



Quality Assurance ERDI-project

Final Report for the Quality Assurance and evaluation of the ERDI-project

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18/06/2018
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Preface

This report has been written in May and June 2018 as a part of a twenty-week project at the Karelia University of Applied Sciences under the supervision of Sini-Tuuli Saaristo, Kaija Saramäki and Liisa Timonen. This project was carried out on behalf of the Empowering Regional Development and Innovations (ERDI) project.

During the project, a questionnaire was set up, interviews have been conducted and the answers provided during the interviews analysed. This report is meant to summarize and analyse the answers to the questionnaire. The names of the partners and interviewees are left out of this report due to the delicacy of the matter.

I would like to thank Sini-Tuuli Saaristo, Liisa Timonen and Kaija Saramäki for their supervision, support and the opportunity of an internship in Finland.

Summary

The goal of this report is to see what the ERDI partners think of the project, what benefits it has provided, what should be improved, and how will the partners continue after the project is finished.

The first step was to identify the stakeholders and what information the coordinators want from the interviews. When this step is completed, a questionnaire was made which was used during the interviews with the partners. Based on this questionnaire and the answers provided during the interviews, an analysis was performed to see the overall benefits, results, feedback, and plans for the continuation.

The project has provided benefits to every partner, ranging from providing knowledge about bioeconomy to improving the language skills of the partners. Most partners are positive about the structure and approach of the project but do have some suggestions that can be implemented in a possible follow up project.

At the end of the interviews, a question was posed to ask whether the term “bioeconomy” has changed for the partner during the project. Most partners have indicated that they have been able to expand their knowledge on the subject or realise they have been working in this field already.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Motive	1
1.2 The goal of QA	1
1.3 Project boundaries	1
1.4 Relations to other projects	1
1.5 Research questions	1
2. Preliminary studies	2
2.1 About the ERDI-project	2
2.2 Evaluation Interviews	3
3. Method and approach	4
4. Stakeholders	5
5. Results.....	6
5.1 Benefits derived from the project.....	6
5.2 Successes and difficulties	6
5.3 Results of the cooperation	7
5.4 Structure.....	9
5.5 Feedback on the project.....	9
5.6 Strengths and Weaknesses	11
5.7 Continuation of the results	12
5.8 Continuation of the partnerships	12
5.9 Meaning of bioeconomy	12
6. Discussion of the results	13
7. Conclusion.....	14
Bibliography	I
Appendix A: Questionnaire	II

1. Introduction

1.1 Motive

During the final phase of ERDI implementation, an external evaluator should evaluate the whole project. The Quality Assurance (QA) interviews are prepared and conducted by the intern among all the ERDI partners. After the interviews, the data is analysed and presented to the coordinators.

1.2 The goal of QA

The goal of Quality Assurance is to get a clear image of the performance and the benefits provided by the ERDI-project during its lifetime. This information can be used to improve the project and its partnerships by working on the possible weak points of the project and giving the coordinators an even better image of what their partners want to achieve.

1.3 Project boundaries

The Quality Assurance interviews will be conducted with the ERDI Consortium. The Consortium includes six higher educational institutes, five working life partners, and five associated partners.

1.4 Relations to other projects

The QA project is not related to previous quality assurance parts of ERDI. This is the first round of overall project evaluation. Previous quality assurance interviews were conducted concerning specific work packages but these do not influence this QA project in any way.

1.5 Research questions

To get the most out of the feedback it is important to set up a questionnaire with clear and direct questions. The questionnaire is based on the following research questions:

- How have the partners benefitted from the project so far?
- What successes and results have the partners achieved within the project?
- What is partners' opinion on the structure of the project?
- How will the partners continue the development of bioeconomy after the project is finished?

Based on these research questions and debates with the supervisors, a questionnaire is set up to be used during the interviews with all the partners. This questionnaire can be found in Appendix A: Questionnaire.

2. Preliminary studies

This chapter explains the ERDI-project, the goals and the approach taken to achieve said goals. Besides the information on the project, this chapter contains information gathered on setting up and conducting evaluation interviews.

2.1 About the ERDI-project

Empowering Regional Development and Innovations (ERDI for short) seeks solutions to decreasing economy, unemployment, and migration in remote and rural partner regions. The project tries to accomplish it by boosting the expertise, entrepreneurship, and co-creation of knowledge in bioeconomy. Bioeconomy in ERDI refers to a sustainable but profitable use of renewable natural resources in the fields of energy and agriculture.

The project is divided into nine work packages as described in Table 2-1. Most of these packages can be viewed as nine steps from the start to the end of the project.

Table 2-1 Work Packages of the ERDI-project

Work Package 1	Current State Analyses
Work Package 2	ERDI Management
Work Package 3	Curriculum Development
Work Package 4	Digital Learning Tools
Work Package 5	Knowledge Alliance Models and Tools
Work Package 6	Business Networks
Work Package 7	Quality Assurance
Work Package 8	Evaluation of ERDI project and process
Work Package 9	Dissemination and Exploitation of Results

The goal of the division into these work packages is to achieve the objectives set out by the project. ERDI seeks solutions to economic issues in rural regions. This is done by having five concrete objectives (Objectives, 2018):

- Internationalising the education;
- Supporting accessibility of education;
- Defining the core competences of bioeconomy experts;
- Boosting co-creation of knowledge with the working life;
- Strengthening bioeconomy business, entrepreneurship, and employability.

These objectives should lead to the following results (Timonen, 2018):

- Competence descriptions;
- International ERDI course (Worth 45 ECTS, one semester);
- Innovative digital e-learning tools;
- Digital, open education materials;
- Knowledge alliance models and tools;
- Business networks and practices;

- Dissemination materials.

Many ERDI objectives are centred on education and providing future employability for new workers in the bioeconomic sector. This should lead to more responsible businesses rising in the current ERDI partner regions.

2.2 Evaluation Interviews

To set up proper interviews and get accurate responses from the interviewees, some information has been gathered regarding the matter.

The whole process can be summarised in six steps (Boyce & Neale, 2006) each focused on a different part of the process.

The first step is the planning. During this step, the interviewer identifies the stakeholders and the information needed for the evaluation.

The second step is the development of the instruments. This includes the formulation of questions, set up, and closure of the interviews. The interview questions should be open-ended to prevent simple answers like “yes” or “no”. It is also important that the interviews feel like a conversation to both parties. (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2001).

The third step is training the data collectors. This part is not relevant for the process as it is used in this case.

Step four and five focus on the collection and the analysis of the data gathered during the interviews.

The final step is the dissemination of the findings. The report itself is part of the final step of the process.

3. Method and approach

This chapter highlights the approach chosen for the QA project. The Quality Assurance will be divided into three steps. The approach taken is based on the book called “CONDUCTING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: A Guide for Designing and Conducting In-Depth Interviews for Evaluation Input” written by Boyce and Neale (2006).

The first step is to identify the stakeholders and the information needed for the evaluation. The stakeholders are described in chapter 4: Stakeholders. The information that is needed for the evaluation is summarised in the research questions. These research questions are listed in chapter 1.5. After the first draft of the questionnaire is set up, it is discussed with the supervisor and revised based on the provided feedback. This process is repeated until the final version of the questionnaire is finished and approved. This version can be found in Appendix A: Questionnaire

The approval of the questionnaire leads to the scheduling of the meetings with the partners. This is the step where the data for the evaluation is collected. These meetings will be conducted face to face with the partners within the region, and via Skype with the partners that are not in North Karelia during the period of these interviews.

The last step is to analyse all the interview answers. The analysis of gathered data is performed by splitting the answers into common themes. This way the information is compared to the answers of the interviews with other partners. This method ensures the extraction of similar feedback from different partners. The goal of this analysis is to get data and feedback forwarded to the coordinators so they can use it to assess the ERDI-project. This data and feedback can be applied to a possible follow-up project, as well as to the ERDI-project itself to improve the current results and performance.

Software used for this project is Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Skype.

4. Stakeholders

The project coordinators Liisa Timonen and Sini-Tuuli Saaristo have high interests in the Quality Assurance part of the ERDI-project considering they want the project to succeed, and the feedback provided during the interviews could show how far the project has gotten so far.

The role of Kaija Saramäki is to coordinate the teacher and student exchange and make sure the planning for the incoming teachers from partner universities goes well.

ERDI Consortium consists out of three groups: Higher Educational Institutes (HEI's), Working Life Partners (WLP) and Associated Partners.

Higher Educational Institutes involved in the project are:

- Karelia University of Applied Sciences (Finland);
- Savonia University of Applied Sciences (Finland);
- Széchenyi István University (Hungary);
- Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (Slovakia);
- University of Pardubice (Czech Republic);
- HAS University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands).

The Working Life Partners involved are:

- ProAgria North Karelia (Finland);
- ProAgria North Savo (Finland);
- SLOV-MART Ltd (Slovakia);
- Local Action Group of Železnohorský region (Czech Republic);
- Enamro (Hungary).

The third group, Associated Partners, includes:

- The Province of North Brabant (the Netherlands);
- The Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick (Canada);
- Regional Council of North Karelia (Finland);
- Université de Moncton (Canada);
- Groupe Savoie (Canada).

All three groups will be asked to provide feedback on the project and the partnership so far. Considering these partners will be providing feedback, their importance in the Quality Assurance is very high. The interests of Associated Partners are expected to be higher than expected of WLP's and HEI's. This is because the Associated partners must fund their participation within ERDI themselves. WLP's and HEI's are also meant to provide self-funding, but they also receive financial support from the EU.

5. Results

This chapter highlights the findings of the conducted surveys. The structure of this chapter is based on the Questionnaire and is divided into eight parts. The question(s) that have been asked to get answers to each part are stated under the headings in cursive. The partner names and the interviews are left out of this document due to the sensitive nature.

5.1 Benefits derived from the project

As a partner of ERDI, what benefits has the project provided to you so far?

The analysis of this question provided seven main themes that the partners talked about: understanding bioeconomy, teaching, international experience and internationalisation, student and teacher exchange, knowledge exchange, networking, and language skills.

Out of fourteen conducted interviews, ten partners listed international experience and internationalisation as benefits, which have been experienced thanks to the project.

Networking is the second most mentioned benefit of the project; seven partners have listed it as an advantage. This should not come as a surprise considering the project is based on cooperation with different partners from different backgrounds and regions.

Considering most partners do not have English as their primary language, language skills was third most mentioned benefit of the project. The partners could practice the language skills during the cooperation, meetings and the workshops.

5.2 Successes and difficulties

Has the partner succeeded within the project so far? Please identify the success and / or difficulties within Work Packages. What are the reasons for the difficulties?

Successes

The interviews show the following successes: meeting the deadlines, establishing networks and knowledge exchange, teaching, e-learning and online materials, and cooperation.

Six partners consider themselves successful at establishing international networks and knowledge exchange within these networks.

Second most mentioned subjects are achieving the deadlines and teaching. Both have been mentioned by four HEI's. Striking is the fact that achievement of the deadlines has only been mentioned by HEI's.

Difficulties

Two partners have mentioned travel as a difficulty. One has mentioned that justification of travel is an issue for them. This is due to the distances that the partner has to travel to meet their partners or the rest of the consortium and the lack of funding. The other partner talks about the

need to travel more so they can meet with others, but they find it hard to find time to do so due to the workload of the partner.

Some partners have mentioned a lack of people within their organisations working on the project. The causes given by the partner during the interview are lack of time and the language barrier.

The delays and lack of ability to implement the results have been brought up as well. The partner mentioning this indicates not knowing the causes of the delays, but suspects it could be caused by the lack of financial resources or the lack of full understanding of the project from the start.

Eight partners have not listed any difficulties they have experienced on their part. The partners that have mentioned some difficulties were referring to the issues that were present during the first phases of the project and are already resolved.

5.3 Results of the cooperation

What are the concrete results from the project so far?

During the interviews, the partners have mentioned ten distinct results. These are (in descending order of mentions): Student and teacher exchange, finished products, networking and internationalisation, closer cooperation with partners, and five unique replies.

Most mentioned results are the student and teacher exchange possibility. Five partners, all of which are HEI's, have mentioned this. As one of the goals of the ERDI-project was the development of an international course for students about bioeconomy, this is a great result.

Finished products are the results mentioned five times during the interviews. Examples of these are "Perspective on Bioeconomy" and the ERDI curriculum (Bioeconomy hub) meant for an international course.

Networking and internationalisation are both subjects brought up four times during the interviews. While internationalisation is equally mentioned between different kinds of partners, networking is mostly mentioned by the WLP's.

Improving the results

How can the achieved results be improved?

When asked how the partners thought to improve the results, most partners came with different suggestions and ideas. It was not possible to find common themes. The partner ideas for improvement are listed below in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1 Suggestions and ideas on improving the results

Improvement on the partner side	Improvement on the project side
Not Answered	Application of PDCA-Cycle for the management.
Not Answered	More active networking between WLP and more cooperation within the consortium for some tasks.
Not Answered	Invite partners from more developed (on the subject) countries.
Incorporate more practice into the study modules.	Take into consideration what the needs of businesses and companies are.
Inclusion of more companies into the network.	Provide more detailed information and feedback for business networks. Implement expectations into the modules.
Involve WLP's that can justify travels to Europe.	Not always enough tasks to justify travel to their partner.
	More stress should be put on the dissemination of the project.
The partner should share more of their expertise. Apply more pressure for the use of e-learning tools.	The partners who want to operate internationally should be shown that they might have to change their ways.
Partner should get more used to the online teaching environments.	The feedback for shared materials should be communicated better.
Not Answered	Making online content free to access is not feasible. Once the financing ends, the resources for online sharing might end as well.
Not Answered	The partner needs more explanation about e-learning tools. There should be more focus on the tasks that have yet to be completed.
Tasks should be worded more concrete from the start. There should be more 1 on 1 guidance. The responsibilities should be split better among the partners.	All the partners should take more responsibility for their tasks.

Most suggestions regarding the improvement of the results on the side of ERDI could be implemented at the start of a potential follow up project. Most of the feedback provided is about changing something within the tasks themselves or inviting other partners to participate.

This however, will not change the quality of the results and products delivered by the end of the ERDI-project. Some partners did provide suggestions so that the current results could be improved. Putting more stress on the dissemination, communication of feedback on shared materials and explanation of e-learning tools is feedback that could be applied before the end of the project. This feedback should lead to improved results.

5.4 Structure

What is your opinion on the structure and approach of the ERDI-project?

Out of fourteen conducted interviews, twelve partners are positive with the approach and structure of ERDI. Six of the positive responses suggest that the approach and the structure have improved when compared to the start of the project. Most partners think the introduction of the task matrix provided a lot of clarity.

Two partners are not as content with the current structure. One of which would like to see more structure within the project. According to the partner, due to the Work Packages being divided into little tasks the project risks to losing the sight of the big picture. Another partner would like to see the return of online meetings. For the partner it is hard to justify travel for every meeting and workshop.

5.5 Feedback on the project

What feedback would you provide to improve the project?

This question is divided into three parts. Feedback for the coordinators, feedback for the consortium and feedback for partners' own performance.

The answers are presented in the tables 5-2 to 5-4. Not all the partners could provide an answer to all the questions; therefore, the tables do not contain the same amount of feedback.

Feedback for the coordinators

Table 5-2 Feedback for the coordinators provided by the partners during the QA interviews

Feedback

Improve the project management by the means of application of the PDCA-cycle from the start of the project.

The benefits for Working Life Partners should be included in the planning. The partner wishes to gain access to the online materials.

The structure of the project (at the time of the interview) is great.

The Moodle system used by the project is complicated.

The deadlines should be enforced more.

The project has benefited from great leadership provided by the coordinators.

The expectations of the partners are well managed. Reasoning for self-funding is explained.

Face-to-face meetings are a great improvement over the previously used online meetings.

The partners should do more work outside the workshops.

The fact that all the partners come from different working cultures can affect many things during the cooperation. This should be kept in mind.

There are no major mistakes, which should be mentioned. The coordinators have already taken care of the small mistakes that have been made throughout the project.

Different partners have different opinions on the way the project is structured, some like it the way it is, and others would like to see improvement. This discrepancy was expected because the partners come from different background and working cultures.

Feedback regarding inclusion of the benefits for WLP's into the planning can prove very useful for a follow up project if the organisers want to attract more and more varied businesses.

Feedback for the consortium

Table 5-3 Feedback for the ERDI consortium provided by the partners during the QA interviews

Feedback

There should be more cooperation between partners, especially within the assessment of sustainability of the achieved results

There should be a file available where all the progress of the partners should be reported (including the hours spent and the achieved results). This should provide a better picture of what has been done. The project could have benefited from a feasibility analysis.

The expectations of the partners must be communicated clearly.

Each partner country or region has their own ways to deal with (region) specific issues. These ways can be useful for many partners and therefore could be a useful tool to share.

The partners should follow the deadlines closer to avoid unnecessary delays.

The partners should be more flexible regarding the workload that is put unto them.

Beside the 4 yearly meetings, the partners should meet more often. These meetings do not have to be attended by all the partners, and should lead to an improvement in work performance by the partners.

The partners should be open-minded about different working cultures and backgrounds of others.

The partners should do more work outside the workshops.

The fact that all the partners come from different working cultures can affect many things during the cooperation. This should be kept in mind.

Great variety of expertise and skills within the consortium.

There should be more emphasis on the preparations of the partners for the projects. Some partners lacked knowledge prior to the start of the project.

The partners should put more effort into the visibility of the project

The only feedback mentioned by more than one partner is the background and different working cultures of different partners that should be kept in mind while cooperating. During the interviews, the partners made clear that the cooperation with different partners from different regions are beneficial for everyone involved, but some disagreement can arise if the differences are not kept in mind.

Feedback for own performance

Table 5-4 Feedback the partners have provided for themselves

Feedback

Following the assignments provided by the coordinators more closely.

Partners needs to be more flexible.

The partner should define clear goals and note their own progress to make sure there will not be any delays.

More meetings with other partners.

The partner needs to cooperate more with companies.

The partner should do more work outside the workshops.

Task Matrix should be made at the start of the project.

Ask the partners, which have responsibility for certain Work Packages, make their own planning.

Original QA process was too complicated.

All the feedback that the partners have mentioned is tied into productivity and making sure the partner can perform more efficiently.

5.6 Strengths and Weaknesses

What are the strong and (possible) weak points in the partnership?

This question handles two matters; therefore, a decision was made to ask two separate questions to give the partners the opportunity to work this out systematically. Firstly, the partner is asked about the strengths of the partnership and afterward about the possible weaknesses.

Strong points of the partnership

Two of the most mentioned strengths of the partnership are networking and skill exchange.

Other strengths mentioned are structure, possibilities to study, working in an international project, learning about different cultures and gaining an understanding of EU commission policies.

Weak points of the partnership

Most mentioned weak point is workload and prioritization. Some partners find it difficult to balance the tasks they should perform and manage their responsibilities in their own organisations.

Other weaknesses listed are a different amount of financing for different regions, no access to online tools or too much use of online tools and communication (language barrier, communication of outcomes or lack of online communication).

5.7 Continuation of the results

How do you plan the continuation and further development of the ERDI results after the project is completed?

The provided answers show the will to continue the work within the field of bioeconomy. The answers given are split into two categories: working on partnerships and working on education. HEI's aim to continue working on the curriculum or submitting research projects while WLP's want to focus on developing more partnerships.

5.8 Continuation of the partnerships

How do you plan on maintaining and developing the partnerships after the project?

Most partners are aiming to continue cooperation under different projects, either continuing the work under ERASMUS+ or in small consortiums adding into other initiatives.

5.9 Meaning of bioeconomy

Has the meaning of the term "bioeconomy" changed for you during the partnership? If yes, how does it show?

Ten interviewees have stated that the meaning of the term has changed for them. The change is either in learning the meaning of the term or expanding the knowledge on the subject.

Five interviewees indicated that the project has not changed the meaning of the term. This was mostly due to the partner already working within the field.

6. Discussion of the results

Based on the answers provided by the partners, it can be noted that their opinions might contradict each other. For instance, one partner suggests that the project needs more structure while the other believes that it is fine the way it is. Another example is the fact that some partners are glad there are no more online meetings while others would like to see the return of these.

The first example can be explained by the background and working culture of the partners. Some partners would like to see set goals and tasks just handed to them to work on, while others prefer more freedom and the possibility to work in their own way to achieve the results.

The second example could be based on the lack of financial resources to travel or the distance that must be travelled. In either case, travel for meetings and workshops is tough and online meetings would be preferred.

The method used to perform this research is the method applicable to the situation. The preferred way to have the interviews would be face-to-face. However, based on the period chosen for the interviews it was not possible. The suggestion would be to have the interviews when all the partners come together for a workshop or a meeting, and reserve some time for the interviewer to talk to all the partners.

Based on the interviews and interpretation of the given answers, the questions must be worded more focussed on the goals. For instance, "What is your opinion on the structure and approach of the ERDI-project?" should be asked as two separate questions, asking specifically first about the approach and secondly about the structure. This should lead to answers that elaborate more on both subjects.

7. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to summarise the answers provided by the partners per research question.

How have the partners benefitted from the project so far?

As listed in chapter 5: Results, the benefits for the partners range from expanding knowledge and their networks to the internationalisation of their organisations and improvement of language skills. The project has provided direct and indirect benefits to all the partners.

What successes and results have the partners achieved within the project?

Various partners have listed both, networks and materials (such as publications) as results and successes. Most Higher Education Institutions have listed teaching and the international course (including the curriculum) as a great result of the project, which gives the students and teachers alike the possibility to work in an international context.

What is partners' opinion on the structure of the project?

The answers to this question are mostly positive. Eleven out of fourteen interviewees had positive opinions on the structure. Half of these have mentioned that the structure has improved if compared to the start of the project.

While one partner indicates that the project needs more structure, it could be explained either by the tasks given to this partner or the way the partner is used to work.

How will the partners continue the development of bioeconomy after the project is finished?

Partners would like to continue the cooperation whenever it is possible and hope to work on more projects within this field.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. Partner and interviewee name, date of the interview, role in the project / organisation.
2. As a partner of ERDI, what benefits has the project provided to you so far?
3. Has the partner succeeded within the project so far? Please identify the success and / or difficulties within Work Package. What are the reasons for the difficulties?
4. What are the concrete results from the project so far?
5. How can the results be improved?
 - a. From partner's point of view?
 - b. From the project's point of view?
6. What is your opinion on the structure and approach of the eRDI-project?
7. What feedback would you provide for eRDI to improve the project?
 - a. For the project coordinator;
 - b. For the whole consortium;
 - c. For your own performance
8. What are the strong point in the partnership?
9. What are the (possible) weak points in the partnership?
10. How do you plan the continuation and further development of the eRDI results after the project is completed?
11. How do you plan on maintaining and developing the partnerships after the project?
12. Has the meaning of the term "bioeconomy" changed for you during the partnership? If yes, how did the meaning change and what has eRDI done to contribute to said change?
 - a. How does it show?
13. Is there anything you would like to add?