

ESMERALD IO4:
GUIDELINES
FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT RESULTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Post-pandemic European economic landscape, additionally affected with war in Ukraine and subsequent disruptions in global, European and regional supply chains and production networks is characterised with high degree of uncertainty and volatility. Particularly vulnerable to these developments are small and medium sized enterprises, SMEs, that struggle with informational asymmetries and are in need of guidance capable of reducing uncertainty and risks surrounding them. Such guidance can come in many forms among which the adaptive, forward-looking and learning-based trainings stand as promising tools. However, neither VET providers nor other entities in European educational landscape were prepared for the crisis of the extent that Covid took. This created the need for innovative and relevant training that will take into account the risks and empower SMEs with tools and operational guidance to face new challenges and embrace the benefits of new opportunities. Such training should have the potential to provide SMEs with new skills, competences and operational tools relevant for operation in a new business environment.

One of such initiatives is project Esmerald (Enhancing SMEs' resilience after lock down) funded by Erasmus+ programme within its KA226 initiative aimed at strengthening digital education readiness. Coordinated by Krakow University of Economics (CUE) and bringing together six additional partners from higher education, non-governmental, business and business-supporting sectors in Belgium, Italy, Spain, Greece, Poland and Croatia the project aimed from 2021

to 2023 to develop high-quality relevant and timely digital and multilingual training content aimed at reinforcing the role of Vocational Education and Training as means to revitalise and make more resilient SMEs across European economies and societies through newly established Open Educational Resource, a focal point for support of the VET and entrepreneurship support ecosystems. To this end, project has for its aim enhancing of the competitiveness of SMEs in European post-pandemic landscape.

To deliver on its initial objectives the project consortium developed total of 24 trainings and provided them in digital, multilingual and ready to use format via project open education platform. These trainings covered many aspects of organisational life recognised as relevant during initial needs analysis and subsequent mapping of enterprise behaviour, responses to external shocks including Covid as well as obstacles encountered by SMEs on this path. To this end, enterprises are given tools that should allow them to cope with challenges in areas of i) public financial and legal support for enterprises, ii) business models transformation in changing technological setting, iii) development of new commerce channels and customer management in digital environment, iv) online safety and security, v) health and work-life balance disorders, mental well-being and psychological needs in digital environment, vi) rules of online business behaviour and net-iquette. For each of 24 courses falling under one of above six areas the project provided materials in several formats resulting in ready to use toolbox for those interested in SME resilience during large external shocks such as Covid pandemics.

The quality and relevance of developed courses depend heavily on the process of their development. This involved interaction with representatives of target groups through testing, validation and dissemination activities. Feedbacks collected this way have allowed consortium to fine-tune initial drafts of training materials and bring them closer to the needs of beneficiaries. These activities served additional purpose of collecting inputs that can be of use for all those interested in applying trainings developed within Esmerald in their future educational activities. In particular, the inputs collected have touched upon topics of organisation of trainings, target group management and motivation, delivery of content, collection of feedbacks and alternative scenario recommendations. Building on these foundations it was possible to develop a set of guidelines for use of our materials across different contexts.

The experiences embodied in these guidelines aim to provide users with practical insights based on experience accumulated through piloting, validation and dissemination activities. Particular attention was given to topics of blended learning and options for online delivery of our trainings. As Covid pandemics revealed, such experiences are pivotal for the delivery of trainings in periods of isolation and lockdowns. While providing starting point the recommendations provided in these guidelines should not be taken as definitive rules for implementation of Esmerald trainings. From its inception, Esmerald was envisioned as living tissue, focused on growth through co-creation. Prospective users are encouraged to experiment and enrich training



content and guidelines for their delivery with their own ideas. With that in mind we provide guidelines for efficient implementation of ESMERALD toolkit.

ESMERALD consortium

2. ORGANISATION OF TRAINING

ESMERALD trainings can be delivered in different settings, either as classroom-based or as online blended learning courses. Regardless of the format used, our piloting, validation and dissemination activities revealed that trainings have highest chances of being delivered efficiently when the materials being delivered are aligned with profile of participants, contain practical examples and are delivered in interactive mode combining several types of tools. Examples of tools that can be used include but are not limited to digital presentations, short video materials, online tools for collection of participant opinion (e.g. Mentimeter, Kahoot etc.) or solutions based on gamification approach. These tools have proven particularly suitable during consortium interactions with target group as solid basis for the subsequent critical reflection, debating and reaching course objectives through participatory, co-creative approach.

Our experiences suggest that trainings can be delivered, subject to initial preparation of instructors in groups involving businesses from same sector but also those from variety of industries. They can be applied in a way that allows stand-alone delivery or delivery in synergy of several different topics of relevance for recipient SMEs. Another valuable insight from our experiences is related to launching of sessions. It was established that provision of as much as possible detailed information regarding expectations from participants, tools to be used and aims of the course facilitates smooth delivery and intra-group

dynamics. For courses delivered repeatedly consortium recommends collection of feedbacks and use of information collected this way to refine and enhance content, tools and methods of delivery used in interaction with target group.

3. RECRUITMENT

Delivery of trainings can be initiated from either supply or demand side. While demand side incentives for engagement in training are relatively straightforward, there are multiple channels through which prospective participants can be enticed to engage in trainings such as those created within ESMERALD. Conventional recruitment methods involve phone or e-mail distribution of information about potential trainings. Here one can use existing dissemination networks of its organisation or those belonging to other organisations. In other cases, specialised entities for business support such as development agencies, incubators, business associations etc. can be used to reach desired participants. When providers are high or higher education institutions the networks of former students now entrepreneurs or employees of prospective organisations may serve as channel. Some of consortium members attempted also to reach participants through channels such as website. Similar effects, albeit with different reach can be achieved by announcing call for expression of interest through social networks. In one case, specialised community forums were used to reach SMEs. This channel also proved efficient reaching substantial number of entrepreneurs. One should not discard specialised events devoted to members of target groups. Such events usually host different side activities and trainings such as ESMERALD based ones can be used for that purpose as well. Finally, networks of stakeholders can be used to promote ESMERALD OER platform among members of target group as developed trainings are provided in ready to use format.

4. COMMUNICATION WITH TARGET GROUP AND PARTICIPANTS

One of keys to efficient delivery of trainings is smooth communication with target group and participants. This requires from instructors often to apply different techniques known as “break-the-ice” approaches. While many approaches exist, our experience shows that one should invest effort in finding balance between being too serious and too friendly with participants and from the beginning define roles and responsibilities in the process. Learner groups usually consist of participants with different willingness to engage in discussion and to challenge stated opinions or facts. For the purpose of breaking the ice one should try to identify such participants and initiate discussion. However, this does not mean that other group members should be excluded from interaction. Ice-breaker questions may include informal issues, introducing of each participant, reflection on individual hobbies etc.

The above activities have for its aim establishing of trust among participants. As our piloting, validation and dissemination sessions indicated, breaking the ice with some of informal questions is quite helpful. Participants may be asked to introduce themselves, to explain motives that led them to joining the session or one can present its own organisation and the characteristics of the training. In case of follow up sessions ice-breakers can include reflection on experiences collected through previous sessions. Here one can ask directly questions or engage learning group to ask each other questions.

Our experience suggests that applying one of above approaches proved beneficial in creating a collaborative environment and encouraged all participants to provide inputs and engage in the productive discussion. The above can be applied in physical or remote setting. Later is particularly prone to described approach as it enables prompt communication, it is convenient and flexible and allows easy sharing of materials in real-time. This, however, comes at a cost of having difficulties in establishment of personal connection which is more pronounced than with in-person communication. It is also important in such circumstances to give thought to challenges such as sporadic technical difficulties. One should pay attention also to generational differences when delivering content and align teaching style to needs of group.

5. GROUP MANAGEMENT

Group management refers to ways instructor keeps learners interested and engaged. Each learning group consists of participants that differ in their willingness to discuss, criticize and actively participate in learning activities. The key to successful delivery of trainings and keeping the session “lively” comes down to ability to make atmosphere free and flexible. This can be ignited by invited discussion with informal spokespersons of the group or by splitting participants in groups and assigning them tasks which they are later required to present. For session to stay active one can use help of digital tools. It was recognised in Covid that some participants feel more free in expressing their opinions via online channels (e.g. Mentimeter, Kahoot and similar solutions) while others will be keen to do so via verbal communication. It is challenge for instructor to find optimal balance between these but at the same time to select proper dose of materials such as best practices, case studies and similar sources that can trigger discussion. The attitude of instructor has non-negligible influence on the way he/she is perceived by the group. For example, whether instructor is constantly positioned behind the desk or other barrier or they mingle among participants can make huge difference in perception of learners about the distance between them and those delivering the content.

Our experiences revealed that keeping group engaged can be easily achieved through provision of many examples relatable to everyday living and maintaining balance between theoretical concepts and practical application. Addition of online games made experience more enjoyable and

interactive but also created a competitive learning environment among participants. Another set of strategies involved invitations to participants to ask questions, share their experiences and provide feedback throughout the session. Group work and collaboration also helped to build a sense of community and fostered creation of supportive learning environment.

In some instances it was observed that visual appeal and ease of understanding of training materials with help of multimedia (videos, images, graphics) helped adoption. In doing this, one should make sure that participants are given enough regular breaks, opportunities for networking and informal discussion. This helps them to maintain engagement and stay focused but also to explore and decide on the relevance of individual segments of content being transmitted.

6. BLENDED LEARNING AND ONLINE TRANSMISSION

Application of course content across different learning contexts requires adjustment of certain settings. ESMERALD OER platform is designed with aim to allow self-learning and online trainings but it can accompany also offline courses to some extent. It is job of instructor to find a balance between traditional tools and digital solutions in their efforts to ease learner adoption of delivered content. In digital environment, however, the task is even more challenging. Many digital resources are static and motionless. The task of trainer is then to guide attention of learners to relevant details. Here one can use tools such as presentation media, moodle-like resources or videoconferencing tools. During our piloting, validation and dissemination sessions we used different tools for videoconferencing such as Zoom, Teams, Meet or Skype. These were complemented with interactive online tools such as Kahoot, Google Forms and Poll Everywhere. In this way we were able to gauge learner understanding of the training material and to adjust our training program accordingly. These tools were in other instances combined with conventional classroom tools such as projector and laptop, flipcharts and whiteboards.

7. PARTICIPANT MOTIVATION AND OPINIONS

Participants may decide to join trainings for various individual and organisational reasons. In some instances they may be drawn by curiosity and self-awareness. In other cases, uncertainty, fear of failure but also the feeling of constant need for upgrading of own competencies can be among motives. Our collected feedbacks revealed that majority of those participating in piloting, validation and dissemination activities did so due to interest in upskilling and learning, desire to apply learned content in professional and personal lives or because they were affected by Covid pandemics but did not have right answers nor strategies to find them in order to reach to the challenges faced.

Relevant part behind sustainability of ESMERALD trainings rests in collection of feedbacks from participants. One should be aware that formal collections of feedback exhibit tendency of causing the feeling of boredom among learners. It is therefore equally important to collect informal feedbacks during sessions where participants can express their feelings, views and attitudes on the content and delivery of training, individual session quality or the approach of instructor/speaker. This open and clear way of communication serves additional purpose of creating trust and making learners feel as if their voice is relevant and thus more willing to open up and speak.

Collection of formal feedbacks can be undertaken through different channels. Focus groups, surveys embodied in tools such as Google Forms or ready to use

feedback forms from different websites can be used and delivered to learners with help of QR code, website link or similar. It is worth paying attention here to anonymity of responses as this is more likely to motivate learners to open up. One should make sure that during filling of feedback survey participants are provided assistance in case of technical difficulties. Engagement in feedback should be increased with different motivational tools. Our experience revealed that explaining the relevance of feedback for improving of training program and delivery acts as relevant incentive. In repetitive sessions, acting upon collected feedbacks and demonstrating results to participants motivated them to continue providing reflection.

8. ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO RECOMMENDATIONS

Each training is developed with aim to satisfy existing or foreseen needs. For this reason, with lapse of time they need further revisions and improvements. Already during piloting, validation and dissemination events several alternative options for training delivery and valorisation were identified. These can be advised for consideration to prospective learners and instructors as alternative scenario recommendations. For one thing, one should plan the timing of training sessions as some participants may find it difficult to attend individual sessions if they conflict with their other obligations. Some participants may struggle with use of technology required for online sessions. This requires preparatory trainings for the use of technology in online sessions. Feedbacks collected from some participants suggest that interactivity and hands-on approach in trainings through group activities, role-playing and case studies could be beneficial for adoption of transmitted content. Finally, one should plan enough time for discussion, reflection and feedback.

In other cases one could identify need for better balance between theoretical and practical parts of the training. This depends on the characteristics of individual groups and it is up to each individual instructor to tailor content in appropriate way. Differences in age and profile of attendees should also be taken into account. As different age groups may differ in receptiveness to individual materials one could introduce dual approach here, confronting each group with materials designed for their counterparts.