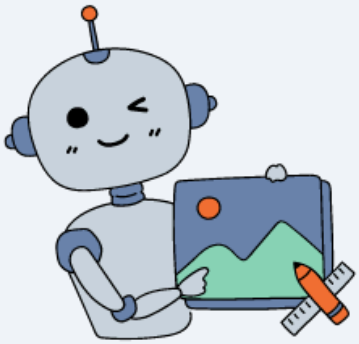
SmartStart Newsletter

Latest news from the SmartStart Teacher Academy



smart start

ERASMUS+

Teacher Academy

Project Update

SmartStart Conference: Three days in Eichstätt – From October 7 to 9, 2026

Laila Khalil

The lead team warmly welcomed all SmartStart partners to the project's Midterm Conference at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt.



We are social!

Check out or Social Media Presence on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn to stay updated on project insights, teacher training activities, and the latest developments in AI in education. Join the conversation and discover how SmartStart is shaping innovative and responsible teaching practices.

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The first day opened with an introduction to the meeting, an account of where the program now stands, and a clear outlook on the objectives the conference was meant to achieve. In the evening, the partners came together over dinner — a welcome chance to reconnect, to continue the conversations begun in the sessions, and simply to enjoy the evening in one another's company.

Thursday turned to the substance of the project, with structured reporting from every work package followed by exchange and discussion on the current status of each and on the next steps ahead. The day closed with the partners gathered around a shared table, and again the talk ran well past the dessert.

The final day began with the project manager, Nils Bötter, reporting on the workshop devoted to procedures, documentation, requirements, timelines and the practical questions that arise in day-to-day coordination. A summary of the outcomes followed, together with reflection on what the three days had shown and an outlook on the next phase of the project. The conference closed with final remarks and warm farewells — partners leaving Eichstätt with a shared and honest picture of where SmartStart stands, and with a common plan for the months that remain.

To all the partners returning to the handsome town on the Altmühl, Eichstätt offered views of the baroque buildings and structures around every corner, a placid river, and an old city center whose streets invite wandering between sessions. This made the return, halfway through the program, feel like an occasion rather than a routine meeting.

A meeting with Dr. Heiner Böttger as SmartStart's Midterm Conference opens in Eichstätt

Laila Khalil

During the October conference, I spoke with work package 8 leader, Dr. **Heiner Böttger**, who opened the conference together with Barbara Lenzgeiger, about what these gathering days are to be achieved.



On Welcoming All the Partners in Eichstätt

It was a genuine pleasure — and he made no secret of it. “Dear colleagues, dear partners, and, above all, dear friends,” he began. “It is a genuine pleasure to welcome you back once again — back to Eichstätt, back to the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, and back into the shared space of our *SmartStart Teacher Academy*. For these few days, please consider KU your university and Eichstätt your home.”

There was a symbolic weight to the setting, too. The partners met in the Holzersaal, the ceremonial hall of the former summer residence of Eichstätt's prince-bishops, built between 1732 and 1735 by the architect Gabriel

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de Gabrieli, and renovated most recently between 2010 and 2013; today that building houses the university's leadership and central administration. Above them, the ceiling fresco by Johann Evangelist Holzer, painted between 1736 and 1738, opens onto a painted sky with Flora, Aurora and Apollo in his sun chariot. “So, in a sense, you are standing right at the university's center of power,” he told the room. “For the next few days, I hope we can also make it a center of inspiration.” He also noted that the university's management sent its best regards and, as a mark of appreciation, had left the project its “two best rooms,” the hall itself and the adjoining senate hall, for the working sessions.

On Not Making the Meeting an Examination of Anyone’s Progress

Dr. Böttger made clear that the honesty the project needs depended on this. “This is not an examination. It is not a judgment of individual partners, and it is certainly not an exercise in criticism or fault-finding. No one is here to defend themselves or their work package,” he said. “Instead, this conference should be understood as a shared, honest, and supportive status quo report.” His image for it was simple and memorable: “A status report is not a courtroom. It is a map.”

“Being open about unfinished work, challenges, or changing circumstances helps all of us. It allows us to plan realistically and offer support where it is needed,” he explained. “In an innovative European project involving many institutions and closely connected work packages, some developments will move faster than expected. Others will need more time, discussion, or adjustment. That is part of the process.” Openness, in other words, is not criticism: it “is a service to the project and to one another.”

On What People Should Take Home from this Halfway Meeting

The intent was clarity above all. “By the time we leave Eichstätt tomorrow, each of us should have a clear understanding of what we have achieved, what remains to be done, which decisions we have made, who will take responsibility for the next steps, and what the key deadlines are,” he said. “We should also know where our own work depends on someone else's contribution — and where someone else is waiting for ours.” The ambition was, in his words, “a shared and realistic roadmap for the second half of SmartStart.”

On the Project Becoming a Network of Relationships

“What once existed mainly as an ambitious proposal has increasingly become a living European project: a network of people, institutions, expert groups, schools, ideas, documents, tools, and — perhaps most importantly — relationships,” he said.



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Behind every result presented during this conference, there are you people." He said to all members, "Thank you for your commitment, expertise, and patience. When processes have taken longer than expected, when responsibilities have had to be clarified, or when cooperation across countries, institutions, languages, and work packages has become complex."



On What to Focus on during the Conference

Paying attention to the seams between the packages, "the places where a conversation, a shared decision, or a little practical support can help us move forward. I would like to remind us to listen with generosity, speak with kindness, and bring your experience into the discussion. If something is unclear, please don't hesitate to ask. If you need support, please say so. And if you see a way to help, please offer it," he said. "We all bring different expertise, perspectives, and working contexts to SmartStart. Our strength lies in how we bring them together."

At the end of his presentation, Dr. Böttger, as the team lead, thanked all for the effort they gave to the project. "Thank you, Barbara, for putting all the weight on your shoulders in demanding times at the Lehrstuhl and with your little ones at home. Thank you, Nils, for keeping the loose ends together and managing the project so naturally, independently and excellently. Thank you, Frau Mayer, and thank you, Bianca, for organizing everything so thoughtfully well."

On What SmartStart is Actually Doing

It is, he admitted, difficult to explain — though a signature video currently in preparation should soon help the partners to be precise. Until then, he has a pitch and a story he tells. An American friend from Nebraska, Travis, recently asked him exactly that question.

"Well, Travis," he said, "we're helping elementary school teachers work confidently and responsibly with AI. There are two connected parts. First, we're developing an online course, drawing on research and the expertise of people from different fields. We're looking at what research tells us about children's learning and educational technology, and connecting that with teachers' everyday classroom needs. Then comes practical experience at partner schools. Teachers try out ideas, reflect on what happens, and learn from colleagues across Europe. Research accompanies the programme, so we can keep evaluating, revising and improving it."

Travis's verdict: "Okay, that sounds definitely useful."

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On the Babylon Program

“Imagine you're teaching a class with children from eight different countries. Different home languages. Different levels of English. And very different levels of the language you teach in,” he continued. “And you want to explain something. Some children follow easily. Others are still trying to work out what your first sentence meant.

“Now imagine those children have earbuds connected to the Babylon app. You speak, and the tool translates what you're saying into each child's own language — in a voice that sounds almost exactly like yours. For example, you explain something in German. A moment later, a child hears your explanation in Ukrainian. Another hears it in Swedish. Another in Portuguese. Your words. A voice they recognize. A language they implicitly understand. That's what we want Babylon to make possible: helping children take part in the same classroom conversation on the same level while supporting the different languages they bring with them. Think of the possibilities for plurilingual classrooms!”

His friend saw a wider horizon almost immediately.

“Wait a second. This could go way beyond schools, right?”

“Yes — think about adults. European specialists like us and our colleagues, working together on this project. Or doctors from different countries discussing a case. Legal experts working through a complicated question. Each person speaks their own language and hears the others in that language, without everyone having to switch to English as a bridge. That's the wider possibility: sharing expertise across languages on the highest levels.”

Travis, by now excited, pursued the implications: if you were explaining something genuinely complex, you could use the language you know best — your own native tongue — and the person listening could understand you in theirs. “Exactly,” he agreed. “That's a possibility worth exploring.”

On How Much Work Remains

The figures he gave made an impact: “18 months – 78 weeks – 548 days – 788,400 minutes, about 47.3 million seconds, and counting. We should waste no time. Let's begin by looking at where we are, and then decide together where we will go next.”

Behind the conference sits the SmartStart Teacher Academy program, which is building an international teacher training offer in two integrated phases. The first is an online course, made accessible through eTwinning, that gives participants the technological, pedagogical and didactic foundations for AI and digital media in primary schools. The second is a practical phase in cooperating project schools using ERASMUS+ mobility, grounded in an Expert Panel and a systematic literature review, and designed for permanent integration into partner university curricula and national systems of further teacher training.

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Upcoming Events

20 November 2026 | European Education and Skills Summit 2026

Location: Brussels, Belgium (hybrid)

Theme: Schools for Tomorrow: Fit for the Era of AI

Format: Hybrid – plenary sessions available online, interactive sessions on-site

Participation: Free online attendance

The summit will explore how education systems and schools can adapt to the opportunities and challenges of artificial intelligence.

More information:
https://education.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/events/2026-european-education-and-skills-summit

23–24 November 2026 | Kraków Forum on AI in Education: From Research to School Practice

Location: Kraków, Poland (hybrid)

Format: Hybrid – on-site and online participation

Participation: Free of charge

Registration deadlines: 15 November 2026 (presentation abstracts) | 20 November 2026 (attendees)

Hosted at the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków (UKEN), the forum brings together researchers and education practitioners to explore AI in teaching, learning and assessment, AI competencies, and the ethical, legal and social implications of AI in education.

Registration:
https://forms.gle/NJTRirALsUZwDX8P6



26 November 2026 | Pan-European Conference on Digital Education

Time: 15:00–16:30 CET

Format: Online (livestream)

Theme: Wonder Learning for Digital Natives

The conference focuses on digital education and innovative approaches to learning for digital-native generations.

Livestream: Facebook | YouTube

More information:
https://www.erasmuspluscourses.com/pan-eu-conference-on-digital-education.html



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