000**. Project results were also downloaded **1,323 times**, exceeding the target of **1,000** downloads. These figures suggest substantial interest in the project outputs and demonstrate their relevance across multiple stakeholder groups within and beyond higher education.

Learning Outcomes

Beyond the development of formal training materials, the project generated **broader learning for the knowledge transfer community**. It reinforced **recognition of soft and transversal competences** – including communication, negotiation, networking, contextual

awareness, and problem-solving – as critical enablers of effective collaboration between academia and external partners.

Through research activities, stakeholder engagement and validation processes, the project contributed to a **clearer articulation of the competence profile** required for knowledge transfer roles. These insights support the development of more systematic professional development pathways and advance the discussion on the human dimension of innovation ecosystems.

Challenges, Mitigation approaches, Lessons Learned

What worked well

One of the main strengths of this Erasmus+ project was the **effective collaboration** among partners from different countries and institutional backgrounds. The consortium brought together complementary expertise in knowledge transfer, research, and soft skills development, resulting in the creation of **structured, high-quality** training materials and learning activities. The project also benefited from **high levels of participant engagement**, with participants valuing the practical and interdisciplinary approach adopted throughout the training and dissemination activities.

What was unexpectedly difficult and how it was resolved

An unforeseen challenge was **aligning institutional expectations, working cultures and timelines** across partner organisations. While all partners shared common objectives, differences in procedures and priorities occasionally slowed decision-making and implementation. These difficulties were addressed through **regular communication, additional coordination meetings and a flexible management approach** that allowed partners to adapt activities while maintaining the project's overall objectives and quality standards.

What partners would do differently

In retrospect, the partners would allocate **more time at the outset** of the project to jointly define operational procedures, communication protocols, and expectations regarding deliverables. **Earlier pilot testing** of the training materials, combined with more frequent opportunities to gather feedback from end users, could also strengthen implementation. These adjustments might reduce the need for later revisions and improve the overall efficiency of project delivery.

Lessons Learned

Future initiatives should allocate **sufficient time and resources** to consortium building and stakeholder engagement during the initial planning phase. Establishing clear communication mechanisms, shared quality standards and regular opportunities for

reflection can help minimise misunderstandings and strengthen collaboration. In addition, future projects should place greater emphasis on **testing and adapting training materials** to different institutional and cultural contexts to enhance both their relevance and the long-term sustainability of project outcomes.

Sustainability, Transferability, and Scalability of the KTSOFTSKILLS – Soft Skills for Knowledge Transfer Project

Sustainability

The KTSOFTSKILLS project demonstrates sustainability potential through the **development of training materials, tools, and online resources** that can continue to support the professional development of knowledge transfer (KT) professionals beyond the project funding period. The project also contributed to strengthening institutional awareness of the importance of soft and transversal skills in KT practices. Sustainability is reflected in three main areas:

Continued accessibility of outputs

Project results will remain accessible through the project website and the [relevant EU platform](#) for at least two years after the end of the funded period, supporting continued dissemination and use of the developed resources.

Ongoing integration into professional development activities

Although the full training programme has not been formally embedded at the coordinator institution, elements of the project's soft skills perspective have already informed participation in training initiatives and educational activities led by the project coordinator.

Potential for follow-up development

The project has created a basis for future follow-up initiatives and further development activities, although no formal continuation project has yet been defined.

Transferability

The project demonstrates a high degree of transferability potential because the targeted competences are **relevant across different institutional and national contexts**. In particular, the modular training materials represent a highly transferable output, as they can be adapted and integrated into existing professional development schemes for KT staff in other organisations. The modular structure of the training design further supports flexible adoption in diverse institutional settings.

Scalability

The project shows scalability potential through the **availability of online tools and resources** and the **modular nature** of the training materials, which facilitate wider implementation across different organisations and larger groups of KT professionals. Its reach has already extended through **online and in-person dissemination activities**, including the Erasmus+ European Festival and the ASTP Annual Conference. Dissemination events and workshops have also raised wider awareness and encouraged uptake of the project outputs.

At the same time, the scalability of the training approach depends on the **delivery format**. Several modules were piloted online, demonstrating that elements of the programme can be delivered effectively in a virtual environment. However, because the programme focuses on soft skills, online delivery may reduce opportunities for interaction and practice-based learning. The interactive, face-to-face component therefore remains an essential element of the training approach.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The KTSOFTSKILLS project highlights the strategic importance of strengthening soft skills among professionals engaged in knowledge transfer. By focusing on competences related to **communication, negotiation, stakeholder engagement** and **collaboration**, the initiative complements existing technical training and **contributes to enhancing** the effectiveness of university–industry partnerships.

The project suggests that structured professional development initiatives targeting relational and organisational competences can support **more sustainable and impactful innovation ecosystems within higher education**. Evidence from the pilot implementation and performance indicators suggests that the training programme, self-assessment framework, and toolkit were well received by participants, trainers and organisations, while exceeding the anticipated satisfaction and enrolment targets. The project’s dissemination activities, modular resources and online tools further demonstrate potential for wider adoption across different institutional and professional contexts.

Future initiatives should consider **integrating such training frameworks more systematically into institutional professional development strategies**, while maintaining the interactive and practice-based elements that are important for soft skills development. Further attention should also be given to sustained cross-institutional collaboration, continued dissemination through professional networks and events, and mechanisms for assessing longer-term impact.

Contact Details and Resources

Contacts

Prof. Elisa Villani

KTSOFTSkills Project Coordinator



e.villani@unibo.it



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



Università di Bologna (DISA)

Natalya Sharovatova

Project Manager, responsible for conducting interviews, analysing data, and structuring content for the development of case studies and user stories for the HEInnovate Project.



natalya.sharovatova@che.de



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



[CHE](#) – Centre for Higher Education, Germany

Caroline Friedhoff

Senior Project Manager, responsible for conducting interviews, analysing data, and structuring content for the development of case studies and user stories for the HEInnovate Project.



caroline.friedhoff@che.de



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



[CHE](#) – Centre for Higher Education, Germany

Resources

1. [ASTP Proton \(ASTP\)](#)
2. [Helsinki THINK COMPANY](#)
3. [JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY \(JAG\)](#)
4. [KTSOFTSkills website](#)
5. [NETVAL \(NETVAL\)](#)
6. [Results](#)
7. [SOPU ACADEMY \(SOPU\)](#)
8. [The KTSOFTSkills – Soft Skills for Knowledge Transfer project](#)
9. [The University of Bologna in figures](#)
10. [University of Bologna](#)
11. [University of Bologna Brochure 2026](#)

Additional project channels

1. LinkedIn – [KTSOFTSkills project](#)
2. X (Twitter) – [KTSOFTSkills project](#)