

“Strategic Partnership for Innovation in Erasmus+. A Study on the Impact”



Abstract: This publication is dedicated to the results of the educational cooperation, organised in strategic partnerships – Key Action 2 - that develop innovative learning methods in different European educational systems. The reference universe of the institutions chosen for research consisted of the projects funded in 2014¹. 11 institutions were researched (out of a total sample of 31 partnerships for innovation in the School and Adult Education sectors): 6 institutions for the School sector, and 5 institutions in the Adult Education sector. In the Higher Education sector all 9 contracted partnerships in the first year of Erasmus+ were analyzed. The study intends to analyze the impact of the Key Action 2 strategic partnerships for innovation projects, i.e. those projects which were inspired by research and experimented with methods and teaching practices that could be replicated in other contexts and environments.

Key words: Qualitative impact – Erasmus+ strategic partnership for innovation - Valorization – Dissemination -Sustainability

Areas of investigation, objectives and tools

“Strategic Partnership for Innovation in Erasmus+. A Study on the Impact” is the second study conducted by the Italian National Agency Indire (Studies and Analysis Unit). Key word of the research is the quality of innovative practices in European contexts. The survey focuses on strategic partnerships for innovation implemented under Erasmus+ Key Action 2 which aims at enabling organisations to work together in order to improve their provision for learners and share innovative practices. Under the Key Action 2 organisations can apply for two types of projects: 1) **Strategic**

¹ In 2014 the Italian National Agency Indire financed 16 strategic partnerships for innovation for school sector (KA201), 15 for the adult education sector (KA204), and 9 for higher education (KA203)

Partnerships for Exchange of Good Practices: the primary goal is to allow organisations to develop and reinforce networks, increase their capacity to operate at transnational level, share and confront ideas, practices and methods, and 2) **Strategic Partnerships Supporting Innovation.** These projects are expected to develop innovative outputs and engage into intensive dissemination and exploitation activities of existing and newly produced products or innovative ideas². The survey was focused on the second type of strategic partnerships.

Strategic partnerships for innovation offer two approaches: one that focuses on the objectives, the methodologies chosen and the training needs of the specific sector(s), and the second that aims to promote collaboration and interaction between different institutions operating in similar fields of education and training. This is a big challenge for Europe of education and learning because it aims to strengthen, renew and share educational practices and policies, in order to improve access for all to the knowledge and development of skills by investing in work and study. The main objective of the study was to analyse the implementation process of partnership activities and to analyse the impact of the results in the short to medium term within the strategic partnerships for innovations projects funded in 2014.

Structure of the study

The publication is composed of four sections: the first introduces the framework, the objectives, the methodologies adopted and the instruments used for the survey; the second and third illustrate the results of the investigation in the school, higher education and adult education sectors; the fourth collects the contributions by project coordinators of Italian institutions involved in the survey. The study was focused on a qualitative analysis of the impact at individual, institutional and systemic level of the **KA2 Strategic Partnerships for Innovation (large scale)** for the School, Higher and Adult education sectors, funded in **2014. 20 projects** were analyzed out of 40 strategic partnerships funded in the call 2014.

In the survey, three subsequent activities have been foreseen:

1. Sampling the projects
2. Developing the tools for qualitative impact analysis, i.e. questionnaire and impact visits
3. Organising three specific focus groups, one for each sector covered by the survey.

The selection criteria adopted were mainly inspired by the thematic approach. As for the School sector, the privileged themes were **social inclusion, didactic methods for language learning** and the **struggle against school despair**, with the emphasis on dual-training systems (learning and working) and enhancement of the learners' skills.

Regarding the Adult Education sector, chosen topics related **to formal and non-formal learning for specific groups, migrants and inmates, social inclusion and innovative methodologies for the enhancement of skills.** In total 11 partnerships for the school and adult sector were selected and all 9 funded projects for the Higher Education sector³.

²More details on the Erasmus+ programme can be found in the Guide, <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>

³ All the partnerships projects studied are described on the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform which collects the contents, results and final products of the European projects: <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/>

Objectives and tools of investigation

The study focused on three aspects:

- Impact at individual/professional level (high impact, positive in term of development and improvement of professional and soft skills)
- Impact at institutional level (high impact, positive impact in term of internationalization of the institution involved in the partnership)
- Impact at systemic level (critical point)

Tools used included questionnaire, impact visit and focus group (peer discussion). As first step, a tool for data collection was developed and in-depth analysis of the aspects related to the dissemination and the impact of results at individual, institutional and systemic level were conducted. The total number of collected questionnaires was 19: 6 for school, 8 for university and 5 for adult education sector. Secondly, impact visits were conducted to beneficiaries of the investigated projects. During these visits, the beneficiaries were invited to reflect on some of the most relevant activities linked to the project, with a particular focus on sustainability in term of benefits and impact of the results after the conclusion of the project, both within the partnerships and outside it. Other investigated aspects were related to dissemination, valorization and sustainability and those issues were addressed to Italian coordinators and partners. This method proved to be very useful and functional to find out and discuss the strategies (activities, methodologies, measures, initiatives) related to the dissemination, valorization and impact of results. After the conclusion of the visits, 3 focus groups were organized as final research activities - one for each sector, aimed at analysing the strategies put in practice in order to valorize and improve the sustainability of the results (third step).

Results of the questionnaire on impact and sustainability: school, higher and adult education.

The main findings are similar across all the sectors taken into consideration – school, higher and adult education.

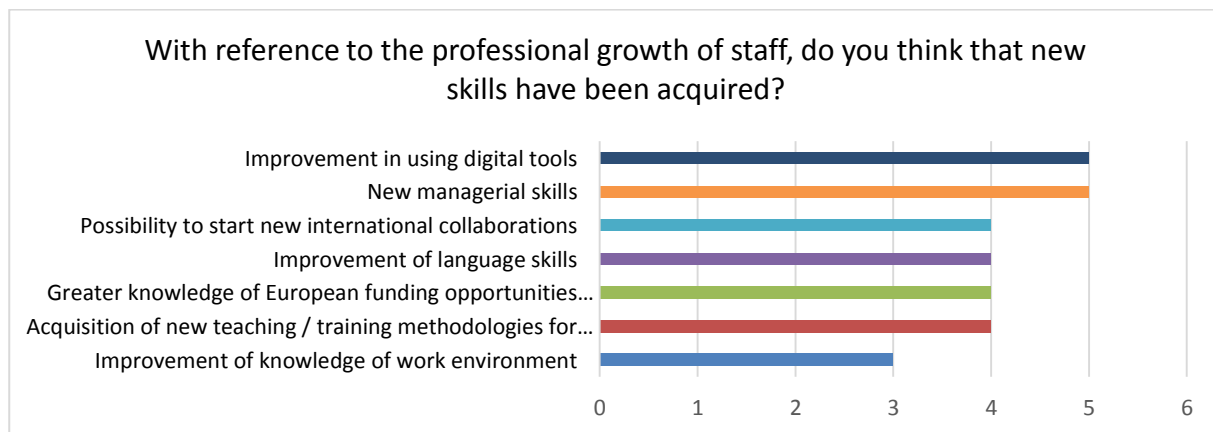
The institutional impact proved to be important and to have produced relevant changes in term of administrative and management procedure in both sectors. Moreover, the third sector (consortia, associations, social cooperatives, foundations, etc.) has skillfully explored areas and new frontiers focusing on social inclusion, multilingualism resulting from migration, flows and methodologies imported from other cultural contexts. For the formal and non-formal adult learning sector, the impact on the institutions has been fundamental and decisive for the growth and development of new educational and training methods and approaches at local and regional level. The more companies, local and national authorities are involved in the design process, the more the projects increase their transferability to other contexts, in order to be fully integrated in the system.

Strongly linked to the type of partnership and the level of synergy between the partners, the impact was perceived more at individual and organisational levels (see figures beneath).

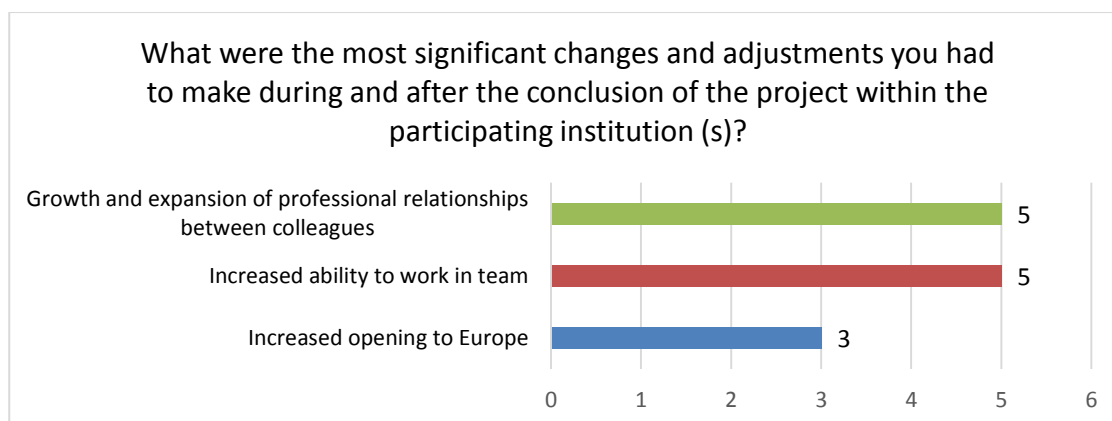
In the figure the qualitative findings came out of the questionnaire addressed to the Italian coordinators of the strategic partnerships of the 3 sectors. As a pilot study sample was limited: 19 questionnaires were filled in.

School education sector

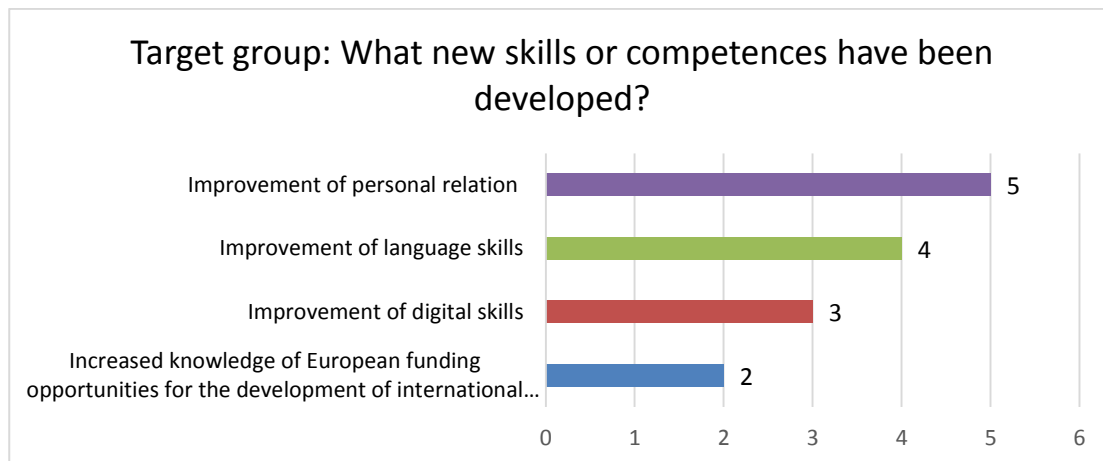
Impact on staff involved in the 6 strategic partnerships



Impact on institutions involved in the 6 strategic partnerships

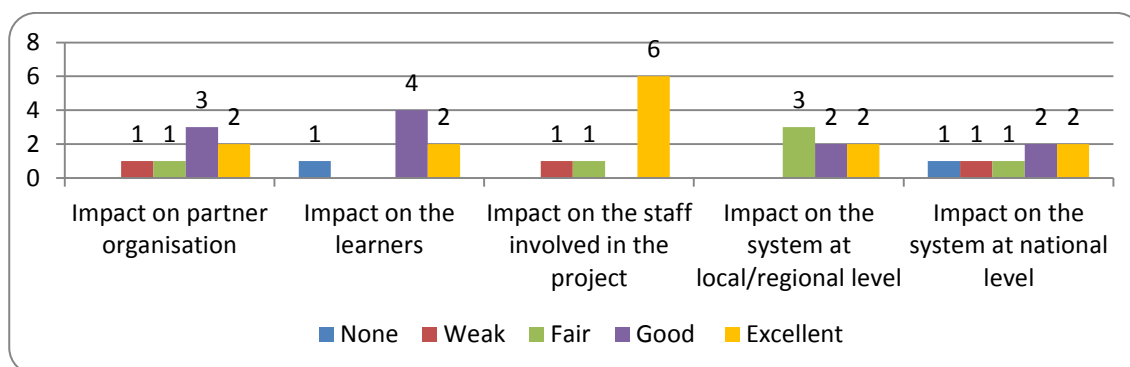


Impact on students involved in the 6 strategic partnerships



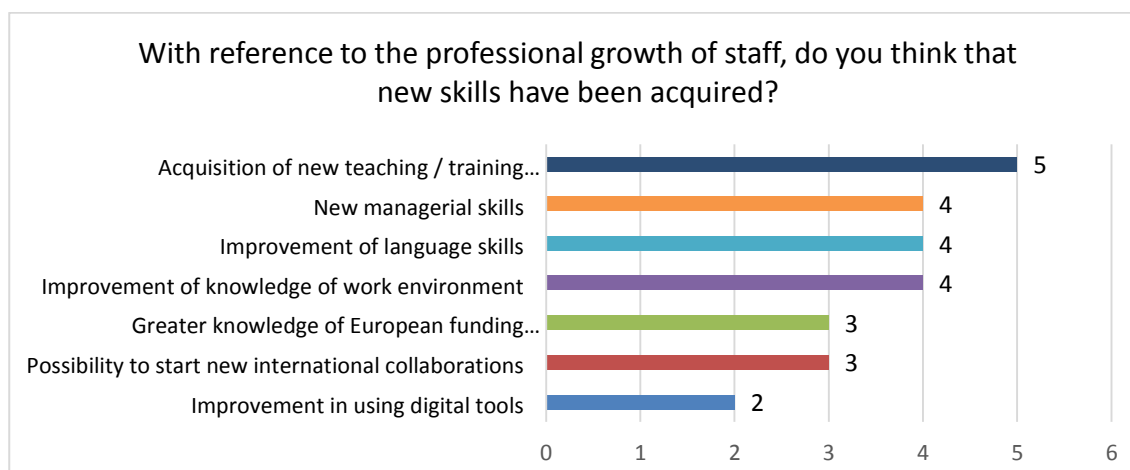
Higher education sector

Impact at individual, institutional and systemic level related to the 9 partnerships coordinated by Italian institution



Adult education sector

Impact on staff involved in the 5 strategic partnerships



Impact on institution involved in the 5 strategic partnerships



Impact visit results - from project ideas to shared partnerships results

The impact visits were conducted to investigate partnerships developed by school and adult sectors, in total 11 visits were carried out. All the meetings were held not only with the institute coordinator but also with the other Italian partner institutes involved. The debate was consistently wide-ranging and keenly subscribed. An initial result shared with our respondents is the idea that the *impact* is an essential part of the implementation process, it is necessary to evaluate results and generate new skills and abilities for future improvements.

The most experimental phase of our survey was unquestionably the impact visits, a moment for sharing and discussion with the beneficiaries and their local partners; all the participants welcomed us with great interest and openness. The main result was a mutual willingness to retrace the fundamental stages, the difficulties and the successes of the project work, with a view to eventual exploitation.

Talking together with the representatives we gained greater awareness of some of the concepts and aspects of the processes used to disseminate and exploit the results. The beneficiaries described how the intellectual outputs were produced, talked about the field research, and the methodologies adopted and renewed in a European key. During the debate the representatives had the opportunity to present experiences, meetings and activities that surfaced during the project, sometimes not envisaged in the work plan but which ended up representing added value.

For the Agency this was an opportunity to observe the projects in the concluding phases of the activity, at a certain distance from the end of the work, a time when it made more sense to speak of the impact assessment and verification of the short- and medium-term results. For the institutions, the meetings were an opportunity to evaluate the work from another view point, in particular, the Italian partners, together with the coordinators, were able to recount their experiences and examine the skills available in depth, as well as their role within the partnership.

Other emerged aspects were linked to the peculiarities and differences within each project: in some partnerships the role of the coordinator proved to be too specific, in other cases, the partner institutions were less involved or less collaborative. However, at every meeting, we found representatives able to find solutions and strategies to solve and improve the results. During the impact visits many concepts related to

exploitation and impact were examined. The discussion was focused on how and when a particular **impact (benefit) produced transformations and changes for people, practices and institutions, and ultimately, the systems themselves**. Regarding the sustainability, emerged a common consideration, namely, the opportunity to continue using the project results beyond the end of the period covered by the grant. Occasionally, final products may be used and exploited in the long term, also through marketing, accreditation or integration.

Not all the innovative results can be sustainable, and it is important to consider dissemination and exploitation as a progression that goes beyond the duration of the activities in order to involve and inform the policy and other stakeholders.

During impact visits it emerged that the partnerships for innovation had produced a multiplicity of strategies and intellectual outputs which, as multifunctional open resources, are easily usable and transferable to other learning contexts, and that the replicability of the results is also ensured by the production of materials and final products in various languages, a guarantee for the dissemination and sustainability of the results. There can be no doubt that the involvement of the local environment and other stakeholders is essential for good dissemination and a sustainable outcome. The domino effect of the dissemination, initiated by multiplier events, as has happened for other dissemination channels, is all the more effective if local, regional and national authorities are involved from the outset.

The results of the focus group - experience exchange among peers and networking activities: dissemination, valorization and sustainability

After the conclusion of the visits, 3 focus groups were organized - one for each sector, in different time - aimed to investigate the strategies put in practice in order to disseminate, valorize and improve the sustainability of the results.

The focus groups were structured in two parts, with one session in the morning and another in the afternoon, and divided into three parts devoted to impact, dissemination, and exploitation, and finally to the sustainability of the results. In the second part of the day, the round table was opened to all of the Agency's participants from other offices (management, finance, communication), so that they could actively participate in the debate. Each group was composed by 10 participants and moderated by Studies and Analysis Unit.

The agenda of the focus groups included an informative presentation by staff from the Italian unit of the **Eurydice network** on activities that had been carried out for years, producing publications in a comparative European key with insights and descriptive analyses to do with educational issues of relevance to the national and international debate. A useful channel for all those who wish to learn about and perform research on education systems and policies in Europe and a response to implement high quality and innovative strategic partnerships.

The participants involved in the focus group had a peer discussion on the dissemination and exploitation of the innovative results, the so called Intellectual Outputs, be they tangible or not tangible. In general, participants agreed that the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform, is functional, but it is not very visible and is not useful to fully exploit them. It looks like an archive, a repository, and is used only by those who already know the programme. A suggestion that came out during the discussion is to integrate it into the Erasmus+ social media and communications channels, so that the results are highlighted and promoted in turn.

Another aspect emerged during the focus group is related to the key role of local, regional and national authorities, since they can amplify the effects of dissemination in the community.

In the focus group dedicated to the higher education sector, participants suggested the idea of organising international thematic meetings during the implementation phase of the project, in order to favor "cross fertilization" among projects focused on similar topics and to stimulate new synergies. In order to capitalize on the results – and therefore make the best use of European funding - it was suggested to introduce a *premium (or rewarding) mechanism*, launching *restricted Calls* addressed only to successful projects which achieved high-quality results, in order to sustain them in transferring the results to a wider audience. Networking, getting to know the local area and creating strong ties with local stakeholders, are all fundamental aspects if we want the outcomes to have full impact on the beneficiaries, especially the indirect ones. It is necessary to create contact bridges that can facilitate the dissemination of results with the support of facilitators.

The pool of participants was full of suggestions to increase the sustainability of the projects. The working group highlighted the recurring drawbacks and problems encountered: the prevailing opinion is that a lack of financial support hinders the creation of methods and initiatives to ensure and engender lasting effects/benefits (impacts). The project has a specific contractual duration and often the projects do not have funds available to ensure the continuity of the results, with the sites becoming obsolete and out of date. Precisely for this reason, the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform is fundamental in documenting and collecting all the project work from around Europe.

These activities produced an interesting discussion on systemic impact. It represents a critical point and there is still a lot of work to be done: there is a lack of communication and exchange channels between national authorities and the group of innovators and experts at the heart of European cooperation. The Ministries of Education in Erasmus programme countries should find common solution to share and put in practice the innovative teaching, and pedagogical methods developed within Erasmus+ strategic partnerships. The participants commented that the initiative to organize the focus group could be structured as an activity of exploitation and exchange between peers on other occasions, including round tables for discussion. Yet another consideration regarding potential strategies and initiatives of use for sustainability and the exploitation of results, underlined the need to involve stakeholders in the implementation phase of the project and not only in the dissemination phase. Pivotal for replicability and interest on the part of other sectors are investments in the territory, at local and regional levels, to actively engage both public and private stakeholders, who could encourage the sustainability of the projects. Another aspect that emerged during the debate is the question of *policy*, and the choice of the proper context in which to disseminate and transfer the outcomes.

Conclusions

"The project only starts when it is finished"–Participant, Teacher, First focus group

At the end of the analysis activities, we were more aware and positively encouraged to continue in this process of reflection on the quality of the impact and the sustainability of results. Two fronts of the survey - i.e. the school and adult sector (although with due distinctions in terms of motivation, areas of interest and educational needs) - showed many points of convergence. In the school, managers, teachers and administrative staff all mentioned the importance of creating links with the territory, in

particular with the municipalities and *School Regional Offices*, linked to the Italian Ministry of Education, but also with other schools and with other areas of learning. Moreover, they expressed the need to network inside and outside the institutions. It is clear from the debates that the impact, sustainability, dissemination and exploitation of projects are interconnected and that we cannot separate one aspect from another. These all play an important role when evaluating an application for a strategic partnership project, just as they do in the final evaluation of the finished project. It is appropriate, therefore, to question the results of an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership in consideration of these characteristics, in order to obtain maximum efficiency from European grants, while still adopting a realistic approach. This experience of the research, deeply interesting and significant for the Agency will continue in the coming years (for the next calls), in order to give an increasingly important value and meaning to the quality experiences at international level, so that they can be of example and stimulus for those institutions, associations and organizations without experience in the Erasmus+ cooperation.

Questionnaire used for the investigation on school and adult education sector

Key Action 2

Strategic Partnerships for Innovation

QUESTIONNAIRE

Project Data

Institution

Latin name

Type of institution

Town

Contact person

Position

Legal Representative

Partnership Data

ID

Title

Main topic(s)

Countries involved

Motivation

Intellectual Output(s)

Tangible Non tangible

Did you encounter any problems in developing the I.O.?

Yes No

If so, what kind of problem(s)?

- Organizational
- Methodological
- Instrumental
- Other

Please specify

In your opinion, can the I.O. be easily transferred to other contexts?

Yes No

If so, in what way?

Multiplier Event

Yes No

- What was the theme of the event?
- How much time did you spend on organizing the overall event?
- Did you achieve the goals?
- How did you select the participants?
- What dissemination activities for I.O. have you carried out?

Further dissemination activities?

Impact data

Institution

- What were the most significant changes and adjustments you had to make during and after the conclusion of the project within the participating institution (s)?

- Have you developed new services/business/collaborations or managerial / administrative procedures?
If so, what are they?

- Have your methodologies and teaching/learning strategies within the institution improved?
(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

① ② ③ ④

- What improvements were you able to notice in the institution, thanks to your European experience?

- Increased opening to Europe
- Increased ability to work in team
- Growth and expansion of professional relationships between colleagues
- None
- Other

- What proposals / procedures are you planning to introduce in your organization to facilitate the professional growth of staff and to put into practice the teaching / training methods acquired during the project?

- In your opinion, to what extent will the project be beneficial for sectoral / professional networks and / or local schools and / or associations, stakeholders, local authorities?

(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4, the highest score)

① ② ③ ④

Staff

- In what way will the project activities have an impact (or have already had an impact) on staff? In terms of people involved, skills and abilities made available

- With reference to the professional growth of staff, do you think that new skills have been acquired?
If so, which ones?
 - Acquisition of new teaching / training methodologies for learners
 - Possibility to start new international collaborations
 - Improvement of language skills
 - Improvement in digital skills
 - Improved knowledge of work environment

Learners/Students/target groups

- In which phase of the project did you involve the students / learners?
 - Planning
 - Implementation
 - Monitoring
 - Verification of results and / or any educational tools
 - Dissemination and valorisation
 - At all stages of the project

Has the experience at European level influenced the personal growth of the students / learners participating in the project?

Yes No

What new skills or competences have been developed?

- Improvement of language skills
 - Improvement of digital skills
 - Increased knowledge of European funding opportunities for the development of international projects
 - Improvement of personal relation
- Other:

Impact on institution and local community

What was the impact at local, regional and national level?

Impact on partner institutions

What was the impact on the partnership at the end of the project?

Have you noticed any benefits in the partner institutions?

(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

① ② ③ ④

Which sustainability strategies of results have you implemented?

Did the intellectual outputs have a significant impact at systemic level?
(from 1 to 4, where 1 is the lowest score and 4 the highest score)

- ① ② ③ ④

The 'construction' of the impact

Project objectives

Have the project objectives been adequately defined? Are they clear, explicit and measurable?

Monitoring Activities

At what stage (implementation, dissemination, exploitation) did you plan the monitoring activities and which tools did you use? (face to face interviews, questionnaire, evaluation forms, other)

Who did you involve in the monitoring and evaluation process?

- Teachers/trainers
- External experts
- Legal Representative
- Staff
- Learners/Students
- Associated partners
- Other:

What were the results of your monitoring / evaluation?

Possible problems or difficulties emerged from monitoring the activities?

- Lack of time
- Lack of resources
- Problems with partner institutions
- Coordinating problem
- Financial management problems
- Administrative difficulties
- Other:

Have you provided a report on the results of monitoring and evaluation?

The dissemination and exploitation of results are essential elements for the project promotion

Dissemination

What tools did you use for your dissemination activities?

- Web site
- Social channels
- Newspaper/Media
- Public events
- Cultural events/Seminar
- Brochure
- Performance
- Conference
- Other:

Have you taken part / will you take part in other events (at local, regional and national level) to present the activities / experiences and the project results?

Did you use any platforms (beyond the Erasmus+ Project results) as *Epale, e-Twinning, School Education Gateway*?

- Yes No

Valorization

Which tools or activities did you use for the exploitation of the results?

Es. OER – Workshops – Seminars –EPALE?

Did you involve any stakeholders in the project? If so, when?

Do you think that the results can be adopted and adapted to other contexts / institutions? If so, how?

Sustainability

Erasmus+ Guide: The quality of the plans for ensuring the sustainability of the project, its capacity to continue its impact and to produce results after the EU grant has been used up.

What initiatives have been implemented for the sustainability of the project?

Would you be willing to write articles, collaborate on publications and participate as example of 'good practice' in other events and workshops organized by the Erasmus + NA?

Yes No

Authors

Lorenza Venturi (Head Unit), Paolo Cavicchi, Angela Miniati, Luisella Silvestri
Study and analysis Unit
Erasmus+ National Agency INDIRE - Italy