GUIDANCE ON IMPROVING ADOPTION OF INNOVATION

Results from Catalonia and Lithuania Twinning

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Introduction

This guidance document results from the Twinning project between Catalonia and Lithuania, supported by the Procure4Health project (Funded by the European Union GA#101057209). It covers key aspects of innovation procurement: what it is, why it matters, how to execute it effectively, what to avoid, and the role of innovation ecosystems in enhancing procurement. The main goal is to support buyers, policymakers, innovation agencies, procurement managers, and stakeholders in the health and social care sectors in adopting innovative solutions to improve procurement processes. It also provides valuable perceptions for entrepreneurs, start-ups, and SMEs that may lack the capacity and track record typically required by public buyers.

The document reflects insights gained from visits to Lithuania and Catalonia, workshops, and responses to questionnaires exploring challenges in procuring innovative healthcare solutions. It provides tailored recommendations to improve procurement processes for all involved stakeholders and is also based on the European Commission's guidance on innovation procurement.

According to the European Commission (2021), innovation procurement rules should focus not only on "how to buy" but also on "what to buy," aiming to deliver the best value in quality, cost-efficiency, environmental and social impact, and supplier market opportunities. However, this is not always the case. Eleven surveys from stakeholders in the innovation ecosystems of Catalonia and Lithuania show that 45% have less than two years of procurement experience, while only 9% have more than ten years, and the rest have between two and six years. This lack of experience leads to challenges such as functional with inefficiencies, poor strategic alignment, and difficulty sourcing suitable solutions. While procurement often meets basic requirements, it struggles with integrating innovation, ensuring transparency, and reducing decision-making delays (see Figure 1).

Moreover, the lack of personnel handling innovative procurement in Catalonia and Lithuania (64%) results in innovative procurement being infrequent (9%), occasional (18%), rare (18%), or only conducted when necessary (45%). As Figure 2 illustrates, the purchases primarily focus on software solutions (45%), medical devices (30%), and pharmaceutical products (17%), with only 4% dedicated to other innovative areas.

Figure 1. Years of experience and current healthcare procurement process.
Source: Questionnaire developed in the Twinning Catalunya-Lithuania project, 2025.

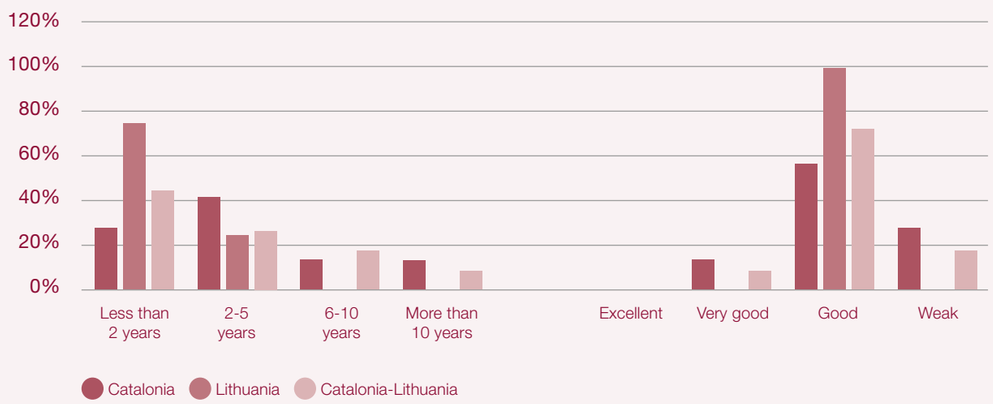
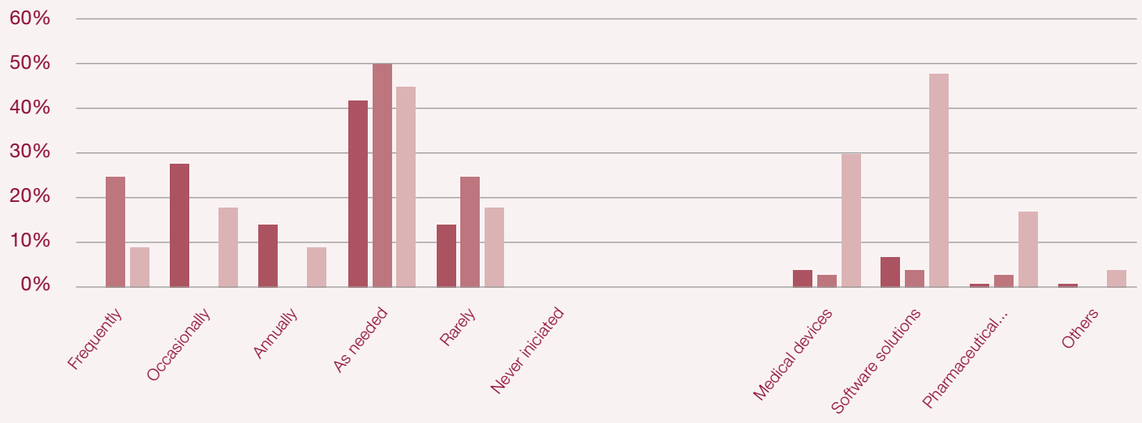


Figure 2. Frequency and priorities in procuring innovative healthcare solutions.
Source: Questionnaire developed in the Twinning Catalunya-Lithuania project, 2025.



The latter percentage is particularly low due to limited expertise in other sectors, a lack of awareness of alternative innovations, and procurement processes that are more orientated toward conventional, widely used products. As a result, innovation in procurement is often constrained to established and well-understood categories, leaving little room for experimentation with more novel solutions that could drive significant advancements in healthcare and other sectors.

Additionally, there are significant barriers to procuring advanced, innovative healthcare solutions. Most respondents identify the main challenges as budget constraints (26%), followed by regulatory and compliance issues (21%), procurement process complexity (18%), and difficulties in assessing the value of innovation, resistance to change from stakeholders, and meeting legal requirements, all with 9%. Therefore, 82% of respondents from Catalonia and Lithuania agree that navigating procurement regulations for innovative procurement is complex. According to the survey, 72% believe it is essential to leverage innovation ecosystems, including collaboration with other organisations and stakeholders, to address procurement challenges and ensure effective stakeholder alignment.

Innovation procurement tackles all the challenges mentioned above by enabling access to higher-quality, more efficient solutions that prioritise environmental and social benefits. It leads to improved cost-effectiveness, enhanced clinical outcomes, and solutions that are scalable and adaptable to evolving needs. Additionally, it fosters new business opportunities for companies, particularly for startups and SMEs that may have innovative but underutilised solutions. By adopting innovation procurement strategies, stakeholders of healthcare system can drive more sustainable, impactful, and forward-thinking, while stimulating growth and competition within the supplier market. This approach not only addresses current gaps but also positions public services to meet future demands more effectively.

This guidance is therefore designed as follows:

Part 1: An explanation of innovation procurement, including what it is and its importance.

Part 2: A list of best practices to consider when conducting innovation procurement.

Part 3: A list of common pitfalls to avoid when making an innovation purchase.

Part 4: An overview of the role of innovation ecosystems and their importance in innovation procurement.

Part 5: Conclusions.

PART 1 Innovation procurement

1.1 What is innovation procurement?

Innovation procurement refers to the process where public buyers stimulate innovation by either:

- Investing in research and development (R&D) to support the creation of new products, services, or processes.
- Acquiring innovative solutions that are not yet available on the market, acting as early adopters.

Public buyers can drive innovation by defining unmet needs, prompting businesses and researchers to develop novel solutions, or by acting as early adopters of market-ready innovations. This approach enhances performance and adds value, taking different forms: incremental innovation improves existing solutions, disruptive innovation reshapes markets, and transformative innovation drives structural or organisational change.

1.2 Why innovation procurement?

Innovation procurement plays a crucial role in boosting economic recovery, driving the green and digital transition, and enhancing the EU's resilience. Public investment in innovation supports economic growth, strengthens strategic autonomy, and enhances competitiveness, particularly in underfunded areas such as digital solutions and R&D.

It is also essential for addressing unmet needs, ensuring public services evolve to meet new societal expectations, and modernising public administration to align with technological, environmental, and social demands.

Furthermore, innovation procurement supports start-ups and SMEs, providing them with opportunities to test and scale their solutions. By acting as lead customers, public buyers attract further investment and stimulate market growth.

Lastly, it drives market innovation, encouraging the development of new solutions when existing products are insufficient or of low quality, ultimately fostering a more dynamic and competitive economy.

PART 2

Good practices in innovation procurement

2.1 Key steps for effective innovation procurement

1. **Start small, scale fast:** Innovation procurement should be approached as an iterative, gradual learning process. Begin by tackling manageable, practical challenges in sectors with high social or environmental impact, such as healthcare, climate change, or urban development. These initial projects help build credibility, gain experience, and establish trust before expanding to larger, more complex procurement efforts. By starting small and demonstrating success, organisations can foster innovation while minimising initial risks.
2. **Turning ambitions into action:** A successful innovation procurement strategy requires a clear and detailed action plan. This should outline key objectives, roles, responsibilities, budgets, and timelines to ensure effective implementation. Engaging relevant stakeholders—including public authorities, private sector players, and community representatives—ensures that the plan aligns with broader public policies, fostering commitment and collaboration across various sectors and levels of governance. The integration of stakeholder feedback can also improve the quality of the proposed solutions and increase the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes.
3. **Professionalising procurement and engagement:** Successful cases from cities like Barcelona and countries like Austria showcase the importance of professional procurement teams. Public buyers must possess a deep understanding of markets, legal frameworks, negotiation techniques, risk assessment, and intellectual property management. Continuous training and development for procurement officers are essential to professionalise the process and ensure that innovation procurement is carried out effectively. Since innovation procurement involves not just the procurement department but also technical experts, legal advisors, finance teams, human resources, users, and other stakeholders. Early cross-department collaboration ensures that all perspectives are considered, objectives are aligned, and the process meets the organization's needs, supporting long-term sustainability and scalability.
4. **Cooperative procurement:** Public procurement organisations can benefit greatly from collaboration with other public bodies or centralised purchasing networks. By working together, these entities can pool resources, share knowledge and expertise, and achieve economies of scale. Collaborative procurement efforts also enable the expansion of innovation adoption across regions while maintaining the flexibility required to cater to specific, localised needs. This approach ensures that

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the benefits of innovative solutions are accessible to a broader spectrum of public service providers.

5. **Managing risk and incentives:** Public buyers often face apprehension when it comes to the risks involved in innovation procurement. To alleviate these concerns, it is important to establish clear financial and non-financial incentives. Performance-based rewards, such as KPIs and innovation awards, can motivate vendors and suppliers to deliver high-quality solutions. Additionally, providing robust business cases demonstrating the long-term benefits of innovation, coupled with securing external funding or subsidies, can provide reassurance to stakeholders and facilitate risk management. A balanced approach to risk and incentives supports both innovation and the financial sustainability of the procurement process.
6. **Attracting innovators:** Nowadays a significant proportion of innovative solutions come from small, fast-growing companies that lack extensive experience with procurement processes and a long track record of results. To foster innovation, it is essential to engage these innovators, particularly high-tech start-ups and SMEs. Public procurement should be structured to accommodate businesses of all sizes, ensuring that smaller companies are not excluded. Adapting procurement processes through tailored procedures, proactive market engagement, and simplified administrative requirements can facilitate participation. A more flexible and inclusive approach encourages diverse solutions and enables innovation from a broader range of vendors.
7. **Reducing bureaucracy:** The EU's procurement rules have been simplified to ease participation, particularly for SMEs and start-ups. Through mechanisms like self-declarations and electronic documentation (ESPD), public procurement processes have become more streamlined and less burdensome. These changes reduce the bureaucratic barriers that often hinder smaller businesses from competing in public procurement, creating a more open and inclusive environment for innovation. By reducing the complexity of procurement processes, public authorities can attract a wider pool of innovative solutions and increase the overall efficiency of the procurement process.
8. **Using lots:** Dividing public contracts into smaller lots is a strategy that can help attract innovators, especially start-ups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs). By breaking down contracts, public buyers can better match the size of each lot with the operational capabilities of smaller innovators. This approach can also mitigate supplier lock-in, especially when large suppliers dominate the market. To facilitate interoperability, public buyers may set standards or open requirements that allow different systems provided by various vendors across different lots to connect. The EU guidelines encourage the consideration of lots in public contracts. However, public buyers must strike a balance between enabling smaller suppliers and minimising administrative burdens by contracting with fewer, larger suppliers.
9. **Using standards, open data, open interfaces, and open-source software:** These elements can further open up markets and provide smaller innovators with opportunities to engage in large-scale projects or secure contracts independently. While they enable a more level playing field, contracts must also address access to both pre-existing intellectual property rights and new intellectual property that arises during the innovation process.
10. **Designing SME-friendly payment schemes:** SMEs and start-ups often face financial constraints, which can hinder their participation in public procurement. To support them, public buyers can implement payment schemes that allow for early or regular payments. In cases where an SME is a direct contractor, advance payments could enable greater participation. For subcontractors, public buyers may be required to make direct payments to ensure that smaller innovators are not delayed by the primary contractor's payment cycle. Shortening payment periods or making direct payments could significantly reduce the risk of late payments and support SME involvement.
11. **Needs assessment:** Before creating technical specifications, public buyers should conduct an in-depth needs assessment to clearly define the problem they aim to solve. This step is crucial in identifying areas for innovation rather than simply replacing outdated equipment with similar models or renewing expired contracts. A functional analysis of the organisation's needs, and the identification of areas for improvement, can reveal opportunities for new solutions or operational changes. The assessment can lead to different contract types or a reevaluation of current practices and technologies. Public buyers should be open to exploring new trends and technological advancements, possibly even screening the market for innovative solutions to enhance public services. An objective needs assessment may also involve external entities or experts to ensure impartiality.
12. **Preliminary market consultation:** Public buyers can engage in preliminary market consultations to better understand the market landscape before initiating procurement procedures. These consultations help identify existing or potential innovative solutions, gauge market capabilities, and determine whether a solution can be developed within the given timeline. These consultations can vary in scope, from minor updates to extensive research, and can take the form of interviews, surveys, or public events. The goal is to gather insights that help public buyers refine their technical specifications and avoid unrealistic or outdated requirements. Buyers must ensure that the process is fair, with all relevant information shared with potential suppliers to maintain transparency and equal treatment.
13. **Technical specifications:** Once market consultation is conducted, public buyers are better positioned to draft effective technical specifications. There are two key approaches to specifying requirements: descriptive and functional:
    - **Descriptive specifications:** These prescribe a detailed solution and leave little room for innovation. They may reflect current market offerings but can limit the possibility of finding more innovative solutions. These specifications are useful when the buyer knows the market well, but they carry the risk of favouring specific suppliers and stifling innovation.
    - **Functional specifications:** These provide minimum requirements for the desired outcome without prescribing how to achieve it, allowing suppliers flexibility in their approach. This method encourages innovative solutions but requires a deep understanding of the market and technologies. By using functional specifications, public buyers can foster competition among innovative providers.

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14. **Clear guidance for bidders:** Providing clear and comprehensive guidance to bidders is fundamental to a successful procurement process. The procuring entity should ensure that the "Request for Proposal" (RFP) includes well-defined submission requirements, evaluation criteria, detailed timelines, and relevant contact information for inquiries. This transparency enables bidders to fully understand the expectations, ensuring the submission of high-quality and compliant proposals, which in turn enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the procurement process.

15. **Award criteria:** The "Economically Most Advantageous Tender" (MEAT) is the preferred award criterion under the EU procurement rules. It evaluates tenders based on both quality and price. A well-designed MEAT approach allows public buyers to reward not only the lowest price but also the best overall value, which can include considerations like functionality, sustainability, and innovation. To achieve this, public buyers may incorporate life cycle costing methodologies that assess not only the purchase price but also costs related to maintenance, operation, and disposal. This ensures a more comprehensive evaluation of each solution's long-term value, promoting innovation and sustainability.

16. **Contract monitoring with indicators:** Establishing measurable indicators and milestones during the contract execution phase ensures that the innovation is being implemented as planned. These indicators should align with the project's goals, such as performance benchmarks, timelines, quality standards, and financial milestones. Regular monitoring helps in identifying issues early, ensuring that the project stays on track.

17. **Integrating sustainability:** Sustainability must be a central factor in public procurement decisions, encompassing the evaluation of environmental, social, and financial impacts. Selecting innovations that align with long-term sustainability goals supports environmental and social objectives while ensuring future viability. To achieve this, it is essential to establish sustainability criteria in the procurement process, including energy efficiency, waste reduction, fair labor practices, and long-term cost-effectiveness.

PART 3

Common pitfalls in innovation procurement

3.1 What to avoid in innovation procurement?

1. **Failing to allocate resources for information gathering:** One of the main obstacles to successful innovation procurement is the difficulty in obtaining relevant information. This often arises because public procurement bodies fail to allocate sufficient resources to information collection and market research. Without comprehensive data on emerging technologies, potential suppliers, and market trends, procurement decisions may be misinformed, resulting in suboptimal outcomes or missed opportunities for innovation.

2. **Lack of understanding of tender procedures:** A significant barrier to participation in innovation procurement is the lack of knowledge about tendering processes, both for public buyers and potential suppliers. This lack of familiarity can lead to inefficiencies, delays, or non-compliance with procedures. Public authorities should invest in training for both internal teams and external suppliers to ensure that tendering processes are clear, transparent, and accessible, particularly to smaller companies or start-ups.

3. **Overburdening with excessive administrative requirements:** Excessive administrative procedures and requirements can be a major deterrent for businesses, especially SMEs, from engaging in innovation procurement. Complex paperwork, long approval processes, and bureaucratic hurdles increase the cost and time investment required to prepare tenders. This not only discourages potential suppliers but also hinders the ability of the public sector to quickly adopt innovative solutions.

4. **Setting unrealistically large contract sizes:** Setting overly large contracts can discourage smaller businesses, particularly start-ups and SMEs, from participating in procurement processes. These companies may lack the resources or capabilities to fulfill large-scale contracts, thus excluding them from the opportunity to innovate in the public sector. It is crucial to design procurement contracts that are proportionate to the size and scope of the innovation required, allowing for flexibility in participation.

5. **Insufficient time for tender preparation:** Tight deadlines for tender preparation are another common issue that discourages potential bidders, especially SMEs. Innovation procurement requires careful planning, research, and proposal development, which can take time. Providing adequate lead time for preparing tenders allows suppliers to submit well-thought-out, competitive proposals, improving the overall quality and diversity of solutions.

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6. **High costs for tender preparation:** The costs associated with preparing tenders can be disproportionately high for SMEs, which often face fixed costs that are harder to absorb compared to larger enterprises. These high preparation costs may discourage smaller companies from participating, reducing competition and innovation. To address this, public authorities should streamline the tender preparation process and consider offering incentives or subsidies to offset these costs for smaller suppliers.
7. **Disproportionate qualification and certification requirements:** Overly stringent qualification and certification requirements can create unnecessary barriers for smaller or newer companies that may lack the resources or track record to meet these high standards. These requirements may inadvertently favour large, established firms, reducing the diversity of solutions and hindering the entry of innovative players. Public procurement should strike a balance between ensuring quality and encouraging diversity by tailoring qualification criteria to the nature of the project.
8. **Excessive financial guarantees:** Requiring large financial guarantees from suppliers can be a significant barrier to entry, particularly for SMEs and start-ups. These guarantees may be seen as too risky or financially burdensome, especially for companies with limited cash flow or resources. Public procurement should avoid excessively high guarantees, focusing on performance-based measures instead that encourage innovation while minimising financial risks.
9. **Discriminating against foreign tenderers:** Favouring local or national enterprises over foreign suppliers can undermine the potential for innovation in procurement. Such discrimination can limit the pool of available solutions and restrict access to cutting-edge technologies and expertise. Public procurement should aim to create an open and competitive environment by ensuring that foreign suppliers have equal access to opportunities, promoting a diverse range of innovative solutions from both domestic and international markets.
10. **Difficulty in finding international cooperation partners:** While collaboration with foreign partners can bring valuable expertise and innovation, many procurement processes fail to account for the challenges of finding and working with international collaborators. Public authorities should actively facilitate and promote international partnerships, making it easier for procurement bodies to identify and collaborate with international innovators.
11. **Delays in payments by contracting authorities:** Late payments from contracting authorities can disrupt cash flow for suppliers, especially small businesses, and hinder their ability to continue innovation activities. This financial strain can undermine the willingness of suppliers to engage in public procurement, particularly for complex and long-term innovation projects. Ensuring timely payments is essential for maintaining healthy relationships with suppliers and fostering a sustainable innovation ecosystem.
12. **Prioritising price alone over quality and long-term benefits:** While cost is important, prioritising it over quality, impact, and long-term benefits can result in cheaper solutions that are not effective or sustainable. It is essential to consider the overall value of the solution, not just the initial price.
13. **Overlooking risk management:** Failing to properly manage risks related to new or untested innovations can lead to project failure. Proper risk assessments and mitigation strategies should be in place to minimise the likelihood of failure when implementing innovation.
14. **Failing to involve end users:** Neglecting to involve end users in the development of the solution can result in products that do not meet their needs or are impractical in real-world applications. Engaging users during the design and implementation phases ensures the innovation is effective and functional.
15. **Using unnecessarily complex procedures:** Using excessively complex procurement procedures can discourage suppliers, especially smaller businesses, or startups, from participating. Simplifying processes makes it easier for a wider range of suppliers to engage and helps accelerate the adoption of innovative solutions.
16. **Neglecting evaluation and feedback mechanisms:** Failing to define clear evaluation criteria and feedback mechanisms can hinder procurement improvements and innovation effectiveness. Active engagement throughout the process is essential to address challenges early and ensure successful implementation. Assigning a contract manager or dedicated team helps maintain oversight, conduct regular check-ins, and track milestones. Continuous communication enhances transparency, supplier relationships, and efficiency. Neglecting post-award oversight weakens accountability and compromises outcomes, reducing procurement effectiveness and innovation impact.
17. **Ignoring legal and ethical considerations:** Ignoring legal and ethical standards, such as intellectual property rights, data privacy, and ethical sourcing, can compromise the integrity of the procurement process. It is crucial to ensure compliance with relevant laws and respect ethical practices throughout the procurement cycle.
18. **Overlooking scalability and adaptability of innovations:** Focusing only on immediate needs can limit the long-term impact of innovations. The adopted solutions should be scalable and adaptable to future changes or challenges within the public sector, ensuring their continued relevance as circumstances evolve.

PART 4

The role of innovation ecosystems in enhancing innovation procurement

4.1 What is an innovation ecosystem?

The ecosystem of innovation consists of business participants, start-ups, academia, technical and support services, and the individuals that drive innovation. Each of these plays a significant role in creating value in the larger ecosystem by transforming new ideas into reality through access to financial investment. The ecosystem of innovation creates an active flow of information and resources for ideas to transform into reality. Through these ecosystems, innovators and entrepreneurs develop and launch solutions to solve real-world problems faster than would be the case without the ecosystem. This process creates expertise in new areas, helps to diversify the economy, and allows businesses to meet their customers where they are (European Commission 2021).

4.2 Why is it important to create and sustain an innovation ecosystem in healthcare?

An innovation ecosystem approach is essential in healthcare because it fosters collaboration among various stakeholders—such as governments, private companies, research institutions, universities, healthcare providers and medical institutions including hospitals, clinics, and healthcare professionals—to drive the development and implementation of innovative solutions. These ecosystems operate at multiple levels (local, regional, national, and international) and across different sectors, creating a supportive environment for entrepreneurship, research, and technological advancements.

Key elements of an innovation ecosystem include policies and regulations, financial accessibility, skilled human capital, research infrastructure, market opportunities, and robust communication and transport networks. Together, these factors enable productive interactions that accelerate innovation and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Given the complexity of healthcare challenges, no single actor or organisation can address them alone. The Europe's Innovation Ecosystem Survey Report (2021) highlights that systemic challenges require collective action to ensure equitable access to innovation and maximise its benefits. By integrating national, regional, and local efforts, innovation ecosystems strengthen resilience, support economic and social recovery, and contribute to environmental sustainability.

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4.3 What does this mean for buyers/stakeholders?

According to the guide on innovation procurement of the European Commission (2021), an innovation ecosystem provides public buyers with valuable insights into key aspects of procurement and market trends. It helps them understand where the next wave of ideas and technologies will emerge, assess the relevance and maturity of innovations, and evaluate their potential value compared to existing solutions. Additionally, it enables buyers to identify emerging market players and gain strategic supplier intelligence.

To leverage these benefits, public purchasers should actively engage with innovation ecosystems—such as clusters, incubators, innovation agencies, and living labs—at local, regional, national, or even European levels. Collaborating with these networks enhances their ability to work with innovators effectively.

One practical way to connect with ecosystem players is through hackathons—intensive 24- to 48-hour events where small teams collaborate on creative problem-solving. They foster innovation across industries, producing prototypes that help identify innovators, initiate co-creation, assess product readiness, and estimate adoption costs.

PART 5

Conclusions

Innovation procurement offers a transformative opportunity for public buyers, businesses, and citizens, providing a strategic way to enhance public services by improving quality, cost-effectiveness, sustainability, and fostering market growth. By adopting innovative procurement strategies, stakeholders within the healthcare system can address critical challenges in sectors like healthcare while enabling startups and SMEs to introduce novel solutions. This approach promotes more adaptable, forward-thinking public services that are better equipped to meet evolving societal needs.

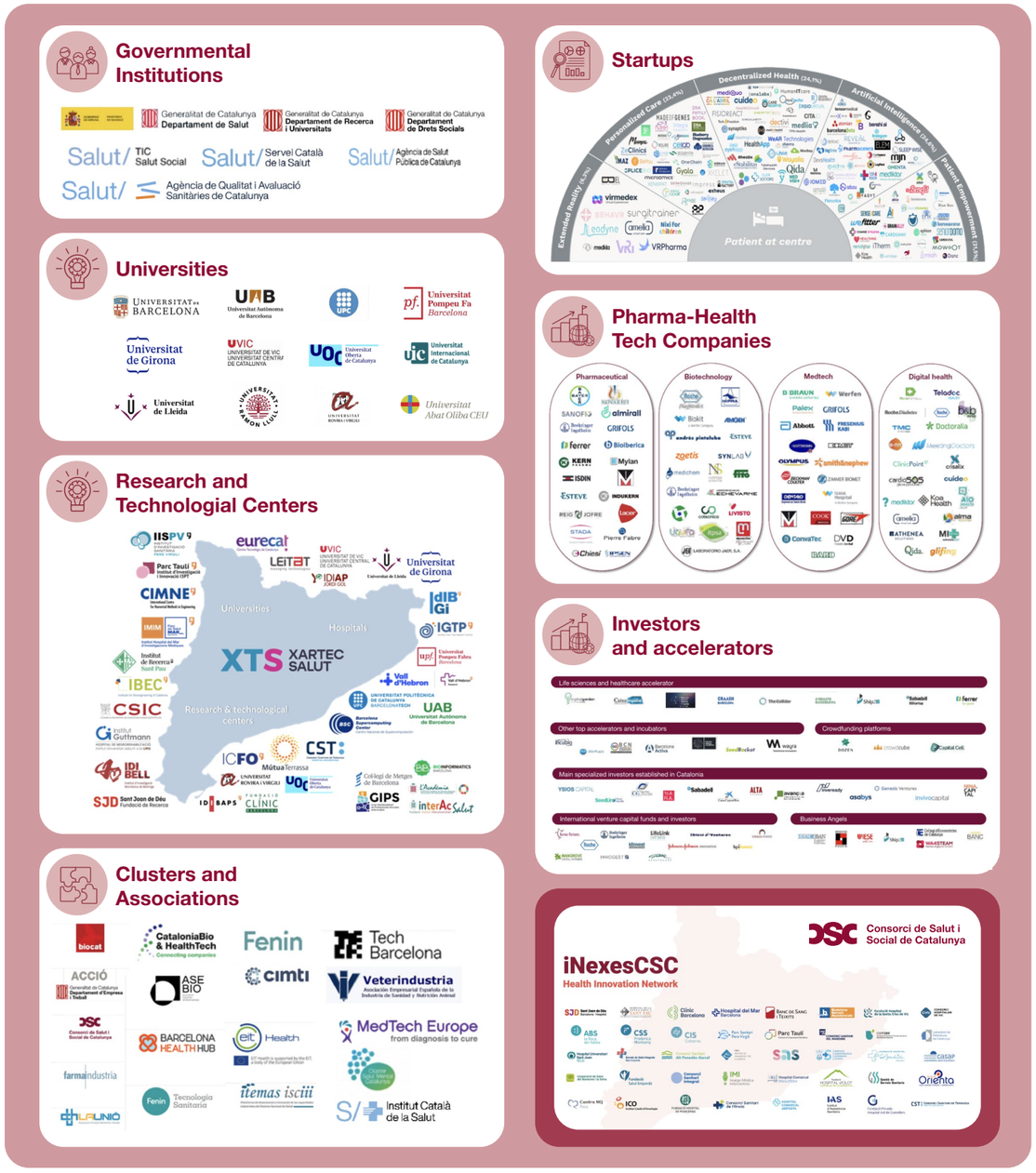
However, despite its potential, innovation procurement faces challenges such as limited expertise and regulatory barriers, which can hinder its successful implementation. The guidance document highlights the importance of collaboration with innovation ecosystems, offering strategies to streamline procurement processes and integrate innovative solutions into public services. A key takeaway is the need for public buyers to begin with manageable challenges, gradually expanding to larger projects, and ensuring stakeholder engagement and performance-based incentives.

Additionally, overcoming bureaucratic barriers and prioritising long-term value over initial cost are essential to creating an inclusive and sustainable procurement environment. Simplifying administrative procedures, ensuring timely payments, and focusing on value such as quality, sustainability, and innovation will enable more impactful procurement outcomes.

Ultimately, innovation ecosystems are vital to this process. By fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, these ecosystems create a conducive environment for developing and implementing innovative solutions. Engaging with innovation ecosystems not only accelerates the adoption of new technologies but also supports long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainability, making innovation procurement a powerful tool for public service improvement.

PART 6 Annexes: Innovation ecosystems from Catalonia and Lithuania

6.1 Catalonia Health Innovation Ecosystem



6.2 Lithuania Health Innovation Ecosystem