

Report

Quality assurance and evaluations



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1 Summary of the Project and Introduction

On average, SMEs are less innovative than large companies, as they have limitations due to more limited internal resources (EC, 2019a). Especially in Eastern European countries, SMEs have very low innovation activity and there are large differences between SMEs and large companies. In the field of customer innovation, SMEs find it particularly difficult to innovate. Meeting real customer needs is the core factor for successful innovation management, for generating customer-oriented business ideas and innovative concepts (von Hippel, 2005).

SMEs do not have the time and resources to receive feedback and ideas from their customers. And when they do find the time, it is difficult to process the information and turn it into valuable solutions. A holistic approach to customer-centric innovation is complex and requires changes at all levels of a company. However, digitization and new media are now opening up far-reaching opportunities to make full use of customer-centric innovations in SMEs as well, thus strongly promoting innovative strength and competitiveness (Robra-Bissantz, 2017). These technologies and the opportunities they offer have so far been little known in SMEs and are only used by very few SMEs. They lack information, experience, knowledge and skills on instruments, methods and procedures as well as on the use of digital technologies to acquire, process and realize customer innovations.

Against this background, the project pursues on a broad regional basis the objective of enabling and supporting SMEs to exploit their customer innovation potential and thus to strengthen the productivity and competitiveness of SMEs, to secure existing jobs and to create new ones. The following main activities will be carried out to achieve the objectives.

- a) In 13 countries, analysis and comprehensive investigation of best practices on how SMEs generate, process and realize customer-centric innovation approaches and which digital technologies they can use doing so. The best practices obtained will be processed, transferred to SMEs in the context of training and consulting, and supported in their implementation in the companies.
- b) Development of a toolbox with instruments, methods and procedures for the realization of customer innovations in SMEs.
- c) Through the development of two specific training and coaching programs, SMEs gain digital skills and are enabled to continuously realize comprehensive customer-centric innovations. The learning takes place mainly at the workplace and at the same time includes individual company development projects, so that digital technologies are already used, and corresponding innovations are realized during the further training.
- d) Comprehensive qualification of teachers and consultants of SMEs.



The qualification, consulting and support programs are carried out by chambers, which, as central SME supporters, have direct access to SMEs and, with their training and technology centers, also have corresponding capacities. However, many teachers and consultants lack the knowledge and skills to qualify and advise SMEs and their staff in the application of digital technologies and in the acquisition, processing and realization of customer innovations at a high-quality level. Therefore, two specific train the trainer programs for teachers and consultants are being developed, which will be implemented and permanently run by 18 colleges and universities from 9 countries. These programs are:

- a) strengthening and promoting the knowledge and skills of teachers and consultants on digital technologies on the one hand and on the realization of customer-centric innovations on the other hand.
- b) constantly providing well qualified teachers and consultants on a broad regional basis.

The developed instruments, digital models, educational and support programs will be tested and evaluated under different national conditions in several countries and implemented by all project partners. A continuation of the work after the end of the project with an ongoing implementation of the educational and support programs is secured, including financing.

The project is carried out by eight experienced partners (chambers, other institutions of vocational training and universities) from Denmark, Germany, Poland and Hungary with different levels of development and conditions. The transnational project approach enables learning from each other, identification and transfer of best practices and joint development work.

All results of the project will be transferred to 70 chambers, SME associations and colleges/universities from 13 countries, which will receive implementation advice and will be involved in the project work as associated partners from the beginning of the project.

At the beginning of the project, a concept and quality plans for the quality assurance and evaluation of the project implementation of the project results were prepared and discussed and agreed with all project partners. This concept is listed below under Part A Evaluation concepts and quality plans.

On the basis of this concept, the quality assurance and evaluation measures were carried out throughout the project duration. The results are listed below in a summary report in Part B Results of quality assurance and evaluations.



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Part A Evaluation concepts and quality plans



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2 Overview

Quality assurance, evaluation and monitoring of three areas:

- Educational measures
- Transfer processes and implementations
- Quality assurance for the implementation of the project

Quality assurance and evaluation of educational measures occur in the Work Packages, in which qualification shall be developed, tested and implemented (WP 3 to 6). The uniform procedures, processes and instruments for the implementation of this work shall be described in Work Package 3 to 6. The results of quality assurance and evaluation shall be implemented directly into the individual educational measures. A comprehensive analysis of the evaluation of all educational measures shall occur in the context of Work Package 1 Project Management.

Quality assurance and evaluation of the transfer processes, implementations and co-operation as well as the entire project implementation shall occur in Work Packages 1 "Project Management" and 7 "Transfer & Dissemination". As the work for these three areas is closely linked, the survey and analysis of the data shall be performed using identical methods and generally uniform work processes.

The following shall be outlined comprehensively:

- Methods and goals of evaluation
- Quality assurance and evaluation of educational measures
- Quality assurance and evaluation of transfer processes and implementations and the entire project implementation



3 Methods and goals of evaluation

Numerous evaluation methods and standards have been established on an international level. The comparison of applied methods shows that concerning the validity evaluation criteria play a significant role (cf. among others Widmer, Th., Evaluation: Ein systematisches Handbuch, Wiesbaden, 2009).

Depending on which criteria certain priority is assigned to, the evaluation results turn out correspondingly.

The same significance has the pragmatic direction. Therefore, the question: which goals have to be reached with the evaluation?

3.1 Goals

As a rule, the evaluation has the following goals:

1. It has to provide objectified knowledge about the progress (quantity and quality) of processes.
2. It serves the control of such processes and helps capturing the strong and the weak points. Therefore, it is an instrument of quality assurance.
3. It serves the legitimization. In other words, a successful evaluation is evidence of competence of the person responsible for the process being evaluated.
4. Transparency, to make a dialogue possible.

In order to achieve these goals, the evaluation was performed in a process-related and summative manner: process-related (also formative, development-related) in order to evaluate the quality of the project progress and if necessary, to make changes. The summative evaluation or evaluation of results serves the evaluation of the specified objectives within the framework of the project, final evaluation of impact and efficiency of the project lecturers management, of cooperation and transfer.

3.2 Methods

As a rule, it is reasonable to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments for evaluations: "If one wants to ensure the availability of statements concerning relevant program conditions and impacts through the framework of mutually reinforcing evidence so the multiple methodical access providers, in general, a more comprehensive and informative picture than a monomethod approach" (Brandtstädter, Jochen (1990): Development during the course of life. Approaches and problems of lifespan development psychology. In: Mayer, Karl Ulrich (Hg.): Life courses and social transformation (special issue of the Cologne magazine for sociology and social psychology. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.).

Whereas for the analysis of process-related data (program control, execution etc.) first of all qualitative survey methods are suitable, for the verification of achievement of the goals, of impact and causal assessment quantitative survey and evaluation methods



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have to be implemented (Stockmann, Reinhard: Was ist eine gute Evaluation. Saarbrücken: Centrum für Evaluation, 2002. (CEval-Arbeitspapiere; 9).

Within the framework of evaluations, the most frequently used methods are:

- Secondary analysis of available materials
- Guided interviews
- Standardized surveys or partly standardized surveys
- Case studies

Which methods are selected and implemented in particular depends on the central questions of evaluation discussed herein, therefore which goals and tasks are set, who performs the evaluation and which research paradigm must be the basis for this.

Within the framework of the present evaluation the mixed model – consolidation model – is implemented. According to the general description it means that first of all a quantitative survey/research is performed. The obtained data material is subsequently evaluated quantitatively, then it is followed by qualitative research method which is aimed at the consolidation of achieved results. So, it provides material for the interpretation of expected and unexpected effects and illustrates the results of quantitative studies on the basis of case examples.

Therefore, for the evaluation of the project standardized as well as partly standardized surveys were used in the form of written questionnaires during planned and conducted partner workshops as well as an online survey. Complementary results were achieved after that with the help of guided interviews.

The secondary analysis of available materials was also included in the broadest sense, i. e. for the registration of framework data of the project the control instrument “Activity planning” and “Project application” were evaluated in order to capture project goals, terms and tasks of the project consortium and to take them into account during the implementation of separate evaluation steps and assessments.





4 Quality assurance and evaluation of educational measures

In the context of the project, the following educational measures shall be developed, tested, evaluated and implemented:

- ✓ In Work Package 3 SME specific Digital competence training programme
- ✓ In Work Package 4 Train the Trainer Program for consultants and teaching staff from chambers of commerce, organizations in the field of further education and SME promoting “Consulting & Qualification Digitization”
- ✓ In Work Package 5 SME specific Further training programme Realisation of customer-centred innovations
- ✓ In Work Package 6 Train the Trainer Programme for consultants and teaching staff from chambers of commerce, organisations in the field of further education and SME promoting “Consulting & Qualification of Customer-Centric Innovations”

Quality assurance for all professional educational measures shall follow EQAVET.

Target groups and beneficiaries are SMEs, their owners, managers and specialists. In order to completely understand their true requirements, representatives from SMEs as well as other target groups shall be engaged intensively. SMEs shall be included in technical discussions and practical testing as well as take part in workshops from the very beginning.

In order to cover differing national requirements, the educational measures developed as part of the project shall be tested in different countries through trials and evaluated scientifically using written participation surveys, interviews with participants, teachers and SMEs as well as accompanying observations.

Indicators include number of participants, distribution across industries, position in the company; satisfaction levels of the participants with lecturers, organization, documents, etc.; assessments of the lecturers; evaluations of SMEs regarding practical relevance; results of examinations and project work.

4.1 Train the Trainer Programs

Partner 8 Miskolc University shall develop the concept, curriculum and all instructional materials for two Train the Trainer Programs

- Train the Trainer Program A “Consulting & Qualification Digitization”
- Train the Trainer Program B “Consulting & Qualification of Customer-Centric Innovations”

A practical test of the Train the Trainer Programs shall occur:



- Train the Trainer Program A on 10. – 12.11.2021 in Kolding with at least 15 participants from 4 countries, namely the advisor and teaching staff of all project partners. An implementation report shall be created by 30 June 2022. Partner 8 Miskolc University shall develop an evaluation concept including surveys, in-person interviews and accompanying observation and will conduct the evaluation of the trial by 30 September 2022. The revision and finalization of the educational product as well as the development of instructions for use for the future shall be completed on the basis of the evaluation results by 31 October 2022.
- Train the Trainer Program B on 01. – 03 June 2022 in Hamburg with at least 15 participants from 4 countries, namely the advisor and teaching staff of all project partners. An implementation report shall be created by 31 December 2022. Partner 8 Miskolc University shall develop an evaluation concept including surveys, in-person interviews and accompanying observation and will conduct the evaluation of the trial by 31 August 2022. The revision and finalization of the educational product as well as the development of instructions for use for the future shall be completed on the basis of the evaluation results by 31 December 2022.

4.2 Training programs for two further vocational training courses

The project aims to promote work-based learning. Two SME-specific training programs are to be developed, tested, evaluated and completed:

- Digital competence training programme
- Realisation of customer-centred innovations

The individual training courses shall be oriented specifically for the needs of the "owner and management of SMEs" and "specialists of SMEs" target groups. The imparted teaching content is transferable between occupations. People from all professions as well as interested companies from all industries shall be approached. The learning results are found under EQF Level 5.

The entire education and coaching programs include:

- a) two to three blocks of classroom training in a training center, in which owners, HR managers, managers and specialists take part;
- b) one to two very long learning phases at workplaces in companies, in which all employees of the company participate at differing intensities;
- c) the implementation of a specific development project for digitalization and realization of customer-centered innovations, which are determined and defined in the beginning of the first learning phase in the company. Learning occurs through accompanying daily work in the company as well as through the implementation of a development project;
- d) an individual training and coaching program, which shall occur during the learning phases in the company with advisors or teaching staff.





Coaching especially concerns owners, HR managers, managers and employees in the coaching first line group.

The entire education and coaching program occur for approximately six months, depending on the teaching requirements and the complexity of the development project implemented.

The curricula and teaching materials developed shall be tested and evaluated in different countries. In doing so, the development and finalization work shall take into account differing national requirements so that use in different countries is strongly encouraged.

SME specific Digital competence training program

Partner 6 International Business College shall develop the concept, curriculum and all teaching material until 31 October 2021.

A practical test of the training program must take place in the period from November 2021 to June 2022 in

- Denmark by partner 6 International Business College
- Poland by partner 4 Warmińsko-Mazurska Izba Rzemiosła i Przedsiębiorczości and partner 9 Dolnośląska Izba Rzemieślnicza we Wrocławiu.
- Hungary through Partner 7 Ipartestületek Országos Szövetsége

Implementation reports should be prepared by 30 September 2022 at the latest.

Partner 6 Hanzeatycki Instytut Wspierania Małych i Średnich Przedsiębiorstw shall develop an evaluation concept including surveys, in-person interviews and accompanying observation and will conduct the evaluation of the trial by 30 November 2022.

The revision and finalization of the educational product as well as the development of instructions for use for the future shall be completed on the basis of the evaluation results by 31 March 2023.

Further training programme Realisation of customer-centred innovations

Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament shall develop the concept, curriculum and all teaching material until 30 September 2022.

A practical test of the training program must take place in the period from September 2022 to March 2023 in

- Denmark by partner 6 International Business College
- Poland by partner 4 Warmińsko-Mazurska Izba Rzemiosła i Przedsiębiorczości and partner 9 Dolnośląska Izba Rzemieślnicza we Wrocławiu.
- Hungary through Partner 7 Ipartestületek Országos Szövetsége

Implementation reports should be prepared by 31 March 2023 at the latest.



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Partner 6 Hanzeatycki Instytut Wspierania Malych i Srednich Przedsiębiorstw shall develop an evaluation concept including surveys, in-person interviews and accompanying observation and will conduct the evaluation of the trial by 30 April 2023.

The revision and finalization of the educational product as well as the development of instructions for use for the future shall be completed on the basis of the evaluation results by 31 May 2023.



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5 Quality assurance and evaluation of processes

Planning includes two areas of project implementation:

1. Processes of project implementation (see 5.2)
Quality assurance and evaluation of project management, partner meetings and further tasks in the context of Work Package 1 "Project Management".
2. Processes of Transfer and Implementation (see 5.3)
Quality assurance and evaluation of written and personnel transfer, individual implementation counselling as well as additional measures for distributing the project results in the Work Package 7 "Transfer and Dissemination".

As the planning and control mechanisms as well as the data collection and evaluation are identical for all three areas, the relevant planning that follows shall be the same for all.

Concerning the evaluation criteria which must be used in relation to the evaluated processes the opinions in the scientific literature diverge strongly. Often it is recommended to use checklists which contain up to 100 and more criteria according to which the processes can be evaluated.

To ensure the practicability of the evaluation but nevertheless to assess the results thoroughly the evaluation of the project implementation concentrated on four criteria.

1. The quality and the efficiency of management
2. The communication and the cooperation in the project consortium and in the Knowledge Alliance
3. The involvement of transfer recipients and success of transfer activities
4. The expected benefits of implementation of products developed within the framework of the project

According to international experiences with evaluations which are available first of all in the English-speaking countries a holistic (integral) evaluation of processes should have the priority.

During the evaluation of the registered data the focus was on the following criteria:

- a) How do project partners assess the cooperation in consortium and the project management of the Lead Partner?
- b) Have the expectations of the project partners been met?
- c) Did the management meet the requirements?
- d) How do transfer recipients assess their involvement and the transfer activities?
- e) What benefits do the developed products have for the project partners and the transfer recipients?

5.1 Planning and control mechanisms

The project uses four central planning and control mechanisms:



1. A binding agreement with
 - foundations of implementation
 - responsibilities and consequences of non-compliance
 - detailed description of goals, activities and envisaged results
 - tasks, obligations and budgets for each partner
 - binding rules of management and accounting statements
 - uniform paperwork for work reports, registration of working times etc.

The agreement shall be developed by the Lead Partner at a workshop with input and votes from all partners and agreement from the Lead Partner and each individual projected partner by 31 December 2020.

2. A differentiated activity plan which sets out individual work steps, tasks, events, etc., until the end of the project
 - responsible and contributing partners
 - deadlines for implementation and execution
 - goals and expected results
 - all tests and implementation
 - quantity structures and quality criteria

This plan shall be created by the Lead Partner at a workshop along with all partners, who advise, vote on and adhere to a binding agreement. Therein after, the activity plan from the Lead Partner shall be monitored, updated and discussed at bi-annual workshops with all partners.

3. On the basis of a uniform foundation, each partner shall vote on a communication and dissemination plan from the Lead Partner with target groups, deadlines, indicators, obligations, dissemination measures etc.

An initial plan shall be created by all partners by 15 May 2021.

An initial record of all measures implemented and an update to the plan shall be created by all partners by 31 December 2022.

The final record of all measures implemented shall be created by all partners by 30 September 2023.

The communication and dissemination plan shall also be discussed at bi-annual workshops.

4. The Lead Partner shall develop a separate project accounting plan with sub-budgets for each partner and financial specifications for tasks undertaken. For this purpose, money for the expenses shall be reserved. The partners shall only receive payment when the agreed upon task has been completed and all receipts have been submitted.

The activity and dissemination plan as well as accounting are the central control and monitoring instruments with regards to achieving project goals, implementation of all activities, compliance with all deadlines, cost-effective implementation and financial development. Monitoring and accounting shall be run by an experienced employee of the Lead Partner, who is responsible for compliance with all requirements, assessments of invitations for tenders, cost efficiency, etc. In addition, the Lead Partner shall



create an external tax consultancy office for monitoring and evaluation, which is also responsible for compliance with all requirements, fiscal accounts and cost efficiency. Planning and monitoring results shall be consulted at meetings where all partners are present. Large savings, greater cost efficiency, faithfulness to goals and deadlines and attaining greater quality shall be ensured with this approach.

5.2 Project Management

Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament shall be responsible for overall project management, which includes:

- Creation, coordination and completion of a partner agreement
- Creation and coordination of a differentiated activity plan for the entirety of the project period
- Development and coordination of a communication and dissemination program with each partner
- Creation and continual implementation of separate project accounting
- Bi-annual activity report and statements with all receipts from all partners
- Continual administrative and financial project management
- Creation and publication of 2 newsletters yearly

Securing of communication and intensive bilateral exchange between the Lead Partner and project and associated partners

- Preparation, management and follow-up of at least six workshops with all project partners
- Preparation, management and follow-up of an international counselling and transfer conference
- Creation of mid- and final reports with project accounting

In addition to the data, results, etc. that result from the central planning and control mechanisms (see 5.1), the following sources of data shall also be used for the evaluation of project management:

- Written evaluation of each partner workshop
- Reoccurring, anonymous electronic survey of project and associated partners
- Comprehensive personal interviews with project and associated partners using external experts

The results of the evaluation shall be reviewed with all partners through workshops and used in additional projects, resulting in a continuous improvement process. A comprehensive project management evaluation report shall be created by Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament.



5.3 Transfer, implementation and dissemination

1. Development and agreement of a communication and dissemination plan individually for each partner with separate activities including transfer, counselling and further dissemination, target groups, deadlines, etc. (see 5.1)
2. Preparation of concepts, curricula, teaching materials and instructions for use for all educational and other measures developed as part of the program as well as paper and electronic transfers for all direct and associated project partners from 13 countries as well as additional education institutions and stakeholders
 - Responsible: Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament
3. Individual implementation consulting for project and associated project partners from 13 countries as well as additional education institutions
 - Responsible: Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament
4. Creation of a book for all results of the project and distribution through a publisher
 - Responsible: Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament
 - Publication by 31 July 2023
5. Implementation of measures for further dissemination
 - Responsible: Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament with the involvement of all other partners
 - Complete results, materials, etc., shall be made available in three Internet platforms accessible to the public as well as on the websites of the project partners
 - The project results and its uses shall be reported intensively in at least three press conferences and at least six press releases.
 - Ongoing information for all project and associated partners on their own platforms and in member journals
 - Project and associated partners introduce the results of the project into the political decision-making processes of their daily business with special support of work-based learning
 - The project results, possibilities of use, etc. shall be presented in person to at least 18 third-party institutions, including universities and business forums, in different countries
 - Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament is an international organization in numerous political committees and shall inform them about project goals and results, in order to further promote their inclusion in political decision-making processes.
 - In addition, eight result videos are to be created by 31 July 2023:
 - PP1 HP Overview of the project and its results
 - PP2 HWWI Best practice customer-focused Innovations & Digitisation
 - PP4 WIRP Experiences with the implementation of SME continuing education Digitalization
 - PP5 HI SME specific training Customer-centered Innovations





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PP6 IBC SME specific training Digitalization

PP7 IPOSZ Realisation of customer-centred development projects in SMEs

PP8 MU Concepts and experiences with two Train the Trainer programs

PP9 DIRW Experiences with the implementation of SME continuing education Customer-centred Innovations

- An international consultation and transfer conference will also be held in Budapest on 16 June 2023.

In addition to the data, results, etc. that result from the central planning and control mechanisms (see 5.1), the following sources of data shall also be used for the evaluation of transfer, implementation and deployment:

- Reoccurring, anonymous electronic survey of project and associated partners
- Comprehensive personal interviews with project and associated partners using external experts

The results of the evaluation shall be reviewed with all partners through workshops and used in additional projects, resulting in a continuous improvement process. A comprehensive transfer, implementation and deployment evaluation report shall be created by Partner 1 Hanse-Parlament.





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Part B Results of quality assurance and evaluations



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6 Evaluation of the implementation of the project

6.1 Methods and goals of evaluation

Numerous evaluation methods and standards have been established on an international level. The comparison of applied methods shows that concerning the validity evaluation criteria play a significant role (cf. among others Widmer, Th., Evaluation: Ein systematisches Handbuch, Wiesbaden, 2009).

Depending on which criteria certain priority is assigned to, the evaluation results turn out correspondingly.

The same significance has the pragmatic direction. Therefore, the question: which goals have to be reached with the evaluation?

6.11 Goals

As a rule, the evaluation has the following goals:

1. It has to provide objectified knowledge about the progress (quantity and quality) of processes.
2. It serves the control of such processes and helps capturing the strong and the weak points. Therefore, it is an instrument of quality assurance.
3. It serves the legitimization. In other words, a successful evaluation is evidence of competence of the person responsible for the process being evaluated.
4. Transparency, in order to make a dialogue possible.

In order to achieve these goals, the evaluation was performed in a process-related and summative manner: process-related (also formative, development-related) in order to evaluate the quality of the project progress and if necessary, to make changes. The summative evaluation or evaluation of results serves the evaluation of the specified objectives within the framework of the project, final evaluation of impact and efficiency of the project lecturers management, of cooperation and transfer.

6.12 Methods

Ordinarily, it is reasonable to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments for evaluations: "If one wants to ensure the availability of statements concerning relevant program conditions and impacts through the framework of mutually reinforcing evidence so the multiple methodic access providers, in general, a more comprehensive and informative picture than a monomethodic approach" (Brandstädter, Jochen (1990): Development during the course of life. Approaches and problems of lifespan development psychology. In: Mayer, Karl Ulrich (Hg.): Life courses and social transformation (special issue of the Cologne magazine for sociology and social psychology. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.).

Whereas for the analysis of process-related data (program control, execution etc.) first of all qualitative survey methods are suitable, for the verification of achievement of the goals, of impact and causal assessment quantitative survey and evaluation methods





have to be implemented (Stockmann, Reinhard: Was ist eine gute Evaluation. Saarbrücken: Centrum für Evaluation, 2002. (CEval-Arbeitspapiere; 9).

Within the framework of evaluations, the most frequently used methods are:

- Secondary analysis of available materials
- Guided interviews
- Standardized surveys or partly standardized surveys
- Case studies

Which methods are selected and implemented in particular depends on the central questions of evaluation discussed herein, therefore which goals and tasks are set, who performs the evaluation and which research paradigm must be the basis for this?

Within the framework of the present evaluation the mixed model – consolidation model – is implemented. According to the general description it means that first of all quantitative survey/research is performed. The obtained data material is subsequently evaluated quantitatively, then it is followed by qualitative research method which is aimed at the consolidation of achieved results. So, it provides material for the interpretation of expected and unexpected effects and illustrates the results of quantitative studies on the basis of case examples.

Therefore, for the evaluation of the KA4HR project standardized as well as partly standardized surveys were used in the form of written questionnaires during planned and conducted partner workshops as well as an online survey. Complementary results were achieved after that with the help of guided interviews.

The secondary analysis of available materials was also included in the broadest sense, i. e. for the registration of framework data of the project the control instrument “Activity planning” and “Project application” were evaluated in order to capture project goals, terms and tasks of the project consortium and to take them into account during the implementation of separate evaluation steps and assessments.

6.2 Evaluation in the ICIinSMEs project

In the ICIinSMEs project, the evaluation has two purposes: to assess the developed and/or tested measures and to evaluate the implementation of the project, as described in the following.

6.2.1 Evaluation of the developed educational measures and other results

The quality assurance for all the educational measures was performed according to EQAVET. All the trainings were implemented according to the work-based learning principles.

The target groups of the educational measures were owners, managers and professionals of SMEs and students as well as lecturers and consultants who conduct the qualification programs.

To fully meet the requirements of the target groups right from the start, they were involved in the development of educational measures through expert discussions,



practical tests and participation in workshops. In addition, Baltic Sea Academy and its members (24 universities from 9 countries) and Hanse Parlament and its members (50 chambers of crafts, industry and commerce from 13 countries) as well as SMEs shared experiences, came up with up-to-date topics and regional conditions.

In order to take into account different regional/national conditions, the educational measures were tested in different countries and evaluated by using written surveys of participants, interviews with participants, lecturers and SMEs as well as by accompanying observations. The evaluation of the training measures, which took place during the entire implementation process from preparation to evaluation phase, was carried out:

- Own Train the Trainer program by the Partner 07 Miskolc University.
- Own Two Train the Trainer program and two further vocational training programs by the Partner 05 Hanzeatycki Instytut Wspierania Malych i Srednich Przedsiębiorstw.

To point out, the evaluation of educational measures developed during this project is not the subject of the present report but the evaluation of the project implementation, management by the lead partner, cooperation in consortium as well as with transfer recipients. Concepts and results of the evaluation and quality assurance of all educational measures are presented in the respective educational measures, see:

- Output 02 Digital competence training programme
- Output 03 Training Program Consulting & Qualification Digitization
- Output 04 Further training program Realisation of customer-centered innovations
- Output 05 Training Program Consulting & Qualification of Customer-Centric Innovations

The outputs are published on the project website <https://ci-smes.eu/> and can be viewed there and downloaded free of charge.

6.22 Evaluation of the management, cooperation and transfer

The project works with a strong centralized management. The goals, content related tasks, cost requirements and schedule were agreed in detail with each partner and set in an action plan, communication and dissemination plan, which are constantly monitored and updated by the lead partner's project team with many years of experience. The action and dissemination plan as well as the billing were transparent for all partners and were regularly discussed in workshops.

The lead partner monitored the project process monthly. In case of divergence from the targets or deadlines the corresponding partners were immediately informed, and solutions worked out together. The results of the control and any necessary updates to the planning were discussed and agreed with all partners every six months.

For further evaluation tasks of the project implementation including transfer activities, an external office was engaged, that as a neutral institution also carried out surveys of the project participants and transfer recipients.



6.3 Evaluation results of the management, cooperation and transfer

6.31 Data sources

For the evaluation of the project implementation the following data sources were used:

1. Project application of the lead partner
2. Activity Plan
3. Written surveys of participants of every workshop and events
4. Evaluation of the skills alliance
5. Online survey of all project partners
6. Detailed interviews with all project partners as well as separate transfer recipients (sample)
7. Intellectual outputs developed during the project

Interim results of the evaluation were continuously included in the implementation of further work, so that a continuous process of learning and improvement was achieved during the project implementation. The overall results are listed below.

6.32 Evaluation criteria

Concerning the evaluation criteria which must be used in relation to the evaluated processes the opinions in the scientific literature diverge strongly. Often it is recommended to use checklists which contain up to 100 and more criteria according to which the processes can be evaluated.

To ensure the practicability of the evaluation but nevertheless to assess the results thoroughly the evaluation of the project implementation concentrated on four criteria.

1. The quality and the efficiency of management
2. The communication and the cooperation in the project consortium
3. The involvement of transfer recipients and transfer activities
4. The expected benefits of products developed within the framework of the project

According to international experiences with evaluation which are available first of all in the English-speaking countries a holistic (integral) evaluation of processes should have the priority.

During the evaluation of the registered data the focus was on the following criteria:

- How do project partners assess the cooperation in consortium and the project management of the lead partner?
- Have the expectations of the project partners been met?
- Did the management meet the requirements?



- How do transfer recipients assess their involvement and the transfer activities?
- What benefits do the developed products have for the project partners and the transfer recipients?

6.33 Evaluation results of the Transnational Project Partner Meetings

A standardized survey was conducted during the transnational project partner meetings. As a survey instrument, a questionnaire was created with statements that can be accepted or rejected by the respondents with a higher or lower consent according to the given multi-level response scale. This method made it possible to form the first impression, a sketch, a tendency to satisfaction and the opinions of the respondents. The individual answers were later discussed in detail in individual interviews.

Six workshops with personal presence of all project partners and experts were planned in the project, but unfortunately only five workshops could be realized due to the Corona Pandemic:

- on 10. – 11.11.2021 in Kolding, Denmark
- on 01. – 02.06.2022 in Hamburg, Germany
- on 03.11. - 04.11.2022 in Warsaw, Poland
- on 16. - 17.03.2023 in Wroclaw, Poland
- on 14. - 15.06.2023 in Budapest, Hungary

Due to the corona pandemic online meeting was held on:

- 13 November 2020
- 06 March 2021
- 20 March 2021
- 20 May 2021
- 27 August 2021
- 01 February 2022

Accordingly, an evaluation of the five project meetings took place.

The workshops usually lasted $\frac{3}{4}$ or the full day and were always accompanied by an additional joint evening event to promote communication and exchange of experience. The dates for all workshops were set before the start of the project in consultation with all partners.

The lead partner invited all partners to the workshops six weeks in advance in writing with a detailed agenda and sent out prepared project materials to be discussed together. Moreover, the lead partner prepared a detailed presentation for each workshop, which was then sent to all partners together with the workshop minutes after the meeting.

In addition to the workshops with all partners also workshops with 2 – 3 partners were organized, where individual questions to implementations were discussed:

The written evaluation of the workshop included 20 topics related to the preparation and the conduct of the workshop, the communication in consortium and the

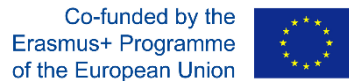


management of the lead partner. For each topic the participants could choose between five answer categories

- strongly agree
- agree
- neither agree nor disagree
- disagree
- strongly disagree

Participants also had the opportunity to make suggestions for cooperation within the consortium, the implementation of the project and the organization of the workshop. However, this possibility was rarely used.

Below, an example of a written workshop feedback form is attached. The workshop feedback forms were identical for all workshops to record possible changes on the statements during the project lifetime.



WORKSHOP FEEDBACK FORM OF THE PROJECT “ICIINSMEs”

Please indicate by ticking the scale that applies to your opinion on the following aspects of the project workshop.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The Lead Partner (LP) sent the information on the workshop in due time					
The information on the workshop: agenda, venue, hotel, etc. is satisfactory					
All project partners were involved in planning the workshop, e. g. setting the date, time, etc.					
The communication with the LP is reliable and supportive					
In general, communication with each other (between the partners) is smoothly					





The topics on the agenda were transparent					
There was devoted enough time for every topic					
All partners were involved in making decisions and action during the workshop					
Everyone who has wished, got a chance to speak, discuss, share own opinion					
The planned total time for the workshop was satisfactory					
In the framework of the workshop was enough time planned to communicate with each other					
All in all, the working atmosphere was good during the workshop					
The premises, lighting, technique, etc. of the workshop were satisfactory					
The time management like punctuality, effectiveness, etc. of the workshop is good					
After the workshop I am well informed about the common further steps in the project (appointments, meetings, etc.)					
After the workshop I know very well what my individual tasks in the future are					
All questions I had before the workshop were clarified during the workshop					
Carrying out the workshop together with other events for reasons of time and cost saving and experience exchange with others from					





different countries is particularly positive aspect					
The organisation of hotel, joint lunch/dinner and catering is good					
It is good to receive information about other projects, acquisitions and funding possibilities during the workshop					

Do you have any suggestions to improve and strengthen cooperation in the consortium, project implementation, and organization of the project workshops?

Thank you!

Almost 90 % of all participants strongly agree with all topics of the survey and 10 % agree. During the survey, only one participants of a workshop did not agree on the statements to the time management.

The participants rated the following statements as particularly positive, a large proportion of whom were rated as "strongly agree":

- Timely and comprehensive information by the lead partner
- Involvement of all the partners in discussions, consultations and during decision-making
- Very good working atmosphere
- Good communication with the lead partner and other partners
- Satisfactory spatial and technical conditions
- Good organization and conduct
- Very good information about other current projects and planned new projects

The following statements were largely valued with "consent":

- All project partners were involved in planning the workshop
- The planned total time for the workshop was satisfactory
- All questions I had before the workshop were clarified during the workshop

Over the course of time, the evaluation results have changed only slightly. The management, organization and implementation of the project, information, and communication as well as the execution of workshops are evaluated very positively and show only marginal starting points for improvements.





6.35 Evaluation results of the Conference

According to the project proposal, an international consultation and dissemination conference was held in Budapest on 16.06.2023, with a total of 105 participants:

- ✓ 52 participants from Hungary
- ✓ 33 International participants
- ✓ 20 project partners

The written evaluation led to very positive results:

- The suitability of the venue's facilities was rated "excellent" by more than 90 % of the participants and "very good" by almost 10 %.
- Refreshment breaks and lunch were rated somewhat less positively.
- The outstanding importance of the conference theme was emphasised by almost all participants and predominantly rated as "excellent".
- 80 % of the participants stated that the topics were presented in a particularly interesting way (excellent). 20 % of the participants answered this question with "good" or "very good".
- For more than 95% of the participants, the results and materials presented were "very relevant and helpful".
- The conference as a whole was exclusively rated "excellent" or "very good".
- None of the participants gave a rating of "fair" or "poor" to any of the questions asked.

6.36 Online survey of project partners

In this case, it is a partially standardized online survey. The online questionnaire is a newer, more modern method than paper, telephone or face-to-face surveys. The positive aspect of this form of written questionnaire is that it is quick and easy to implement, e.g., respondents can decide for themselves when to complete the questionnaire and there is no time pressure to answer questions. With online surveys, time and costs are saved and immediate availability of data is possible. For example, the free internet tool Survey Monkey, in which the questionnaire was completed, automatically summarizes the answers to each question and displays them graphically.

The written online survey contains 29 questions on project implementation and the use and dissemination of the results. It was carried out between March and June 2023.

1. In your opinion, do the tasks developed and implemented so far, follow the project's objectives?

All persons determine it matches with the project objectives.

2. Taking into consideration the tasks performed so far, please indicate your expectations in regard to meeting the project's deadlines?

Most of the responses each concern full compliance with the deadlines, only one concerns a slight delay. Nobody specifies that the deadlines will not be met.



3. What have been the biggest challenges for you when implementing the project?
17 % stated "No challenges at all", 8 % stated "Delays", 8 % referred to individual project tasks and 67 % stated "Other", most with the specification problems due Corona pandemic.
4. In your opinion, is the implementation of the ICLinSMEs project an asset to both - beneficiaries of the project (for example SMEs, chambers) and project partners as it allows for the improvement/development of new skills and knowledge?
The most partners completely satisfied this question; answered „A great deal“ or “A lot”.
5. The international composition of the partnership is an enrichment for the whole project approach.
All person responded strongly agree or agree.
6. How do you benefit from the international cooperation within the project?
 - The international cooperation is highly appreciated by most partners, the transnational project approach is described as without alternative.
 - New contacts, new experiences, projects results are useful. It is very important experience for the countries, in which the project has been implemented.
7. The partners were asked to rate the individual outputs of the project in terms of various criteria. This led to the following conclusions.

7.1

Q7: Regarding Output 1: Best Practices customerfocused Innovations & Digitilization - How do you evaluate the following criteriæ?

Answered: 10 Skipped: 2

	BAD	WEAK	AVERAGE	GOOD	EXCELLENT	NOT APPLICABLE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Quality of the content	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0	20.0% 2	70.0% 7	10.0% 1	10	4.9
Suitability to the target group	0% 0	10.0% 1	0% 0	50.0% 5	40.0% 4	0% 0	10	4.2
Translation of the content	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0	60.0% 6	30.0% 3	10.0% 1	10	4.5
Upscaling potential	0% 0	0% 0	0% 0	30.0% 3	70.0% 7	0% 0	10	4.7
Overall assessment	0% 0	0% 0	10.0% 1	20.0% 2	70.0% 7	0% 0	10	4.6

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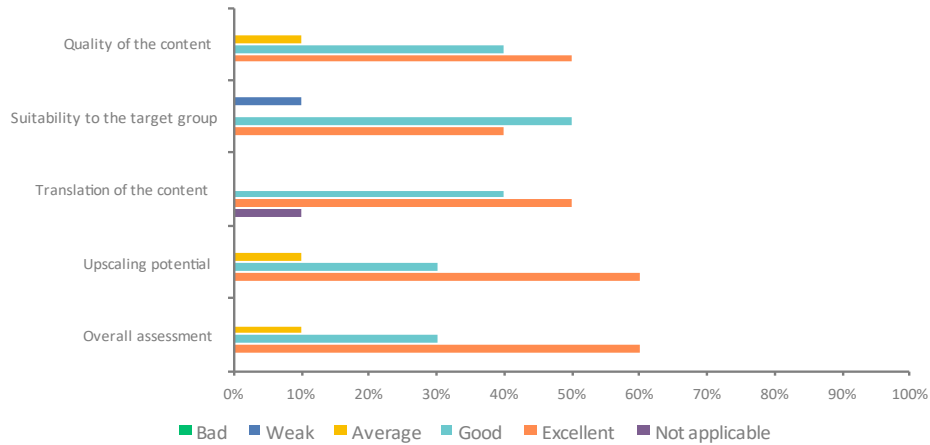




7.2

Q8: Regarding Output 2: Training Digitalization - how do you evaluate the following criteria?

Answered: 10 Skipped: 2

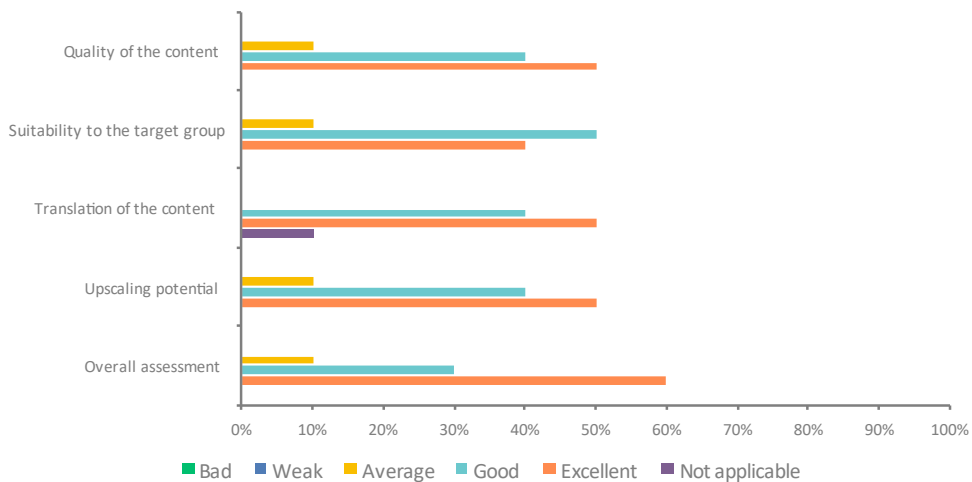


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7.3

Q9: Regarding Output 3: Training Program Consulting & Qualification Digitilization (Workpackage: Train the Trainer Program A Digitilization) - how do you evaluate the following criteria?

Answered: 10 Skipped: 2



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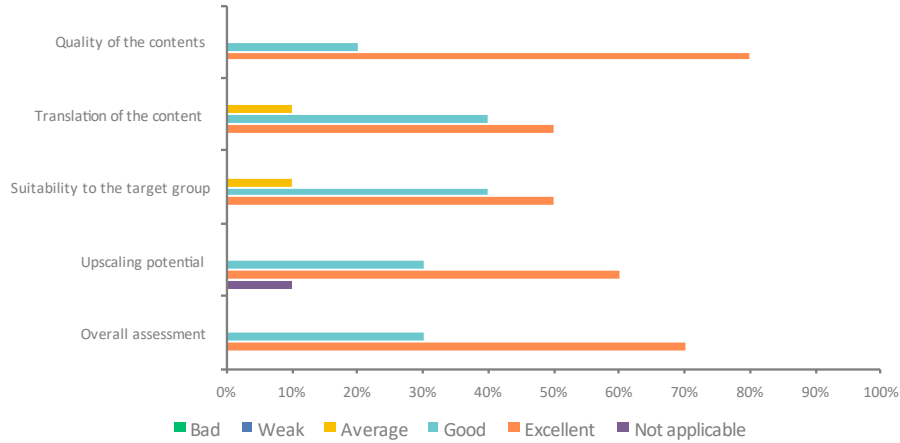




7.4

Q10: Regarding Output 4: Further training programme Realisation of customer-centered innovations - how do you evaluate the following criteria of the product developed so far ?

Answered: 10 Skipped: 2

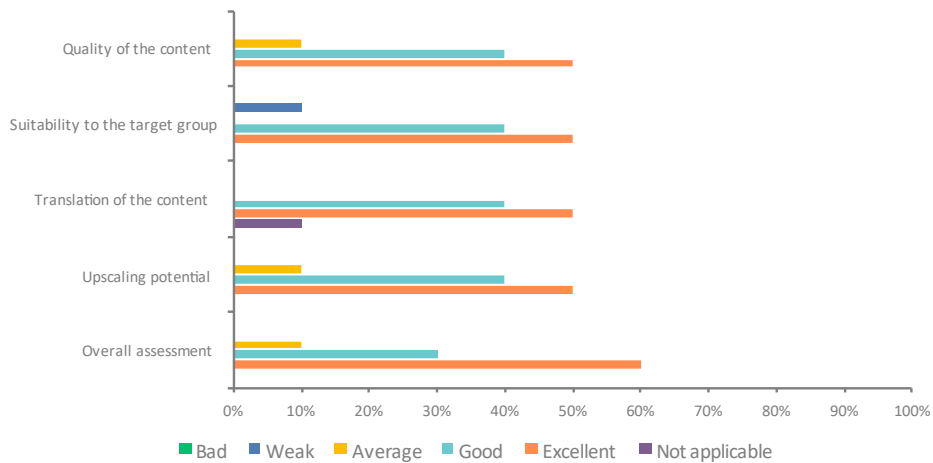


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7.5

Q11: Regarding Output 5: Training Program Consulting & Qualification of Customer-Centric Innovations (Work package: Train the Trainer Program B Customer-Centric Innovations)- How do you evaluate the following criteria?

Answered: 10 Skipped: 2

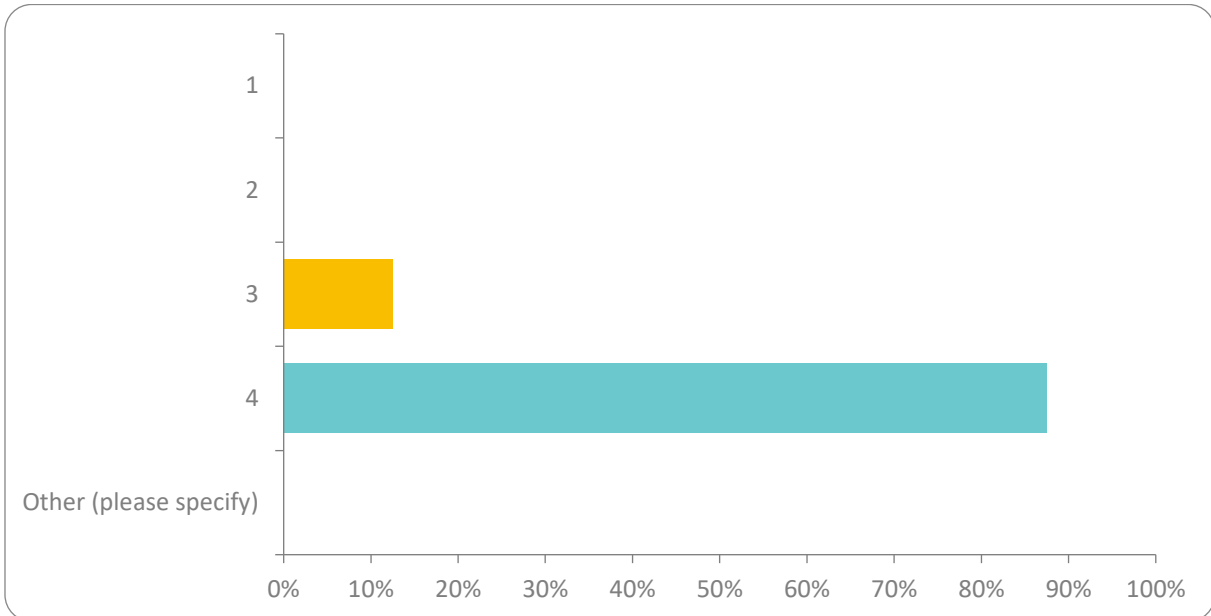


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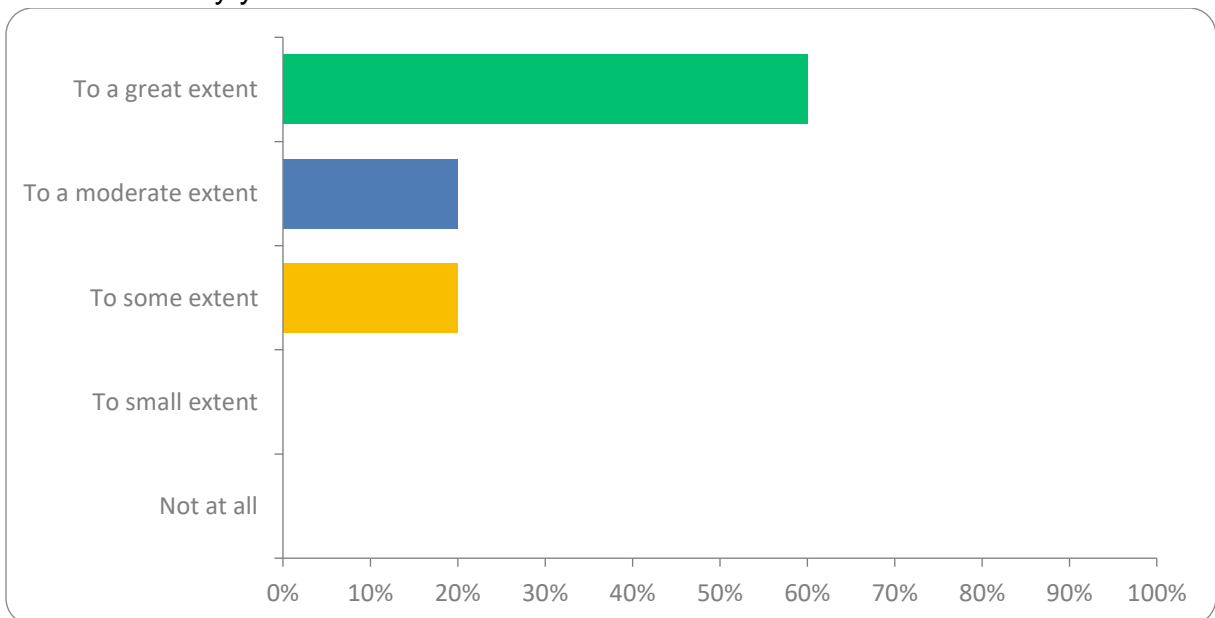


8. On the scale 1 to 4 (where 1 means poor quality and 4 – high quality), how would you rate the quality of all project measures developed so far?



9. In your opinion, can the developed project products be used successfully by you and other interested parties after the project ends?
40 % answered with “Strongly degree” and 60 % with “Agree”.

10. To what extent can the project results (in their entirety or partly) improve the services offered by your institution?



11. Has all necessary support been provided within the project to enable you/your institution to use the project results independently?

All partners confirm that they have received all help and advice for the future use of the project results.





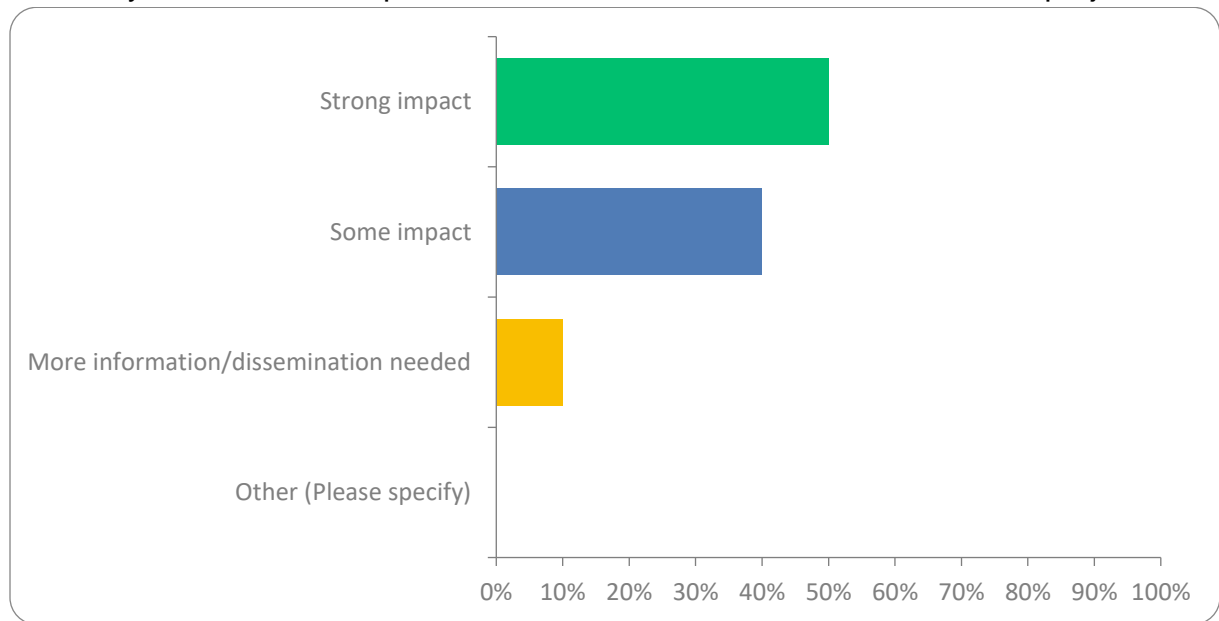
12. How do you assess the use of the activity plan? Has it been a helpful tool for your individual project management?

All partners answer with yes, very helpful.

13. How do you assess the dissemination plan of the project activities? Has it been a good tool to reach a wide dissemination of project results in your region/country?

The control instrument "Dissemination Plan" is assessed very positively by all partners.

14. How do you assess the impact of the dissemination activities done in the project?



15. How do you assess the assistance and support by the Lead Partner?

All partners rate the assistance and support by the Lead Partner as excellent.

16. Is there something that the Lead Partner can do better/differently in order to meet your expectations of good project leadership?

All partners do not see any opportunities for improvement.

17. How do you assess the administrative burdens?

10 % see none, 20 % low, 60 % average and 210 % high bureaucratic hurdles.

18. How do you assess the reporting/accounting in the project?

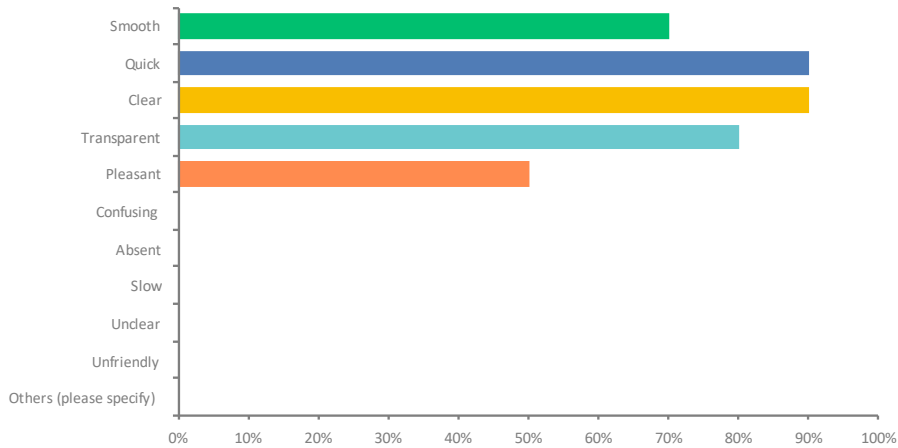
30 % evaluated “easy” and 70 % “average”.

19. How do you rate the communication with the Lead Partner? (Multiple answers possible)



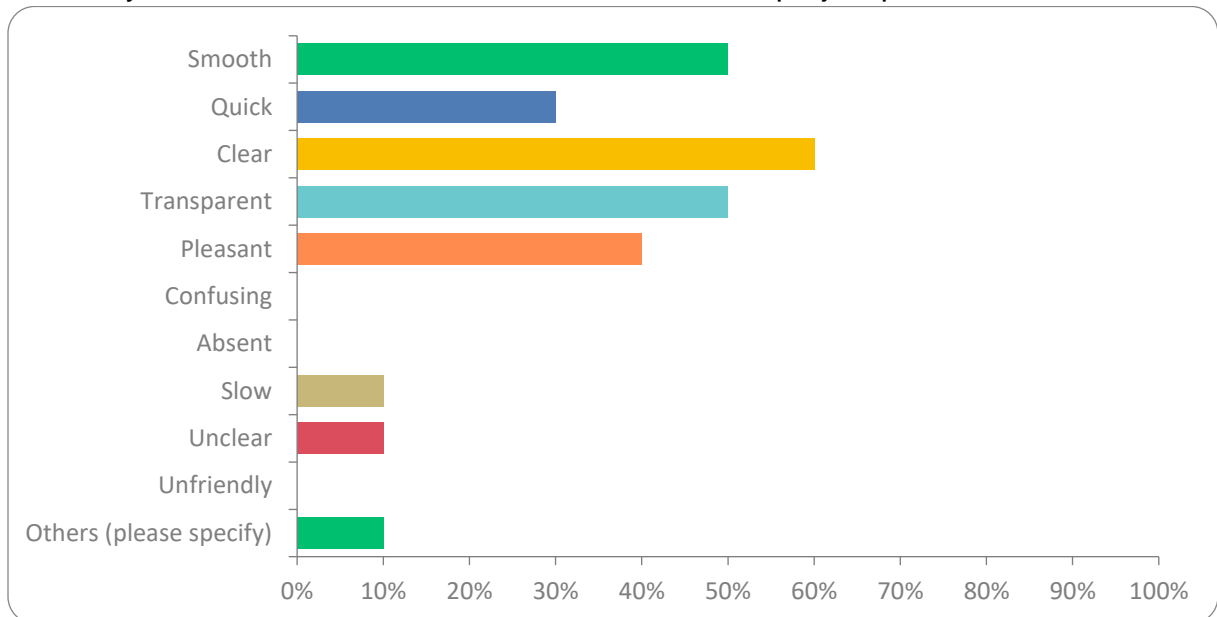
Q21: How do you rate the communication with the Lead Partner? (Multiple answers possible)

Answered: 10 Skipped: 2



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20. How do you evaluate the communication between the project partners?



21. Any other suggestions / recommendations?

No proposals or recommendations were made.

Like the evaluation of workshops, the online survey provides a consistently positive view of various aspects of project implementation and of the results. In particular, the following questions and answers give rise to the following inquiries in order to find further starting points for improvements.

- Even better time management to ensure that all deadlines are met by all partners.
- Especially at the beginning of the project, more time for the lead partner to convey the extensive information on project implementation and, after the kick-off





workshop, for all partners to be provided with a clear manual for processing all tasks.

- More intensive use of electronic tools and online platforms for project implementation.
- To further improve communication and cooperation, online meetings will be held between the semi-annual project meetings.

6.37 Interviews with project partners¹

The interview related to key questions is also called guideline-based interview that means, a set of questions is prespecified by the interviewer before the interview. However, this set of questions should give a guideline through the interview and not kind a strict order, so the interview is more of a fluent, relaxed conversation by freely and openly answering questions. This method makes it possible to act less strictly than with other survey methods, so he / she conducts the interview considering the conversation flow, the set key questions or certain topics not considering the sequence of the questions, for example, or omitting some questions at all.

From March to June 2023 an external expert conducted interviews with the ISlinSMEs project partners. These interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes each. The interviews followed a generic set of questions but allowed also for free conversation to hear the opinions of the partners. The interviews focused on the following topics:

- The quality and usefulness of the project outputs
- The involvement of and communication among the project partners
- The design and implementation of the project workshops
- The dissemination of project results
- The administration processes of the project.

1. Was the project important for you? Why did you take part in it?

The project partners mentioned three main reasons for taking part in the project: (1) Customer-centred innovation and digitalisation are key factors to increase the competitiveness of SMEs, so that the chambers/business consultants were eager to develop and disseminate new training programmes in this field; (2) Many partners wanted to extend their (international) network and the network of the SMEs that they are representing; (3) some partners stated that the Hanse-Parlament as a lead partner was another factor.

Innovation is absolutely crucial for our customers, i.e. SMEs. Therefore, the topic was exciting for us and we were sure that we could bring added value to the project. Additionally, we are always eager to learn ourselves which we always do in such international projects.

¹ Done by Philipp Jarke, Graz



Hanse-Parlament

Digital methods, toolbox and trainings for increasing customer innovation in SMEs” (IClinSMEs)



Our university is cooperating with commercial partners in research and development activities – therefore the topic of the project was very appealing for us, and we were looking forward to cooperating with new international partners in this field.

I had been doing a lot of research on this topic before. And I was suggesting this topic to the Hanse-Parlament a while ago. I was expecting a lot of this project and was really looking forward to it.

Hungary is 5 to 10 years behind the Western European countries. Customer-centred innovations were a brand-new topic for us and the combination with digitalisation made it extremely attractive!

Innovations are vital for SMEs to be able to survive on the market. We wanted to contribute to strengthening SME innovation capacity and thus the regional economy.

Another organisation has recommended the Hanse-Parlament as an excellent project leader.

Every time we start a new project with the Hanse-Parlament, we will get access to new knowledge!

2. A number of outputs were developed in the project. What do you think about each of them?

Output 1: Best Practice Customer-focused Innovations & Digitization

All partners were very satisfied with Output 1. This overview of digitalisation and customer-centred innovation activities of SMEs, they said, was a) very informative for the ICIInSMEs project partners as a foundation for their work on the other outputs (e.g. training programmes); b) this best practice collection could also be useful for SMEs directly, giving them good examples to follow.

This is a very good summary of digitalisation and innovation activities of SMEs in the countries of the project partners. The best practice collection informed the other partners who were working on the other outputs – i.e., the education programmes.

This was very interesting and helpful as a start of the project! We learned a lot about the status-quo in the European countries. Many SMEs communicate with their customers and gather data from them. But then they do not know what to do with this data.

Excellent collection and overview of the status quo at the beginning of the project. We can learn so much from others! And we found out that even small changes can make a huge difference – this was very motivating!

This outcome is important because it provides SME managers with guidance and strategies for effective innovation and digital practices that focus on customer needs and expectations. This helps companies develop competitiveness and adapt to a changing market.





Output 2: Digital Competence Further Training Programme

This further training programme was praised by the partners: Its content, they stated, was highly relevant and useful to boost digital competences in SMEs. And at the same time, some partners said, the format of the programme is very attractive – interactive and modular.

This training programme is very useful to raise the digital competence of SMEs.

This output is good – a collection of a wide range of videos and animations. This approach is different to what outputs look like usually. The users are invited to try things out for themselves. When users can try things themselves, it is more likely that they can transfer the knowledge into practice afterwards.

Many SMEs are able to collect data about their customers through e-commerce tools or social media tools. But they don't know the tools to use these data afterwards. This training programme is very helpful in this respect.

This is very well done. We have already implemented this programme – 130 SMEs have registered to an online training course, and it is very well received.

The programme is very exciting and interactive!

Output 3: Train the Trainer Programme Consulting & Qualification Digitization

Like Output 2, this programme received good ratings by the project partners – it is interactive, the structure of the programme makes it easy to digest, and the content is useful for the trainers to prepare.

This is a very important output. You have to combine the pure knowledge with the right structure to get the content across and to make a sustainable input.

This outcome is valuable because it allows trainers to develop competence in digitization-related counselling and support. Trainers will be able to transfer their knowledge and skills to other employees, which will contribute to the implementation of effective digital strategies.

The methodology of this programme is very useful in order to teach SMEs and their staff. The demands of SMEs are specific, we have to adapt to those in order to make the training programmes work.

Output 4: Further Training Programme “Realisation of Customer-centred Innovations”

This training programmes has received good reviews by all interviewees as well. The methodological approach, one partner said, was more traditional, but effective. Some partners mentioned that the term “customer-centred innovation” might be problematic when it comes to promoting the training programme among SMEs (it sounds rather “scientific”).

This programme is excellent, and we are already implementing it. 15 participants from all over Hungary have subscribed. We started with a 1.5-day course in Budapest and an additional online course. And now the trainer is traveling to visit all companies to check on their progress.



This outcome is important because it focuses on improving managerial skills related to the implementation of innovations, especially those that are customer-focused. This programme can help managers identify, implement and improve innovative solutions.

This programme is good, but more traditional.

This programme is very useful. But many SMEs do not know what is meant by the term “customer-centred innovation”. They do not use this term at all. Maybe for advertising the training programmes, we should think of a different term to make this appealing to SMEs.

Output 5: Train the Trainer Programme “Consulting & Qualification of Customer-centred Innovations”

The interviewees were satisfied with this output but did not go much into detail.

This programme is very important and useful. It is crucial to know how to teach to a particular audience. The methodology of this programme helps a lot.

It is also good, but more traditional like output 4.

This outcome is valuable because the train-the-trainer programme focuses on the development of consulting skills and qualification for innovations, especially those that are customer-oriented. Trainers will be able to transfer their knowledge and skills to other employees, which will contribute to the successful implementation of innovative strategies in the organization.

3. Can you use the project results in your future work (e.g. the curricula)?

There is a clear divide between the project partners: On the one hand, all chambers/SME-focused consultancies said that they can and will use the results of ICLinSMEs for their own work in the future. On the other hand, the universities/think tanks stated that they will not use the results in their own work, because they do not work with SMEs directly.

Yes, we will use all results in the future. We use them in our further training programmes for SMEs. We offer online programmes for individuals – the videos and animations are very suitable for this audience. But we also consult with SMEs and build customized further training programmes for their staff. We pick and choose individual materials from our portfolio and combine them to a training course. The materials of ICLinSMEs will be useful for that.

Yes. I will definitely use the results in the future. SMEs are very interested in this topic.

We are already using the programmes and materials. Right now the painter branch of our organisation is offering the training programmes. They cooperate with paint manufacturers who sponsor the events. This way the subbranch can afford the expansion of its services.

Rather not. We are an economic research institute that does not offer services for SME or training institutions.



We are a university with little contacts to small and medium enterprises. Thus, we will not be able to use the programmes ourselves.

4. Communication

How would you characterise the communication between project partners?

All project partners were extremely satisfied with the communication and cooperation among all partners. Everyone supported each other, having a common goal in mind. As a result, the partners established a strong and sustainable network among each other.

The communication with the other partners was really good! We were cooperating fluently, whenever there was a problem or an open question, we arranged a meeting and talked about it online and solved it.

The communication was the best I have ever experienced in a project! The people who were involved were a perfect match – everyone was very open, eager to cooperate and learn and easy to communicate with.

The communication and cooperation were very smooth, simply excellent. It was very interesting to learn about the views in the different countries and exchange our experiences. The knowledge transfer was excellent. And also, personally we built good connections.

The communication with all partners was truly superb! Very solution-oriented, but at the same time the cooperation had a family feel to it. Over the years, we have grown together into a small community!

Was the lead partner's communication quick, clear and overall satisfactory?

All partners were completely satisfied with the lead partner. All information was shared regularly, and the partners received support whenever necessary. At the same time the lead partner was creating a good atmosphere which fostered the trust among people involved in the project.

The role of the lead partner is very significant. And they were excellent! They answered all our questions, sent emails with deadlines and reminders. We were very happy with that.

Absolutely, yes! All the information was easy to understand, we always knew what we had to do. It was perfect.

The project manager Anna was excellent, working with her was brilliant.

The Hanse-Parlament has a great experience in building relationships with and among the project partners. And they have fantastic language skills: They speak Polish, English, German – this helps all partners feel at home.

They were perfect! It is amazing how they deal with all the different working cultures in such international projects.

The lead partner was impressive! He gave us partners a lot of reassurance, offered support and led many conversations. They know how to promote good





work and make sure that relevant results are produced. You can tell that they have a lot of experience in managing such projects.

Project workshops were held every six months to discuss tasks and project implementation.

In your opinion, is this sufficient? Are the time intervals between meetings adequate?

Most project partners were happy with the workshop schedule. One partner would prefer less workshops in the beginning of the project’s funding period.

Yes, the 6-months-rhythm was appropriate.

The rhythm was good.

At the beginning of a project, one workshop per year might be enough, but in the later phase of the projects, biannual meetings are crucial, as there is a great need for coordination.

The workshops were mostly half-day; is there a need for change from your perspective: longer, shorter?

All project partners agreed that the workshop length was appropriate.

The duration of the workshops was always appropriate.

It was adequate. By effectively planning, prioritizing tasks and eliminating wasted time, the project manager has achieved greater productivity and efficiency.

Is there enough time at the project workshops to communicate and discuss the individual points?

All partners stated that the workshops unusually offered enough time to discuss all individual points.

Yes, there was enough time to discuss all the topics on the agenda.

Most of the time, yes. Only sometimes there is a little bit of time pressure, especially when there are consecutive tasks that built on the results of previous tasks during the workshop.

Are all partners sufficiently involved in the work at the project workshops?

None of the partners mentioned that other partners were not engaging in the workshops. They were very happy with everyone’s contributions.

Yes. The atmosphere was always very productive.

Yes, everyone was involved.

Some workshops have had to be held online. How do you rate the online meetings?

All members were very pleased with the online-workshops and meetings.

They were excellent! Very well organised. And we want to emphasize how happy we are with the flexibility of the lead partner, when we could not travel



due to the war in Ukraine – the lead partner turned the in-person workshop into a hybrid workshop so that we could take part. That was great!

The online meetings are good. I was very happy that I could attend the Hamburg workshop when I was isolating at home with Covid.

Can online meetings replace face-to-face meetings?

All project partners think that in-person workshops are far superior compared to online workshops. Online-meetings have their place, saving a lot of time and money, but they can only be supplemental to in-person workshops.

No, definitely not. Meeting people face-to-face will always be far better than online meetings.

I much prefer face-to-face-meetings. It is important to meet the people, see the countries, feel the local atmosphere, walk the streets and see how people act. This is also important for the business sector and the representatives as a multiplier.

Online meetings are cost- and time-efficient - for a two-day workshop I am on the road for almost four days including travel time. But the informal, bilateral exchange only works when we are face-to-face - it is indispensable and contributes to good project results!

No, they can't – but nevertheless I am happy that some workshops were held online –travelling costs a lot of time that we can save when we meet online every now and then.

Do you have any suggestions for improving the workshops overall?

Please provide more time for informal talks and activities during the in-person workshops. This time is necessary to build networks with international partners, to build trust and to get creative together.

No, the workshops are very well organised. I find it very useful that external guests from the respective regions are also invited to the workshops as speakers - this allows you to find out what issues are of concern to the other countries. The view opens up, the horizon broadens.

5. The curricula and programmes produced in the project were developed by individual project partners, sent to all project partners for comments and discussed intensively at project workshops.

Were you able to sufficiently contribute your ideas to the development work?

Most project partners were happy with the way they were able to contribute to the outputs of ICLinSMEs. Only one partner wished for more possibilities to influence the developments of other work packages, i.e. the ones that it was not responsible for.

Absolutely! This was a real team effort. All partners gave feedback to the others and this feedback was then picked up and built into the project outputs. We had online meetings and workshops where we all shared our first rough drafts and were very happy to get feedback from the others.



Yes, we were.

We could provide feedback, but this is not ideal: Each partner is developing an output on its own, presents it to the others and asks for feedback. But this is rather late in the process.

How could all partners be better and more intensively involved in the development work?

One project partner had one suggestion to change-up the process in which the outputs are developed:

I would like to try a different approach: Build teams of two partners to develop outputs together! The results may not be better this way, but the partners can develop much stronger ties to each other– the international networks as a “soft” result of the project would be stronger.

6. Dissemination of project results is very important. Therefore, here are a few questions on dissemination of project results.

Have you carried out dissemination activities yourself?

All project partners have made efforts to disseminate results of ICLinSMEs. The measures ranged from posts on social media channels and websites, to newsletters, journal articles and personal presentations for larger audiences and smaller circles of people who can spread the word.

We gave lectures at conferences at our university and at an entrepreneurship conference, talking about our experiences and results. We wrote journal articles and a book for SMEs. And once the outputs of the project are finalized, we will share them through facebook posts, on our website and through the university’s newspaper.

Yes, we did – via our homepage, social media and most importantly the newsletter that we send to our customers every 6 weeks. The newsletter reaches more than 36.000 SMEs in the country. We can measure that this way of dissemination is working.

During meetings with representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises, directors of trade schools.

Do you think that the project results will be used in the future by third parties (institutions that were not involved in the project implementation as project partners) in your region/country?

All project partners were optimistic that the results of ICLinSMEs will be used by other organisations in their region.

Yes, this will happen. The results are easy to transfer and apply. We recognize that our competitors are always curious about what we are up to at our college. This curiosity will lead them to the ICLinSMEs results.

Yes. It is already happening. The association of bakers in Hungary has already contracted one of the teachers to provide a training on innovation and



digitization. We have such excellent experts and programmes, the demand in regional organisations is real. They will use the results.

Yes, the results can be used well by other organisations. And the SMEs indeed need these training measures. The only problem is that many small companies are trapped in their bubble - they think they have too little time and not enough money to do such training. A lot of persuasion is still needed from politicians and associations.

Yes, providers of further education programmes will be able to use the results. The materials are very good and meet the demands of the SMEs precisely.

7 Project management, steering and implementation of the project

How would you rate the steering and coordination by the lead partner?

Scale from 1 (very good) to 5 (poor).

The partners unanimously rated the lead partner’s steering and coordination as “very good” (1).

What was particularly good? What was particularly bad?

The partners praised the design of the project and how the project manager kept everyone informed about the next steps, shared all necessary information und prepared the materials and meetings/workshop. At the same time the lead partner was very supportive and created an atmosphere of trust.

The lead partner was very helpful, flexible and empathetic.

The communication and substantive preparation of meetings and documents was very good.

The structure of the project was perfect! The progression during the project was well planned and we could always check where we were at.

The hard facts are excellent: The results, the structure etc. But also the soft side of the project was very strong: We built relationships among the partners and will continue to cooperate even when the project will have ended. We create ideas together!

The coordination was excellent. We got all information in time, the next steps were laid out, everything was easy to follow. But at the same time the Hanse-Parlament was very open for feedback and suggestions.

How would you rate the bureaucratic effort involved in the implementation, reporting and accounting of the project?

All ICIInSMEs project partners reported that the bureaucratic load was rather low, compared to other international projects.

Not very bureaucratic. The procedures within our own organisation are much more demanding.

It was not a problem.



The administrative burden was much smaller than in other EU projects.

The lead partner provided administrative support, such as project documentation management, reporting, proposal preparation. This allowed us to focus on the substantive aspects of the project rather than on administrative activities.

How else could the bureaucratic effort be reduced?

The evaluation questionnaires for course participants (Innovation and Digitalization) were sent out in a Word format. The process of receiving the email, downloading the file, filling it out and sending it back meant that not every participant sent the file back in time. An online questionnaire would have shortened the time to complete the document.

8. How do you assess the project in general?

What was particularly good about the project and its implementation?

All project partners pointed to the excellent cooperation between all partners and the sense of community that was built.

The topic is highly relevant, the results are very applicable. The cooperation with all partners was excellent, a community has formed.

The cooperation with the other partners was excellent, it was a very good experience! We have built strong connections to the international partners. We have created a lot of synergy.

This was the best international project I have ever been part of! Everyone has contributed to the perfect outcome of the project and everyone has benefited from it. The cooperation was very productive, the results, curricula and materials are very good.

The best part from our perspective was the cooperation of the university teachers with small companies. That was very innovative for our region and very effective.

What was less good and should be improved?

There was only one comment on aspects of the project that could have been better:

In rare cases, some project tasks and the timing of those tasks were colliding. We were waiting for other partners to send results that we needed to move on. That was a little bit difficult, but we could solve this eventually.

What grade would you give the whole project on a scale from 1 (very good) to 5 (poor)?

All project partners rated the ICLinSMEs project “very good” (1).



6.38 Interviews with transfer partners²

In separate projects with a limited number of project partners, the Hanse Parliament develop support measures for SMEs, e.g. vocational training, further training or consulting, promoting tools, Best Practices ect. After testing and evaluation, the developed and successfully tested products are transferred to 50 chambers and associations as well as to 24 colleges/universities from 13 countries. From the very beginning, Hanse Parliament were involved as transfer partners in the IClIn SMEs project. Right from the start, the transfer partners were involved on a project-related basis; they gathered all the information, submitted their proposals and offers, which were continuously included in further work. The transfer partners as well as the transfer activities have already been discussed in written evaluations and also in interviews with the project partners.

From March to June 2023, an external expert conducted interviews with transfer partners that have received results and products of several projects of the Hanse-Parlament in recent years. These interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes each. The interviews followed a generic set of questions but allowed also for free conversation to hear the opinions of the interview partners. The interview focused on the following topics:

- The centralized development of support measures for SMEs and their decentralized dissemination
- The use of the developed support measures and the assistance provided by HP
- General identification of project topics and project design.

1. Hanse-Parlament develop support measures for SMEs (e.g. vocational training, further education or consulting) in projects with a limited number of project partners. After testing and evaluation, the support measures are transferred to all chambers, associations, colleges and universities.

What do you think about this approach of centralized development and decentralized dissemination and utilization?

All interviewees stated that the approach of centralized development of support measures and the decentralized dissemination of these project results is working very well and that it has proven its effectiveness in the past.

This approach is working very well. It seems to be based on the German model, with a very prominent role of chambers of crafts and chambers of commerce as multipliers. But the Hanse-Parlament is bringing together not only chambers, but also SMEs and universities – all relevant stakeholders that contribute their unique skills and perspectives. That is very useful.

The approach is working very well. You have to limit the number of partners in the development process to keep it manageable. But the network of the entire

² Done by Philipp Jarke, Graz





partners helps a lot to share the results with many people, organisations and users.

Do you feel sufficiently informed about the respective work, even if you are not involved as a project partner?

All transfer partners get enough information about other Hanse-Parlament projects and their results. They either seek such information themselves and find it on the Hanse-Parlament’s social media channels or the project websites; or they receive information on other projects via the newsletter, brochures and presentations at meetings.

We receive a good amount of information from the Hanse-Parlament. Just recently we received the newsletter with a lot of information about other projects and their results.

We receive enough information. We get the information on common events like annual conferences, we receive emails and newsletters and also brochures on paper.

The Hanse-Parlament is offering many opportunities to follow other projects: Their social media channels, the project websites. And at meetings like meetings of other projects and at the general meeting, the secretariate shares a lot of information on results of other projects.

2. As a member of the Hanse-Parlament or Baltic Sea Academy you will receive the finalized products for the support of SMEs.

Do you look at these outputs and assess them for your own work?

The answers to this question were completely varied. While one partner said they always look at the results of other projects, others said that they only look at such results of projects that relate directly to their own core topics. And one transfer partner said that they usually do at all not look at results of projects that they are not involved in, because they do not have any time to do so.

Yes, we always look at the results of other Hanse-Parlament projects.

It depends on the topics of the projects. Not all projects and their results are relevant for us as a university. But when the results are related to our core topics we definitely do look closely at the results.

Unfortunately, I usually do not have the time to look at the results of other projects.

Are these project outcomes of interest for your own work?

As one may have expected, the relevance of the project outcomes depends on the projects’ topics. The closer the topics are to the topics that the transfers partners’ work is focused on, the more interesting are the results for the transfer partners.

When the results are related to our core interests - like (higher) education, digitalisation of SMEs, labour market developments and migration – they are very interesting for our work.





Hanse-Parlament

Digital methods, toolbox and trainings for increasing customer innovation in SMEs” (IClinSMEs)



Many of the outcomes are very interesting and relevant for our work. As a higher education institution, we are interested in educational programmes, but also results of scientific studies.

Some of the results are interesting, but the results of the projects that we have been taking part in are more relevant for us than the ones we did not take an active part in.

For which purposes of your own work do you use the results?

The universities that were interviewed use the results of Hanse-Parlament projects to incorporate them into their teaching programmes and/or into their research activities. The chamber that was interviewed would use results for consulting/supporting SMEs, but as they stated above, this is rarely the case.

We are a university that is doing mostly applied research on SMEs, labour market, digitalisation and socio-economic developments. Some results of Hanse-Parlament projects feed into those research activities, like cases of best practice or key findings of research analysis done in Hanse-Parlament projects. We also use the project results as a source for networking, to find potential partners for research activities and projects with international partners.

We use results of other projects to incorporate them into our own study programmes.

Do you get all the help you need for your own use of the results when you are not a partner in a project?

All transfer partners stated that the results contain enough information so that they can use them. And in case they are not sure about anything, they said they could contact the Hanse-Parlament at any time to ask for help. Thus, none of the interviews needs any additional, individual advice to use the results of other projects.

Yes. The materials that are produced in the projects are written very well, very clear, detailed and well structured.

Yes. We get enough information to assess the results. Whenever we have additional questions we can contact the Hanse-Parlament office and ask for support.

Do you wish to receive comprehensive individual advice on your own use and implementation of the support measures received?

That is not necessary, we can always ask the Hanse-Parlament office for support and additional information if needed.

In the rare cases that we do need special advice and support, we reach out to the Hanse-Parlament ourselves and receive the support we need.

3. How can future projects and results be better aligned to your needs?





Do you have sufficient opportunity to integrate your needs, topics and tasks into the design of the projects?

All transfer partners that were interviewed said that they have some influence on the design of potential future projects.

Yes, we talk about the design of projects at annual meetings, we exchange emails on that matter. This way we can have some influence on the design of projects.

When we are members in a project, we always have the chance to talk about ideas for new projects.

The Hanse-Parlament share project proposals and we have the chance to give feedback, which is very well received and implemented.

Do you feel sufficiently informed about the preparation and acquisition of projects?

The transfer partners do get informed about the preparation and acquisition of new projects. But one partner stated that the information was shared rather late – they would like to be informed earlier to have more influence on the preparation and acquisition process (see also next sub-question).

Yes, we get information about that during informal meetings at workshops or at the annual meeting of the Hanse-Parlament.

Well, we only get that information at a rather late stage. The application for projects are prepared by the Hanse-Parlament. And only when this application has reached a certain level, the Hanse-Parlament is reaching out to potential partners and asks them if they want to join.

Do you have suggestions for improvement?

We would love to get involved at an earlier stage – developing ideas for projects together with the Hanse-Parlament and maybe also other partners. Maybe we could arrange online-meetings to do such developmental brainstorming's on what kind of projects could be done in the future.

4. What do you think about ...

a) ... the identification of topics and acquisition of projects?

All transfer partners stated that the identification of topics and the acquisition of projects is done very well – the topics match the demands of SMEs, chambers and universities as well as the funding programmes/criteria of the European Commission. One partner gave a hint that the Commissions funding criteria may limit the focus of projects to topics that are popular; potentially more innovative, but not yet popular topics may get overlooked.



The Hanse-Parlament is doing a great job! It is a fantastic establishment. They have a unique network of partners, great sense and knowledge about the needs of SMEs.

The topics are excellently chosen. They are very relevant for SMEs and higher education as well.

The identification of topics and acquisition of projects is very good, very efficient. It is well aligned to the funding schemes of the European Union. But the European Union is never ahead of the market but rather reacting to developments.

b) ... the design and implementation of the projects?

All transfer partners were very satisfied with the way the Hanse-Parlament is designing its projects – this is reflected in the high acceptance rate of project applications. The implementation of funded projects is also regarded as highly professional and effective.

The projects are very well designed, they have a very high rate of approval when they apply for projects. And I have never heard of any project that got in trouble – they are all implemented very professionally.

The projects that we were part of were all very well designed and implemented!

c) ... the broad transfer and use of the project outcomes?

All partners agreed that that transfer of the results is important and that the Hanse-Parlament is doing well on its part. But eventually it is up to the partners themselves to make the transfer and implementation of the results sustainable.

The broad transfer is very important and working well.

This does not depend on the Hanse-Parlament, but rather the project partners and their networks. When the project funding ends, many partners cannot work on the transfer of the results anymore. But we all can and do build on the results of previous projects und use them indirectly for our future work.

5. Would you like to participate more or less as a partner in projects?

The majority of the transfer partners would like to participate in more projects than in the past.

Same as in the past.

Definitely more projects than now. But we would like to participate not only as an education partner – we are also interested in being responsible for research activities and boosting the entrepreneurial potential of students/staff of SMEs.

More projects, please – we now have a project manager who is eager to get to work with the Hanse-Parlament!



6.39 Summary of evaluation results and recommendations

Various results demonstrate exemplary management, cooperation and implementation of the ISlinSMEs project. The control and information tools developed and used by the lead partner have proven to be particularly effective and are also used by individual partners for their own purposes, regardless of the project.

The broad transfer and implementation of the project results went very well. The transfer recipients were optimally involved in the project work, including a high level of re-use.

The program has succeeded in creating a good team spirit and turning the entire project consortium into a kind of learning organization and project implementation into a continuous learning process. The evaluation results were continuously incorporated into further project work so that continuous improvements could be achieved.

The remarkable project results are reached due to the high commitment of all project partners and the excellent project management. The developed results are evaluated very positively by the project partners and the transfer partners and will continue to be implemented on a large scale within the scope of their service offer.

The management and work instructions developed and implemented by the lead partner, in particular activities planning, dissemination planning and forms for reporting and accounting have proven their worth. The lead partner carries out strict, strong project management, which is surprisingly appreciated by all partners. The lead partner takes on very extensive organizational and management tasks, relieves the project partners as much as possible so that they can focus on the content.

The cooperation within the consortium is assessed by all parties as constructive, target-oriented and harmonious. The exchange of information and communication is positive. The project and transfer partners spoke in written surveys and detailed personal interviews about very successful transfer and implementation processes, which are described as exemplary. The implementation of these activities with intensive personal exchange and individual implementation consulting is associated with very high costs, especially for the lead partner, in order to achieve broad regional dissemination and high implementation results.

The performed evaluation results as a summary lead to the following suggestions for improvements for the further project work and for the future performance of projects:

- The Covid pandemic made project implementation very difficult and caused delays. A larger number of online meetings were held to maintain communication and information sharing. Online meetings have certainly proven their worth, but they can by no means replace face-to-face meetings. In future, regular face-to-face meetings will be supplemented by online meetings with the entire consortium at least twice a year. In addition, online meetings will be held with individual partners as needed.
- To further improve communication and cooperation, implementation of online meetings between the semi-annual project meetings. For face-to-face workshops every 6 months is perfect. But it will be good to add online workshops in





between like every 3 months to foster discussion and communication among the partners.

- Especially at the beginning of the project, more time for the lead partner to convey the extensive information on project implementation and, after the kick-off workshop, for all partners to be provided with a clear manual for processing all tasks.
- More time should be set aside in the face-to-face workshops for informal discussions and activities. This time is necessary to build networks with international partners, to build trust and to become creative together.
- In each workshop more time should be planned for brainstorming; individual partners would like two hours for this. The use of skype or other online tools for short meetings between the official workshops can also reduce the time needed for the biannual project meetings and further improve communication.
- Even better time management to ensure that all deadlines are met by all partners. Further strengthening requires personal responsibility and initiative of the project partners during project implementation, e.g., meeting deadlines or carrying out separate tasks, e.g., sending reports in time.
- More partners should be intensively involved in the development work, e. g. of curricula. Teams of two to three partners are to be formed to carry out development work together.
- More opportunities should be created for individual partners to influence the developments of other work packages, i.e. those for which they are not responsible.
- The Hanse-Parlament should set up an internal database of the profiles of partners and cooperating institutions and individuals. Not only containing contact details but also short profiles of their background, skills and professional interests. This would make it easier to match potential project partners with the project requirements.
- The lead partner should design its effective steering instruments such as activity plan, dissemination plan and budgeting in digital form and offer them to the project partners online. A project-specific online database should also be created, in which all instruments, information, results, etc. are clearly arranged, so that the partners can find everything in one place and do not have to search for it in their documents. An electronic timesheet would be helpful. And the possibility to use electronic signatures.
- Dissemination of project results is already going very well, but there is still room for improvement. The dissemination plan developed by the Lead Partner should be more detailed. It is also recommended to design this planning as an online tool which could be updated directly. This would be useful for every participant.
- In the design of EU programs, strong financial incentives should be given for successful dissemination and implementation. Support for dissemination and implementation of project results could also be encouraged by providing 5 –



10 % of an approved budget for each funded project as an additional performance bonus in the event of a successful transfer/implementation.

- Individual partners raise concerns that the calls for proposals and the Commission's selection and funding criteria may limit the focus of projects to popular topics; potentially more innovative but not yet popular topics may be overlooked.
- The billing of personnel costs with fixed daily rates represents a significant reduction in bureaucracy. However, the EU Commission must review the amount of the daily rates. The current daily rates do not cover the actual personnel costs by far, even if an own contribution of, for example, 20 % is included.
- The EU should review and redesign the system for accounting for personnel costs. Limitation on daily working hours (8 hours max) and no working hours on Saturdays and Sundays is no more valid since people work sometimes more than eight hours a day and/or during weekends. The classic working week (Monday to Friday) is somehow outdated. What is needed is more flexibility in working hours, which is reflected in timesheets.