ESSENCE IO4:

GUIDELINES

FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT RESULTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

ESSENCE (Enhance soft skills to nurture competitiveness and employability) is an international project financed under Erasmus+ programme and delivered by consortium of seven partners coordinated by the University of Information Technology and Management from Rzeszow Poland. The project objective is improvement of employability opportunities for HE students through development and enhancement of their soft skills. Over the course of the project duration the consortium developed a set of tools and trainings intended for use and applicable across European and international higher education and lifelong learning spaces. Seven courses have been developed addressing the following topics defined as i) coordination, ii) creativity, iii) emotional intelligence, iv) judgment and decision-making, v) complex problem solving, vi) critical thinking and vii) cognitive flexibility. Each course comes with a rich set of resources such as case studies, best practice examples and decision games. This provides a free and ready to use package for all those interested in soft skills development among students and employees.

Considerable efforts have been invested in the development of training materials to make them self-guiding and self-explanatory to all prospective instructors interested in their use. To make this process even easier and more intuitive and to fine-tune developed materials in line with needs of target group beneficiaries, a piloting procedure was undertaken in the first half of 2022. This provided the consortium with feedback along several dimensions relevant for delivery of individual courses and training as a whole. As a result, valuable insights were gathered that are now being translated into guidelines for implementation and use of project results (courses, case studies, best practice examples and decision games) independently or within curricula of higher education institutions.

The gained experience constitutes the pillars of this document, the guidelines for the use of the project results. The aim is to provide prospective users with some practical, experience-based insights gathered through piloting and initial implementation of developed materials. The guidelines cover a wide range of topics from organization of training to tips for communication with target groups and participants, recruitment and group management. Particular attention was given to issues of blended learning and experiences gathered through online transmission of training. These experiences are crucial for delivery of trainings during challenging periods such as the recent Covid pandemics in an online or blended learning format. Finally, the guidelines provide advice on increasing participant motivation as well as lessons learned through collection of participant feedback.

While providing a starting point, these guidelines are not definite rules for the implementation of ESSENCE trainings. Prospective users are encouraged to experiment and enrich our suggestions with their own ideas. As a living entity ESSENCE is intended to grow and develop through implementation.

ESSENCE CONSORTIUM

2. ORGANIZATION OF TRAINING

ESSENCE trainings are developed for application in both traditional classroom and blended learning (online) formats. Throughout the piloting phase both formats have been tested and gathered experience suggest that these kind of trainings fall on fertile soil when organized as practice oriented, accompanied with attractive training contents adapted to targeted topic and also supported with interactive tools. For example, participants may use PPT presentations, video materials but also case studies, and decision games as starting point in the development of discussions. Prospective instructors may use these trainings in more or less homogeneous groups but also in heterogeneous settings involving students from different countries. It is particularly useful if trainings are embedded in the related parts of a wider curricula. Human resource management, Business negotiations or Business communication are examples of modules where our trainings may be particularly useful. Prospective instructors are encouraged to open their classes with provision of as much information as possible about the tools and the expectations from students in order to ensure smooth application and interaction within the group during sessions.

3. RECRUITMENT

The recruitment of participants can take place through multiple channels. One possible approach could involve contact through groups from similar education domains or stakeholders involved in similar day-to-day activities. For example, one of the approaches to recruit participants during the piloting stage of ESSENCE involved exploitation of professional relations with organisations and institutions working with young people and first job-seekers. In other instances, associated partners of institutions were used. Stakeholders interested in encouraging their teachers and instructors to engage with ESSENCE outputs could use also promotion of the OER platform, its free-of-charge access, contents and functions as an incentive to integrate ESSENCE trainings in their regular classes. Finally, ESSENCE trainings can be organized adjacent to other events whose participants may be invited as well.

4. COMMUNICATION WITH TARGET GROUP AND PARTICIPANTS

Many break-the-ice techniques exist to start setting up a classroom's climate that is beneficial (and at times instrumental) for a pleasant time in the company of the people sharing this space. In general, we noticed that for non-formal settings trainers / speakers should avoid to take themselves too seriously, but still without falling into the trap of being "too friendly" – all in all, there is still a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities which is what legitimise the very role and status of the speaker. In general, there is always a student / participant there is more open to carry on the discussion, raise questions / doubts / food for thoughts: he / she is indeed the icebreaker and, involuntarily, makes the other feel more comfortable in raising their hand and participating in the discussion – an effect that would be quite difficult to achieve (but not impossible) in online settings. Where ice-breaking techniques were used students involvement was encouraged by asking them to introduce themselves in order to tailor provided contents to their realities.

Overall, a trust-based classroom's environment is essentials to engage, and most importantly, to retain the attention and interest of participates. This requires a few narrow-focused efforts from the trainers since the very moment they step into the classroom and meet with participants for the first time. A calm and welcoming approach most definitely helps participants in feeling comfortable not only with the trainer or the training content, but firstly and foremost with their environment. Trainers are recommended to open each new session / the introduction with a new topic with some experience-based examples: this helps perceiving the content of the training as vibrant. Relevant examples should be used to trigger interests.

5. GROUP MANAGEMENT

People love to talk and express themselves as much as they like the feeling of having someone that is relating to what they are saying. From our experience we learned that even the shyest among participants (not to say the most disinterested) will not contain themselves from saying something at some point. This "breaking" point depends on the degree of freedom and flexibility perceived by participant. The speaker can influence the breaking point of the classroom by recruiting allies which in all cases are represented by the person / people emerging naturally as informal spokesperson of the group.

Slides and PPTs proved very useful in orientating the discussion and the key takeaways per each given circumstance, but instructors should be careful in maintaining the balance between too much reliance on such materials and keeping the classroom "alive". For instance, best practices and case studies triggered fruitful discussions in class. Students could be assigned various self-paced tasks: autonomous familiarisation with the OER ESSENCE Platform; doing self-assessment quiz; filling in feedback forms. Making them participants in the training all the time, as active agents in the training, creating a training environment in which we can all share ideas, impressions, questions, etc.

The same goes for the very "presence" in the room of the speaker: sitting at a desk in the centre of the room helps monitoring the expression of interest / disinterest on everybody's face, but after a while it poses a risk of being perceived as too static. In an environment as the one addressed by ESSENCE (i.e., participated by young people), the speaker should be source of knowledge and "animator", driver of expertise. A statement can be rephrased as an open question that will be asked to the audience, that helps the training sessions in transiting from an a-personal transfer of notions to a co-development ecosystem.

6. BLENDED LEARNING AND ONLINE TRANSMISSION

As previously stated, ESSENCE is developed with the aim of application in both traditional and online environments. The OER platform is perfectly suited for self-learning and / or online training, it has great potential for the offline sessions as long as it is not the primary vector for the retaining of learners' attention. Old-school blackboards and coloured markers allow for much higher degrees of dynamics, helping students in better understanding what leads to certain processes, how they are created, etc. For being an animator, it is important to "own" the physical space hosting the session. This very opportunity conflicts with the limitations that comes with many digital resources that per se are static and motionless. In these contexts, the OER platform should provide and overall concepts' map, while the trainer / speaker gets into details with the help of other resources that are more suitable for an interactive F2F delivery. Technology is of vital importance for the content and the delivery of the training in an online mode. Our piloting sessions revealed positive response to the use of presentation media, Moodle resources and videoconferencing tools (e.g. Google Meet, Zoom or MS Teams). All users responded very well to all these formats, as they help to better understand the content and make it more dynamic and graphic.

7. PARTICIPANT MOTIVATION AND OPINIONS

Our experience suggests that several motives may be behind the motivation of participants to engage in trainings such as the ones provided by ESSENCE. Across all piloting sessions we identified curiosity and the sense of self-awareness as motives. In other instances, the sense of oversaturation of the labour market and the consequent need for constant and continuous upgrade of one's offer emerged as common motives. Some participants joined under feeling of pressure from their peers. Finally, there were those with desire to broaden their knowledge on the topic of soft skills.

An Important ingredient for sustainability of ESSENCE trainings is the continuous collection of feedback from participants. During our piloting sessions feedback has been collected informally since the formal collection of feedbacks via surveys, interviews, etc., seemed generating a sense of fatigue among participants. In their views, they had multiple occasion to express their feelings about the training, the sessions, the content, the speakers – unless fully necessary, filling in a survey seemed a bureaucratic burden that many are tempted to avoid. Collecting Inputs and comments informally allowed the communication to be open and clear since the very beginning.

In some instances it may be needed to collect feedbacks via conventional formal channels. Here, focus groups, survey applications via mobile phone or even feedback forms prepared on websites can be used. However, while doing this, instructors should be at disposal to participants in case of technical difficulties.

8. ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO RECOMMENDATIONS

Similar to all trainings developed, those created under ESSENCE are living entity and as such open to continuous improvements. All prospective users are encouraged to adjust provided trainings and accompanying materials to the context in which they operate. The timing of delivery is also of importance as having too many modules within a narrow timeframe may result in an excessive burden to students. Instructors should invest efforts to avoid static expressions of the training and build a climate of co-development and co-creation of the content. For this, building of trust-based environment is essential as it allows the emergence of desired effects such as unfiltered and spontaneous provision of comments.