EXTERNAL QUALITY
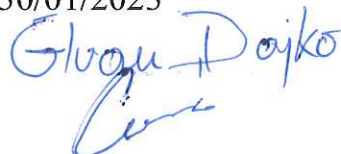
ASSESSMENT REPORT

Developing Research and Innovation Capacities in Albania and Kosovo
DRIVE

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30/01/2023

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ACRONYMS

CBHE – Capacity Building in Higher Education

EACEA – Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

DRIVE - Developing Research and Innovation Capacities in Albania and Kosovo

HEI – Higher Education Institutions

PMT – Project Management Team

QAC – Quality Assurance Committee

QAP – Quality Assurance Plan

SC – Steering Committee

PU – Polis University

UET – Polytechnic University of Tirana

PUT – European University of Tirana

UP – University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina

UGJFA - University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani"

UC – Universum College

TUHH - Hamburg University of Technology

PoliMi - Politecnico di Milano

AAU - Aalborg University

WP – Work Package

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SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

This is a quality assessment report for the project "**Developing Research and Innovation Capacities in Albania and Kosovo / DRIVE**" Ref. No. 610307-EPP-1-2019-AL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP. The author has been contracted by the project coordinator POLIS University, as foreseen in Work Package 6, Activity 6.2 to provide an independent opinion on the project's quality, efficiency, and sustainability.

The main objectives of this assessment report include:

1. Identify key findings from the project implementation that can serve as a reference for other actors that wish to engage in similar projects.
2. Identify best practices that can be replicated by peer HEIs in the region that seek to improve their research and innovation capacities and foster their cooperation with other stakeholders and policy-making institutions.
3. Conduct an objective, evidence-based, and informed assessment of the project to share it with the donor, stakeholders, and other groups of interest.

The principles that have guided the preparation of the report are:

- Transparency – include all the findings that emerge from the assessment in the report.
- Inclusiveness - conduct a complete and crosschecked assessment by gathering the insights of the involved stakeholders.
- Professionalism - depict a truthful picture of the project quality and impact by adopting an objective and unbiased approach.

It is important to emphasize that both, the project coordinator and the other consortium partners have been very active in mobilizing other Erasmus+ CBHE projects and intend to keep doing so in the future, so, with this in mind, the report can inform their future conduct and approach about project writing and project implementation.

PROJECT'S BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Project background

Research and innovation are fundamental for the development of any country in today's globalized and knowledge-driven economy, and higher education institutions hold an important role in a country's innovation system. The higher education system in both Albania and Kosovo saw a robust increase in student participation and institutional expansion of the system within less than a decade (2006 – 2015). This proliferation of student intake and institutions has brought about increased access, but it has also posed numerous challenges for the student population, academic staff, and new institutions in both the public and private sectors. Due to the young age of most institutions as well as the limited legacy in terms of research capacities from the past (for historic reasons), these challenges pertain largely to the research activity as well. And it was not surprising that both countries score poorly in almost all research, innovation, and competitiveness indicators. Considering the identified limitations at the national and institutional levels for capacity building in research and innovation, it became imperative to rely on the expertise of HEIs in program countries, and integral support for 3 years in the form of a targeted CBHE project.

DRIVE – "Developing research and innovation capacities in Albania and Kosovo", co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and led by Polis University has brought together 8 partners from the WB region and other EU countries. Throughout three years of its implementation, this project has adopted an integral and systemic approach towards the capacity-building process for research and innovation in Albania and Kosovo, identifying several target groups and their specific needs, and tailoring the project activities to such needs. In addition to capacity building and exchange of experience with EU partners, the project has already established new structures in 4 HEIs that will focus on research and innovation adopting an interdisciplinary approach and eventually close cooperation with partners from businesses and industries in line with the quadruple helix goals. Other HEIs will reinforce existing structures in place. Furthermore, the openness of HEIs towards other partners, local and international, will be further enhanced through the development of a network, supported also by a virtual platform that will ease the interaction and synergy among the members.

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Project aim and objectives

The general objective of this project has been to contribute to the development of the research and innovation capacities of HEIs in Albania and Kosovo by enhancing their institutional capabilities, staff skills, and networking.

Specifically, the project intended to:

1. Enhance the teachers' capacities and methodologies to effectively equip the students (graduate level and beyond) with the skills to conduct independent research.
2. Enhance the mentors' capacities to effectively guide the students in their research activity.
3. Enhance the research capacities of the academic and managerial staff through study visits and tailored pieces of training.
4. Strengthen the managerial capacities for research activities and innovation at the institutional level by setting or strengthening dedicated research and innovation support structures (RISS).
5. Promote research excellence and innovation by developing a network that eases the interdisciplinarity and cooperation among local and international actors.

METHODOLOGY

This report has been a work in progress during the project implementation and has been finalized by the end of January 2023. Through this period, especially during the last months of project implementation, several on-site visits to the consortium partner campuses/face-to-face meetings have been held while some of these meetings have also been compiled through virtual platforms/tools. So, the adopted methodology has been a combination of desk research and interviews with representatives of project partners.

Desk research: A series of documents have been consulted such as the approved project proposal and budget, the intermediate and final report prepared by the project coordinator, the project website, project publications, and social media posts by the coordinator and project partners.

A series of semi-structured interviews have been conducted via telephone with representatives of the consortium members, focusing mostly on the fulfillment of the project objectives and foreseen results, but also providing room for additional comments. The interviewees (n= 6) have been asked to discuss the faced shortcomings (if any) and to identify what they consider a best practice of the project.

The gathered inputs have been processed, analyzed, and interpreted to assess the achievement of the overall and specific objectives of the project, but also the quality and impact of the implemented activities as per the approved Work-Packages and Work Plan. Special attention has been paid to assessing whether the foreseen short-time impact indicators (quantitative and qualitative) have been met and the efficient use of the resources.

This approach dictated also the structure of the report which consists of 3 parts:

1. An overall assessment of the project objectives
2. A general assessment of the efficient use of the budget
3. The assessment of each Work-Package

Finally, the report concludes with a summary of the main findings of the assessment, identifying, when possible, bottlenecks to be avoided or best practices to be replicated.

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OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT

Project name and Website

The project name is DRIVE – "Developing research and innovation capacities in Albania and Kosovo" and its reference is 610307-EPP-1-2019-AL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

The project has its official website: https://driveproject-eu.com/ which provides detailed information on the project objectives, project deliverables, the consortium, the implementation of project activities, publications, etc. There could also be found a rich gallery of pictures and testimonies from various staff on their mobilities. With this regard, the website has shown to be instrumental not only for dissemination purposes but also in terms of transparency of the project implementation with the interested parties.

DRIVE – "Developing research and innovation capacities in Albania and Kosovo", co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and led by Polis University has brought together 9 partners, listed below:

Consortium

Polis University	Albania	Partner Countries
Polytechnic University of Tirana	Albania	Partner Countries
European University of Tirana	Albania	Partner Countries
University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"	Kosovo	Partner Countries
The University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani"	Kosovo	Partner Countries
Universum College	Kosovo	Partner Countries
Hamburg University of Technology	Germany	Programme Countries
PoliMI	Italy	Programme Countries
Aalborg University	Denmark	Programme Countries

Table 1. Consortium Composition

Budget

Budget Headings	Grant awarded (in EURO)	Budget spent (in Euro)	Budget spent (in %)
Staff Costs	369,915.00	400,016.00	108%
Travel Costs	70,020.00	45,235.00	65%
Costs of stay	126,720.00	87,360.00	69%
Equipment Costs	270,000.00	263,302.40	98%
Subcontracting costs	91,100.00	89,005.54	98%
Exceptional costs	0.00	0.00	
	927,755.00	884,919.00	95%

Table 2. Budget Overview

The total grant awarded for this project was: 927,755.00 Euro, from which 731,015.00 Euros was awarded for project activities and 196,740.00 was awarded for staff mobility.

The table above represents an overall good management/spending of project funds. Anyhow, there should be emphasized that the pandemics and the restrictions imposed by most countries hindered the ability to carry all the planned travel in the mobility strand, therefore the approved budget was not used entirely and a part of this fund has been transferred to staff costs according to the needs of the coordinator and project partners. Although a dedicated and more thorough assessment of the budget efficiency and its conformity with the EACEA guidelines is conducted by the financial audit, the focus in this report is on the impact that the budget execution has had on the quality of the project activities and its outcomes.

- As a general assessment, given the substantial achievement of all the project objectives, the financial management of the project, even though challenging, has not prevented the consortium to deliver the intended results.

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- In terms of management and reporting, the partners have been provided with templates and guidance on the EACEA rules and regulations since the beginning of the project, so that the budget implementation adhered to the guidelines. There have been periodic reporting from the partners to the project coordinator and in return from the Coordinator to EACEA.
- A detailed report of the grant management, companioned by the external financial audit will also be included in the project's final report.

Timeframe

The project has an overall duration of 36 months (starting from 15/01/2020 until 14/01/2023). Even though the first year of the project coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and several restrictions have been applied in the following years as well, no extension period was required by the end of the original timeline.

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ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Objective 1

When it comes to equipping students with the necessary skills to conduct independent research, there are some steps/strategies that partners (their respective academic staff) have employed to achieve the first objective of the project:

- Providing a solid foundation in research methodology during the entire project implementation: Providing a solid foundation in research methodology, including research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation has been and remains of crucial importance. This foundation will help students in the future to understand the various stages of research and the techniques involved in each stage.

- Teaching critical thinking skills: The academic staff of each HEI has been boosting critical thinking by exposing students to different research methodologies and encouraging them to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each method.

- Using case studies and real-world examples: Case studies and examples have helped students understand how to apply research methodologies in practical settings.

- Encouraging collaboration: Collaborative learning has helped students develop research skills by working with others. During the project implementation, this was made possible mainly by assigning group projects that require students to conduct research together.

- Using technology: The academic staff of each HEI has been constantly using some of the most recent technologies to facilitate collaborative learning and encourage students to use technology to conduct their research.

- Providing feedback: Providing timely and constructive feedback to students on their research projects, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement has been one of the best strategies that the academic staff has applied during these 3 years.

All partners have declared and are committed to keeping employing these strategies beyond the project implementation, so they can enhance their capacities and methodologies and effectively equip students at the graduate level and beyond with the skills to conduct independent research.

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Objective 2

Effective guidance from mentors is essential to ensure that students receive appropriate support and direction in their research activities in long term. Below are some of the strategies that partners have been employing to enhance mentors' capacities to guide students effectively:

- Establishing clear expectations: Mentors (under the guidance of project representatives) have been working during the entire period of project implementation to provide clear expectations for different research projects and communicate them to students. This includes outlining the goals of the research project, the expected outcomes, and the timeline for completion.

- Providing constructive feedback: Mentors have also been providing constructive feedback on students' research activities, including their progress and the quality of their work. Feedback should be timely, specific, and actionable.

- Encouraging independent thinking: Encouraging independent thinking and providing opportunities for students to develop their research questions and hypotheses has been extremely important and has resulted to be one of the most effective strategies. This will help students develop critical thinking skills in the long term and prepare them for future research activities.

- Using appropriate tools and resources: Mentors have been using appropriate tools and resources to support students in their research activities. This includes access to relevant literature, research databases, and software tools for data analysis.

Again, all partners are committed to keeping helping students complete their research projects successfully and preparing them for future research activities and careers beyond the lifespan of this project.

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Objective 3

Enhancing the research capacities of academic and managerial staff has been and remains crucial to ensure that institutions remain competitive and can meet the demands of their stakeholders. To accomplish this objective, there have been held several training workshops (on teaching methodologies, publishing, IPR, ethics, writing research proposals, publishing research articles, project writing, and project management) which have been linked with the specific needs of academic and managerial staff.

In addition to this, several study visits at the premises of EU partner HEIs have been held. This has included visits to their research centers, laboratories, academic conferences, etc. Some training workshops have been delivered virtually (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) while others have been held on-site.

As a result: The Codes of Research Conduct and Research Ethics & Gender Equality Plans have been prepared and published by each of the WB Partners. These documents are now accepted and being used as legal documents for the same issues in all 6 HEIs. In addition, a Handbook on Project Management has been prepared through the collaborative work of the partners and will serve as a very helpful manual moving forward.

Objective 4

Strengthening managerial capacities for research activities and innovation at the institutional level is essential to ensure that participating institutions can effectively plan, manage and support research and innovation activities. When it comes to this objective, it is worth to be mentioned that all partners have benefited from the RISS training so their staff can now effectively and efficiently manage this structure but the most important piece is that all WB partners have been able to legally formalize RISS within their HEIs (and employ dedicated staff), as well as develop regulations, and action plans for their activity.

So far, these RISS structures seem to effectively function as inter-departmental entities facilitating knowledge exchange (open lectures), facilitating proposal writing processes, and having a significant number of students engaged in research and innovation projects.

Objective 5

The final objective of this project has been focused on promoting research excellence and innovation by developing a network that eases the interdisciplinarity and cooperation among local and international actors. In this regard, some of the steps/strategies that have been employed by all DRIVE partners include:

- Establishing communication channels to facilitate information exchange and collaboration among network partners.
- Fostering interdisciplinarity among network partners by encouraging cross-disciplinary collaborations and promoting joint research initiatives.
- Supporting joint funding applications by assisting in proposal development, budget preparation, and submission (especially when it comes to Erasmus+ CBHE projects).
- Organizing joint research activities, such as conferences, seminars, and workshops, to facilitate knowledge exchange and dissemination among network partners.
- Developing joint research projects that address common research challenges and objectives.

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Below are given some quotes retrieved from the interviews with representatives of "Universum" College and the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"

Universum College: "The general objective of this project is satisfactorily achieved and the DRIVE project has positively contributed to the development of the research and innovation capacities within our academic units. During the course of the implementation of this project, our institution made its priority addressing very rigorously the issue of institutional research capabilities and the establishment of innovative research systems at a much broader and advanced level. Accordingly, it managed to organize workshops and training in large groups and small groups by providing opportunities to all professors and students interested in research to further develop their research skills and capabilities. Participation was at a large scale and we were able to identify the strong motivation of our academic staff to learn new research methodologies; to learn how to make a research project and what instruments to be used; to be able to provide collaborative research reports between different disciplines and make the research interdisciplinary as well as how to become a part of a larger group of research networks beyond national borders".

University of Prishtina: "All the project objectives were fulfilled and we can say that this was one of the projects that our faculty benefited the most with:

-A considerable number of staff from our faculty trained for best mentoring practices
-Faculty Staff trained for new teaching methodologies
-Several documents developed and implemented already in our faculty: A benchmark system with quality indicators in research, a Code of research conduct and ethics, a Gender equality plan, RISS regulation, a Roadmap, a Calendar of activities, and a Handbook on Project Management
-Development of local and international linkages through interdisciplinary research groups
-Access to the virtual platform
-RISS center established and fully operational at our faculty

The best practice was having a coordinator to continuously monitor the progress and the quality of the project objectives and having a web page of the project where all project partners could see the deliverable progress and remaining tasks".

THE ASSESSMENT OF EACH WORK-PACKAGE

A summary of Work packages and their respective progress

Work Package 1: Define project management structures and action plan	Progress
1.1. Discuss and sign the consortium agreement. 1.2. Draft and sign partnership contracts. 1.3. Appoint members and responsibilities of the managerial structures. 1.4. Validate the work plan.	100%
Work Package 2: Develop new teaching and mentoring methodologies that enhance students' research skills	
2.1. Define the topics and logistics of the training workshops. 2.2. Develop presentations and training materials. 2.3. Develop new teaching and mentoring methodologies. 2.4. Disseminate the developed methodologies. 2.5. Define and distribute the students' questionnaire. 2.6. Report survey findings.	100%
Work Package 3: Enhance staff capacity for research	
3.1. Define the topics and logistics of the training workshop. 3.2. Develop presentations and training materials. 3.3. Develop and disseminate manuals. 3.4. Develop and disseminate promoting material. 3.5. Define the research quality indicators. 3.6. Report the assessment results applying the benchmark system.	100%
Work Package 4: Develop Institutional Capacities for Research	
4.1. Approve RISS establishment in Academic Senates and Boards of Administration. 4.2. Define the agenda and logistics of the training workshops. 4.3. Develop RISS regulations, strategies, and action plans. 4.4. Organize tendering process and purchase equipment. 4.5. Report RISS activities.	100%

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Work Package 5: Establish a Network of Research Excellence	
5.1. Define the roadmap and calendar of activities. 5.2. Validate and disseminate the road map and calendar of activities. 5.3. Draft and sign Partnership Agreements. 5.4. Define the virtual platform features and contents. 5.5. Contract platform developer.	**100%**
Work Package 6: Quality Monitoring and Control	
6.1. Define quality plan. 6.2. Subcontract an external quality expert. 6.3. Prepare and submit the mid-term and final quality reports.	**100%**
Work Package 7: Dissemination and Exploitation	
7.1. Develop a dissemination strategy. 7.2. Design dissemination products and project website. 7.3. Define the agenda and logistics for the national info days. 7.4. Organize and host the final project conference. 7.5. Launch virtual platform. 7.6. Prepare dissemination report.	**100%**
Work Package 8: Project Management	
8.1. Define agendas and logistics for Managerial Committee meetings. 8.2. Contract external audit. 8.3. Prepare and submit a mid-term and final report.	**100%**
Work Package 9: Sustainability	
9.1. Develop Project Sustainability Report. 9.2. Develop RISS Sustainability Report. 9.3. Develop Network Sustainability Report.	**100%**

Table 3. Summary of Work Packages

WP1: Define project management structures and action plan

The Kick-off Meeting of the consortium was held at the coordinator's premises in Tirana, Albania (between the 20th and 21st of February 2020) and served as the starting point to formalize the conditions and the rules of the cooperation between partners. This meeting was held in the second month of the official start of the project and all partners did attend. There was a representative of the Management structures and a Coordinator/ Contact Point from every institution/partner in this consortium.

The Partnership Agreements, as guided by EACEA, have been signed between the coordinator and each of the partners with specific tasks, deadlines, and responsibilities as described in the respective work packages.

During the Kick-off meeting, three structures were established:

- Steering Committee (SC),
- Managerial Committee (MC), and
- Project Quality Committee (PQC).

In addition, the work plan was validated by all partners. This document outlined the steps needed to achieve specific objectives (5 general objectives) and included a detailed list of tasks, timelines, responsible parties, and resources required to complete the project.

All the deliverables under this Work Package have been produced according to the planned description and timeline.

WP2: Develop new teaching and mentoring methodologies that enhance students' research skills

The objective of this Work Package was to strengthen the students' research skills for conducting independent research and for making critical reviews of others' research, to contribute creatively to solving problems based on research. In this regard, the initial activities have been related to academic capacities, such as strengthening research capacities and developing teaching methodologies. This was later followed by the evaluation of research capacities through the development of quality assurance indicators. And the final step was the validation of the developed courses/methodologies through the students' evaluation, alumni, and partners from the industry.

New forms of learning in research work have been presented and discussed among the partners/network. The partnerships were flexible networking and boundary-crossing in ever-changing collaborative settings in which no single actor has a fixed authority. Groups of teachers and specialists did a significant amount of work together. Working face-to-face was essential and there were mobilities. Aalborg University and the Polytechnic University of Tirana led all the work under this Work Package and all tasks did follow a linear pattern: Workshops, Study visits, Reflective seminars, and Virtual seminars, which were the milestones to make sure that this work package was delivered according to the proposal. It is worth to be mentioned that 60 lecturers and mentors from 6 Partner Country Institutions were trained on new teaching and mentoring methods; 18 new teaching methods (3 new methodologies in each partner country Institution were developed).

Guidelines on research mentorship were developed during the second training as well as validated and implemented by 6 HEIs. The training workshop on teaching methodologies was hosted by the University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani" and there attended 5 academic staff from each of the Partner Universities (30 participants in total), while staff from the Universities of European countries participated in the role of the trainers and shared their expertise (experts from Aalborg University, PoliMi, and TUHH joined the event online).

Due to the pandemic of Covid-19, the training session under this work package was held a couple of months later compared to the initial plan/proposal.

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WP3: Enhance staff capacity for research

In this Work Package, various approaches to strengthening research capacity were taken, including improving the capacity of individual researchers through training courses, supporting collaborative partnerships, and developing research leadership skills. All activities under this work package aimed to enhance the abilities of individuals, and institutions, to undertake and disseminate high-quality research efficiently and effectively.

In particular, the first activities have been devoted to improving the capacity of individual researchers followed by activities aiming to enhance the institutional capacities for research.

The overall objective of this Work package was to develop and strengthen the Institutional Research Culture and Ethics and all partners did attend the first training workshop (under this WP) on publishing, IPR, and ethics. All partners also did attend the second training workshop on research management.

In addition, the Codes of Research Conduct and Research Ethics & Gender Equality Plans have been prepared and published by all partners. These documents have been accepted and are now being used as legal documents for the same issues in all 6 HEIs. A Handbook on Project Writing and Project Management has been prepared through the collaborative work of the partners and will serve as a very helpful manual moving forward.

No troubles were identified while producing the deliverables under this Work Package.

WP4: Develop Institutional Capacities for Research

This work package contributed to the shortcomings identified during the needs analysis on the country and institutional level: the need for coordinating structures that have processes and procedures in place to support research and innovation within each institution.

The overall outcome of this WP did improve capacities not only for the staff who did get direct training but because of the formalization as an integral part of the HEI structure, they will ultimately result in improved capacities for the entire institution, achieving long-term impact and sustainability of the project results even beyond the lifespan of the project.

During the lifespan of this work package, there have been held 3 training workshops (one in each Program Country Institution) with 3-4 participants from each HEI in the Partner Countries. These training workshops consisted in equipping the trainees with the required know-how on RISS operation.

- The first workshop was organized by TUHH and the outcome for each partner county was an outlined regulation for the establishment and operation of RISS.
- The second workshop was organized by PoliM and the outcome for each partner county was an outlined job description for RISS staff.
- The third workshop was organized by AAU and the outcome for each partner county was the strategy and action plan for RISS for the upcoming 3 years.

During the implementation of this work package, all partner countries did participate in the workshops; Developed regulations, and action plans for RISS activity & trained the acting RISS staff.

Below is given a quote retrieved from the interviews with representatives of "University of Gjakova "Fehmi Agani"

"Our RISS support center, Practice-Based Labs is serving as a center for sharing experiences in research, publications, and facilitating proposal writing processes. When it comes to students, they are mainly engaged in data collection (questionaries, interviews, data entry, etc), and supporting several research projects while being monitored by a supervisor/academic staff who due to the bureaucracies in place still is a part-time staff.

The most recent proposal writings/applications have been in the areas of environment and public health and RISS has shown to be of great support. In addition, when it comes to the open lectures, they are being organized in cooperation with the Didactic Centre for Teaching Excellence which is part of our university. Finally, with the new spaces we are working on incorporating into the "Practice-Based Labs," we are sure that we will be a model for other universities in the region, especially for public ones where new concepts and innovative ways of thinking and acting are crucial for their future".

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WP5: Establish a Network of Research Excellence

This work package aimed to initiate a process of intensive collaboration among HEIs of the region in the areas of research and innovation and make the project team play the role of catalysts in facilitating the synergies in research and innovation. WB partners did monitor the European members developing presentations that illustrated best practices of successful research network development.

The first workshop under this work package aimed to define a map of the teaching, research, and technology transfer activities of each HEI involved, based on which a roadmap for collaboration areas was defined. While the second workshop was focused on setting the activities to be implemented to achieve the roadmap and the calendar of them.

As a result of this work package, all WB partners in the region have initiated the development of the linkages among research groups in the form of writing common research projects. To support the collaboration among the partners and the communication of the results of the activities, a virtual platform has also been developed.

In addition, each of WB's partners did develop:

- A roadmap for the network;

- A calendar of activities for the network:

No issues have been identified during the implementation of this Work Package.

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WP6: Quality Monitoring and Control

WP6 was led by Universum College, and it was dedicated to ensuring the highest quality during the project implementation. The WP6 did imply utilizing internal and external mechanisms to produce deliverables that indicate the quality of the project implementation.

Internal mechanisms for quality control included:

- The Project Quality Committee (PQC) – who was entitled to adopt and monitor the quality action plan and define the performance indicators upon which the quality of the project will be assessed. *The representatives of all partner HEIs and stakeholders did contribute by filling out the questionnaires and other online tools used to collect and generate data regarding the project performance. The Project Quality Committee was established during the first work package and led by U_Polis and UGJFA.*

- Responsibilities of the PQC did include the adoption and implementation of the Quality Action Plan for the cycle of the project. More specifically, PQC did conduct the following activities:

  ✓ Monitor the implementation of the Quality Action Plan and inform the WP lead on warning signs, and deviations and provide recommendations for improving the implementation ;

  ✓ Assist in the designing of the questionnaires and online surveys that were delivered to the partner HEIs and stakeholders to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. After each major activity or event, task

  ✓ Gather feedback on the process of the implementation and assess the impact;

  ✓ Monitor and evaluate the quality of the deliverables according to the indicators specified in the Logical Framework of the project;

  ✓ Provide guidelines and recommendations for the improvement of the quality of the deliverables;
  ✓ Plan and apply the necessary corrective actions if any deviation in project outcomes has been identified.

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- Quality Action Plan (QAC) – did elaborate the strategy, instruments, processes, indicators, assumptions, and risks that speak to the project objective and goals. The plan also did provide a detailed description of the processes and mechanisms that will be implemented to facilitate smooth and transparent communication among partners, sharing work documents, reports, and feedback. The QA plan did implement the Balanced Scorecard tool to assess and measure the performance of the project implementation. The QA plan for project partners did provide the following information:

  - ✓ The general principles of the plan with concern on transparency, participation, documentation, collaboration, efficiency, relevance, and contribution;
  - ✓ The structure and processes of monitoring and evaluation which also includes a timeline and the entities in charge to deliver the action ;
  - ✓ The key performance indicators upon which the progress toward achieving project goals and objectives will be assessed and evaluated;
  - ✓ The means and procedures of internal communication arrangements;
  - ✓ The procedures for the submission and review of the deliverables;
  - ✓ Templates of questionnaires and online surveys;

And apart from the internal mechanisms of quality control, this external quality assessment aims to provide an independent opinion on the quality, efficiency, and sustainability of the project.

No problems were identified during the implementation of this work package.

This working package, under the lead of the European University, ensured that all project outputs and results are transferred outside the partnership and disseminated and used most effectively. To achieve such objective, transparent instruments of communication were used, as well as adequate and timely inclusion of the targeted audience for the project. All this was integrated into the Dissemination Strategy, ensuring a smooth rollout of key messages, while synchronizing targeted outreach with project implementation milestones. A variety of communication tools were used for measuring communication and awareness, raising effectiveness. To ensure the cohesive delivery of project outputs and results, internal communication activities have been performed concurrently with external ones.

In particular, during the lifespan of this work package, there have been developed:

- Project visual-identity materials like flyers, posters, roll-ups, brochures, promotional videos, and a wide range of information materials.
- Newsletters - reporting relevant achievements and events.
- A project website - designed and dedicated to the project results. Such a website goes in line with the main focus of DRIVE, to create an innovation and research network in the Western Balkans.

No problems were identified during the implementation of this work package.

WP8: Project Management

Polis University, in the role of coordinator for this project, has been responsible for overall efficient project coordination. Anyhow, successful project management and its sustainability relied on consortium partners who kept the project's objectives as a high-level priority, did cooperate, and amended their organizational structure/institutional guidelines accordingly. During the entire lifespan of the project, all partners have actively participated in all meetings, training workshops, and other activities, as well as supported the coordinator with regular reporting according to the deadlines. There have been a couple of cases where partners haven't been able to meet these deadlines but nothing to affect the overall implementation of the activities.

In addition, all partners have been very responsive in providing feedback related to the quality of the activities implemented.

In this Work package, both Polis University and UGJFA have been actively involved in:

- Day-to-day management

- Mid- Term Reporting

- External Evaluation and Audit

- Final Reporting

No major problems were identified during the implementation of this work package.

The last work package activities aim to maintain project results beyond the project lifetime. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that all members of the steering committee are committed to elaborate plans to sustain all the specific objectives of the project courses, the online networking platform, and the established or upgraded *Research Innovation Support Structures (RISSs)*. Under the lead of TUHH, a sustainability methodology has been developed and its overall objective was to provide a procedural framework for the sustainability of the DRIVE project results and outcomes. The methodology for the project sustainability comprises the entire project period and the follow-up period (which lasts 3 years after the end of the DRIVE project). In addition, sustainability indicators and concrete measures of the sustainability plans were elaborated on and discussed during the project workshop in the third year of the project.

TUHH did also consolidate, and analyzed the progress of the implementation of the project activities and submitted a detailed sustainability plan to the project management team. This plan focuses on the project outcomes and specific measures to sustain these outcomes, as well as the key performance indicators (KPIs) for sustainability validated through workshop sessions (Sustainability and Networking Workshop, October 2022) and the respective communication processes with the project partners. This document also set out the more specific sustainability commitments of the project partners, which have been implemented in the form of the Research and Innovation Supporting Structures (RISS) Strategy and Action Plan as well as the Research Networks Roadmap paired with the Calendar of Activities that constitute an integral part of this plan.

The final workshop within WP9 held at the Polytechnic of Milano did summarise the sustainability plans and the main achievements accompanied by a lot of discussions about future perspectives commitments (see the table below) and activities.

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Project Outcomes	Strategy to ensure the sustainability of the project outcomes	Resources to ensure the sustainability of the project outcomes	Where will these resources be obtained?	Sustainability commitments
Elaborated methodologies (WP2)	Introduction of new methodologies	Trained lecturers for the implementation of the methodologies	Internal operation capacities of PCIs	Defined in D4.3 (RISS regulation, Strategy, Job description & Action plan)
Enhanced staff capacity for research (WP3)	Building the capacity of the research staff	Trained academic and administrative staff to uptake research activities	Internal operation capacities of PCIs	Defined in D4.3 (RISS regulation, Strategy, Job description & Action plan)
Established/upgraded Research and Innovation Support Structures (RISS) (WP4)	Promotion of research and innovation activity at RISS after the project is finished	Trained RISS staff for the management of the RISS activity; Internal and external financing sources for the maintenance of RISS	Internal organizational and operational capacities of PCIs; Internal financing of PCIs (e.g. research project financing); External financing sources of local enterprises	Defined in D4.3 (RISS regulation, Strategy, Job description & Action plan)
Elaborated online networking platform (WP5)	Support and regularly update the content of the online networking platform after the project is finished	Trained RISS staff for maintenance and updating of the online networking platform	Internal organizational and operational capacities of PC universities; Internal financing of PCIs (e.g. research project financing); External financing	Defined in D5.1, 5.2, 5.3 (Roadmap for the research network & Calendar of Activities)

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			sources of local enterprises	

Table 4. Project outcomes and sustainability efforts of the DRIVE project partners

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MAIN FINDINGS

Upon its completion, the project has fulfilled the general and the specific objectives and reached the aimed target groups and short-term impact.

Despite some few challenges in implementing/running some activities, all foreseen meetings, workshops, training, roundtables, and deliverables under work packages have been delivered according to the initial plan. In addition, all the partner universities have set long-term targets of improvement for the areas affected by the DRIVE project: innovative teaching methodologies, improved RISS, and an established online networking platform.

Along with some challenges, deriving mainly from external factors, several best practices emerge from this evaluation:

- All training workshops offered have had a significant positive benefit for respondents, especially questions and answers time, as well as interactive discussions with partners during all types of meetings.
- New learning experiences have been highlighted by many respondents.
- The project has been managed on the right path including time management, meeting of the deadlines, financial management, effective communication, and promotion of the project at host institutions
- The quality of communication, and information exchange among partners and the project management team.

Another identified 'best practice' is the peer learning methodology, especially during the work of establishing RISS centers and making them operational. It is important to consider the capacity-building processes not only as a unidirectional process, from Programme Countries to Partner Countries but also as an internal one. Additionally, this model has enabled a broader outreach of the target groups, promoting innovative tools/teaching methodologies which would benefit all partner countries in the long term.

Finally, the project consortium seems optimistic regarding the sustainability of the project outcomes and is willing to push forward the achieved results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A total of 27 KPIs have been provided by programme countries under the Sustainability Plan for this project. The latter aims to help universities by monitoring their current performance with objective indicators; allowing a comparison between target indicators and current status; highlighting the most critical areas of improvement, and helping universities establish the right priorities for their corrective actions. In this regard, it will be necessary to periodically review the measured indicators, and to take corrective actions accordingly. Such corrective actions may have a cross-cutting impact on the universities' processes.

In addition, future protentional joint activities might involve the demand to establish the project on the development of innovative mentoring and teaching methodologies that enhance students' research skills, organizing training workshops on teaching methodologies, as well as training workshops on how to mentor students interested in research.

Furthermore, future mutual exchanges between academic staff must be maintained so that a complementary applicable research methodology could be created and could give a more holistic approach to the learning process.

And finally, the inclusion of cooperation with the industry remains of crucial importance and has been considered appropriate and necessary for all partner countries moving forward with their innovative teaching and research methodologies.