D3.3

Typology of success criteria for innovative SME awards

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FORSEE
Forging Successful AI Applications for European Economy and Society

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Typology of success criteria for Innovative SME Awards

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FORSEE: Forging Successful AI Applications for European Economy and Society

Mapping of social expectations: understanding of success from a lifeworld perspective

The capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) are advancing rapidly, yet understanding what constitutes successful AI for society and the conditions that enable its effective deployment remains limited. AI promises economic growth, knowledge creation, and broader societal benefits, but realising this potential depends on developing and integrating applications that are successful not only technologically and economically but also socially, and ethically. AI applications are embedded within complex social contexts, reflecting and shaping aspirations, biases, and inequalities; thus, understanding AI success requires attention to these broader dimensions.

The FORSEE project (*Forging Successful AI Applications for European Economy and Society*) adopts a sociological perspective to examine these dynamics, focusing on how different stakeholders define success and how controversies, and unequal distributions of risks and benefits are articulated and potentially resolved.

This cluster of research papers maps social expectations of AI success across stakeholders, adopting a lifeworld perspective that situates understandings within societal and economic contexts. It comprises four interrelated reports. The first examines **digital small and medium-sized enterprises' (SMEs) success narratives**, identifying recurring themes and operational challenges. The second addresses **civil society organisations (CSOs) perspectives on gendered risks related to AI**, examining potential paths to advocate for gender vulnerable communities. The third investigates **criteria for awards and prizes**, providing an external perspective on standards of AI success. The fourth applies a **gendered lens**, exploring SMEs' perspectives on AI and gender bias. Together, these reports link SMEs' and CSOs' viewpoints with societal concerns, offering a multidimensional understanding of AI success in Europe.

The report focuses on AI innovation awards, with a focus on those awards offered to SMEs. Through our analysis, we seek to understand the types of success communicated through awards giving.

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Abbreviations and definitions

- **AI lifecycle:** Includes **design:** data set collection and selection, model design, development and validation; **deployment**, and **monitoring**.
- **Demographic characteristics:** gender, sexuality, race, age, income, residence, and more.
- **Environmental sustainability:** The pursuit of policies that protect and improve the environment for present and future generations while enabling economic and social wellbeing within the planet's ecological limits.
- **Equity exchange:** Process through which shares of a company are traded, typically for funds or other capital
- **SME:** Small and Medium Enterprises
- **Sociotechnical analysis:** Analysis that considers the interdependent relationship between social elements (people, culture, rules, values) and technical systems (tools, processes, technology)

Deliverable 3.3 – Typology of Success

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Executive Summary

This report develops a comprehensive typology of how success is defined within the AI innovation ecosystem, with particular attention to the ways in which award schemes articulate and shape success criteria for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in this domain. Grounded in the Sociology of Expectations (SoE), the analysis demonstrates that awards are not neutral evaluators of innovation. Instead, they are sites where expectations about the future of AI are articulated and circulated. Awards translate aspirational visions - about growth, competitiveness, trustworthiness, or social impact - into concrete evaluative criteria that reflect which technologies, business models, and organisational forms are considered viable or desirable. In this way, awards help align technological development with particular futures while placing alternatives on the periphery.

Drawing on 91 award documents issued between 2023 and 2025 across the EU, UK, US and Asia, the analysis uses lexicometric clustering and discourse analysis to identify six interconnected dimensions through which awards conceptualise successful innovation:

1. Institutional success
2. Market success
3. Societal success
4. Ethical success
5. Governance success
6. Sustainable success

The findings show that success is largely defined through market-centric and institutional logics, reflecting long-standing business practices that privilege scalability, commercial readiness, revenue potential, administrative conformity, and are capable of rapid measurable impact. Institutional criteria further reinforce expectations about what kinds of organisations - by geography, structure, partnerships, and procedural conformity - are seen as credible actors with innovation ecosystems.

Conversely, expectations around ethics, sustainability, and societal wellbeing - as presented in key pieces of EU digital policy - remain sidelined in award practice. This suggests that, although the EU has articulated visions of trustworthy, human-centred, and sustainable AI, these expectations have not fully permeated the award ecosystem. Instead, the shift from the normative aspirations of the 2019 Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI to the compliance-oriented regime of the AI Act has produced a narrower governance expectation: responsibility is equated with legal conformity rather than ethical ambition.

These imbalanced expectations could generate structural consequences. Market-based evaluation privileges actors with pre-existing access to capital and administrative capacity, reinforcing gendered and racialised inequalities in entrepreneurship. It also incentivises environmental intensive AI systems - a clear tension with Europe's climate ambitions.

Meanwhile, socially-driven or early-stage ventures struggle to align with dominant expectations, limiting innovation diversity.

Overall, awards offer an underused level for articulating and shaping the expectations that drive AI development. Rebalancing evaluative criteria would support a more inclusive, sustainable, and strategically aligned European AI ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly positioned as a key component of Europe's economic competitiveness, digital sovereignty, and societal change. While AI could revolutionise various business and analytical tasks, the technology presents significant ethical, environmental, and societal quandaries. These issues have drawn the attention of politicians, academics, innovators, founders, and funders alike - demonstrating the breadth of stakeholders affected by AI.

Within this landscape, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an important role. SMEs have the potential to advance innovative technologies, but operate under significant restraints, including funding limitations, competition from Big Tech, and burdensome compliance requirements (See D3.1). How SMEs are evaluated and rewarded for their development of AI could impact the direction of Europe's AI ecosystem - and the kinds of futures possible with responsible AI development.

This report examines how 'success' in AI innovation is defined and operationalised through innovation awards. Awards are not merely celebratory or symbolic instruments: they function as powerful evaluative mechanisms that translate abstract visions of technological progress into concrete criteria against which applicants are judged. In doing so, they shape expectations about what kinds of AI applications are desirable, what forms of organisational behaviour are legitimate, and which trajectories of innovation are worthy of recognition. In this way, awards contribute to the construction of shared norms and priorities within the AI innovation ecosystem.

Drawing on the Sociology of Expectations (SoE), this report treats innovation awards as sites where socio-technical futures are produced and stabilised. Expectations about growth, competitiveness, trustworthiness, responsibility, and social impact are embedded - to various extents - within award criteria, implicitly communicating what constitutes as credible or successful innovation. These expectations could influence how organisations frame their projects, allocate resources, and justify technical choices.

The analysis is based on a corpus of 91 award-related documents published between 2023 and 2025 by organisations across Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Asia. Through a combination of lexicometric clustering and qualitative discourse analysis, the

report demonstrates that market-oriented and institutional criteria remain central while social, ethical, governance, and environmental considerations are marginally integrated into awards.

By developing a typology of success that encompasses institutional, market, societal, ethical, governance, and environmental dimensions, this provides a structured framework for understanding how success is currently defined in the AI awards ecosystem. Ultimately, the goal of this report is to make visible the implicit priorities embedded in innovation awards, highlighting how they could reflect pathways of technological development for SMEs. Further, it contributes to ongoing discussions about responsible innovation by showing how awards schemes could better serve societal good. Finally, it adds to the limited field of scholarship examining European AI innovation awards and SME development of AI.

2. Background

2.1 European SMEs and AI innovation

99% of European businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, defined by the European Commission as having fewer than 250 employees and an annual turnover below EUR 50 million (European Commission, 2023; Schwaeke et al., 2024). These firms represent the work of 24.3 million entrepreneurs and provide employment for over 85 million Europeans (European Commission, 2023). Given their centrality to the European economy, it is critical to understand how SMEs approach market disruptions, including emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI). Examining how SMEs perceive and engage with AI provides critical insight into the broader trajectory of Europe's digital transformation and its pursuit of sustainable and inclusive technological development.

2018 marks a significant turning point for AI development, ethics, and governance. Advances in deep learning and Natural Language Processing (NLP) highlighted the potential of generative AI while institutional actors began formalising guidelines to address the risks and benefits of AI deployment. Most notably, the EU High-Level Expert Group on AI published its Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI, establishing foundational principles for human-centred AI. This milestone provides a logical starting point for research into institutional and societal definitions of successful AI, which continue to evolve as technology and governance frameworks mature.

As interest in AI continues to grow, SMEs are increasingly working to develop their own AI solutions. However, research on SME development and deployment of AI remains limited, with most scholarship focused on Big Tech firms. To date, the majority of research examining SMEs' interactions with AI has focused on adoption, the integration of AI into ongoing business activities. Syntheses of this work identify financial, organisational,

technical, and data-related challenges as the core barriers to AI adoption (Borah et al., 2022; Le Dinh et al, 2025; Schwaeke et al., 2024; Schönberger, 2023).

2.2 Why focus on 'success' in AI

AI applications are frequently assessed in terms of technological performance or economic impact, such as efficiency gains, task accuracy, or productivity improvements. However, AI does not operate in isolation: it is embedded within the social, political, and economic contexts that shape - and are shaped by - societal expectations, norms, and values. Understanding what constitutes 'successful' AI requires moving beyond purely technical or financial metrics to consider how AI aligns with societal priorities and stakeholder perspectives.

As AI technologies rapidly advance, there is limited understanding of what constitutes successful AI, particularly from a societal perspective. Traditionally, success has been understood in technological and economic terms: scalable solutions that improve task efficiency, accuracy, and productivity and contributing to economic growth (Feenberg, 1991). However, AI applications operate within social contexts, reflecting and shaping societal values, biases, and aspirations.

Modern democratic societies are dynamic systems of negotiation, contestation, and consensus (Wagner, 2002). AI can disrupt social equilibrium, for example, through the unequal distribution of risks and benefits or labour-market impacts. This report adopts a sociological lens, investigating the conditions required for AI to be considered successful, how stakeholders articulate tensions and resolve conflicts, and the ways AI aligns with or challenges broader socio-political priorities.

2.3 Conceptual framework: Critiquing understandings of success using Sociology of Expectations

AI success is often defined in narrow technical or economic terms, but AI operates within social, political, and economic contexts that reflect and shape societal values, biases, and priorities. Understanding how success is conceptualised in AI and innovation requires integrating social, organisational, and economic perspectives.

The Sociology of Expectations (SoE) highlights how technological development is shaped not just by technical capabilities, but by social forces, including the beliefs, interests, and priorities of different actors. Expectations - socio-technical visions of the future - mobilise resources, guide innovation pathways, and influence which technologies and approaches gain traction (Bakker et al, 2011; Brown et al., 2003; Kerr et al., 2020; Kitzinger, 2008; Pinch & Bijker, 1984). In AI, this dynamic is evident in the cycles of hype and recalibration, where societal, investor, and media expectations shape adoption, funding, and development strategies, often privileging certain applications over others (van Lente et al., 2013). By

mapping these expectations, SoE illuminates the interplay between optimism, risk, and strategy that drives innovation, without reducing analysis to mere predictions of technological feasibility (Brown et al., 2003; van Lente, 2012).

For SMEs, SoE provides a lens to understand their specific role and constraints within the AI innovation ecosystem. SMEs adopt AI wishing to improve productivity and competitiveness, while facing resource, data, and skills limitations compared with larger firms (Konrad, 2006; Watney et al., 2021). Their expectations about AI's benefits and challenges influence both technology uptake and business strategy.

By prioritising this sociological lens, FORSEE seeks to uncover the tensions, negotiations, and contested visions surrounding AI, highlighting not only disagreements among stakeholders but also areas of consensus and alignment with societal priorities.

2.4 Innovation awards as a practical, evaluative mechanism of 'successful' AI

Innovation awards provide a valuable lens for understanding how institutional stakeholders - in this case, award recognition bodies - conceptualise and evaluate 'successful' innovation. Awards represent a formal recognition, typically conferred by an organization, institution, or governing body, that acknowledges exceptional achievement, performance, or innovation within a specific domain. Awards often involve a competitive selection process, guided by explicit or implicit criteria, and may include symbolic, reputational, or material incentives. Within the context of AI innovation, awards function both as markers of technological excellence and as mechanisms that signal value, legitimacy, and potential impact within the broader innovation ecosystem. These awarding entities vary in their organizational nature and underlying motivations, encompassing commercially driven entities, non-profit organizations representing sectoral interests, and public or governmental bodies. By establishing evaluation frameworks, emphasizing particular outcomes, and highlighting exemplary projects, these bodies influence perceptions of value and set benchmarks for excellence, legitimising particular notions of success through their award criteria.

It is crucial to understand how such bodies, by means of evaluating and rewarding specific forms of AI innovation, articulate expectations around which specific forms of AI innovation may be more worth pursuing. This dynamic does not inherently shape AI innovation, that is it does not predispose these specific forms of AI innovation but contribute to the process of creating shared norms and expectations around the field. In Bourdieusian terms, innovation awards can generate symbolic capital (e.g., public recognition, prestige) that may later, under certain conditions, be converted into economic capital through investments, partnerships, expanded customer base or access to other opportunities (Pret et al., 2016).

To be clear, our analytical interest here lies less in whether such conversion occurs in practice than in how this symbolic value, including shared norms and expectations, may be generated through award criteria. These conditions enable innovation award schemes to hold a distinct position in the wider innovation landscape. They publicly validate emerging

technologies, signal organisational or sectoral priorities, and shape shared understandings of what kinds of innovation deserve recognition and support.

Moreover, we choose to focus on award recognition bodies rather than on investment actors whose primary role is capital deployment (e.g., venture capital firms) because, on the one hand, the latter's underlying rationale may be more explicitly driven by their interest to have demonstrable positive returns on their investments and, on the other hand, the former structure their rationale around specific criteria that carry their evaluative logics, imaginaries, and expectations for AI innovation more broadly. Additionally, for award recognition bodies, prize competitions offer advantages over traditional R&D grants or funding schemes by shifting development risks onto participants, testing technologies before scaling, and lowering barriers to entry, thereby attracting a broader and more diverse applicant pool (Crawford & Wulkan, 2021). For participants, awards programs offer legitimacy and strengthen reputations (i.e., symbolic capital) by publicly affirming their credibility, placing them in a stronger position to raise economic capital (Choi et al., 2024).

While research assessing the impact of awards on AI is limited, similar dynamics have been observed in other funding areas. For instance, empirical work on platforms' funding programmes for journalism has demonstrated how Meta and Google made use of these initiatives to advance their own interests (i.e., fend off public scrutiny and regulation), while also predominantly rewarding journalistic projects that reflected and fit their own values, i.e., projects that advanced the integration of platforms' infrastructure in journalism under the guise of innovation in the newsroom or audience acquisition and monetisation (Papaevangelou, 2024; De-Lima-Santos et al., 2023).

Analysis of awards documents therefore provides insight into the narratives and evaluative logics structuring institutional understandings of innovation, while also revealing the benefits and constraints experienced by SMEs working with AI. A systematic, discourse-focused approach makes it possible to identify how specific constructions of innovation and success are produced, reinforced, and circulated across the ecosystem. In that sense, we can thus argue that award criteria may reflect award recognition bodies' values and strategic visions of how they seek to intervene and potentially structure the field, without necessarily claiming that their aspirations will ultimately materialise. Through this analysis, FORSEE hopes to explore how 'successful' AI is being constructed in Europe and how these constructions shape pathways for SMEs to build, scale, and legitimise their innovations.

3. Methodology: understanding 'success' in innovation awards

Award schemes occupy a distinctive position in the wider innovation landscape: they confer legitimacy and credibility onto winners (Choi et al., 2024), publicly validate emerging technologies, signal industry or organisational priorities, and shape shared understandings of what forms of innovation merit recognition and support. The texts these schemes produce - including calls for applications or criteria documents - function as discursive artefacts that articulate norms, expectations, and values. Through these means, award-giving organisations - whether public, private, or philanthropic - act as influential norm-setters, advancing particular visions of 'successful' innovation and steering technological development.

This analysis of awards documents therefore provides insight into the narratives and evaluative logics structuring institutional understandings of innovation in artificial intelligence, while also revealing the benefits and constraints experienced by SMEs working with AI. A systematic, discourse-focused approach makes it possible to identify how specific constructions of innovation and success are produced, reinforced, and circulated across the ecosystem.

3.1 Research question and contribution

This section addresses the central research question guiding the report: **How do organisations that provide awards and prizes define success in relation to the innovation and development of AI systems?**

Addressing this question enables two broader aims:

1. To identify the institutional logic of success, meaning how public and private actors articulate evaluative standards for innovation.
2. To provide a comparative framework for future analysis of how SMEs themselves perceive and pursue success within these parameters.

Award-giving bodies represent an under-researched node within innovation networks, despite their ability to confer reputational, symbolic, and financial support that shapes how success is perceived and pursued. FORSEE contributes to addressing this gap by systematically examining the discourses embedded within award materials, revealing how these contributions influence the directions and possibilities available to SMEs developing AI technologies.

3.2 Corpus and data collection

The methodology for assembling the corpus and conducting data collection centres on systematically identifying and gathering documentary materials produced by organisations that grant awards in AI and AI-adjacent fields. The criteria for inclusion emphasised documents that articulate success measures - whether implicitly or explicitly - thus capturing the range of parameters used by awarding bodies to assess innovation and entrepreneurial achievement in AI. Due to logistical limitations, only English-language documents were included, with the exception of one document in Portuguese and one document in Czech.

Data collection proceeded through a multi-stage process:

1. Identification of relevant organisations through targeted searches of institutional websites, innovation award databases, and public promotional channels.
2. Retrieval of documents describing each selected award scheme, including application and selection procedures, governance and judging structures, timelines, award benefits and incentives, and any stated obligations or expectations placed on award recipients:
    a. Calls for applications
    b. Nomination instructions
    c. Application forms
    d. Entry kits
    e. Terms and conditions
3. Collection of supplementary public communications (news items, social media communication)
4. Cataloguing of documents by year, document type, document language, issuing organisation, type of award, geographical region and topic of the award.

The collected documents were then organised into a structured corpus suitable for qualitative analysis (See Appendix 1). This curated corpus serves as the foundation for subsequent analytical stages. By assembling a coherent and comprehensive set of materials, the methodology ensures that the study draws on a robust evidence base reflecting both the breadth and diversity of award practices affecting innovators in the AI sector.

The corpus consists of 91 documents published between 2023 and 2025 capturing a representative cross-section of award-giving bodies. Key characteristics of the corpus include:

- **Awards selected:** The primary criterion required that the competition explicitly recognise or rewards innovation in artificial intelligence or AI-enabled solutions. As a secondary, non-mandatory criterion, preference was given to awards that explicitly identified small and medium-sized enterprises and/or start-ups as part of their intended target audience.

- **Geographical coverage**: The awarding institutions span multiple geographical regions, including the United States, Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East and Southeast Asia, alongside organisations with global mandates (e.g. United Nations–affiliated bodies) and regional scope such as Central European and Mediterranean initiatives. This broad geographical coverage enhances the representativeness of the sample by capturing diverse institutional contexts, policy environments, and innovation ecosystems shaping the recognition of AI-driven innovation.
- **Award type:** Awards were characterised as either recognition-based or offering financial rewards. Of the 91 documents included in the corpus, 73 were recognition-based and 6 included a financial incentive. This does not include the 12 remaining documents, which were either promotional material or news items.
- **Institutional type:** The corpus included documents from 35 separate organisations, selected to reflect a diverse range of institutional types active within the AI innovation ecosystem. These included 13 private commercial institutions, 6 private non-commercial institutions, 11 public institutions (ministries, implementing agencies, intergovernmental bodies), 2 public and private non-commercial organisations, and 3 public-private partnerships. Private commercial organisations provided the majority of the corpus, accounting for 69 documents. This institutional diversity was intentionally sought in order to capture variation in organisational mandates, strategic interests, and governance models, all of which are likely to influence how award schemes articulate and operationalise criteria of success.

3.3 Lexicometric clustering and discourse analysis

We adopted a mixed-methods approach combining computationally assisted textual analysis and discourse analysis, supplemented by an examination of characteristic Text Segments (TSs), which we define later in this section. The sample analysed in this study is not, and is not intended to be, exhaustive or representative of all AI-related award schemes, which are organised by a diverse set of actors, ranging from public bodies and philanthropic foundations to industry associations and corporations. The analysis should therefore be understood as exploratory rather than exhaustive or generalisable. Within these limits, the lexicometric analysis reveals some early recurring themes, which are both pragmatic (e.g., applicant type, application domain) and more aspirational or normative (e.g., ethics, societal impact), that gives us insight into how 'successful' AI innovation is articulated by award-giving bodies.

3.3.1 Computational analysis

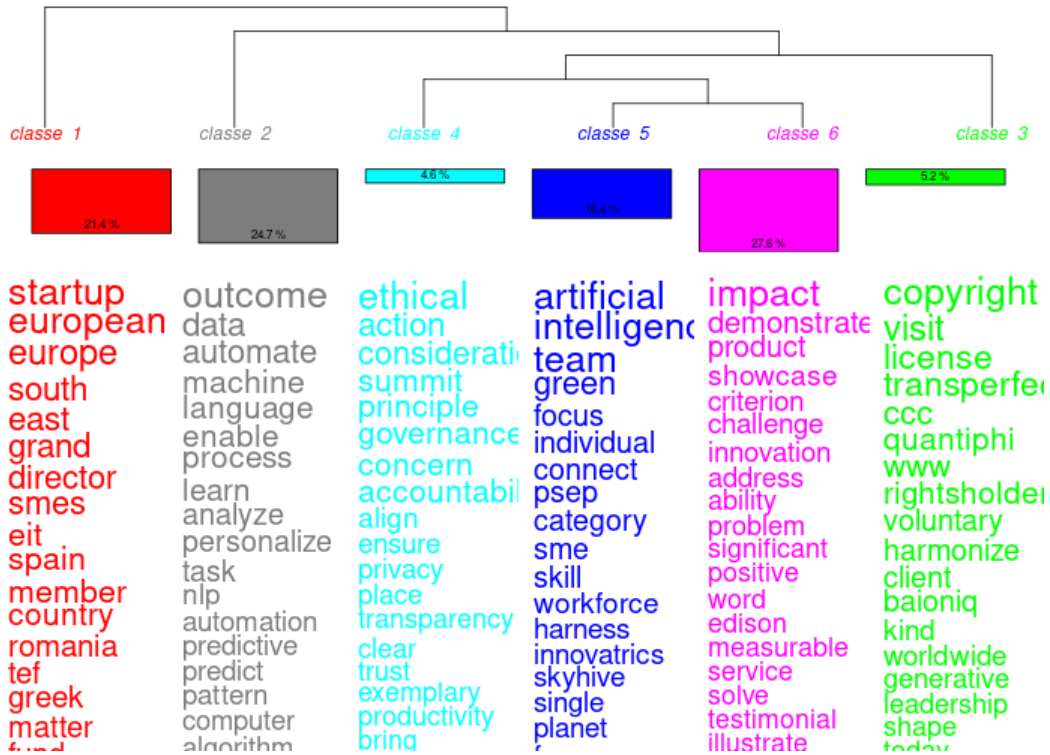
The computational analysis refers to the analysis enabled by IRaMuTeQ (Ratinaud, 2024), an open-source software that algorithmically dissects textual corpora into thematic clusters based on lexicometric principles of the corpus, while the interpretive dimension follows the conceptual framework of WP3 concerning institutional framings of innovation and success. This process, known as Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) (also known as the

Reinert method) (Reinert, 1993), allows us to explore and compare the discourse employed in different textual corpora (Chaves et al., 2017; Ratinaud et al., 2019).

There are several reasons for choosing the Reinert method. First, the project team has implemented IRaMuTeQ-based DHC across varied and large corpora (e.g. press discourse, platform-related texts, and grey literature) in prior research, which supports methodological continuity and enables cautious comparison with earlier results. Second, while alternative semi-automated discourse analysis techniques (e.g. topic modelling, supervised classification) offer different affordances, existing research suggests that the results produced by these methods are broadly comparable when applied to similar corpora (Alboni et al., 2023). The Reinert method was therefore selected as a well-tested and appropriate methodological approach for inductively identifying recurring lexical and discursive patterns even in heterogeneous textual corpora like the ones analysed in this report and across FORSEE.

Concretely, IRaMuTeQ partitions the corpus into a large number of Text Segments (TSs), which are typically, but not always, approximately 40 words in length (depending also on punctuation marks) and classifies them into thematic groups according to vocabulary distribution. The result is visualised as a dendrogram that visualises lexical proximities and divergences (See Figure 1). Each class produced by the DHC may be understood as a discursive frame, since co-occurrences of terms delineate coherent semantic fields through which success is defined. This approach aligns with inductive "frame mapping" (Ledouble & Marty, 2019), as it identifies frames without imposing predefined categories.

Figure 1
Dendrogram and class profiles



The dendrogram visualisation allows us to observe how classes relate to one another and whether certain interpretive themes (e.g. market readiness, ethics, data governance) cluster together. In addition, each class corresponds to a percentage of the corpus, indicating the proportion of all text segments in the dataset that were assigned to that class during the clustering process of the Reinert method. These percentages thus express the relative weight of each class within the corpus, based on how many TSs were grouped together as being lexically close.

3.3.2 Chi-Squared associations

It is also important to note that the analysis is agnostic to document provenance during clustering. In other words, DHC classes arise from the entire dataset without considering variables such as organisation or document type. These variables can be reintroduced later through chi-squared (χ^2) tests to assess over- or under-representation across modalities that were added to the corpus during data formatting (Ratinaud, 2024). To clarify, the chi-squared, or χ^2, procedure is foundational to IRaMuTeQ's processes as it measures the strength of association between particular terms or TSs and a given class (Souza et al., 2018). To illustrate, high χ^2 values indicate that a term or excerpt appears more frequently in that class. What is more, each DHC cluster consists of a set of characteristic TSs, i.e., short excerpts statistically representative of the class.

In this analysis, TSs refer exclusively to the TSs generated by IRaMuTeQ during the DHC process based on the original sourced documents listed in Annex 1. When quoting TSs in the findings, we draw on the highest-scoring χ^2 segments (default threshold $\chi^2 \geq 50$) to provide context for the lexical classes. In other words, we quote TSs that were both statistically important in each class and that were semantically informative and illustrative.

In doing so, we zoomed in on specific parts of the analysed texts in order to contextualise the dendrogram visualisations, verify the semantic coherence of classes, and select illustrative excerpts to facilitate the reading and understanding of the DHC classes.

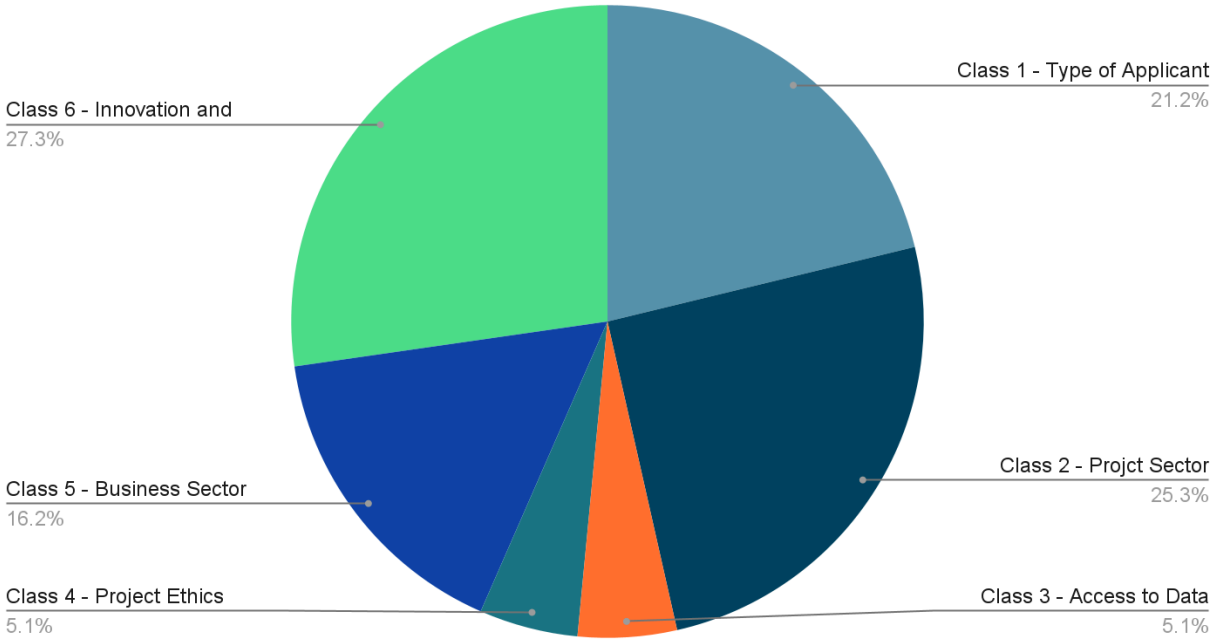
3.4 Integrating the analyses

The combined lexicometric and discourse analysis make it possible to trace how award-giving bodies encode priorities, norms, and expectations about what counts as successful innovation. In that sense, the goal of our analysis was to foreground the discursive framings, as articulated via specific vocabulary and lexical structures, that explicitly or implicitly articulated expectations. By doing so, we can understand both how the award-giving organisations frame success regarding AI and how these framings intersect with broader sociopolitical, economic, and ethical debates.

4. Findings: six ways awards define success

Our analysis of the corpus documents revealed that innovation awards construct "success" through six recurring themes. These themes reflect how awarding bodies evaluate applicants, what criteria they prioritise, and what forms of innovation they deem worthy of recognition. Although each theme emphasises a different dimension of success, together they show a consistent pattern: market-oriented measures dominate, while social, ethical, and environmental considerations remain secondary.

Figure 2
Representation of Classes within Corpus as based on Lexicometric Analysis



4.1 Class 1: type of applicant

The first and most foundational layer of evaluation concerns whether an applicant fits the award's institutional requirements. Awards typically define success through criteria such as SME or start-up status, geographic location, alignment with the programme's mission, and evidence of credible partnerships. This establishes a baseline of compliance before any assessment of innovation occurs. These criteria help funders manage risk and maintain procedural fairness but can inadvertently exclude unconventional or early-stage actors who lack administrative capacity.

The European AI Forum outlines one of these institutional criteria:

> Business angels can be nominated in case of confirmed involvement in more than 2 transactions and providing ongoing support to companies. Individuals associated with accelerator programmes may be nominated in case of confirmed funding of further rounds of companies supported under these programmes. - European AI Forum, 2025

4.2 Class 2: project sector

Class 2, which accounts for almost 25% of the corpus, focuses on the impact of AI on companies. Whether framed in general terms or as objectives for prize applicants, the underlying message is consistent: AI is expected to drive improved performance and increased profitability. A wide range of sectors is referenced, extending well beyond the engineering sciences to include health, education, marketing, and the humanities and social sciences. For example, the Cloud Awards call for solutions that "should have significantly enhanced learning or training experiences and improved educational outcomes," citing

AI-powered tutoring systems for individualized instruction and machine learning algorithms for adaptive assessment and feedback.

AI is framed both as a means to enhance productivity, efficiency, and profitability, and as a catalyst for wider societal transformation - for example, through personalised education or support for urban planning. Overall, AI's transformative capacity is most clearly associated with its ability to process large datasets. The Cloud Awards provides an example of a call for the deployment of AI innovation on a domain-specific level:

> Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing the telecommunications and unified communications sectors by driving automation, enhancing customer experiences, and optimizing network management. AI also plays a critical role in fraud detection, analyzing call patterns and user behaviors to identify and prevent fraudulent activities. - The Cloud Awards, 2025.

4.3 Class 3: access to data

An infrequently represented theme concerns responsible access to data. Awards highlight lawful data use, copyright compliance, licensing arrangements, and the need to respect the rights of data creators. This reflects growing concerns about the legal and ethical use of training data in AI systems. While these concerns had a limited presence in this corpus, these criteria align strongly with emerging regulatory frameworks such as the EU AI Act and ongoing global debates about AI and copyright (Martens, 2025).

The Business Intelligence Awards includes one of these rare references to copyright concerns:

> Responsible AI is good business practice and is the key to unlocking AI's untapped potential. The copyright ecosystem produces the high-quality content essential for training effective AI systems. Success is a future where AI innovation and copyright are complementary strengths. - Business Intelligence Awards, 2025.

4.4 Class 4: project ethics

Ethics appears only infrequently across award criteria, but when included, it signals expectations around fairness, transparency, accountability, and responsible AI deployment. Some awards explicitly recognise exemplary ethical governance, while others require applicants to demonstrate alignment with ethical principles or sustainability standards. However, ethical considerations remain marginal relative to commercial and technological indicators,

The Cloud Awards includes references to ethics in their awards documents:

> The best consideration of ethics and governance in AI award recognizes organizations that demonstrate exemplary commitment to ethical principles and governance frameworks in the development, deployment, and use of artificial intelligence technologies. - The Cloud Awards, 2025.

4.5 Class 5: business sector

Class 5 - which makes up 16.2% of the corpus - reflects how awards position AI innovation in relation to broader economic and policy priorities, effectively showing - either explicitly or implicitly - what forms of AI innovation are more desirable from an institutional strategic standpoint. In particular, awards emphasise green innovation, workforce upskilling, and alignment with national or EU strategies for digitalisation and sustainability. Here, success is linked to contributing to policy and societal sectors - such as education, health, or "green tech" - rather than simply generating commercial value. This suggests a growing desire to steer innovation toward public priorities, even if such considerations remain secondary to market performance.

The Czech National AI Platform provides an example of this class, discussing the potential for AI to support a policy-priority area in the education sector:

> Awards for individuals, teams or organizations that actively support artificial intelligence education at various levels of the education system and or are dedicated to integrating AI into education raising awareness of its potential and or promoting the ethical and responsible use of AI. - Czech National AI Platform

4.6 Class 6: innovation and impact

The most dominant substantive theme frames success through measurable innovation outcomes. Awards reward projects that demonstrate originality, market readiness, scalability, and clear evidence of impact. Indicators include having a product near or already in the market, demonstrating user uptake, or providing quantitative evidence of benefits. This theme reinforces a commercial logic: innovation is successful when it produces tangible - preferably rapid - results. Some award programmes counterbalance this by celebrating purpose-driven or impact-oriented initiatives, though these appear in the minority.

The National AI Awards - which operates in the United Kingdom - makes a clear call for applications capable of demonstrating measurable impact:

> The nominee must showcase a transformative AI driven technology product or solution that exemplifies creativity and originality addressing significant challenges or unlocking new opportunities across industries or domains the innovation should provide measurable evidence of its impact.' - The National AI Awards

4.7 Regional variations

Further, we leveraged the information about each organisation's country of origin to identify some potential patterns about each country's association with identified discursive framings as these were clustered through our DHC analysis (Figures 1, 2). In doing so, we examined TSs that were statistically overrepresented within particular DHC classes to

understand which of them are linked to specific countries of our sample. To be clear, when a country appears associated with a class, it indicates that phrases referring to that country appear more frequently in that class than others, rather than implying representativeness.

Based on these associations, we saw that Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, which are overrepresented in Class 5, are more frequently associated with framings that link innovation success to policy and societal priorities, such as education and alignment with broader policies. France's association with Class 4 corresponds to award discourse that foregrounds ethical principles, responsibility, and governance considerations, often articulated through public-sector or policy-adjacent initiatives. Romania, Spain, and Taiwan, which seem to cluster around Class 1, are more strongly linked to procedural framings of success centred on eligibility and organisational criteria. Further, references associated with the United States are overrepresented in Classes 2 and 3, aligning more closely with framings that prioritise application domains and technical deployment. By contrast, the United Kingdom and other 'Global' references cluster primarily in Class 6, reflecting a stronger emphasis on market-oriented notions of innovation success, including scalability and measurable impact. Lastly, we did not identify any statistically significant associations for Ireland, Lithuania, Qatar, or Singapore, indicating that award discourse linked to these contexts does not cluster strongly around any single evaluative framing within the dataset.

It should be repeated that these patterns should not be interpreted as comprehensive representations of national approaches to AI innovation. They reflect the organisational structure of the award recognition bodies and programmes associated with each context. So, we could say that, in our limited sample, based on lexical similarity of each award programme, industry-led, corporate-sponsored, and globally oriented awards tend to privilege technical applicability and market impact, while public or hybrid organisations more frequently articulate ethical, societal, or policy-oriented success criteria. In the next sections, we present the DHC classes in more detail.

5. Typology of success in innovation awards and prizes

To better understand how success is defined within the SME and innovation award ecosystem, we reassess existing categories through the lens of Sociology of Expectations (SoE) and established business model approaches. This approach integrates both market and non-market considerations, presenting a more holistic understanding of how AI companies create, capture, and distribute value. Our typology identifies six dimensions of success represented across the award corpus:

1. Institutional success
2. Market success
3. Societal success
4. Ethical success
5. Governance success
6. Sustainable success

While these categories overlap, each reflects a distinct logic shaping how success is conceptualised and rewarded. Collectively, they highlight the enduring dominance of market-oriented criteria alongside an emerging, though still peripheral, recognition of social, ethical, governance, and environmental considerations.

Table 1: Typology of Success

Type of Success	Overview	Indicator
Institutional Success	An organisation's structural and administrative alignment with the awarding body's eligibility requirements, strategic mission, and broader policy objectives.	Meets funder criteria, geographic eligibility, partnership status
Market Success	Measurable outcomes, profitability, originality, scalability, market readiness	Demonstrable impact, commercialisation, cost-benefit ratio
Societal Success	AI's cross-sector impact, relevance to social good	Application to health, education, or inclusion; community benefits
Ethical Success	Integration of ethics in design and deployment and alignment with EU	Human agency, oversight, bias mitigation, privacy, fairness, accountability mechanisms

	Guidelines for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence	
Governance Success	Compliance, responsible data, and IP management	Compliance with law, use of licensed data, transparency in model development
Environmental Success	Addressing complex environmental challenges	Green innovation, energy management plan, sustainable supply chain practices

5.1 Traditional markers of business success

Institutional and market success reflect two familiar pillars of traditional business thinking: organisational conformity to established rules and the ability to demonstrate commercial viability. Together, they create a dominant model of "success" that channels SMEs toward meeting bureaucratic expectations on one hand and market-driven performance metrics on the other. While these criteria provide structure and comparability, they also risk narrowing which organisations - and which forms of innovation - are recognised as legitimate or worthy of support.

5.1.1 Institutional success

Institutional success refers to an organisation's alignment with the administrative, strategic, and policy requirements of the awarding body. It captures whether an SME fits within the institutional boundaries of what judges consider eligible and worthy of reward. This success type corresponds primarily to Class 1 criteria, which account for 21% of the corpus.

Indicators of institutional success focus on demonstrable compliance with formal requirements. These include proof of eligibility, such as being headquartered in a designated region or operating within a priority sector, alongside documentation of financial stability, legal status, and corporate governance. Awards may also require evidence of partnerships or collaborative arrangements, which both validate organisational credibility and align applications with policy priorities that emphasise networks and joint innovation. Together, these indicators provide a structured filter that helps funders manage risk and ensure consistency across applicants.

Institutional success therefore functions as a baseline condition for participation. It supports procedural fairness, accountability, and compliance with strategic mandates such as strengthening regional ecosystems, promoting EU-based innovation, or encouraging cross-border collaboration. By confirming that applicants meet these criteria, it enables subsequent assessments of technological merit, market potential, or societal impact. In this sense, institutional alignment operates as a prerequisite for recognition.

At the same time, institutional criteria act as gatekeeping mechanisms. Requirements such as SME status, geographic location, and mission alignment filter applicants long before substantive evaluations of innovation take place. Together with market indicators, they create a framework in which procedural conformity and measurable commercial potential become the primary conditions for success.

This emphasis carries important risks. Strict adherence to bureaucratic templates may disadvantage organisations with strong innovative capacity but limited administrative resources or unconventional structures. Early-stage research initiatives, mission-driven organisations, or informal collectives may struggle to translate their work into standardised application formats, even when their contributions are socially or technologically significant. As a result, institutional conformity can reinforce existing exclusions, narrow the diversity of eligible actors, and limit experimentation in organisational forms, ultimately shaping not only who is funded but what kinds of innovation are made possible.

5.1.2 Market success

Market success - which is the capacity to generate profit and demonstrate commercial viability - remains the dominant lens through which innovation is judged. Within our awards corpus, references to market-based indicators appear more frequently than any other category of success, as represented within classes 2, 5, and 6. This implies that evaluators continue to rely on traditional business metrics as proxies for innovation quality. For example, the International Telecommunication Union's 'AI for Prosperity' awards 'celebrates AI initiatives that foster economic growth, industry innovation, and social progress.' Further, the Globee Awards 'highlights the transformative impact of artificial intelligence on exceptional customer service' and the Global Tech and AI Awards asks applicants to demonstrate how AI has 'improved efficiency, productivity, or customer experience within the organisation.'

The focus on market-related outcomes carries important risks. Prioritising commercial outcomes can inadvertently reward exploitative or extractive practices that deliver rapid results while externalising social and environmental costs (O'Higgins and Zsolnai, 2018). Start-ups may achieve strong market performance through environmentally harmful resource use, precarious labour arrangements, or opaque data practices that compromise users' rights.

5.2 Assessing the inclusion of societal and environmental considerations

Although institutional and market-based indicators dominate the corpus, societal, ethical, governance, and environmental considerations also appear, albeit peripherally. In our corpus, this is largely captured through Class 5, which reflects how awards position AI innovation in relation to broader economic and policy priorities.

Their comparatively limited representation indicates that market and institutional success remain the primary benchmarks, yet their inclusion reflects recognition of AI's broader societal impacts and the growing European rhetoric of "innovation for social good," shaped by EU digital policy and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This positioning is reflected in FORSEE's Typology of Success, which incorporates societal, ethical, governance, and environmental categories alongside market-oriented metrics. In practice, however, these dimensions remain secondary: for-profit firms tend to pursue social or environmental value only where it does not conflict with financial performance.

One reason for the marginal status of social and environmental success types is the difficulty of measurement. Unlike revenue or commercialisation potential, social and environmental impact is hard to quantify and isolate from broader societal trends, making attribution to individual firms challenging. As a result, societal success risks remaining symbolic: acknowledged in principle but weakly embedded in decision-making.

The EU's ethical framing of AI provides an important backdrop. In 2019, the High-Level Expert Group on AI introduced seven non-binding principles for trustworthy AI, including human oversight, robustness, privacy, transparency, fairness, societal and environmental well-being, and accountability (European Commission, 2019). These principles continue to inform how success is articulated in innovation award criteria.

However, the policy context has shifted with the adoption of the EU AI Act. Whereas the HLEG framework focused on normative guidance and agenda-setting, the AI Act marks a move toward operationalised legality, emphasising enforceable compliance and clearer distinctions between developers, deployers, and users (Golpayegani et al., 2025).

5.2.1 Societal success

Societal success offers a conceptual balance to market-based evaluation, capturing the extent to which an innovation contributes to public welfare, equity, and social cohesion while benefiting all human beings and future generations. Debates over the very nature of AI itself demonstrate how difficult it is to assess the social impact of innovations. Supporters of emerging technologies emphasise their transformative potential: machine learning and AI systems can accelerate scientific discovery, enhance public services, and expand accessibility in ways previously impossible. At the same time, critics highlight the very real risks these technologies pose, including the potential to exacerbate social inequality, deepen labour precarity, perpetuate discriminatory practices through algorithmic bias, and drive job displacement. Within the context of innovation awards, this creates a challenging dynamic: projects may be celebrated for technical sophistication or market readiness while their broader societal consequences remain secondary considerations.

In this context, success is defined not solely in economic terms but as the demonstrable ability of a project to generate tangible benefits for communities or societal groups. Criteria often emphasise measurable improvements in health, education, accessibility, inclusion, or broader community development, reflecting a practical rather than purely aspirational conception of societal impact. In other words, projects are considered successful when they can evidence concrete social outcomes, such as enhanced service delivery, improved

participation of underserved populations, or measurable contributions to equity and inclusion.

A subset of projects demonstrated a clearer commitment to social good. Awards from Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia demonstrated a relatively strong commitment to policy and societal priorities. Further, organisations such as the International Telecommunications Union, the French Ministry of AI, and the Edison Awards provide examples of awards that actively recognise projects with strong social objectives, signaling a deliberate orientation toward innovations that address societal needs.

5.2.2 Ethical success

Despite the strong normative foundation provided by the HLEG's 2019 Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI, ethical considerations appear only marginally within the award corpus: just five percent of criteria explicitly referenced ethics. Where present, ethical success is demonstrated through commitments to bias mitigation, participatory design, or transparency beyond regulatory minimums. The rationale for including ethics lies in building long-term public trust and steering innovation toward socially beneficial outcomes. French awards demonstrated a higher level of commitment to ethical considerations, providing a potential example for awards-givers seeking to build on this success type. Furthermore, the Cloud Awards has a specific category for 'best consideration of ethics and governance,' recognising organisations 'that demonstrate exemplary commitment to ethical principles and governance frameworks in the development deployment and use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.'

The deprioritisation of ethics in award documents is ambiguous and open to different interpretations. On the one hand, it may signal a shift from ethics as non-binding principles to binding rules; in this sense, ethical concerns are not marginalised but rather translated into enforceable regulation. On the other hand, this finding may point to a move towards "procedural fetishism", an emphasis on due process in AI governance which, in practice, risks overlooking broader societal risks posed by AI (Zalnieriute, 2025). The data in the present study do not allow for a definitive assessment of this issue, indicating the need for further research.

5.2.3 Governance success

The rise of AI-driven business creates new governance considerations, as demonstrated by the awards criteria analysis. In a digital economy, governance success refers to the responsible and legally compliant management of AI systems, data, and intellectual property. Key indicators of this success indicator include legal compliance, use of licensed data, and transparency in model development. In the US, the Globee Awards calls for applicants that are 'promoting transparency, accountability, and decision making at the board level.' Data privacy and management are also critical concerns: in our corpus, 5% of criteria referred to access to data. This is again found within the Globee Awards, which

'highlights the importance of data protection and privacy in advancing responsible artificial intelligence.'

References to governance success in the corpus are intertwined with references to ethical success. The United Kingdom's National AI Awards, for example, calls for applicants to 'showcase how [their] AI implementation adheres to ethical principles, ensures compliance with financial regulations, and prioritises data security and customer trust criteria.' In the post-AI Act landscape, successful governance marks the transition from aspirational notions of "trustworthy AI" toward their operationalisation through formal oversight mechanisms, documentation requirements, and risk-management obligations. As regulatory expectations tighten, governance has become an increasingly important marker of institutional credibility, offering funders evidence of due diligence and reducing both legal exposure and reputational risk.

5.2.4 Environmental success

As the planet hurdles towards environmental collapse, the need to transition away from carbon-intensive activities and advance green solutions has never been more critical. However, issues related to sustainability were largely overlooked in the awards criteria. In the context of the corpus, environmental success refers to efforts that reduce the ecological footprint of AI systems, such as optimising computational efficiency, using renewable energy, adopting responsible procurement practices, or developing applications that support environmental monitoring and climate goals. In spite of the importance of these measures, awards criteria rarely treat environmental performance as a meaningful indicator of achievement.

The relative absence of environmental considerations from our corpus stands in stark contrast to the EU's Twin Transition Strategy, which calls for a simultaneous digital and green transition (Muench et al., 2022). While European policy frameworks seek to embed sustainability within technological development, these ambitions are increasingly undermined by the rise of power-hungry AI infrastructure. The disconnect between high-level policy goals and award-level evaluative practices signals a broader governance failure: by not integrating environmental metrics into innovation assessments, award-givers in our corpus risk incentivising resource-intensive AI systems that undermine Europe's climate commitments and exacerbate global inequalities in technological resource use.

5.3 Navigating trade-offs: inside the danger zone

The 'Danger Zone' captures the tensions that arise when economic and social objectives run counter to one another - a dynamic frequently discussed in social enterprise business strategy (Sparviero, 2019). When a firm enters the Danger Zone, the decision they make reveals that 'success' is often defined by which side of the trade-off is prioritised. The prevalence of market-based considerations within awards criteria relative to social outcomes suggests that - broadly speaking - financial concerns take precedence, revealing the trade-offs embedded with prevailing definitions of innovation success. Firms operating within the 'danger zone' may inadvertently advance a wide range of digital harms, including

algorithmic bias, environmental degradation, legal non-compliance, labour exploitation, and more.

These harms expose the limits of a success model grounded primarily in profitability and performance metrics. When awards privilege measurable market outputs over more complex forms of public value, they reinforce incentives that may undermine the social and environmental goals invoked in European policy discourse. The 'Danger Zone' demonstrates that success is not neutral: it is shaped by institutions' priorities and by the harms they are willing to accept.

6. Awards as instruments of policy and cultural norm setting

The Typology of Success developed through this analysis provides insight to the institutional logic underpinning how innovation is recognised, valued, and rewarded across European SME award schemes. Award criteria do not just reflect the prevailing norms of what constitutes 'success': they actively shape the boundaries of worthwhile innovation. By signalling what counts as valuable, fundable, or impactful, these awards exert a formative influence on how European SMEs conceptualise their purpose, design their strategies, and present their achievements. As a result, SMEs are incentivised to frame their work within the dominant, market-based narratives of funders, reinforcing a particular model of success within European innovation ecosystems.

This dynamic raises important questions about whose interests and priorities are being embedded within these instruments and how alternative visions of success may be restricted by current evaluative norms. Over time, this could narrow the diversity of the innovation ecosystem as resources are steered towards ventures that align with funder-defined conceptions of success rather than those focused on public need.

6.1 Alignment with business narratives

This typology of success reflects core components of mainstream business narratives. Although AI is frequently referred to as a 'disruptive' technology (Păvăloaia & Necula, 2023), it does not appear to have fundamentally disrupted dominant understandings of what business success looks like. Instead, AI is largely incorporated into existing logics of value creation and capture, where institutional legitimacy and market performance are the primary benchmarks. Ultimately, this may sideline social, environmental, ethical, and governance considerations - a tendency which can also be identified in our corpus.

This pattern is best understood within the context of mainstream business narratives, which can be interpreted through the reading of business model frameworks. They are both descriptive and normative, explaining how firms operate while shaping how success is

defined and pursued (Massa et al., 2017). By specifying the structures and processes through which financial, growth, or social goals are achieved (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Sparviero, 2019), business models establish what counts as legitimate performance. Positioned between expectations and strategy, they translate future-oriented visions into organisational decisions, as anticipated markets, adoption trajectories, and societal demand shape how value is created and captured (Brown et al., 2003; van Lente, 2012).

6.1.1 Dominance of market-oriented considerations

The prominence of institutional and market criteria in award programmes reflects the persistence of these dominant narratives. Frameworks such as the Business Model Canvas, the Balanced Scorecard, lean start-up methodologies, and strategic alignment models all define success through profitability, scalability, competitive advantage, and efficiency (Krivkovich et al., 2025; Madsen, 2025; Massa et al., 2017; Maurya, 2012; Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010; Rigby et al., 2023; Sondhi, 1999; Vayyavur, 2020; Waterman et al., 1980). Award indicators such as market impact, revenue potential, commercial readiness, cost–benefit efficiency, and competitive positioning therefore reproduce long-standing conventions about what constitutes "successful" innovation.

Institutional criteria further reinforce this orientation. Skills such as navigating funding systems and producing polished applications are unevenly distributed, often disadvantaging early-stage, community-based, or non-traditional organisations. Awards may thus unintentionally privilege actors already aligned with dominant business norms, narrowing diversity in the innovation ecosystem.

AI-specific business models largely reproduce this traditional approach while operationalising technology through datafication, algorithm development, automation, and AI-first innovation (Gibson, 2024). This pattern suggests that AI's greatest contribution lies less in a new business model than in augmenting value propositions - enabling new offerings and embedding AI as a core rather than peripheral feature - and in elevating data and AI technology as central business-logic drivers (Gibson, 2024; Weber et al., 2021). Data source, model type, customisation level, and continuous learning become key business model dimensions (Weber et al., 2021). In this sense, AI changes how value is produced, but not what counts as value.

The emphasis on institutional and market success has implications for equity and inclusion. Market-oriented indicators often presume access to capital, networks, and institutional legitimacy, thereby privileging entrepreneurs with existing structural advantages. Extensive research shows persistent gendered and racial disparities in financing, mentorship, and investor credibility (Eurochambres Women Network, 2025; PitchBook, 2025). Metrics that appear objective may therefore mask unequal opportunities, and awards that rely heavily on them risk reproducing these inequalities, even when evaluators aim to be fair. This is reinforced by the lack of diversity among funding decision-makers, with only 17% of general partners and 34% of principals in European venture capital firms being women (Female Innovation Index, 2024). Entrepreneurs from minority ethnic groups also face systemic challenges undermining their ability to access capital (Legrain & Fitzgerald, 2022;

Lyons-Padilla et al., 2019). Together, these dynamics can create structural barriers to achieving the early-stage metrics needed to secure further funding. However, since this study did not examine the composition of judging bodies, it remains unclear whether these patterns are reflected in the corpus.

At the same time, awards present an opportunity for intervention. Adjusting institutional success criteria or their weighting could help counterbalance structural disparities and support a more diverse innovation ecosystem. For example, prioritising organisations with diverse teams would not only advance inclusion but also align with evidence that diversity strengthens organisational performance (Gomez & Bernet, 2019; Rock & Grant, 2016). In this sense, awards-givers could not merely reflect dominant business narratives but actively participate in shaping which forms of innovation, organisation, and entrepreneurship are made visible and legitimate.

6.1.2 Impact of social considerations on business approaches

Social, environmental, ethical, and governance dimensions remain secondary within mainstream business models. Their presence in the typology reflects recognition that innovation cannot be judged on economic performance alone, but they are still treated as complements to, or constraints on, market success.

While some emerging AI applications integrate social or environmental goals, such as sustainability or energy optimisation, these remain the exception rather than the norm (Paeplow et al., 2025). Broader frameworks like Social Entrepreneurship, ESG, the Triple Bottom Line, and the Circular Economy attempt to embed non-market values more systematically, but they still negotiate tensions between profit and public good (Scholtysik et al., 2023; Sparviero, 2019; Joyce & Paquin, 2016; Knight, 2023). Even corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts aim to integrate social and environmental considerations into ongoing business practices (HEC Paris, 2022). The differences between these frameworks and the various extents to which they prioritise profit over purpose demonstrates the breadth of approaches in navigating the 'Danger Zone.'

Meanwhile, the wider business landscape has seen the emergence of approaches explicitly centring environmental concerns - such as the Triple Bottom Line, ESG frameworks, the Circular Economy, and the Progressive Economy (Knight, 2023; O'Higgins and Zsolnai, 2018; Sparviero, 2019;). However, this shift is unfolding alongside a growing political and commercial backlash against ESG and so-called "woke capital," particularly in the US (Eccles, 2024; Harmes, 2025; Impact Europe, 2025). These narratives frame environmental and social considerations as illegitimate or ideologically motivated, creating pressure to retreat from sustainability commitments. In this context, the limited emphasis on environmental criteria in AI awards represents a missed opportunity. Without stronger sustainability benchmarks, definitions of innovation risk remaining environmentally shortsighted and misaligned with Europe's climate and resilience goals.

The awards corpus mirrors this dynamic. The inclusion of societal success in awards assessment signals an emerging recognition that innovation is not only about profit, but

also about public value, equity, and social responsibility. However, their secondary position reflects the fact that mainstream business models still treat such concerns as constraints on or complements to market performance. Going forward, steps should be made to encourage awards criteria that elevate societal and environmental considerations.

6.2 Alignment with European policy discourses

The patterns observed in the award corpus echo broader trends in European AI governance. The rapid growth of AI systems - and the resultant growth in policies designed to ensure their responsible use - has led to a fragmented AI governance landscape. Within this ecosystem, the European Union has emerged as a key actor in the development of AI-related policies - most notably, the High-Level Expert Group's guidelines for trustworthy AI and the 2024 adoption of the EU AI Act (Golpayegani et al., 2025). While these policies have a markedly different focus than funding awards criteria, the gaps within both of these spaces reflect a larger struggle to acknowledge the sustainability and societal challenges associated with AI technologies.

6.2.1 A growing emphasis on compliance

Before the passage of the EU AI Act, the policy landscape had a strong focus on ethical AI, data governance, and risks to vulnerable groups. According to a 2025 analysis by FORSEE researchers, 'This emphasis aligns with both the non-binding nature of the EU HLEG documents and their mission to promote ethical AI, raise awareness of AI risks, and provide a strategic roadmap, particularly in 2019–2020, when the concept of trustworthy AI was emerging as a popular yet still unfamiliar topic' (Golpayegani et al., 2025).

Attention shifted after the passage of the AI Act, moving from 'aspirational ethical AI' toward 'operationalised legal AI, with a particular emphasis on regulatory enforcement.' The AI Act and its associated guidelines formalise this shift by distinguishing between actors involved at different stages of the AI value chain (developers, deployers, and end users) each bearing distinct regulatory obligations to ensure trustworthiness (Golpayegani et al., 2025). This move toward "legal AI" is mirrored in the award criteria analysed in this study. While explicit references to ethics remain relatively rare (just 5% of the corpus explicitly concerned ethics), funders increasingly operationalise compliance and accountability as indicators of governance success.

Awards occasionally reward demonstrable adherence to data protection law, responsible intellectual property management, and transparency in model design - criteria that directly align with the AI Act's regulatory expectations and appear intermittently in our corpus. The emphasis on governance-oriented metrics reflects the broader European policy shift from normative aspiration to measurable enforcement.

As already noted, this shift may indicate an inclination towards binding regulation that translates abstract principles into actionable rules. On the other hand, it may indicate a prioritisation of legal conformity over broader ethical or societal reflection, a tendency that

may encourage 'tick-box' compliance. The Typology of Success developed in this report demonstrates this complex dynamic: while market and institutional dimensions remain dominant, the limited but consistent appearance of ethical, societal, and environmental indicators hints at an emerging policy and funding commitment to aligning innovation with sustainability and public value.

However, this emphasis on compliance could introduce a series of structural challenges for European SMEs. Larger, resource-rich organisations are typically better equipped to navigate complex legal frameworks, while more than half of European SMEs citing 'regulatory obstacles and the administrative burden as their greatest challenge,' (Draghi, 2024, p. 8). Further, there is a risk that 'procedural fetishism' may drive administrators to follow rules without considering the impact these rules may have on marginalised groups or larger societal good - as was the case with responses to the Digital Services Act (Griffin, 2025, see also Zalnieriute, 2023 for an early critique of procedural fetishism in the AI Act). In such contexts, compliance becomes a ceiling rather than a floor, adding cost and slowing deployment without necessarily improving the substantive quality of governance.

6.2.2 Advancing the 'twin transition'

Despite growing attention by media, activists, and researchers to the potential social and environmental harms posed by AI - ranging from algorithmic bias to massive energy consumption in data centres - the analysis shows what some scholars describe as a 'waning of attention to environmental impacts of AI as well as its broader effects on the future of work in the post-AI Act era,' (Golpayegani et al., 2025, see also Bresnihan & Brodie, 2025). This gap is echoed in the awards corpus, where social and environmental considerations were markedly less prevalent than market indicators.

The relative absence of environmental considerations from our corpus stands in stark contrast to the EU's Twin Transition Strategy, which calls for a simultaneous digital and green transition (Muench et al., 2022). While European policy frameworks seek to embed sustainability within technological development, these ambitions are increasingly undermined by the rise of power-hungry AI infrastructure. The disconnect between high-level policy goals and award-level evaluative practices signals a broader governance failure: by not integrating environmental metrics into innovation assessments, award-givers in our corpus risk incentivising resource-intensive AI systems that undermine Europe's climate commitments and exacerbate global inequalities in technological resource use.

6.3 Awards as a vehicle for public value

The Typology of Success demonstrates the prioritisation of market-centric narratives over public-value-oriented understandings of successful innovation. While commercial viability is essential to a thriving innovation ecosystem, its disproportionate weighting reduces the visibility and value of social, ethical, and environmental contributions. A more balanced assessment ecosystem - one that values market performance and social contribution as interdependent - would enable SMEs to pursue innovation that is economically viable and socially responsible. Such an ecosystem would recognise that long-term competitiveness

increasingly depends on social trust, environmental stewardship, and inclusive economic participation - not just early-stage market traction.

To advance the growth of a responsible AI ecosystem with a holistic, socially-informed understanding of 'success,' it is worth reconsidering which narratives should be embedded into European innovation awards. Much of the existing awards corpus originates outside of the EU, creating a misalignment between the values embedded in award criteria and Europe's strategic priorities. By contrast, national awards in the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea are used to guide technological development, spotlight strategic sectors, and cultivate domestic innovation capacity (Crawford, 2025). Without a similar purpose-driven infrastructure, Europe risks undermining its digital sovereignty.

Awards can complement Europe's risk-averse funding ecosystem by recognising and resourcing companies aligned with public-interest values. As Crawford notes for the Center for Security and Emerging Technology, 'While prize competitions are not a suitable replacement for basic and applied research, they can be used as vehicles to encourage private sector innovation in areas of national security or economic interest,' (2025). This strategic function is particularly important for responsible and sustainable AI, where the societal benefits are high but immediate commercial returns may be limited.

For existing award schemes, reorienting criteria - especially among public-sector and mission-driven funders - could serve as a practical tool to shift institutional norms. Awards - with their lack of equity exchange - can reward forms of innovation that the market does not: social inclusion, environmental sustainability, community impact, ethical governance, and responsible AI deployment. By prioritising social and environmental good, awards can broaden evaluative criteria and counter structural biases possibly embedded in current systems, including gendered and racial inequalities.

This approach aligns with Mazzucato and Ryan-Collins's argument that public value is not created solely by correcting isolated market failures, but through the actions of public, private, and civic actors shaping markets (2022). Markets are shaped by institutional arrangements, norms, and policy choices, meaning that awards can steer innovation toward socially desirable missions rather than reinforcing purely commercial logic. Embedding public-value principles into award design positions these schemes as instruments for directing innovation, expanding organisational capabilities, and fostering cross-sector collaboration that generates solutions which would not emerge through private incentives alone.

The European Commission's Next Generation Internet (NGI) initiative offers a potential model for intentional, value-driven support. Building on over €250 million in initial funding, NGI supports research, innovation, and mentoring under Horizon Europe to develop a trustworthy, secure, and inclusive Internet aligned with European values. Through an agile cascade funding mechanism, NGI Research and Innovation Actions support short, high-impact research cycles for academic researchers, hi-tech startups, and SMEs, combining programme vision, technical support, and mentoring to advance market- and society-relevant technologies (Next Generation Internet, 2024).

6.4 Study limitations

This report - which is based on the analysis of 91 documents outlining awards criteria - aims to contribute to a larger understanding of how 'success' is conceptualised by AI innovation awards givers. However, our methodology presents key limitations.

The scale of the EU-based awards landscape is small compared to its US and UK counterparts, reflecting the larger reality of the AI innovation ecosystem. As a result, awards from organisations headquartered in the United States and United Kingdom dominated the corpus while just 11 of the documents were sourced from EU countries. Furthermore, Of the 91 documents in the corpus, 89 are in English (See Appendix 1 for full corpus details) - meaning that awards from other languages were largely excluded from our analysis (the corpus included 1 document in Czech and 1 document in Portuguese). As such, the characteristics of our corpus thereby limit the extent to which our analysis can comment on the larger state of the European awards ecosystem. Further research should include a broader linguistic scope and focus more specifically on European awards (if available).

Further, the structure of our corpus offers limited differentiation between organisations and documents. This limits our ability to conduct comparative analysis and provide tailored recommendations. Additional research could improve in this area by analysing the relevant representation of classes based organisation type or award type.

The complete reliance on public-facing awards documents also limits our analysis. While this allows us to evaluate how funders communicate their priorities, it neglects internal discussions, judging processes, and organisational preferences - all of which may differ from public communication. Additional research should include interviews with awards givers to better account for internal discussions and how funders' non-public processes shape decision-making.

7. Conclusion: looking toward a more responsible innovation awards ecosystem

This report demonstrates that innovation awards carry expectations of successful AI, currently privileging growth, scalability, competitiveness, and investment readiness, reinforced by institutional norms of legitimacy and compliance. As a result, only a narrow set of innovation trajectories is consistently recognised. Social, ethical, governance, and environmental dimensions remain peripheral, aligning with a broader shift in European AI governance from early commitments to trustworthy AI toward compliance-focused regulation. Awards therefore risk reinforcing a restricted notion of success at odds with

Europe's stated priorities of public value, democratic resilience, inclusion, and the Twin Transition.

Reconfiguring these expectations is essential. The Typology of Success developed here provides a foundation for a more holistic understanding, where market performance and social contribution are interdependent. Long-term competitiveness increasingly relies not only on commercial traction but also on social trust, environmental stewardship, and inclusive participation.

Awards are uniquely positioned to drive this shift. As non-dilutive mechanisms, they can recognise and resource values overlooked by markets and risk-averse funding systems - such as responsible AI governance, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and community impact. Embedding public-value principles into award design acknowledges that markets are shaped by institutional choices, not merely corrected after failure.

For Europe, expanding a purpose-driven AI awards ecosystem is strategically important. Much of the current landscape is shaped outside the EU, risking misalignment with European priorities. EU-backed, mission-oriented schemes should broaden their scope and integrate social, environmental, and governance criteria alongside market considerations. Further research should examine variation across award-givers, alignment with other funding mechanisms, and outcomes related to systemic bias and SME participation.

Ultimately, innovation awards should function as instruments of both recognition and direction-setting. By redefining success, Europe can steer AI innovation toward futures that are economically viable, socially grounded, and aligned with public-value objectives.

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9. Appendix

Appendix 1
Awards Corpus

ID	YEAR	ORGANIZATION	TYPE OF INSTITUTION	TYPE OF DOCUMENT	TYPE OF AWARD	COUNTRY
1	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
2	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
3	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
4	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
5	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
6	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
7	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Nomination instructions	Recognition	United States
8	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Press release	Promotion - not offering the award	United States
9	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Press release	Promotion - not offering the award	United States
10	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Press release	Promotion - not offering the award	United States

11	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Press release	Promotion - not offering the award	United States
12	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	Press release	Promotion - not offering the award	United States
13	2025	Business Intelligence Group	Private commercial	ebook	Recognition	United States
14	2025	Globee Awards	Private commercial	Entry Kit	Recognition	United States
15	2025	Globee Awards	Private commercial	Entry Kit	Recognition	United States
16	2025	Globee Awards	Private commercial	Entry Kit	Recognition	United States
17	2025	Globee Awards	Private commercial	Entry Kit	Recognition	United States
18	2025	AI Awards Ireland	Private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	Ireland
19	2025	Qatar Digital Business Awards	Public	Website	Recognition	Qatar
20	2025	Edison Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United States
21	2025	Tech & AI Live: Global Tech & AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
22	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
23	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
24	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
25	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
26	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
27	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom

28	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
29	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
30	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
31	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
32	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
33	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
34	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
35	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
36	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
37	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
38	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
39	2025	The National AI Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
40	2025	Tech Breakthrough organization	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	Global
41	2025	Newsweek AI Impact Awards	Private commercial	Website entry kit	Recognition	United States
42	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Application Form	Recognition	United Kingdom
43	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
44	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom

45	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
46	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
47	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
48	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
49	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
50	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
51	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
52	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
53	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
54	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
55	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
56	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
57	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
58	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
59	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
60	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
61	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom

62	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
63	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
64	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
65	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
66	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
67	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
68	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
69	2025	The Cloud Awards	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	United Kingdom
70	2025	UN International Telecommunication Union	Public/ intergovernmental organization	Website	Recognition	Switzerland (Global reach)
71	2025	French Ministry for AI	Public	Call for Contributions PDF	Recognition	France
72	2025	Taiwan Ministry of Economic Affairs	Public	News	Financial	Taiwan
73	2024	European Patent Office	Private/Public	News	Recognition	*EU*
74	2025	The Business Times and the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD)	Public	News The Business Time	Financial	Singapore
75	2023	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)	Public	Press release	Financial	United States

76	2025	Austria Wirtschaftsservice	Public	Special terms& conditions website	Financial	Austria
77	2025	European AI Forum	Private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	*EU*
78	2024	Internet privatstiftung Austria	Private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	Austria
79	2023	Junta de Andalucía	Public	Website	Promotion - not offering the award	Spain
80	2023	Comunidad de Madrid	Public and private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	Spain
81	2023	Axians and IDC	Private commercial	Website	Recognition	Portugal
82	2024	prg.ai	Private non-commercial	Newsletter	Promotion - not offering the award	Czech Republic
83	2024	Czech National AI Platform (CNAIP)	Public and private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	Czech Republic
84	2024	Innovatrics	Private non-commercial	News	Promotion - not offering the award	Slovakia
85	2024	Romania Insider	Private commercial	Press Release	Promotion - not offering the award	Romania
86	2024	Practica Capital	Private commercial	Facebook Post	Promotion - not offering the award	Lithuania
87	2024	Central European StartUp Award	Private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	Hungary - Scope: Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, North

						Macedonia, Montenegro
88	2024	European Commission	Public	Press Release	Financial	*EU*
89	2024	European AI Forum	Private non-commercial	Terms and Conditions	Recognition	Belgium (European scope)
90	2024	eit Manufacturing and AI-MATTERS TEF Greek Satellite	Public and private non-commercial	News	Financial	EU
91	2025	Union for the Mediterranean	Public and private non-commercial	Website	Recognition	Spain (scope: Mediterranean area:Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Palestine, Tunisia, and Türkiye