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Report on the impacts of the Empowering Migrants for Employment project

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Introduction

Empowering Migrants for Employment EME was a transnational project funded by European Social Fund. Its purpose was to identify, evaluate and disseminate good practices supporting empowerment and employment of migrants. This was accomplished by joint and mutual learning. The partners of the project were from three EU-countries: Belgium, Finland and Sweden. The main activities of the project were transnational visits and seminars as well as sharing and evaluation of the good practices. The good practices and the recommendations created in the project have been collected in the EME Methods website <https://ememethods.net>

The EME project started in November 2018 and will continue until the end of 2020. The main Finnish partner of the project was Työväen Sivistysliitto TSL (Workers' Educational Association WEA of Finland), other partners from Finland were Helsingin aikuisopisto (Institute of Adult Education in Helsinki), Silta-Valmennusyhdistys, Tampereen Aikuiskoulutuskeskus (Tampere Adult Education Centre) and Tampere University. The main Belgian partner was EVA bxl, its national partners in the project 'Culturally sensitive care ambassadors – valorizing talents+' were Vrije Universiteit Brussel VUB (University of Brussels), Kenniscentrum Welzijn Wonen Zorg (Knowledge centre for welfare housing and care) en Groep INTRO (adult education centre). The Swedish partners were Municipality of Piteå and Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (the Workers' Educational Association).

This report is based on the follow-up and evaluation study of the EME project implemented by Tampere University and University of Brussels. The study is reported in more detail in the evaluation report of the Tampere University (in Finnish). In this report, we focus on one target of the evaluation, that is, the impact of the project and ask: *What added value and impact did the EME project have for the project participants, their local contexts and their work in enhancing the employment of migrants?*

As a part of the follow-up and evaluation study, we also analysed and evaluated the process of the transnational network. Therefore, the mutual learning methods in the EME project were mapped and evaluated. Based on these findings, we created recommendations for promoting successful joint learning in transnational projects, which are published in the EME Methods website <https://eme.tyoelamanverkko-opisto.fi/recommendations/>

Research design, data and methods

In the follow-up and evaluation study in the EME project, we used both formative and outcomes/impact evaluation. The formative evaluation assisted in different phases of the project, the data was used for ongoing development of the project and for making early improvements. The outcomes/impact evaluation examined the changes in comprehension, attitudes and practices resulting from the transnational project activities. This report focuses on the outcomes/impact evaluation in the project.

Following data collection methods were used by the researchers during the EME project:

- Online surveys to transnational project participants (1 opening survey, 3 surveys on the reflections from the visits in the transnational seminars, 4 surveys after each transnational seminar, 1 final survey)
- Participatory observation by 2-3 researchers in 5 transnational seminars
- Elevator pitch at the end of every transnational seminar concerning the lessons learned in the seminars and the learning process
- Focus group discussions in two transnational seminars
- Blog posts (16) about the transnational seminars and the good practices shared in the EME project

In this report, we focus on data collected by the elevator pitch exercises, focus groups, and the final survey, since they indicate clearly the added value of the EME project.

Project researchers organized the elevator pitch exercises at the end of each 5 transnational seminars. All seminar participants were asked to share their thoughts about the following questions:

1. What was the most important thing you have learned during the seminar?
2. What was the best way for you to learn?

Three focus groups with 22 participants were conducted in February 2020, during the second last transnational meeting. In these focus groups the photo-elicitation method was used, for which participants were asked to bring two pictures which symbolised the added value and the process to reach this added value. The research questions on the added value and impact of the EME-project, used in these focus groups were:

1. Which added value did this transnational project have for the participants?
2. What is the output of the project, and how is this evaluated?

In the final survey, nine open-ended questions were asked to the project participants. The following four questions were the most important in terms of the impact of the EME-project:

1. What have you learned when participating in EME-project?
2. Have you shared the things you have learned in the EME-project in your own organization or in your national project? If yes, which things and how?
3. Have you used the things you have learned in the EME-project in your own work? If yes, which things and how?
4. Are you going to use the transnational networks created in the EME-project in the future? If yes, how?

Altogether 19 out of 41 project participants responded to the final survey. The data was analysed by data-driven qualitative content analysis. In the analysis, five themes indicating the impact and added value of the EME project for the participants, their national projects and organisations were identified. These themes are presented in the following section.

Added value and impact for project participants, their local contexts and their work

1) Disseminating lessons learned in the EME project to the project participants' own organisations or projects

In their responses to the final survey and in the focus groups, the project participants mentioned various lessons learned in the EME project that they disseminated to their own organisations or projects. Some of them were very concrete methods or exercises used by their transnational project partners and some more abstract ideas from the partner countries.

Many project participants told that they have shared the lessons learned by telling their colleagues about their experiences in the EME project, such as visits related to seminars. They have presented the ideas they have got from the EME project in their workplaces:

"Yes, I shared [the things I have learned] with my colleagues, by talking to them, about certain projects that we visited, what they were doing there and how they were doing it." (Belgium)

Some project participants had disseminated the lessons learned as well as good practices and methods shared in the EME project by using them as working methods or examples in different groups and meetings in their own organisation:

"[I have shared] especially good practices and a punch of ice-breaking methods with teachers and counsellors in my unit. We had already an afternoon meeting and we will continue in December with the method guidebook and other outcomes of the project which I will present to them." (Finland)

"I used different projects/concepts (like study circle ABF, project concept of Piteå, peer tutoring of Finland,...) as examples during brainstorming or meetings." (Belgium)

These lessons learned led to improvements in the own national projects. This was enhanced by reflections that the participants could do by visiting other projects that were part of the transnational network:

"I think what we have actually learned from both your countries, maybe helps us to do our work better in the future. We have gotten some new ideas on how to reach people, how to empower them. And maybe we have started to see some flaws in our system. But something we can't make better immediately. But we can try to have an impact on it of course. But also some flaws in our ways of working with a migrants."

Some told that they had not yet shared the lessons learned in the EME project but were planning it or hoping that it would be possible in the future. However, most of the project participants saw the effect of the EME project as positive in their own project or organisation:

"Sometimes we get "home blind" and need to get strength from real examples showing that if we really want, most of the challenges will be overcome. I think I have

got many good examples from the both partner countries.” (translated from Swedish, Sweden)

“By participating in the EME-project I have learned that transnational learning really enriches our national project in many ways: the different projects inspire you; they start a reflection process” (Belgium)

2) Applying the practices and methods learned in the EME-project in the project participants’ own work and context

The great majority of the project participants were convinced that they had discovered new methods to use in their work. Many of them also confirmed they had used some new concrete practices already, such as icebreakers and other exercises they have learned in the EME project in their own work with the target group. As for larger and more complex methods, they told that they had “tried” them in their work, customised them or implemented some elements of them:

“I have tried some of the good practices from Piteå in my counselling work with migrants (when evaluating one’s working life skills).” (Finland)

“We got inspiration of the buddy-system of Piteå and tried to implement a likewise system in our national project. We didn’t implement the peer tutoring of Finland completely but took some elements of it.” (Belgium)

Some of the issues impacting the project participants’ own work were abstract ideas, such as how to “encounter immigrants” and “introduce the trainees to the workplace”. Projects, practices and “successful examples” from partner countries could also be a source of inspiration, motivation and growth:

“It has become clearer to me how important the exchange between countries is! Operational personnel who work with target groups needing a lot of support need strengthening experiences, knowledge and competences.” (translated from Swedish, Sweden)

“If how we see, approach and work with persons with a migration background could be influenced by all we learned during the EME journey, there will be a spiral growth effect within our projects, our participants and workplaces. This is definitely not going to be easy but if we are determined and believe in what we do, we will get there in tiny but essential steps over time.” (Belgium)

In case the project participants saw similarities in the activities in the partner countries and their own country, they perceived the application of ideas and concepts to their own context as easier. For instance, one project participant told that in the project, (s)he has seen new ways how individuals can get included in their neighbourhood. These ideas could be applied in his/her own context by his/her colleagues who work with these issues.

3) Increasing understanding of transnational partners' contexts

The project participants told that they have learned about their transnational partners' country contexts, systems, cultures and approaches. It has made them see the differences and similarities in their own country and the partner countries. They saw similarities in the challenges their transnational partners face in their work, while the contexts and structures in the partner countries were regarded as somewhat different compared to their own country. Therefore, some project participants stated that the methods, actions and solutions were difficult to transfer as such to other countries.

"The different sectors and structures in partner countries prevent transferring EME actions to Finland as such but there are still a lot of smaller things like methods and practices which can be adaptable and customized to our organisations." (Finland)

These differences were also seen in terms of the migration history of the three countries. While some countries were facing migration already for a longer time, for other countries migration was still new. This mix of migration histories was perceived as meaningful for the learning process.

"But it's also interesting to see like how it is already evolved here and we have new challenges. But it's also to see like oke they are also having issues."

"We haven't had immigrants for such a long time. So It's interesting to compare how they are doing in your countries that have had immigrants for much longer time."

Due to the transnational collaboration, the project participants had got a broader view and perspective to the local ways of doing things in integrating migrants as well as the aims and working conditions in the partner countries. Some compared the conditions in the partner countries to their own country and identified needs for improvement based on that comparison:

"It seems that in partner countries there are more resources and opportunities for more diverse and innovative actions (comparing to Finland) thanks to the longer history of immigration and amount of people of migrant background as well as the open and welcoming atmosphere of people in general." (Finland)

"What Finland could learn from other countries for example how workplaces should be more involved in the integration process." (Finland)

4) Gaining recognition and widening networks transnationally

An important part of the added value for the project participants was the transnational network created during the EME project. The network was seen to work for the same aim and enabling discussion, reflection and learning together. The participants valued their project partners' engagement and enthusiasm towards their work. They were also satisfied with finding new partner organisations which they can contact:

"And we also have to be connected and I am happy to say I have friends in Finland and Belgium and, they are like us and they do it like us but in a different way." (Sweden, elevator pitch in transnational seminar in Belgium)

"I met many interesting people and I am very happy that I have them in my network." (Belgium)

Many project participants saw the network as very beneficial in getting support and encouragement from others in their own projects. This has empowered them and made them believe more strongly in the aims they are striving for in their work:

"I think one very important thing I have learned is that I am actually doing right things. You agreed when I told you about my work. But it tells me that I'm on the right track." (Finland, elevator pitch in transnational seminar in Finland)

In the final survey, the project participants were asked whether they are going to use the transnational networks created in the EME-project in the future. 11 of the 19 project participants who responded to the survey commented, that they would be interested to use the network in the future, but they were yet not sure whether they will have a chance to do so:

"I/we don't know it yet. Anyway it's an interesting option. Why not use a network which already is existing?" (Finland)

Three project participants stated that they are planning to continue working transnationally and could contact colleagues in the EME network related to it.

5) Improving the professionals' competences and skills

Some project participants told that working in the EME project has improved their multicultural knowledge and language skills. Awareness was created about the challenges that migrants are facing. One of them told that due to the transnational collaboration (s)he has got an insight, how difficult it can be to speak a new language and understand what the others are saying – this increased his/her understanding of the challenges faced by the jobseekers with a migration background:

"I have read English all my school time, but I still had difficulties to understand everything that was said and to formulate something to say. As a consequence, I mostly listened and remained silent." (translated from Swedish, Sweden)

"Be conscious of what we are asking from people coming to here, working here in a completely different context. To stay aware of this."

In the elevator pitch-discussions some of the project participants told they had realised the importance in involving the target group to the development of activities. One participant expressed that (s)he had understood that it is not sufficient to educate only the trainee with a migration background but the whole work community should be coached and supported. Another participant

shared his/her insights about the importance of vocabulary when talking about the target group – how do we treat them by speaking about them. Also other participants became aware of the need to not only use their ‘western glasses’:

“We were looking at the situation with our western glasses. And they are actually flawed glasses and we need to take them off and switch the way we think early on.”

Concluding remarks

Even though some of the project participants had applied some concrete practices or methods to their own work, the most significant impact of the EME project was the change in their thinking. The transnational collaboration, especially the visits in partner countries has increased their understanding about work with jobseekers with a migration background, its challenges and possible solutions. It was an eye-opening experience that gave them inspiration, strength and encouragement to continue striving for their goals. They regarded participating in the transnational project as meaningful, giving them sense of belonging to a professional community working for the same aim.

A long-term impact of the project would be the continuity of the transnational network created in the EME project. However, there was a lot of uncertainty about whether the project participants were able to use the network in their future work. If the project participants would have had a chance to meet face to face in the final seminar, it would probably have created a more solid base for the network. Due to the Covid-19 situation, however, it was organised as an online event, which was not an optimal way to consolidate the connections between the project participants.

Another long-term impact of the project could be that the project participants utilize the new knowledge gained in the EME project and apply new working methods in their own context. Learning and developing the modes of action are slow long-term processes and thus the impact might become visible after a long time. Transnational projects promoting mutual learning can give a push to the further learning and developing processes as the project participants are exposed to new ideas and become aware of different practices in other countries. Even though the shared ideas and good practices would not be utilised straight away, the need for applying them may emerge later. Then, the lessons learned might evolve into a new kind of action. By comparing own practices with the practices of others, one can realize the needs for development in own context. This way, the transnational projects can also function as a platform for self-reflection.