



*Interim Report External evaluation
December 2021*

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Empowering Higher Education in Adopting Digital Learning POWERHEAD

Objectives

How can national authorities support higher education institutions on digital learning, given their autonomy? How can digital learning in higher education be stimulated? This project builds upon an analysis of the needs of higher education institutions to enhance digital learning in higher education. This project aims at developing guidelines for partner (and other) countries for a national policy on digital learning in higher education at two levels:

- Guidelines for a national policy strategy on digital learning in HE;
- Guidelines including recommendations for higher education institutions.

External evaluation

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Evaluation

Draft background paper

At the start of the project the project partners Flanders and Latvia agreed on the practical course of the project. When the first agreements were made, the project started in terms of content. The start of the project was initiated in Flanders. Within WP3 it was their task to produce a background paper. The activities conducted in Flanders are steered by a working group of the Flemish Education Council (Council for Higher Education). The external evaluator attended some of these meetings where this paper was prepared. He noted that a diverse group of experts was involved, including representatives of the Student Union, the Trade Union, the Flemish Interuniversity Council, the Flemish University Colleges, EATDU, the University of Antwerp, the Secretariat of the Flemish Education Council and Ministry of Education and Training of the Flemish Community.

With such a diverse group of relevant experts involved, the paper was solid. This paper succeeded to outline the current context of digitalisation in higher education and to give an overview of existing insights on digitalisation in higher education. The draft paper was finished in March 2021 and sent to the Transnational Steering Committee.



First meeting of the Transnational Steering Committee

The first meeting of the transnational steering committee took place on 31 March 2021. This meeting is the real starting point of the project where all partners agree on the outline of the project.

The meeting started with a tour de table and a presentation of the project. The latter was necessary as in this first meeting the external experts joined the meeting. Subsequently the working methods and implementation tools were presented. These include the QA plan, the overview of deliverables, the presentation of dissemination and (internal and external) communication tools.

After the meeting, participants were asked to fill in a survey in order to evaluate the meeting. 10 out of the 15 participants did so. All of them strongly agreed that the meeting was very well prepared. Almost everyone strongly agreed that the meeting took place in an open atmosphere¹. Subsequently participants were asked whether the meeting had clear outcomes, 5 scored this as very good and 5 as good. When asking if the division of tasks between the project partners is clear, 5 scored this as very good and 4 as good and 1 person disagreed.² These are good scores, although they indicate that there are elements that can be optimised. One participant in the survey summarised it very well: *The lack of real interaction, of in-depth discussion [was the least valuable aspect of the meeting]. (Due partly to the digital character of the meeting, I suppose? In 'real' international project meetings, the participants get to know each other during a diner, a lunch and then go to the meeting. Previous informal contacts facilitate discussions during the meeting).* Others mentioned that it was quite a long meeting and that much time was dedicated to the practical and administrative side of the project, but a bit less on the motivation, relevance and urgency of organising this project. Even so, there was some double information about the deliverables and the quality assurance, according to one of the participants.

The external evaluator acknowledges that in the first meeting quite some time was spent on the practical aspects of this project. However, it is crucial to have sufficient time for the practicalities in the first meeting of a project. This avoids misunderstandings about practical and financial aspects of the project. These comments by participants were nevertheless taken up in drafting the programme for the second meeting of the transnational steering committee.

The most valuable aspects of the meeting were according to the participants the open discussions, sharing of ideas and getting to know each other. The fact that the partner organisations and the external experts finally met, felt for all as the real kick-off of the project.

Preparing a needs analysis

The meeting was soon followed by the minutes, including a call for additions to the paper and to actively use the SharePoint site. The latter is meant to be a common workspace for the members of the transnational steering group. The participants were encouraged to talk and write about our project as often as possible including filling in the dissemination form. On 11 May 2021 the final background paper of the POWERHEAD project was sent to the transnational steering committee.

On 5 May 2021, a first project team meeting took place. Initially, there was a discrepancy between the preparatory work already done by the partners. In the following project team meetings the partners

¹ One person scored this as 'good'.

² When the external evaluator presented these results at the second meeting, it was requested that if anyone felt that there was still a disagreement with this situation after the second meeting, that this person contact the external evaluator for further follow-up.



agreed on a timeline. In the project team meetings in spring and summer 2021, the partners reported on the progress in the focus groups they organised to substantiate the needs analysis.

The external evaluator occasionally participated in the project team meetings. He was always kept informed of these meetings with the agenda and the minutes. These are practical oriented meetings. They are informative, solution-oriented and based on the timeline of the project. The external evaluator believes that the project team was from the beginning aware that due to the strong representation from Flanders, this partner risks to be the dominant partner, whereas it appears that it is sometimes difficult for the Latvian partner to work everything out in time.

The project meetings proved to be crucial in the success of this project. Especially since there are limited project partners, this one-on-one communication is extremely important. The external evaluator therefore congratulates the members of the project team for the energy they have put into the project and the good follow-up of the project. These meetings seem to be encouraging for both project partners. The frequency of the meetings guarantees a good follow-up of the project.

In these project meetings, the next meeting of the transnational steering committee was prepared. Initially the external evaluator had a slight concern about the limited participation of Latvian working group members at the transnational steering group meeting in Brussels. The external quality observer insisted on a more balanced representation. This was taken up by the Latvian project partner.

Second meeting of the Transnational Steering Committee

The second meeting of the Transnational Steering Committee was an online meeting that took place on 16 November 2021 from 2 until 5.30 pm CET and on 17 November 2021 from 9.30 until 12.30 CET. Although practical arrangements were made for a meeting in Brussels, the Covid 19 pandemic – again – forced the committee to organise the meeting online.

At the start of the meeting, the project coordinator gave an overview of the state of play and subsequently the external evaluator elaborated on the participants' satisfaction and the preliminary projects results achieved. He confirmed that until then the intended project outcomes were achieved.

Based on the suggestions from the previous survey, the transnational steering group kept the time dedicated on the practical matters brief. Rather quickly, the focus was placed on the content. The first discussion topic on the agenda was the needs analysis of Latvia and Flanders. These gave further insight to all involved to learn how this needs analysis was made.

It is clear that the needs analyses of both countries were methodologically well prepared. Different groups of stakeholders were involved in the needs analysis. The project partner in Latvia had some difficulties in the beginning to find enough people to participate. This was resolved after making further efforts. In Flanders, the different focus groups had 3 to 12 participants. After an initial evaluation by the Flemish authors, it was decided that the labour market needed to be further surveyed before the needs analysis could be completed.

During the presentations of the needs analysis of Latvia and Flanders, the other participants could ask clarifying questions. Afterwards, there was time for thorough discussion. It was a rich discussion on many relevant topics as input for the second part of the meeting the day after.

The second day started with a presentation of the project website where the public deliverables and minutes are published. The website also contains information about the project partners, the planned activities and information about the management of the project. The participants were asked to what extent they have already disseminated. This was not done yet by most of the participants. The Flemish

Education Council gave examples on how they have already disseminated the project. The participants are encouraged to disseminate and to report dissemination. The financial state of play of the project was also discussed at the start of the second day.

After this introductory half hour on the practical aspects of the project, the participants worked on a joint needs analysis. For this purpose, the group was divided into two subgroups that discussed a few themes. Then, during half an hour, the discussion points from both groups were shared. This showed that several of the needs were defined even more sharply for the benefit of the common needs analysis.

Finally, the first steps of the PLA were prepared during the meeting. The steering committee discussed which other countries, types of participants and persons could participate in the PLA. Within this project, it is foreseen to invite at least three countries to the PLA; however, given the fact that there are only two partners (which is considered to be a 'weakness' of the project), and given the fact that there have been made savings on the travel budget, the project partners would strive to invite more countries, to have a broader picture and to collect more diverse experiences.

After the transnational steering committee meeting, an evaluation survey was sent out. It was completed by 13 participants. Due to this high level of participation, a fairly complete picture can be made of the participants' satisfaction. The participants indicated that the meeting was very well prepared. The external evaluator believes that this is due to the many meetings and corresponding efforts of the project team.

The vast majority of participants strongly agrees that the meeting took place in an open atmosphere. However, several participants indicate that they consider the online setting to be a pity. The members of the transnational steering committee have only had online meetings so far. The personal contact and inspiring one-on-one conversations are missed by several participants. It is therefore strongly recommended that the next meeting be 'physical'. If this is not possible due to the Covid 19 pandemic, there should be time dedicated to build in an informal moment(s) at the beginning of the meeting and between sessions and breaks of the meeting. Several online tools can stimulate this informal interaction.

A large majority of participants gave a positive answer to the question of whether the meeting had clear outcomes. Compared to the survey after the first transnational steering committee meeting, there is a smaller share of participants who 'strongly agree' with the statement. The same applies to the question whether the division of tasks between the project partners is clear. To ensure that participant satisfaction in this area remains high, the concrete intended outcomes of the meeting can be elaborated on in more detail at the start of the next meeting.³

In the survey, participants mentioned the open discussions and engagement of project partners and experts as strong point. As the weakest aspect of the meeting, it was stressed that the actions the

³ It is remarkable that one participant answers 'strongly disagree' to all questions. However, no explanation is given for these answers in the open boxes for additional answers. The external evaluator indicated in the second transnational steering committee meeting that if someone disagrees, this person can always contact the external evaluator. The more so as this dissatisfaction does not appear from the survey on most and least valuable aspects of the meeting.



committee needs to take require a certain amount of dynamism and interaction, which can be better facilitated in a physical meeting.⁴

Conclusion

All outcomes that should have been achieved by the end of 2021 are achieved. The project is running smoothly, but the participants indicate that the dynamics among them could be strengthened if the personal dynamics between them could be strengthened by personal meetings in real life. Hopefully, Covid 19 will allow this common wish to be realised at the PLA in February.

⁴ Other comments from the survey include: The fact that two experts missed part of the meeting, due to unforeseen circumstances or weak internet connection; A few more Latvian colleagues attending the meeting would perhaps have been fruitful; The fact that continuing education and professional development is still low on the agendas, which probably will change with the upcoming EU discussion on micro-credentials.