

---

## How to ensure sustainability within online communities? Raising the problem from the point of view of the Erasmus Plus project “European Social Entrepreneurs”.

Allan Lawrence<sup>1</sup>, Franziska Guenther<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Director and Chair of Trustees, The Enterprise Centre, Manchester

<sup>2</sup> Research Associate, Technische Universität Dresden

### 1 Background. The importance of Social Enterprise.

Social enterprises are an important driver for inclusive growth and play a key role in tackling current economic and environmental challenges. In 2014 it was estimated by the European Commission that the social economy engages over 14.5 million people, 6.5% of the workforce in the European Union (European Commission, 2014a, p. 45). The European Commission has given support to the development of social enterprises and in 2011 launched the Social Business Initiative (European Commission, 2011). Yet, according to the first in-depth study on mapping social entrepreneurship in all member states commissioned by the European Commission (2014b), only eight countries (Bulgaria, Greece, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Sweden, and United Kingdom) have a policy framework in place to encourage and support the development of social enterprises (European Commission, 2014b). In summary, Social Enterprise is still a small yet rapidly growing sector within Europe.

### 2 Background of the Project.

In addition, “the lack of business support and development structures, training and workforce development”<sup>1</sup> is one of the five main barriers faced by social enterprises. This shortfall of training and support was also identified in a report (Richardson, 2013) produced by the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE), which brought together public authorities and social enterprise organizations with extensive experience of developing strategies to support social enterprises. SENSCOT (2015) made the following recommendations in 2015 to policy makers, in terms of start up support and training. Recommendations that drove the development of this project:

(1) Start-up support should be provided at two levels: firstly mainstream business advisers should be capable of giving initial advice, and secondly, should signpost potential social entrepreneurs to a specialist support infrastructure, well linked to existing federal and support bodies of the social economy; (2) Training for social entrepreneurs should focus on leadership and (3) Training support should be provided that is appropriate to the enterprise life-cycle, for example, start-up support should also include new business creation. (4) The networking capacity of social enterprises

---

1 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=2149> (last accessed 2017-09-04)

---

should be geared up by supporting scaling and replication mechanisms such as social franchising and (5) Social Impact Measurement methods, which provide an evidence base, should be supported and promoted.

### **3 Case study: Erasmus Plus Project “European Social Entrepreneurs”**

The aim of this particular project was to develop an integrated pan-European approach to the educational and training support of social business in all of its forms. This was supported by the following five objectives:

1. To identify and analyze stakeholders and existing social business support providers (SBSPs) across Europe and to identify specific needs;
2. To establish the *OnlineIncubator*, which is a platform for communication, co-operation, training and resources;
3. The exchange of training and best practice of SBSPs/ infrastructures across Europe;
4. To develop a social business support model (SBSM);
5. To establish an European (global) network of social business support providers (SBSPs).

The EU Sector 3 project has evolved into the network of European Social Entrepreneurs. It developed a model of social business support (SBSM) to overcome the lack of pan-European exchange of best practice and appropriate support models for social businesses. The ultimate product is the *OnlineIncubator*, [www.onlineincubator.eu](http://www.onlineincubator.eu), which is the online platform hosting the SBSM and all of its functions, including an associated Facebook platform that operates as an incubator for partnerships and mobilities and a model of European best practice for social enterprise support.

An essential outcome of this project proposal is to encourage access to greater mobility across the EU/EEA alongside the recognition of the lifelong learning that this project will bring. New initiatives in training and business support models for social enterprises, voluntary/ community groups, co-operatives will be generated through this proposed initiative. The focus of the information provided is twofold - for business and management and the basic and necessary information for personal employability and autonomy.

#### **4 The challenges of Erasmus Plus.**

Firstly, many EU-funded projects result in outputs such as a website, portals and handbooks which become redundant after the end of the project lifecycle. This statement is partly anecdotal but also there has been long-standing concerns regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of the outputs and deliverables of EU-funded projects and the perceived lack of sufficient quality monitoring (Bischof & Punčo, 2015). Reports have been commissioned by the European Commission to analyze the effectiveness of KA1/Mobilities and the whole Erasmus Plus application process (Long, G., 2010, Markeviciene, 2011), but there is not a specific review of the outputs of LLP and Erasmus Plus and their lasting value and benefit. This is potentially an area for future research and analysis.

There are concerns with outputs for Erasmus Plus KA2 and a report produced in 2015 commented that "...many frustrations have especially been expressed on intellectual outputs (KA2): applicants were mostly confused about what should be considered as an output or not" (EUCIS-LLL, 2015, p. 4). They also suggested that those outputs were hindering a global vision of the project, in particular for the evaluators when trying to understand the work plan. The report also stated that "...people noted that many relevant activities could be funded even though they are not concretised by tangible intellectual outputs as they are currently understood (i.e. courses, booklets)" (EUCIS-LLL, 2015, p. 4). There is an evaluation of Erasmus Plus currently underway and an interim evaluation has recently been produced (Weimer, 2017) which will be reviewing efficiency of project implementation, focusing on inputs and outputs. The full report will be published in mid-2018.

In a position paper produced a year later the same organisation criticised Erasmus Plus for its lack of user-friendliness, particularly with respect to SMEs and NGOs and an excessive bureaucracy that mitigates against smaller organisations (EUCIS-LLL, 2016, p.1). However, EUCIS-LLL have not made many comments regarding dissemination, although a key point raised was that National Agencies could do more to encourage inter-project communication and valorisation to ensure innovation and prevent duplication. Indeed, this lack of pan-European co-ordination of projects is a major barrier to thematic and cross-sectoral networking. Regarding deliverables, Long (2010) stated that the deliverables should be influenced by the end-users via QA feedback. This relationship between the target groups, the end-users and the outputs is a critical success factor for any Erasmus Plus project.

---

## 5 Problem Statement

The key questions for the purpose of this practical activity is as follows:

1. How do we produce lasting and sustainable outputs/deliverables?
2. Also, how do we ensure the relevance, as well as the sustainability and exploitation of the SBSM, the online incubator, and the associated on-line community, the European Social Entrepreneurs for the next five years?

## 6 Approach to the solution.

The practical exercise proposed is in the form of a focus group to consider the following:

1. How to ensure the continuing development of the European Social Entrepreneurs network? Are there lessons to be learnt from other pan-European thematic networks?
2. What needs to be done to ensure the future value of EU-funded projects without resorting to the 'usual' outputs of websites, portals etc.?
3. How do we ensure the survival and sustainability of online communities such as European Social Entrepreneurs?

The outputs of the focus group will form the basis of a further and more detailed research leading towards an article that considers both effective sustainable outputs of Erasmus Plus projects and applying lessons learnt to the network, European Social Entrepreneurs.

## 7 Acknowledgements

The Erasmus-funded EU Sector 3 (European Social Entrepreneurs) project is made up of the following partners: The Synthesis Center, Nicosia, Cyprus; Technical University of Dresden, Germany; VSI Socialiniu inovaciju centras, Siauliu, Lithuania; IES, Instituto De Empreendedorismo Social, Cascais, Portugal; AC Amics de la Biblioteca de la Fonteta, Valencia, Spain; Aydin Valiligi Ab Ve Dis Iliskiler Koordinasyon Merkezi, Aydin Turkey and the Enterprise Centre, Manchester, UK. It was an initiative in line with the general objectives of Erasmus Plus, with an emphasis on capacity building, harmonization of training and the development of strategic partnerships.

**References**

- Bischof, L & Punčo, P (2015). Quality Assurance in International Cooperation and development projects in Higher Education. Internationalisation in Higher Education. Vol. 1, 2015. Retrieved from [https://www.che-consult.de/fileadmin/pdf/publikationen/Bischof\\_Punco\\_2015\\_Quality\\_Assurance\\_in\\_International\\_Cooperation\\_Projects.pdf](https://www.che-consult.de/fileadmin/pdf/publikationen/Bischof_Punco_2015_Quality_Assurance_in_International_Cooperation_Projects.pdf)
- EUCIS-LLL (2015). Erasmus+ assessment. First phase – ownership of the programme and applications. Retrieved from [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/EUCIS-LLL-Erasmus-assessment\\_first-round\\_28.05-25.06.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/EUCIS-LLL-Erasmus-assessment_first-round_28.05-25.06.pdf) (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- EUCIS-LLL (2016). Implementing Erasmus+ Better. Retrieved from <http://www.eucis-lll.eu/news/eucis-lll-news/new-position-paper-implementing-erasmus-better/> (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- European Commission (2011). Social Business Initiative Creating a favourable climate for social enterprises, key stakeholders in the social economy and innovation. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/social\\_business/docs/COM2011\\_682\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/social_business/docs/COM2011_682_en.pdf) (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- European Commission (2014a). Social economy and social entrepreneurship. Social Europe guide Volume 4. Retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=10010&langId=en> (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- European Commission (2014b). A map of social enterprises and their eco-systems in Europe Executive Summary. Retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=12988&langId=en> (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- Long, G. (2010). Evaluation of Erasmus Project reports (Progress/ Final). Experience and recommendations from the point of view of an assessor. Retrieved from [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/LLP/events/2010/documents/erasmus\\_ccord\\_meet\\_02\\_10/evaluation](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/LLP/events/2010/documents/erasmus_ccord_meet_02_10/evaluation) (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- Markeviciene, R. (2011). Evaluation of Erasmus Project Reports (Interim and Final) experience and recommendations. Vilnius University. Retrieved from [www.ies.stuba.sk/erasmus/file.php/1/AdministrationManagement/Evaluation\\_of\\_Erasmus](http://www.ies.stuba.sk/erasmus/file.php/1/AdministrationManagement/Evaluation_of_Erasmus) (last accessed 2017-09-04)
- Richardson, M. (2013). A Report on Social Enterprise training in the UK. School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE). Retrieved from <https://www.the-sse.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Social-Enterprise-Training-Report-for-SSE.pdf> (last accessed 2017-09-04)

- 
- Social Enterprise Network Scotland (SENSCOT) (2015). 15 key policy lessons - Extract from 'Policy meets practice - enabling the growth of social enterprises: Results of the Social Entrepreneurship Network – an ESF learning network 2013-14'. EU Social Entrepreneurship Network. January 2015. Retrieved from [http://www.senscot.net/view\\_art.php?viewid=18551](http://www.senscot.net/view_art.php?viewid=18551) (last accessed 2017-09-09)
- Weimer, L. (2017). The nuts and bolts: mid-term evaluation of Erasmus Plus. EAICE (European Association for International Education). Retrieved from <https://www.eaie.org/blog/nuts-bolts-midterm-erasmus-evaluation/> (last accessed 2017-09-04)