

Executive Summary

This document is going to present targeted policy recommendations in order to contribute to mainstreaming the strategies regarding virtual institutions that offer modular learning, focusing on two substantial domains of the economies across Europe, Tourism and Social entrepreneurship. The policy recommendations address key stakeholders – governments including local authorities, indigenous and local communities, international organizations, the private sector, NGOs and consumers. Here will be demonstrated the strategies that have been followed, the results that have been derived and a several umbrella recommendations in order to promote as much as we can our project as a continuous process.



Project description

The main aim of the “VIRTUS Vocational Education and Training-VIRTUS” project was the development of an innovative, fully functional virtual communication education and training center, which has provided appropriately designed modular certified courses in 1. Tourism and Hospi-

ality Services and 2. Social Entrepreneurship, corresponding to regional growth potential and skills needs and targeting at increasing the participation rate of Adult Learners in continuing VET.



Policy analysis

In order to achieve the above, many actions, strategies, policies and plans were followed. In a first stage, the needs analysis report was the basis on which the modular courses in Tourism and Social Entrepreneurship were developed and provided through the Virtus virtual VET center. Through the research of what potential participant need, it was concluded that communication skills, soft and interpersonal skills were identified as the most relevant types of skills to be developed for working in the tourism sector through a VET course. All respondents pointed out the importance of balance between theory and practice with a stronger focus on practice that could be more inspiring and motivating for both trainers and trainees. Consequently, for a lot of potential trainees, flexibility of the VET was a priority. With the view to collect related requirements so as to design the platform as effectively as possible, a requirements analysis has been made. It was concluded that both learners and trainers prefer intuitive solutions regarding the operation of the platform; that means no excessive efforts on learning how to use the platform. Other important requirements for the learners were the duration of the trainings to be known and the existence of an associated certification after completion. For the creation of a hyper learning environment it was proposed to combine the best aspects of Learning Management System, Personal Learning Environment and Gamification.

The next stages pertain to Quality Assurance and Risk Management. The purpose of the first one was to verify that all aspects of the project have been covered

sufficiently by QA measures and criteria. Moreover, it evoked how risks minimized, mitigated and how they have been managed throughout the project. Having used a quality plan, the quality of project management, deliverables and risk management were certified. By adopting an iterative approach uncertainty was reduced; this was possible through the identification of risks and related information throughout the program with regular updates.

Another action was the Evaluation Compendium which described the strategic actions in order to achieve the objectives set, and defined the methods to monitor and evaluate the project execution. Regarding the characteristics of the evaluation system that has been used, the criteria for indicator selection were: valid, reliable, specific, sensitive, operational, affordable, feasible, comparable. The evaluation tools used in the program were: surveys, analysis from focus groups, evaluation forms, questionnaires, as well as additional tools needed during the implementation of the program.

Additionally, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) was the collective use of social science research methods and the assessment of the project implementation. The overall purpose of M&E was to measure project's effectiveness, identify problematic areas, gather lessons learned and improve the overall performance.

Last but not least, dissemination activities of the project aimed at providing information to the primary and secondary target groups and key actors in regard to project

process, activities and results by the use of different dissemination channels at the local, regional, EU and international levels.

Project accomplishments and outcomes

After implementing the presented stages and moving closer to the end of the project, some of our accomplishments are demonstrated below. A balanced combination between education and technical training has been achieved through the development of VIRTUS platform. The material and the activities inside the platform are connected to reality as much as possible, so that during the courses participants can get experience relevant to their future activities. By the completion of both modules, learners gain knowledge in the identification of different social networks and the possibilities they offer for marketing purposes in their businesses. Additionally, information has been provided so as the learners will

be able to outline strategies in order to attract clientele. Not only the obtainment of knowledge on how to create a successful tourism business has been accomplished, but also learning the way about handling customer complaints and gaining positive feedbacks. Besides these benefits, many of the participants have been motivated to get going the courses due to the European Certification by ECQA, providing value to the VIRTUS project. It should be pointed out that receiving a free certificate is a key policy subject that has the ability to increase the acceptance of potential learners.

Delivery of VIRTUS modular courses & policy-makers meetings

A pilot testing of the modular courses was implemented in Italy, Austria, Greece and Spain. VIRTUS VET partners organizations delivered the testing to a total of 402 participants in the 1st testing round. The first course delivery was done in two different ways:

- Synchronous learning for participants from the different participant countries, delivering "Tourism and Hospitality Services" course. This course was programmed in 4 days, being one module taught per session(day) in English language. In total, 47 people were trained, more than

the expected number.

- Asynchronous learning for participants from the different participant countries, delivering "Tourism and Hospitality Services" course and "Social Entrepreneurship" course. These courses had a duration of five weeks and about 2-4 hours per week. The second courses delivery was done in an asynchronous learning for participants from the different participant countries, delivering "Tourism and Hospitality Services" course and "Social Entrepreneurship" course. These courses had duration of five weeks and about 2-4 hours per week. By the end of the 2nd round, the participants

were (including the participants of the first round):

- √ EUROTraining: 141 users
- √ European Progress: 123 users
- √ CESIE: 100 users
- √ Fondo de Formación de Euskadi (FFE): 96 users
- √ BEST Institut für berufsbezogene Weiterbildung und Personaltraining GmbH: 100 users

At the end of the course, two rounds for the final exams were made for each course, finals and follow-up inspection. After completing both rounds, the participants that successfully passed the exams and received the Certificate from ECQA were 86

in total. More specifically, the recipients of certificate in “Tourism and Hospitality Services” were 51 and in “Social Entrepreneurship” were 35.

Moreover, VIRTUS VET partners organizations arranged events inviting policy-makers with the view to disseminate the project and through their involvement to create a strong policy network that can inform and influence policy-making at European, national and regional levels regarding Adult Learning and, thus, constructively affecting the educational landscape. Below are presented the most important feedbacks that were received by policy makers.



Optimum channels & forums of communication

The VIRTUS Policy recommendations, this document, aims to provide solid evidence-based material for the promotion of virtual vocational education and training as an innovative method in Adult Learning. In addition, the involvement of policy makers and all other kinds of stakeholders throughout the project created a strong policy network that can inform and influence policy-making at European, national and regional levels regarding Adult Learning.

Following our experience, recommendations related to dissemination activities are to use::

- Graphic identity: VIRTUS and Erasmus+ logos
- Text-based information: flyers, posters, policy briefs, policy recommendations.
- Web-based channels: VIRTUS website (including electronic news items), VIRTUS Virtual VET Centre, web 2.0 tools, , Erasmus+ dissemination platform.

- Face to face events: All partners organized at least one face-to-face event with policy-makers.
- Specialized channels: Digital repositories for education material, virtual and/or collaborative and/or virtual vocational education and training fares and conferences, academic journals.
- Networking and synergies with

Universities and VET providers, sector-specific representatives/associations (Tourism, Social Entrepreneurship and beyond), professional associations, adult learners' organizations and NGOs at local/regional/national/EU levels have been undertaken.



Feedback from trainers & policy-makers

Participants were invited to answer a set of questions in order to identify the strong points of the platform and courses and recommended improvements. The questionnaire for learners was structured in different parts: Assessment about the virtual VET environment and Assessment about the training contents including global appreciation, understandability, relevance of the content, training mate-

rial quality, quizzes and tests. The main obtained results from Greek participants' feedback were very positive as the general satisfaction was rated very high in a scale from 1 to 5. Their comments about what they liked most about the platform were that it is easy to navigate, flexible and easy to use. They also like the ability to download the material and the videos. Furthermore, they stated that there were

enough interactive elements in the training material. The assessment about the learning environment by the Spanish participants was very positive in all the elements evaluated, more than 4 points out of 5. Italian participants rated the platform with a very positive feedback. They pointed that the platform was user-friendly, some really liked the interaction aspect of the content and several others liked to have the possibility to download the slides in pdf. Others appreciated the structure and the precision of the training material. One liked the free access and other one said that he liked the videos. All the evaluated aspects received a high validation value. As for the Austrian participants, the percentage of those who ranked the platform high was the majority, with some recommendations regarding quizzes and the interaction of training material provided there.

Respectively, the comments from VET policy makers confirmed project findings until now. Existing courses are often unattractive to young learners who have expectations towards modern learning concepts and technologies. However, VIRTUS offering, i.e. courses, platform and EU-compliant ECVET certification are interesting for young learners, especially for those job areas that negatively require mobility around Europe, such as tourism. Through the meetings exploitation possibilities were discussed, implementing them into mainstream training. The participants shared experiences and ideas of how they could use the project outcome in their own organization. Also, possible obstacles and challenges that could occur when implementing them

were discussed. Further, the policy makers especially highlighted the fact that the courses are certified by ECQA and thus internationally accredited and certified. This was perceived as an extra value that could help raise acceptancy. The participants were highly interested in the dissemination and exploitation of VIRTUS outcomes in the future, leading to a successful event and end of the project. Among the attendants of all meetings were the mayor of two Italian regions and four city councilmen.

Some additional points of the received feedback were:

- Interesting material answering to the need of the sector/country.
- Having a specific module according to the specific characteristics and needs of each country is a good idea.
- A good opportunity for participants to get a certificate with EU value considering that at least Tourism & Hospitality sector is an important sector all over Europe.
- The Virtual Center will help people working in the sector of Tourism and Hospitality to acquire new competences in their free time.

Consequently, all people which took part in the meetings found very interested the project and its results both in terms of platform and courses/content.



Policy Recommendations

With the view to expand further and preserve the functional and effective features of VIRTUS project, there are some actions that will be followed for the next period. Firstly, the training platform, in order to attract more participants and engage them to be part of it till the end, should be responsive to messages and technical issues providing clear instructions to the users. In addition, the training material should be representative of the specific fields taking into account the market needs as well as sustaining its interactive character. It is vital to have an up-to-date programme and adjust it to forthcoming changes. Moreover, the face-to-face events/dissemination events with people that could be “policy ambassadors” of the program will be a vital part for the dissemination and promotion of policies at regional, national and European level and it is a point that will indicate the responsive character of VIRTUS project.

Particular emphasis will be paid to the sustainability of the following networks:

Network of Associated Partners

The consortium shall continue to disseminate all project outcomes at local, regional and national level in order to maximize the impact and promote new knowledge and expertise to both relevant organizations and potential end users. More specifically, all partners shall utilize their wide network of associates, including NGOs, Vocational Training Centers, schools, educational and parent organizations, networks of professionals etc.,



not only at national but also at regional/local and international levels.

Project's Network of Associates

During the implementation of the VIRTUS project, a network of associates was developed. The overall goal is this network of project associates, who have been actively involved throughout the development phase, to operate as a project multiplier, furthering the sustainability of its outputs.

Relevant Stakeholders

In addition to the previous section, the consortium shall make an effort to attract relevant stakeholders/organizations, which are actively involved in activities related to the VIRTUS end users to diffuse the project outcomes not only at national but also at European level.

Last but not least, National authorities, community officials and other relevant entities should work together to ensure that every education organization and programme will become an effective learning environment. Clear norms and policy rules should be defined and enforced, hence VIRTUS project has been

implemented trying to contribute to this aim and promote an innovative way of learning. The effectiveness of all these policies will be thus enhanced by the setting up of structures that would allow coordination between all stakeholders,

and the adoption of a balanced mix of tools such as synergies with national and European policy-level instruments in order to achieve VIRTUS' legacy and sustainability.



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