STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS IN ERASMUS+, WHAT IMPACT CAN BE EXPECTED? REFLECTIONS BASED ON SOME CASES

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Abstract

The paper reflects in general on the impact based on project outcomes from several Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership projects. The impact criterion is given the most weight at 40% in the final report and yet is the most speculative of the four criteria since it requires project coordinators to predict future effects. More specifically, two recent projects are analyzed as cases: The 9 Conversations Project (9C) and the Mastering 9 Conversations project (M9C). The aims of the projects were to develop a practical entrepreneurship training for refugees and a teacher training package for refugee support centers. Many immigrants have business experiences from their previous life. How can Support Centers build on their experiences and give them support to become entrepreneurs in their new countries with new rules and regulations? Will the 9C and the M9C projects have an impact in the short or long term? What measures can be taken to increase the impact? Based on our cases we will present some conclusions about the usefulness and impact of the project results for different target groups.

Keywords: Impact, Entrepreneurship, Teacher training, Refugees

1 INTRODUCTION

The Mastering 9 Conversations (M9C) project is a follow up of the 9 Conversations (9C) project. Both projects were developed under the Erasmus+ umbrella, i.e. as Strategic Partnership projects for Adult learners. The 9C project started 1.10.2018 and ended 30.09.21. The M9C project started 1.10.20 and will be finished by 30.09.2023. In the M9C project we have six partners coming from Norway, Lithuania, Greece and Italy, representing, both universities, learning centers /VET school and refugee support organizations. These two projects are used as the main exemplars for the impact discussions.

Statistics show that many immigrants have problems entering the labor market in their new countries, despite governmental language and introductory programs [1]. The idea (or hypothesis) of the two projects is that some immigrants with previous business experience could create their own jobs if they could attend a practical entrepreneurship course where the rules and regulations of their new countries are explained, together with building a network in their local community. The Deloitte report [2] Talent Displaced: The economic lives of Syrian refugees in Europe from 2017, substantiates that idea, especially regarding Syrian immigrants.

Since pilot testing was not financed either for 9C or M9C it was not possible to verify the usefulness of the projects. Despite that we have gathered some limited qualitative feedback from possible users, both immigrants and their supporting organizations, by some video interviews and by arranging events during the project, so-called Multiplier Events [3].

The Commission is quite concerned with what impact a project might have, and the project must try to give a reasonable answer to this question to obtain a high score in the Final Report. When developing the M9C project, we used the methodology Erasmus+ tool for impact and evaluation [4]. The same methodology was used at the end of the project.

2 METHODOLOGY

The definition of impact in the Cambridge Dictionary is: "a powerful effect that something, especially something new, has on a situation or person".

There are several methodologies both to plan for impact as well as for measuring impact. In the web site of the UK National Agency a methodology / tool to discuss and document project impact is presented [4].
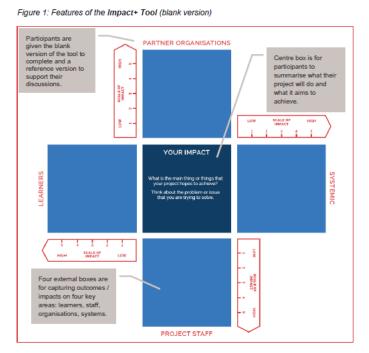
2.1 IMPACT ANALYSIS TOOL

Figure 1. A diagram to discuss /document the aim of the project and four areas to capture impact from the project: Project staff, Learners, Partner organisations and Systemic.

IMPACT+ EXERCISE TABLE

AREA OF IMPACT	IMPACTS / OUTCOMES	INDICATORS	DATA SOURCES	TIMESCALE		
				SHORT TERM	MEDIUM TERM	LONG TERM
SYSTEMIC						
ORGANISATIONS						
LEARNERS						
STAFF						

Figure 2. A table to collect possible impact from stakeholders.

2.2 OTHER TOOLS for CHANGE

Impact relates more generally to obtaining change. Methodologies especially for SYSTEMIC change that are relevant to our two projects include:

2.2.1 SROI – Social return on investments

Social Value is a broader understanding of value. It is about how the wellbeing of people is changed in a positive or negative direction, because of an activity. To measure the social impact of an activity or project one can use some principles developed by the network Social Value International [5]. The SROI value map is a practical tool for calculating the impact [6] as shown in Figure 3.

Value Map

SROI Value Map					
This sheet is designed to help you develop your SROI analysis. If your analysis does not use monetary valuation of outcomes, please use the "Value Map (non-SROI)" tab. For further information please see the "Guidance" tab.					
Stage 1		Stage 2			
Who and how many?		At what cost?			What changes?
Stakeholders		Inputs		Outputs	Outcomes
					Outcome description
Who do we have an effect on?

Who has an effect on us? | How many in group? | What will/did they invest and how much (money, time)? | Financial value (for the total population for the accounting period) | Summary of activity in numbers. | What is the change experienced by stakeholders? |

This is an Excel spreadsheet of the value map with preset formulas to help you calculate your impact.

Figure 3. Template Value Map

By using the Value Map, it is possible to measure impact on social value either by giving the activity a value and a weight and do a traditional calculation or by indicating the possible change in a more qualitative way.

The direct involvement of the stakeholders in this process is necessary to have a trustworthy result. The most important stakeholders for 9C are the refugees and the Supporting Refugee organizations for M9C.

2.2.2 Theory of Change (TOF)[7]

TOF is a systematic backward approach to determine long term goals and how to achieve them. The methodology has six components: 1. Outcomes, modeled in causal pathways; 2. Interventions (activities), leading to the relevant Outcome(s); 3. Assumptions; 4. Rationales; 5. Indicators; 6. Narrative.

One uses group work among the participants / partners to set up a pathway (graphically) of steps of outcomes and activities necessary to achieve the long-term goal. Both assumptions and rationales are discussed and documented (narrative) as well as indicators of achievements.

The TOF approach could have been used for 9C and M9C to better understand if the outcomes and activities are sufficient for achieving the long-term goal of refugees and immigrants becoming entrepreneurs in their new host country. In our projects we have for instance made some assumptions about language, technology, social networks, and previous knowledge that has been confirmed during several Multiplier Events.

2.2.3 Mapping outcome for social investments

Social investment presents the promise of financial returns combined with social impact [8]. In both 9C and M9C the work we have done have the overall goal to give refugees and immigrants the possibility to enter into the labor market as entrepreneurs or have a better understanding how the labor market work in their new country. NPC, New Philanthropy Capital, is a think tank and a consultancy for the social sector. NPC have looked at 13 sectors (outcome areas) and developed Outcome Maps for each area. The areas most interesting for 9C and M9C are: Education and learning; Employment and training, and Finance and legal matters.

In the 9C project we have developed a FAQ where refugees and immigrants can obtain knowledge about Finance and legal matters in five different languages for five different countries. This Output is supposed to have impact for the users as defined by some of the outcomes in that area. This will be a tool both for the immigrants themselves, and also a tool for the RSOs. In the M9C project we have also made a tool that can be used for knowledge and skills evaluation in addition to the European Skills profile tool for third country nationals. This tool will help the RSOs to guide the refugees and immigrants both in documenting their previous skills and knowledge related to entrepreneurship, but also help them to choose the right level for further education. The 9C and M9C work will therefore be one of many to support and increase the impact in the sections of the NPC impact map highlighted earlier.

2.3 9 CONVERSATIONS

The aim of the 9C project was to develop an entrepreneurship course accessible to refugees with limited host language abilities by giving access to the main information required to start a business in that country. At the same time, the program was designed to help participants extend their network to local organizations and individuals who could support them in taking the next step to implementing their business idea. The project was developed after seeing the way in which some refugees started businesses in a very hurried fashion as a response to the pressure in some European Union (EU) countries to become self-sufficient as soon as possible as a means of gaining permission to stay in the country over a longer period. The refugees often had useful support from their own compatriots but overlooked certain basic rules about doing business in their new country of residence. In the worst-case scenario this could jeopardize their permission to remain in the country. The 9C project therefore sought to extend their existing network and help them find out about the basics of running a business in the host country.

The 9C project aimed to provide refugees with entrepreneurship courses and resources to start a business in their host country, while also expanding their local network. The project was initiated in response to the rushed business ventures of refugees in some EU countries, which often overlooked local business rules and could jeopardize their stay.
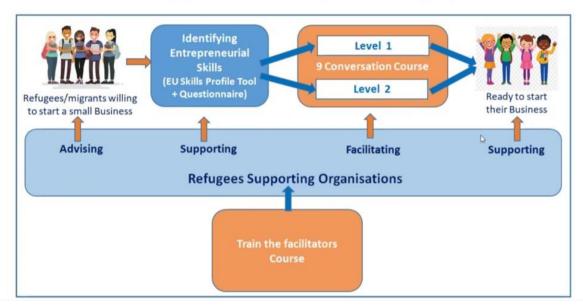
The outputs were as follows:

1. An FAQ about starting a business, tailored to the host country's language which could also be used as a standalone tool.
2. A self-evaluation tool of entrepreneurial skills based on the four lowest levels of the EU EntreComp framework [9] that linked to the nine areas of the Osterwalder Business Model template [10] a one-page visualization tool used in the 9C course. This could also be used as a stand-alone tool.
3. Integration of the EU Skills Profile Tool [11] into the 9C course and course assessment through badges that can be added to the EU Skills Profile Tool.
4. Shareable 9C course materials for refugee support organizations.
5. A facilitator guide for organizations implementing the 9C course.
6. An Android app containing the 9C course and supporting tools 1-3 because 9C participants would most likely be completing the 9C program on their Smartphones.

Despite funding cuts, a small-scale pilot was conducted in Denmark using national funding. The project also held public events in Greece, Italy, and Lithuania for feedback from stakeholders, leading to the development of the follow-up project, Mastering 9 Conversations. The six outputs should be considered as a package supporting the 9C course.

2.4 MASTERING 9 CONVERSATIONS

The Mastering 9 Conversations (M9C) project aimed to enhance the original 9 Conversations (9C) course by differentiating learner levels, developing a train-the-trainers course, and providing additional support to refugee support organizations (RSOs) with a business plan template and easily accessible digital materials.

The M9C project is visualized as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. A visualization of the M9C project

The outputs were as follows:

1. A more advanced level of 9C with additional videos and materials from previous Erasmus+ projects.
2. A tool for differentiating between the two 9C levels through an entrepreneurship survey.
3. A guide for RSOs on micro credentialling that explained three cost-effective options.
4. A train the facilitator course preparing facilitators to locally tailor the 9C materials.
5. A low-tech approach to achieving easy digital access to the materials, by recommending Google Drive.
6. A tailored business plan template to help RSOs integrate 9C into their other activities.

Despite reduced funding, public events in Greece, Lithuania, and Italy allowed for feedback from RSOs and expressions of interest in the M9C package. The six outputs together constituted a comprehensive package valuable to RSOs, though each also had standalone value.

3   RESULTS

In this section we will describe the impacts of the two projects by following the framework of the Impact+ tool in Figure 1. The Impact+ framework derives from the publicly available evaluation criteria [12] applied by the evaluators appointed by the National Agencies in assessing the applications to be funded and evaluating the results once the projects are completed. The questions that need to be answered in both the application form and the final report are phrased according to this framework of levels of impact. Note that the Impact+ tool was used only on the later M9C project by the consortium and that therefore Section 3.1 represents a backward design attempt to analyze the impact of 9C using this framework.

The impacts described in the following two sections are specific to each project and do not include the more general impacts experienced by most Erasmus+ projects that include increased cultural awareness, specifically inclusivity; enhanced language, communication and problem-solving skills which could aid employability; and finally improved educational methodologies, curricula and approaches.

3.1   9C Main IMPACT

The 9C project aimed to help refugees in European countries who had previously run businesses and wished to continue doing so in their new location. The project developed a training program encouraging local networking, thus having a potential impact beyond the initial target group, since it was also useful to inter-EU, and internal migrants.

The key impact of the 9C project was the perceived value of the course package by refugee support organizations. However, these organizations expressed a need for more than just the Facilitator Guide for implementation. This led to the demand for a new project to develop a more effective 9C course offering digital infrastructure, and the train-the-trainer course. This demand resulted in the successful development of the follow-up Mastering 9 Conversations (M9C) project.

3.1.1 Staff

Staff refers to the partner staff directly participating in the project.

The project had three main impacts on staff:

1. Technology Use: Staff gained expertise in offering courses outside of a corporate Learning Management System (LMS), using the project's WordPress site, the Lifter LMS plugin, and the H5P learning object builder. The eLearning partner also developed skills in building Smartphone apps for learning.

2. Promotion of Entrepreneurship: Staff adapted the EU EntreComp framework to develop a self-assessment tool and integrated the EU Skills Profile Tool into the course to identify entrepreneurial skills.

3. Adapting Learning Activities: Staff learned to adapt learning activities for refugees with limited host nation language levels and varying educational backgrounds. All partners implemented Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into the project outputs, making learning more accessible to a wider range of learners. The Norwegian requirement that all publicly funded education must follow Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to make learning more accessible to a wider range of learners meant that all partners benefitted from learning more about how to implement UDL in a practical example, including the Norwegian partners for whom this was a relatively new requirement.

3.1.2 Learners

The requirement to report on the impact of your project on learners reminds project coordinators that Erasmus+ projects are ultimately about learning. The 9C project faced a reporting dilemma when funding for a planned course pilot was rejected. However, a local pilot funded by the Danish partner yielded positive feedback, particularly on the cohort group model.

3.1.3 Organization

The project contributed to the Greek partner's organization's creation of the new Research Institute on "Refugees Flow and Crisis Management" that was mandated by Greek law in 2019. The Greek partner also used the experience of the 9C project to support their creation of a post-graduate course on entrepreneurship.

The Norwegian eLearning company was strengthened by its first attempts to develop an eLearning app, and this may have contributed to its merger with another Norwegian eLearning company soon after the project.

Through their contacts with refugees, refugee business owners and refugee support organizations, partners were able to understand the learning needs of this target group more deeply through several lenses including UDL, micro-credentialling and the pedagogy of transformative learning circles.

3.1.4 SYSTEMIC

Systemic impacts involved strengthened contacts with refugees and refugee support organizations. The Italian and Lithuanian public events led to new partnerships in the follow-up M9C project. The Greek partner also had a dialogue with the EU Skills Profile team at DG Employment about potential tool extensions based on the 9C project.

3.2 M9C Main IMPACT

The central aim was making 9C usable and sustainable by RSOs mainly through the development of a train the 9C facilitator course and a business plan template for the RSOs, but also through differentiating the original 9C course into two levels using an entrepreneurial skills tool developed by M9C and through the production of additional video materials for the higher level. By the end of the M9C project it was

clear that the consortium had produced a comprehensive package that could also be reliably credentialled and truly platform agnostic.

3.2.1 Staff

The two Norwegian partners have benefitted from analyzing how to make learning materials available in a low-tech way. Norwegian policy mandates the implementation of Universal Design for Learning in publicly funded education at all levels and the M9C project was an opportunity to consider practical steps to implementation.

The Italian university partner experimented with several modes of micro-credentialling, a global trend in higher education.

3.2.2 Learners

M9C trialed two sessions of the new train the facilitator course at their public events in Lithuania and Italy, which were both well-received. Reduced funding meant that more widespread piloting was not implemented. The enhanced two-level 9C course was not piloted although the new materials were quality checked.

3.2.3 Organization

The Greek partner was able to develop an entrepreneurial skills diagnostic tool that could also be used in their organization's new research institute.

The Italian RSO partner took the first steps to implementing the complete M9C package in a project involving helping independent cocoa farmers in Africa to make a living.

3.2.4 SYSTEMIC

The M9C project integrated several pre-existing EU tools as vital parts of the package. These included, the EntreComp framework of entrepreneurial skills, the EuroPass approach to certification and the EU Skills Profile tool for third country nationals. M9C also made a survey of previous Erasmus projects to uncover materials to add to the enhanced two-level version of 9C.

The materials and tools developed by the project are truly Open Educational Resources (OER) with no need to set up an account to access and use them.

The Red Cross organization of Lithuania expressed their interest in adopting the M9C package in that country as did Social Services Jonava, a very active Lithuanian associate partner in the project.

3.3 Erasmus+ projects impact in general

The EU Erasmus+ programs, evolving from Socrates in 1995 to Erasmus+ in 2014, have increasingly emphasized impact, transparency, and visibility, with impact growing in significance albeit using different terms, such as valorization or exploitation. This has partly been to avoid fraud [13] through increased transparency, to make EU funding more visible by ensuring that project activities are clearly branded, as well as wishing to achieve impact beyond the immediate participants to maximize the effect of the funds used. KA2 strategic partnerships until 2020 were required to describe their main activities in terms of Intellectual Outputs (IOs) which each had to be innovative in nature. Since 2021, the requirement for innovation remains, but less emphatically. The EU and the individual National Agencies regularly assess trends and impacts at an aggregated level though these tend to be concerned with attitudes and values rather than more easily quantifiable factors. In this article we examine the implication of achieving impact at the level of the individual project.

The programs aim to improve teaching and learning quality, integrate new trends like technology adoption, promote European values, equity, inclusion, democracy, active citizenship, and encourage innovation [14]. Unlike projects that are funded internally within organizations, Erasmus+ funding, especially in the Key Action 2 strand, is also about achieving impact external to the project participants.

Erasmus+ projects are expected to have both internal and external impact. Projects must present a coherent dissemination and impact plan at the application stage, accounting for up to 30% of the total points allocated. By the project's end, this increases to 40% reflecting the critical significance of impact from the EU side.

Impact can be shallow (wide dissemination of results) or deep (adoption or transfer of project outputs). The capacity of partners to implement outcomes varies; Higher Education partners typically have more capacity than small charities. The two main projects used as case studies in this article included both higher education partners and small charities or single person businesses.

Three observations about impact in Erasmus+ strategic partnerships are:

1. To be approved, a balance is needed between development activities and planned impact and dissemination activities during the lifetime of the project.
2. The final beneficiary report must be completed within two months of the funding period's end, which may be too short for significant impacts.
3. The most significant impacts likely occur much later, such as the adoption of a course developed within a project by partner organizations.

Erasmus+ evaluators consider the project's timescale, grant size, and partner capacities. Therefore, a larger project with a €300,000 budget and several higher education partners in a consortium of six to eight partners is expected to deliver considerably greater impact than a smaller €60,000 project comprised of three or four small non-profit organizations.

3.4 JITOL Impact from an old example

The project, JITOL – Just in Time Open Learning, under the DELTA – program, was run from 1992 to 1994 [15]. The project focuses on the development and evaluation of IT-based learning environments to support the professional development of individuals. A framework was developed, and trials were carried out in four areas, one of them was for learning technology training specialists in SMEs.

Impact: "The project will have been successful if it is possible to define effective functionality for a service provider and to be able to identify features of knowledge exchange and training needs which can be satisfied by a particular implementation of the JITOL model." [15]

A follow up project in Norway called NITOL – Norway net with IT for Open Learning, used the same technology as in JITOL to establish online courses for adults delivered from four Norwegian HEIs in disciplines like business, teacher training and ICT. This became a tremendous success and more than 50 000 students enrolled in NITOL courses in the period from 1994 to 2014. In Megaproviders of e-learning in Europe [16], Sør-Trøndelag University college (which institutionalized NITOL) was rated as number 23 of the largest e-learning providers in Europe with 2500 enrolments on 148 different courses in 2005.

The technology used to deliver the courses, and the technology for course administrations have changed much from the beginning in 1994 to today, but the impact from JITOL and NITOL have been great, both in number of courses and enrolments, but probably even more important was the lifelong learning effect for individuals and organizations. There may also be other spin off projects from JITOL in other countries. The conclusion is that it is impossible to predict the specific impact of a project at the time when it is finished, but it may be possible to define criteria for success as in the JITOL case.

4 DISCUSSION

From the funder's point of view, in this case, the EU, they would like to be certain that the monies have been spent as planned and that they have had a positive effect, both internally within the consortium, and externally, to strengthen the reputation of the EU. As we have seen in the two case projects, 9C and M9C, there are conflicting forces in identifying and quantifying impacts within two months of the project period's end when reporting must be completed. The much older case of JITOL shows that project impacts can be significant over a much longer time perspective, in this case, over 11 years.

The survey of methodologies highlights that a feature of Erasmus+ programs is the expectation of qualitative changes, whereas it is easier for projects to plan for shallower and more quantifiable impacts such as number of visits to a website, material downloads or of subscribers to a newsletter.

The Impact+ tool was used in the M9C project at application stage with all partners invited to submit suggestions about the different sectors, timescales, and levels of potential impact, and as a discussion prompt in the final partner meeting in preparation for completing the final report.

It is important to consider not just the whole packages that were produced in both 9C and M9C but also the individual components, most of which could be used standalone. One example is the work done on

micro-credentialling which was of relevance to all partners in the M9C project, whether or not they planned to use the whole package.

The 9C project was criticized for not including RSOs as partners, even though there had been an NGO partner, and all three public events involved RSOs. M9C therefore included a RSO as a partner in Italy and there was also a very active associate partner RSO in Lithuania. It was noticeable that greater impact could be achieved with closer involvement of the target group.

The M9C project made use of at least four existing EU tools or frameworks, and this highlights the potential for two-way impact, in that this provided the EU with use cases, and in one case, dialogue for improvements.

The public events played a key part in amplifying impact in both projects. For example, the Lithuanian M9C event resulted in an expression of interest by a national RSO. Most Erasmus+ outputs involve learning materials and most organizations running learning events require a longer lead in process as the course is approved and added to the course catalogue and finally has resources committed to it. It was not possible therefore to point to a specific timetabled course before submission of the final report of both projects.

The case of JITOL suggests that a useful strategy would be to declare criteria for success. In the case of M9C (which now includes 9C), this could be "the project will have been successful if the M9C package, or parts thereof, are adopted by RSOs or other stakeholders".

5   CONCLUSIONS

Impact is a multi-faceted concept that occurs at different levels and over different time periods. Reporting on impact within two months of the end of a substantial 2- or 3-year project therefore presents several challenges.

Although the Corona pandemic was a disruptor in both the case study projects, more disruptive was the fact that in both cases, funding was reduced which meant that plans had to be adjusted and, in both cases, this hit the piloting of the learning resources being produced. This is a negative impact that can affect the symmetry of a project and that should not be underestimated by the evaluators when they make such decisions.

The Impact+ tool was useful in planning potential avenues for impact and then reporting them. The use of this and other EU frameworks and tools achieves impact also for the EU and should be noted in Erasmus+ final reports.

It is debatable whether the creation of a follow up project should be considered as a main impact of 9C but on the other hand, the EU do actively encourage follow up Erasmus+ activity, at different scales, with new partners and on different topics. Follow up projects have value in enhancing the impact of previous projects. The 9C project stood on its own merits but its impact was amplified by M9C.

Deep and major impacts are largely impractical to achieve during the lifetime of a project. A way forward may be to define criteria for success as demonstrated by the JITOL case study.

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