



OWLS
Outcomes that Work for Learners and their
Stakeholders

Progress report

Public Part

Project information

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Beneficiary organisation: Reykjavik University

Project coordinator: Ásrún Matthíasdóttir
Project coordinator organisation: Reykjavik University
Project coordinator telephone number: +354 5996200
Project coordinator email address: asrun@hr.is

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Executive Summary

OWLS is a 3 year Development of Innovation project which focusses on Outcomes that Work for Learners and their Stakeholders. The OWLS partners are passionate about helping to make vocational education and training (or VET) more effective by focussing on how to ensure that learning outcomes can be utilised in the workplace. Our project is supported by the Leonardo da Vinci Programme and we started on 1st October 2011.

The OWLS partners wanted to make our training more effective; in particular we wanted to ensure that learning outcomes gained in the “classroom” are useful in the workplace. Our partnership, which consists of partners from five countries, is interested in how EQARF Indicator 6 (utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace) can be harnessed to improve the performance of training providers and trainers especially in blended learning.

Our diverse partnership has consulted with stakeholders, carried out research to design, develop, pilot and evaluate a self-assessment quality assurance process, which helps training providers and trainers assess their own performance against this standard for Indicator 6 in the new European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQARF).

We have identified and shared best practice within our stakeholder network via our multilingual on line learning community. We are developing tools and techniques to be used by learners, employers and trainers, which will aid the achievement of the standard. We are using a range of methods in order to disseminate results and reach different target audiences including website, blogs, newsletter, briefing and policy papers, case studies, blended learning materials and face to face seminars.

Providers and trainers will be able to use this system to benchmark their performance against other EU providers, continuously improve their work as well as log and measure the improvements they make.

At the time of writing we are half way through the project and are now starting to pilot the second version of our prototype. This report describes the aims and objectives of the OWLS project and our progress so far.

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1. Project Objectives

The overall aim of the project is to improve the quality of VET, specifically by improving the utilisation of learning outcomes in the workplace.

We will achieve this overall aim we will be working on these specific aims:

- To improve our own knowledge and understanding of how current quality assurance practices in our own countries help to monitor Indicator 6
- To improve our knowledge and understanding of how stakeholders relate to Indicator 6 including learners, trainers, employers, training providers, VET funders and VET experts
- To enhance our knowledge and skills relating to how Indicator 6 can be addressed through the application of our self-assessment process and associated materials
- To provide blended learning support and training to new users of the system

Our objectives are:

- To compare and contrast the performance of trainers and training providers
- To design a prototype self-assessment process and associated materials based on consultations and research with stakeholders, as well as an ongoing dialogue with stakeholders engaged with the project
- To further develop and hone the prototype products and services through an iterative design process across all partner countries and across a diverse range of learners and sectors
- To raise awareness of the project amongst potential stakeholder groups and to engage stakeholders in the project both as recipients of information but also as pilot sites
- To disseminate the emerging results of the project in different appropriate formats to reach targeted groups of stakeholders and to proactively seek their feedback on our results through the use of social media
- To network with and engage with key stakeholders who can support our exploitation of the project results and support their mainstreaming into policy and practice e.g. through our Steering Group membership
- To develop a body of evidence and knowledge concerning the impact and experience of using the self-assessment process achieved by partners and other user sites adopting the system to improve the quality of their VET

We will manage our performance through a combination of transparent project management and quality assurance processes.

By achieving these specific aims and objectives we will have developed an evidence based approach to quality assurance which focuses on the end product of VET– how the learner actually performs in the workplace for their employer. The new approach will have been tested and proven in each partner country and amongst different sectors of VET so that, we believe, the final product will be applicable to all EU countries. Trainers and training providers will have a practical proven tool and supporting infrastructure through our on line platform to help them improve their performance. They will be able to benchmark their own performance against all other

participants as well as share tools, ideas, techniques and resources across the newly formed network of providers.

Learners will have real evidence of how their training has impacted on their performance at work – not only that but they will be able to measure the resulting changes where this is applicable. This can only help their job prospects and career progression.

Other stakeholders will have research evidence as well as practical examples and case studies, which support the adoption of this approach, which should support the rolling out of the system. Employers will have real evidence of the value of investing in VET for their employees as well as be able to compare training providers' effectiveness.

2. Project Approach

In order to achieve these changes we will carry out the following activities:

1. Set up **project teams** to carry out the project plan including a project management team to coordinate and monitor the operations within the work packages. Each member of the team has been chosen according to their previous knowledge and experience in VET and projects of this kind.

2. Carry our **research** and **consultation** with stakeholders including trainers, training providers, employers, learners, VET funders and policy makers. The focus of the initial research will be to ask trainers, training provider, VET funders and policy makers how they currently measure this indicator and what evidence they have to demonstrate their effectiveness. We will be asking all stakeholders about their current experiences and what changes they want to see. The methods to be used will include telephone interviews as well as on line questionnaires. To ensure a good response rate the questionnaires will be distributed through appropriate networks and interfaces e.g. professional bodies for trainers, via tutors for specific groups of students.

3. The results of this initial research will be used to inform the design of the **first prototype** for the self-assessment process, standard, guidelines, workbook and blended learning solutions to support the correct implementation of the process. This first prototype will be designed by the project partners.

4. We will then go out to **consultation with stakeholders** to ask their opinions on the initial prototype. This will be achieved through a **cascade of consultation workshops** in each country. Each workshop will follow the same format and will include hands on use of the tools to help generate accurate feedback on the prototypes. The cascade element of these workshops is important. The first workshop in Iceland will generate feedback and some participants from this workshop will contribute to the second workshop in Lithuania and so on. Our intention is that this will provide a truly international experience and perspective to the process and hence enable the partners to take on board cultural and systemic differences between countries at a very early stage in the project. These consultation workshops will then inform the amendments to create the second version of the prototypes.

5. The second version of the prototypes will be utilised in the **Pilot Phase** and will be put to use by partner organisations in different pilot sites in each country. Again we will cascade the implementation of this pilot phase with Iceland and Lithuania starting first. Briefing sessions for participants will lead into a 6 month trial period throughout which we will support the trainers to make full use of the system and tools. Experience from Iceland and Lithuania's pilots will inform the third version of the prototype which is then used in the other partner countries. The briefing sessions and 6 month pilot will be repeated in the other partner countries and results used to produce the final and fourth version of the prototypes. We hope that this iterative method will enhance and strengthen the effectiveness of this final prototype version.

6. In the final phase of the project the partners will continue to use the final products and services established throughout the first 19 months of the project but we will also roll out the use of the system to other users. Hence we will build a body of knowledge and evidence regarding the effectiveness of the system which will support our sustainability plans and exit strategy for the project.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

Project outcomes and results to date

Project Management:

- We have established working parties for each work package.
- We have developed the Project Handbook (Deliverable 1.1) to guide the management of the project
- We have held regular on line meetings on a monthly basis to oversee the progress across all work packages
- We have also held 4 face to face meetings – Iceland, Austria, Lithuania and Belgium

Research & Development:

- Developed a research methodology and approach to identify issues concerning the quality of VET.
- Carried out research and consultation amongst stakeholder groups regarding the quality of VET with particular emphasis on indicator 6. We also identified poor and good examples of practice (deliverable 2.1).
- This research helped to inform the design and development of our first prototype – a self-assessment system (deliverables 2.2).
- Designed guidelines, workbook and training materials (deliverables 2.2).
- We completed a comprehensive review of these materials again with trainers, managers, learners and other stakeholders. This was achieved via a series of consultation workshops in each partner country where stakeholders were invited to have hands on experience using the prototype system (deliverable 2.3).
- Finally we used the feedback and results from our consultation to inform the amendments and changes to our prototype (deliverable 2.4).

Pilot Phase:

- We developed a legal agreement for our pilot sites which describes roles and responsibilities of OWLS partners and their pilot site partners (deliverable 3.1).
- We had preliminary discussions and contact with some of our potential pilot site partners.
- Some pilot site partners have been recruited (deliverable 3.1).

Quality, Monitoring & Evaluation:

- We developed a monitoring and evaluation framework for the project.
- We have developed and utilised internal monitoring tools such as post meeting evaluation forms etc.
- We have written two internal monitoring report for the period covering the first 18 months of the project (deliverables 4.2 a, b).
- We selected an external evaluator with the appropriate skills, knowledge and experience of VET and quality assurance to add value to our project. A

contract was drawn up to ensure that the evaluator would make contributions at key milestones within the project (deliverables 4.1).

- A formal meeting was held with the External Evaluator in Austria with all OWLS partners present and we have got comments for the external evaluator (part of deliverables 4.4).

Dissemination:

- We have designed and established our initial website presence. As part of this website we have also included a stakeholder registration and management system – see owls-nest.eu (Deliverable 5.1)
- We have produced online learning briefing materials on Indicator 6 etc. (Deliverable 5.2)
- We completed video interviews with all project partners (Deliverable 5.2)
- We have established a Facebook presence and Twitter accounts. Further, as part of our website design, we have included a social media, networking and resources sharing facility. (Deliverable 5.3)
- We have designed and published 2 e-newsletters (Deliverable 5.5). We have distributed these e-newsletters via our website and also email cascades in each country.
- We have developed an online presentation re. becoming a pilot site. (Deliverable 5.4)
- We have shared our results from the consultation meetings through the publication of the report Design implications and stakeholder needs (Deliverable 5.6)
- We have written a report entitled “Briefing Paper: Consultation on initial prototype” (Deliverable 5.7) and this was distributed to our stakeholders

Exploitation:

- We have recruited a range of experts to become part of our project Steering Group.
- We then produced an internal document comprising profiles of our steering group members. (Deliverable 6.1)
- We have organised 2 Steering Group meetings to date. (Deliverable 6.2) It was decided to arrange these at key milestones in the project.
- We have reviewed current practice in quality assurance of VET and produced a comprehensive report giving details of systems and processes in operation in each country. (Deliverable 6.3)
- Steering Group Briefing paper – Designed and ready for piloting (Deliverable 6.4) was prepared to illustrate how the consultation and their feedback has influenced the design of Prototype II.

Work in Progress

Pilot Phase:

- Our main focus is now the Pilot Phase of the project (work package 3) as well as the dissemination (work package 5) and exploitation (work package 6) of the project and the Quality Plan will be active (work package 4)

- We will continue to recruit more pilot site partners with the specific intention of engaging a representative sample of VET providers using e.g. the website material, reports, online media and newsletters.
- We will work closely to support them during the pilot phase, to collect feedback, to identify emerging issues, strengths and weaknesses (deliverables 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 5.8 and 5.9). In this way we will be able to make further improvements to the prototype (deliverables 3.6).
- We are also starting to design the online version of our prototype (deliverable 6.8, 6.9 and 6.10).

Next Steps

- We will continue to engage with our stakeholders, pilot sites, experts and steering group members in order to complete the design of the prototype and associated support materials (deliverables 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 5.8 and 5.9).
- We will develop new training materials and services to support new users of our self-assessment system including online training materials, online tutorials and mentoring services (deliverable 6.6, 6.8, 6.9 and 6.10).
- We will be enabling other sites to use the final online products as part of our mainstreaming activity.
- At the end of the project we will write up our final report and present our findings at an end of project conference & webinar in Brussels (deliverables 1.2 and 6.7). We hope that a wide range of stakeholders will hence be able to participate in this event.

4. Partnerships

The partners are:

P1 – Reykjavik University, Reykjavik, Iceland (applicant organisation)

P2 – Funding Ideas Ltd, Scotland UK

P3 – Vytauto Didziojo universitetas (Vytautas Magnus University), Kaunas Lithuania

P4 – abif (analysis, consulting and interdisciplinary research), Vienna Austria

P5 – Thomas More University College (former Katholieke Hogeschool Kempen), Turnhout Belgium

The partners met through a Contact Seminar in Finland (June 2010). We wanted to improve the quality of VET (especially blended learning). We were particularly interested in how to improve our own performance by focusing on EQARF Indicator 6 - shifting the focus of quality assurance from inside the “classroom” to provide greater emphasis on how learning outcomes are actually used at work.

Together we cover a diverse range of different sectors (subject areas), age groups and levels of training, which provide a good representative sample for the DOI. A skills analysis for the partnership shows each partner is able to offer considerable knowledge and experience to support this DOI. All partners will be involved in all aspects of the project but different partners will lead on various aspects of the project as follows:

Iceland

- Considerable project management experience and involvement with EU projects as well as experience in training teachers.
- Extensive experience in the use and development of blended learning solutions for their learners.
- Particular interest in research development and innovation.
- **Project Coordinator** and lead for work package on **Project Management**.

Lithuania

- Specifically concerned with research and development in VET.
- Conducts research on VET curriculum design as well as the qualifications and competences of VET teachers/trainers including designing and implementing National Qualifications Frameworks.
- Lead for work packages **Research & Development** and **Pilot Phase**.

Austria

- Considerable experience in monitoring and evaluation work and at the level of EU Projects, both as an internal monitoring partner and as an external evaluator of projects and products.
- They monitor the project and oversee the work of an external evaluator who will evaluate the final products.
- Leading work package on **Quality** of the project.

UK

- Many years of experience working on EU projects.
- Works extensively with the not for profit sector in UK and beyond.
- Particular experience in training quality assurance in that sector and in developing tools for quality assurance in partnership with larger UK charities.
- Much of their time is working with charities on fundraising strategies in particular the development of sustainable business models, products and services.
- Leading work packages on **Dissemination** and **Exploitation**.

Belgium

- Passionate about improving VET for medical professionals in the field.
- Experienced in participating in EU projects.
- Particularly interested in improving their knowledge, skills and performance in developing blended learning solutions.
- Their work in intensive care, resuscitation and other critical areas of health care and research in their field has highlighted the importance that our QA approach should include the **maintenance** of competencies rather than just the initial utilisation of skills in the workplace.

5. Plans for the Future

By the end of the project we will have developed:

- A new self-assessment process for VET quality assurance (public)
- Guidelines for its implementation (public) .
- A work book to support the implementation, to document evidence which supports self-assessment judgements and to record progress against development actions (public).
- Blended learning materials to train new users in the implementation of the system (public).
- Online tutorials.
- Online mentoring services.
- An online platform including blended learning materials, publications, social media and networking area and resource library.*
- An online workbook through which users will be able to benchmark their progress with other providers across Europe.*

It is through this online workbook and associated evidence logs and development logs completed by participant organisations that we will gather evidence of the practical benefits of using this system.

As part of our exploitation strategy we will begin a move towards sustainability. New organisations will be engaged with the project and encouraged to use the online system to log their progress and liaise with others in the network.

As part of our project we will be seeking legal advice regarding international copyright and looking to form a legal structure which will continue the work of the partnership. Those partners who wish to continue to support the work will become partners in the new venture – which we anticipate will be an EU form of Community Interest Company (CIC) i.e. a not for profit enterprise.

The reports and the public products (as marked above) will remain in the public domain supported through the website and/or partner websites.

After the project.

The online platform and items marked with an asterisk (*) (on line platform and associated support services) will be available supported through the CIC. The CIC will then be in a position to attract new partners and engage with other related development projects in the future.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The project will promote innovations through close cooperation with universities, training providers and companies on tasks and issues that demand a European-level approach. It would not be possible to achieve our objective of creating a generic approach to Quality Assurance relating to Indicator No 6 without EU level cooperation. All the participating countries engaged with this project will exchange information; discuss cultural approaches and practical experiences regarding the quality assurance of VET.

Transnational aspects of the international collaboration in this project provide the perspective not only of the comparison of the experience but also the development of new know-how in the VET quality assurance in relation to effective learning outcomes. The CEDEFOP study (2009) gives an idea that “there is no single correct or apt way to develop and use learning outcomes” - this is the case with “effective teaching and learning, the level of activity, the context and interaction between the actors”. Such international and interdisciplinary approach which is expected in the project opens the possibilities for the transfer of the useful experiences and know-how for training institutions and other stakeholders, which meet with difficulties in VET quality assurance.

The project development tasks demand the transfer of knowledge and experience between all partners in order to inform the design of the prototype materials. These materials will also be tested by all of them, including associated pilot sites, to ensure the iterative approach builds an effective and generic quality assurance approach for any EU VET provider who is interested in Indicator 6.

All developments and innovations from the project will be shared and made accessible in all partner languages. Hence the products and services developed under this DOI will be available for not only educational and training institutions in Europe but also for the European labour force market that will be able to utilise the results of the project in order to recognise and access higher quality learning experiences.

7. Final comments

This is an exciting part of the OWLS partnership project we have just started. We are currently recruiting a diverse range of pilot sites that are keen to work with us to test, evaluate and improve our self-assessment system.

We have deliberately targeted a representative sample of VET training providers in relation to:

- Initial vocational education and training (IVET) and lifelong learning (CVET)
- Cultural and ethnic diversity
- Age of learners
- Level of academic study
- Accredited and non-accredited training programmes
- Vocational sectors
- Contexts in which VET providers work
- Social partners e.g. public, private, not for profit sector etc.

This diverse range of partners will help us to test and evaluate the tool and hence help ensure that the final product is valid and reliable.