External Evaluation of Bridging the Gap

Interim Report 1

May 2014
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The Bridging The Gap Consortium:

- Bridging To The Future (United Kingdom)
- Business Development Friesland (The Netherlands)
- Academy of Entrepreneurship (Greece)
- Business Incubator Gotse Delchev (Bulgaria)
- Merseyside Expanding Horizons (United Kingdom)
- Everis (Spain)

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Lifelong Learning Programme
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1. Executive Summary: Assessment & Recommendations

Introduction
The “Bridging the Gap” Project is a Leonardo Transfer of Innovation Project. It is a partnership project that seeks to bring together partners from 5 EU countries to adapt and transfer an innovative, training and development methodology, “The Bridge Model” which was developed in the UK, for use across the EU. The Bridge Model is a structured programme of support and development that enables and empowers individuals to establish, develop and grow a business.

The partnership is committed to continuous improvement and, as such, has commissioned an organisation to undertake an independent and objective evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation, which will involve regular reviews throughout the lifetime of the project, is to assess the impact and effectiveness of the project. The remit of the evaluation includes reviewing the processes and work programmes employed by the partners, monitoring the progress of the partnership against key milestones and objectives and reviewing the work, materials and other tangible outcomes produced by the partnership. Alongside this, Allium Research & Consulting who were appointed as the project evaluator, attend, observe and, where appropriate, input into the partnership’s cycle of meetings.

This Executive Summary provides an assessment of the work and progress made by the partnership to date and highlights any emerging issues and recommendations to support continuous improvement.

Overall Assessment

Overall, over the seven month period covering November 2013-May 2014 (when the partnership met for the second time in Madrid, the partnership and the project has made steady and good progress towards its key objectives and targets. There are no obvious areas of concern or issues that might prevent the partnership from achieving the successful implementation of the programme. There are however a number of areas where improvements might be made to support the implementation of the project.

Judgement: Work Programme & Activities (Quantitative)

To date, a structured programme of high quality work has been undertaken by the partnership. This provides a foundation for the partnership to continue and develop its programme of work.

With regards to the phasing of the work the Bridging the Gap project has undertaken a programme of work that is consistent with the timetable agreed by the partnership earlier on in the project. There is no evidence of any significant delays.

Critically, it is also clear that the partnership has completed a number of key foundation tasks. Firstly, a structured and comprehensive programme of research has been undertaken in each country. This has enabled a detailed needs analysis to be produced by each country that has enabled the partnership to compare and contrast the research findings, the needs of each of the partners (essentially a local context) and produce a detailed position statement that will shape future work and the transfer and adaptation of the Bridge model.
The programme of research undertaken was consistent with the original workplan and was comprehensive in that it involved research with stakeholders, enterprise practitioners and VET trainers. In undertaking the research the partners have utilised a model research template to ensure that the research was standardised.

The research phase of the project was the primary key task that needed to be completed by May 2014. This was completed in full. Alongside this, a number of other, key foundation tasks have been completed that will enable the smooth running of the project in future. These include:

- Putting in place a Drop Box facility to enable effective sharing of information and documents by the partners, enabling them to remain abreast of progress in each country against key work packages. Whilst in place, it would appear that this resource is not being fully exploited at this point.

- A dedicated website has been developed and has become operational to support awareness raising and dissemination activities.

- The project applicant has put in place effective programme management arrangements, on a partnership and partner to partner basis, to support delivery of the programme.

Future Work & Recommendations

At this point in time, the partnership appears to be on track and remains well placed to deliver the next phases of the project and its deliverables on time. However, it is essential that the UK and Bulgarian partners, who are responsible for Work Packages 3 and 4, maintain steady progress against key milestones, in particular the drafting of a step by step guide and course materials, to enable the testing phase to commence and be completed on time.

It is important, therefore, that Bridging the Future work closely with the leads for WP 3 and 4, and other partners, to maintain steady progress and ensure that underpinning development work is completed, to a high standard, to enable the testing phase to be undertaken.

Judgement: Wider Project Performance

As part of the external evaluation of the Bridging the Gap project, Allium Research & Consulting has also sought to look at the wider performance of the project and partnership, reviewing a number of key lines of inquiry or thematic areas of work. This has involved observing and consulting with partners and reviewing a number of areas of the partnership’s work including: the Coherence of Work Programmes and Activities, the Effectiveness of Work and Processes, the Direction of Travel and Progress against Key Measures of Success, Programme Management, Partnership Working & Transnational Activity, Innovation, Dissemination & Mainstreaming, Legacy Dimension & Valorisation and the project’s Impact.
At this point, it is the view of Allium Research & Consulting that the partnership and project, as a whole, appears to be making steady progress against its key objectives, milestones and targets and that the partnership’s work to-date appears to have been underpinned by effective programme management, partnership working and a structured and coherent work programme that is consistent with the original application.

**Coherence of Work Programmes and Activities:** At this point in the project lifecycle, the project is considered to be on a positive direction of travel and is undertaking a programme of activities that are both coherent and appropriate and which is in line with the original work programme.

Interviews with the partners, both in advance of and during the Madrid partnership meeting, revealed that they thought all key tasks had been completed on time and in line with the original work plan. Moreover, partners felt that the quality of the work was high and was shaped by contributions from all partners.

Partners feel that they are clear about what needs to be done and by when and what role they are expected to play. There is a strong clarity of purpose with all partners making a positive contribution. In addition, the project is underpinned by a range of systems and standardised approaches. This means that work is undertaken to a consistent and high quality level.

**Programme Management & Communications:** Programme management has, up to this point, been effective with the lead partner striking a balance of effective yet light touch programme co-ordination. The lead partner has co-ordinated the partnership but has equally devolved responsibility to all partners to play a full role and lead on elements of the project.

This approach is welcomed by partners. However, reflecting the importance of the next phases of the project, and the need to ensure key tasks are completed by late August to enable testing to start on time, it was felt that programme management should be a “little less light touch” and more “visible” during the next phase of the project.

Communications have, up to this point, have been at an appropriate level with partners communicating on an as and when needed basis. This has to some extent mirrored the “light touch” programme management arrangements. In future, it was felt, partners will need to increase the volume and quality of communications, again on a partnership and on a 1-1 basis, to ensure that the programme of work and the roles, responsibilities and deadlines of partners remain clear and that the partnership is able to monitor progress and address any emerging issues on an ongoing basis.

**Innovation:** The Bridge Model is considered to be innovative at a number of levels: the use and adoption of structured processes and systems to achieve key goals, a greater flow of information and knowledge and the development of a model and materials that will enable use across the EU and by partners to engage with groups it might not necessarily engage or work with otherwise and promote entrepreneurial development.
Partners believe that product, the final learning materials to be developed by the project, will be of use not just to the partners in the participating countries but will be of use to any organisation, be that a VET organisation or other body with an interest in encouraging entrepreneurship. In addition, the partners believe that, as a result of participating in the project, they have become more knowledgeable and better placed to encourage the development of individuals and enterprises.

**Partnership & Transnational Working:** The partnership is strong, empowered and equal. All partners appear to be committed to the development and delivery of the project and have played a key role up to this point. The partnership has been vocal and active.

To date there has been a good allocation of roles and responsibilities. All partners are treated equitably in that they share the workload, roles and responsibilities. Each partner is expected to lead on a key element of the project. This has helped the partnership bond and work together.

In addition, the partners feel that there has been a good flow of experience, knowledge and skills between each organisation participating in the project. This has demonstrated the value of the project.

**Dissemination & Mainstreaming:** Assessment: It is relatively early in the project lifecycle however there is emerging evidence to suggest that the partners have begun to lay the foundations for the effective dissemination and mainstreaming of the project and any lessons learned. Partners have begun to hold local events, engage key local stakeholders and have sought to engage individuals at a local, regional and national level to promote the project.

**Impact:** Again, it is too early in the project lifecycle to assess the extent to which the project has generated any significant or long term impact. Accordingly, Allium Research and Consulting has sought to explore the extent to which the conditions for the project having a long term impact are present. What is evident however is that participation in the project has helped capacity build partners in a number of ways, improving their knowledge of enterprise development and engaging with disadvantaged groups, and building a solid base of evidence to help shape and develop materials. Feedback from partners suggests that the Bridge Model is a welcome addition to, and will enhance, the range of tools and approaches that partners and others use.

**Future Work & Recommendations**

At this point, there are no significant areas of concern. However, over the next few months, it is essential that a number of key tasks are completed, namely the production of a step by step guide and accompanying course materials, to enable the prompt and effective testing of the Bridge Model.

For the project to remain on a positive direction of travel trajectory it is essential that:

- Levels of programme management and communications increase. Given the importance of ensuring that WP4, the testing phase, commences in late August and early September it is essential that the level of programme management and communications are stepped up a level. Regular liaison between the applicant and WP leaders and between WP
leaders and all partners is required to ensure that progress against timescales is maintained and any issues are addressed. Equally, and this was acknowledged at the Madrid meeting, partners need to communicate more and share their experiences.

- Engagement of the VET sector. The project has involved the VET sector and practitioners however it was acknowledged that they have not been as fully engaged as they might have been. In moving to implement WP4 and commence the testing phase it is important that all partners seek to engage more widely with and involve the VET sector to get their views on the model and ensure that the final product developed by the partnership meets their needs and can be used.
2. Introduction

The “Bridging the Gap” Project is a Leonardo Transfer of Innovation Project. It is a partnership project that seeks to bring together partners from 5 EU countries to adapt and transfer an innovative, training and development methodology, “The Bridge Model” which was developed in the UK, for use across the EU.

Bridging to the Future, a Birmingham (UK) based organisation, pioneered the Bridge model. Bridging to the Future will lead and co-ordinate the “Bridging the Gap” Project and working in partnership with 5 organisations from Bulgaria, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom will adapt and transfer an innovative methodology used to train and develop entrepreneurs.

The Bridge Model is a structured programme of support and development that enables and empowers individuals to establish, develop and grow a business. The model has a number of steps to it:

- Starting a Business: Making New Business Work
- Growing a Business: Making Businesses Work Better
- Strengthening the Business: Making Businesses More Secure
- Having a Business: Making the Business More Sustainable

The model uses practical group sessions, workshops and one to one coaching sessions to support individuals.

The “Bridging the Gap” project will target business and enterprise incubators, Vocational Education and Training (VET) centres and organisations providing employability support to develop their capacity and capability to engage and work with marginalised groups and individuals and support them to become entrepreneurs, establish and grow a business.

Over a two year period, November 2013-October 2015, the “Bridging the Gap” Project partnership will work towards and deliver the following objectives, which are structured around a series of Work Packages that include:

**Undertaking research and a needs analysis in each of the participating countries to:**

- Establish the needs of VET organisations and systems in terms of working with and supporting marginalised groups and individuals to establish new businesses.
- Identify the needs of learners from disadvantaged groups wishing to establish a new business.
Collate a position paper that draws together key messages and issues from across the EU to shape the further development, adaptation and transfer of the Bridge model.

**Adapting and Transferring the Bridge Model. This will involve:**

- Engaging with individuals from disadvantaged or marginalised groups, entrepreneurs and individuals working in the VET, Enterprise and employability sectors. Each participating country will engage with a different target group.

- Capturing examples of good practice and case studies and producing video materials (in the form of DVD or short multi-media materials).

- Developing a course book with learning materials for use by VET trainers and other practitioners.

- Producing a step by step guide, which will accompany the course book, on how to use the Bridge model; to engage and work with disadvantaged groups and support them to become entrepreneurs.

- Piloting and Testing the" Bridging the Gap" model.
3. Objectives of the External Evaluation

The “Bridging the Gap” partnership is committed to continuous improvement and assessing the impact and effectiveness of the Project. As such, the partnership have appointed an external evaluator to play an ongoing role in the development and delivery of the Project.

This role includes monitoring the progress of the partnership against key milestones and objectives, reviewing the work and materials produced by the partnership and attending the partnership’s meetings, observing them and providing input where required.

The “Bridging the Gap” partnership wish to commission an independent and impartial evaluation that explores both quantitative and qualitative aspects.

**Quantitative:** the partnership requires the evaluator to

- Review the work and processes of the partnership and its overall effectiveness in delivering key outcomes (as set out in the project documentation).
- Review the distance travelled.
- Assess the project’s effectiveness to deliver outcomes on time and in line with the partnership’s work programmes.

**Qualitative:** the partnership requires the evaluator to

- Assess the extent to which key outcome targets are being and have been met.
- Assess the broad direction of travel.
- Review the more qualitative elements of the project: in essence, the wider effectiveness and impact of the project and other key lines of inquiry such as Programme Management, Partnership working, Transnational Development, Innovation etc.
- Review other areas of work that don’t easily allow for quantitative assessment e.g. the extent to which marketing and dissemination activities have been successful.

Allium understands that the partnership wish to receive a series of evaluation updates or mini-reports at key points throughout the development of the project, essentially reports that are presented to the partnership in line with the cycle of regular partnership meetings and which would satisfy any mid-term reporting requirements and a final, end of programme evaluation report.
4. Evaluation of Process & Progress against Milestones & Objectives

Essentially, this section of the evaluation report explores the more process oriented and quantitative elements of the partnership’s work to May 2014.

Judgement:

Allium Research & Consultancy considers that the Bridging the Gap project and partnership has to-date made good progress against its key work related deliverables and milestones.

A structured programme of high quality work has been undertaken by the partnership that will allow the partnership to move effectively onto the next, critical phase of the project.

At this point, the project is on track to deliver its core outcomes and in line with the original proposal and timetable. However, the partners are entering a crucial phase of the project and must maintain progress against the work programme and key milestones.

Progress:

The Bridging the Gap project has made stable and solid progress. The partnership’s work is on track and it finds itself at a point where it expected to be in May 2014. At this point Work Package 2, essentially the production of a robust evidence base to inform future work, has been completed.

The quality of the research produced by the partnership in the first 5 months of 2014 is impressive. Underpinning this is the commitment to, and use of, a consistent and structured approach to undertaking the research.

A comprehensive programme of research was undertaken in each country. This has enabled a detailed needs analysis to be produced by each country that has enabled the partnership to compare and contrast the research findings, the needs of each of the partners (essentially a local context) and produce a detailed position statement that will shape future work.

There are no significant delays at this point in the project lifecycle.

Issues:

A review of programme documentation reveals no fundamental issues. However, partners concur, there is now a relatively short window to complete the next key task; namely developing course materials and a step by step guide, that is essential to enabling the testing to start on time.

The Bridging the Gap project will run over two years, spanning the period October 2013 to September 2015. The project is ambitious in that it:

- Brings together a partnership consisting of 6 different partners from 5 EU Member States, many of whom have not worked together previously
- Seeks to adapt and transfer a model that has been successfully pioneered and used in the UK
- Involves undertaking an extensive programme of research to shape the ongoing adaptation and development of the Bridge Model so that it is relevant to the needs of individuals (potential learners and service users), the VET sector and other practitioners in each of the 5 countries
- Involves engaging a group of learners, VET trainers and practitioners who will be involved in the development and testing of the new materials
- Involves developing a range of materials to support the roll-out of the Bridge Model by each of the 6 partners; development of course materials, development of a step by step guide, the identification of case studies and good practice and the development of multi media materials e.g. video clips to accompany the written materials
- Will pilot, test and revise those materials culminating in a set of final materials that are translated into the langauges of each of the partners, thereby enabling use in each of the 5 participating materials.

**Distance Travelled – Anticipated Progress by May 2014**

This section of the report seeks to assess the distance travelled and whether the project remains on course to deliver its objectives. The Bridging the Gap partnership met for the first time in Birmingham 2013. The inaugural partnership meeting focused on a number of key tasks:

- Familiarising themselves with the Bridge Model, meeting individuals who had been supported and understanding how it works
- Reviewing the Transfer of Innovation application and establishing key milestones and objectives
- Developing and agreeing a set of detailed work packages; defining the key tasks and activities of the partnership over the two year period and defining the key steps and processes required to achieve the project’s key objectives

This meeting also allowed the partnership to consider issues raised by the UK National Agency, some of which have subsequently been adopted and addressed.

In essence, the inaugural partnership meeting provided an opportunity for the partners to agree key tasks, roles and responsibilities and a workplan and to obtain clarity on any issues that were pertinent to the development and delivery of the project. As such, this meeting was pivotal in laying the foundations for the delivery of the project. It was used to agree a structured and phased programme of work that would deliver the project’s key objectives and measures of success.
By May 2014, or the time when the partnership would hold its second transnational meeting in Madrid, the partnership anticipated the following tasks having been completed:

- Establishment of a project Drop Box facility enabling information sharing.
- Development of a project website.
- Each of the partners having undertaken a structured and in-depth piece of desk based research in their respective countries exploring the current position and needs of the VET sector in relation to the delivery of training and support to entrepreneurs.
- Primary research with learners, entrepreneurs, VET trainers and other practitioners (using a series of questionnaires and e-questionnaires).
- Analysis and collation of each partner’s research and the production of an aggregated partnership report (produced by Stichting Business Development Friesland) piece of research.

By the time of the meeting in Madrid in May 2014 the partnership had put in place or achieved all of the above tasks.

- A Drop Box site has been established where partners can access or add project related documents and materials. This Drop Box site will provide a central point facility for partners to share information and keep track of the project’s general progress. It is still relatively early on in the project to ascertain whether this Drop Box facility will prove to be effective. There is evidence, from reviewing the series of folders corresponding to the project’s Work Packages, to suggest that it is being used but maybe not to its full potential. It is clear that some partners would benefit from some additional support to understand the functionality of Drop Box and how they might use it more effectively.

- A dedicated website has been developed and had become operational. The website appears to be an appealing, easily navigable and structured website that allows readers and visitors to obtain information about the project. To support the evaluation of the effectiveness of the website there is a need to ensure that the site is capable of interrogation to understand visitor information e.g. who is using it, how often, which pages appear to be most valuable etc. Such management information will enable interrogation and identification of trends.

- A comprehensive programme of partner led research in each country has also been completed culminating in the development of a Training Needs Analysis report, which was produced by the Dutch partner.

- A programme of structured Desk Based Research coupled with Field Research (both e-questionnaires, using the Survey Monkey platform, and 1-1 interviews) was completed.
The Desk Based Research, using a standardised format, looked at the range of support and entrepreneurial training that was available across the EU and each of the participating member states, national policy and the extent to which the VET sector was able to deliver training.

The desk based research explored a range of background issues including: prevailing economic conditions and culture, demographic profile, local education systems, the range of support that is available to entrepreneurs locally and the range of learning materials that exist and the different approaches organisations can use. This research provided a valuable context to the work of the partnership.

Coupled to the Desk Based Research, the partners undertook some primary research. A combination of e-surveys and 1-1 interviews were used to capture the views of a range of individuals. Typically, those that were involved in the primary or field research were:

- VET Trainers / Employed in a VET institution
- Business Mentor / Advisor
- Entrepreneurs / business owners
- Students
- Unemployed / Potential entrepreneurs

The field research, again using a standardised format, probed a range of issues and questions that are salient to the Bridging the Gap project and the transfer of the Bridge model, including:

- The motivation for individuals setting up a new business
- Views on existing business support mechanisms and materials
- Changes individuals would like to see implemented in order to improve the quality of business support training and development
- The range and appropriateness of support targeted at those who were from disadvantaged groups

The partnership delivered its research on time and a final report was produced in April, in advance of the May Madrid meeting. The lead partner for Work Package 2 compiled and collated all the partners’ individual pieces of research and produced an overview report.

At this point, the research has been completed on time and the outcome of Work Package 2 is a detailed and comprehensive report that describes the conditions and issues in each of the member states and an overview of the situation in the EU.
This report was shared in advance of the Madrid meeting, enabling partners to consider the report, compare and contrast the position in each of the Member States, the needs of the VET and supporting sectors and understand the strengths, weaknesses and positive features of the Bridge Model.

Work Package 2 has resulted in a valuable piece of research and report being produced. The conclusions and recommendations set out in the report are underpinned by a robust evidence base.

In general, some 20 or more e-questionnaires were completed by each partner (although this was significantly surpassed by the Spanish partner who received 51 responses) which were augmented by a smaller number of, some 5 or so, 1-1 interviews, which enabled any issues to be probed more intensively.

Critically, completion of the research report in advance of the Madrid meeting allowed partners to consider the report and enter into valuable, informed discussions at the Madrid meeting that would shape the next phases of the project.

The project now has a solid and robust evidence base upon which it can now build and proceed, substantively, onto the next key phases of the Bridging the Gap project, namely Work Packages 3 and 4.

The project and the partners, both the lead partners for Work Packages 3 and 4 as well as all of the partners undertaking further development and delivery work, now have a thorough understanding of the issues and can proceed to adapt and test the model.

At the meeting in Madrid, and reflecting local needs and circumstances, a number of priority target groups were agreed. Each partner will seek to work with a different group and test the model, using different stages of the model as appropriate and according to local needs.

- **Bulgaria** – Business Incubator Gotse Delchev will focus upon testing the early stages of the model, primarily starting a business but also growing a business, upon local individuals who are unemployed and looking to establish a business.

- **Greece** – The Academy of Entrepreneurship will focus upon engaging young people and testing the efficacy of the first stage.

- **The United Kingdom** – Merseyside Expanding Horizons will work with the NEET cohort, young unemployed individuals including some with disabilities, establishing links with a new high profile National Lottery funded programme “Talent Match” and testing the first stage of the project.

- **The Netherlands** – Stichting Business Development Friesland will work with individuals who have already established a business and who are in or entering the incubator system or who are known to the organisation and focus on stages 2 and 3 of the model, namely; growing the business.
Spain – Everis, reflecting their background, will focus upon engaging women who have been unemployed and who are in, or looking to establish, a business in the digital and multi-media industry. Everis will primarily focus upon Stages 2 and 3 of the model.

**Actions Required:** At this point in time, the partnership appears to be on track and remains well placed to deliver the next phases of the project and its deliverables on time. Earlier on in the project, however, it was decided to put back Work Package 4 (Testing and Piloting by approximately 3 months) to enable a more linear programme of development ie enabling the research to be completed, in turn shaping and enabling the course book and step by step guide to be completed.

In practice this means that there is now a short window of time for Work Package 3 to be completed and to begin the testing and piloting of the model with initial feedback being shared at the Athens partnership meeting in November. It is anticipated that the testing will begin in August and September.

In order for WP 4 to commence on time and for it to be effective, the main elements of WP3, the development of Course Materials and a Step by Step guide, now need to be drafted and finalised (and even translated) prior to the testing starting in late summer.

This limited window of time means that Merseyside Expanding Horizons, working closely with Bridging the Future, now have a short space of time co-ordinate and undertake the work planned for Work Package 3. Completing Work Package 3, in particular the step by step guide and course materials, therefore must be the partnership’s key focus.

Merseyside Expanding Horizons facilitated a series of useful discussions about Work Programme 3 at the Madrid meeting and have a clear understanding of the key issues that need to be addressed to support the effective delivery of Work Package 4 and the testing phase.

Work Package 3 is, arguably, the most critical element of the project’s overall work plan. If the key tasks within Work Programme 3 are not completed on time or to a high standard there is a real risk that the piloting and testing in WP4 will be delayed and that the meeting in Athens will need to be postponed or held without sufficient feedback from the testing to discuss how the project’s final materials can be improved.
5. Assessment of Effectiveness

The preceding section of the report explored quantitative aspects and elements of, including the processes employed by, the partnership to-date. This section of the interim evaluation report explores qualitative issues.

As part of the external evaluation of the Bridging the Gap project, Allium Research and Consulting was able to attend the Madrid meeting, participate in and observe the partnership’s discussions and work. Equally, Allium was able to meet with the partners to discuss the performance of the project and explore a number of key lines of inquiry.

In undertaking the external evaluation Allium Research and Consulting, in both observing the partnership and interviewing the partners, has sought to explore the progress, effectiveness and impact of the project and partnership against a number of Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE). These include:

- Coherence of Work Programmes and Activities
- Effectiveness of Work and Processes
- Direction of Travel and Progress against Key Measures of Success
- Programme Management
- Partnership Working & Transnational Activity
- Innovation
- Dissemination & Mainstreaming
- Legacy Dimension & Valorisation
- Impact and Change

Judgement:

The partnership and project, as a whole, appears to be making steady progress against its key objectives, milestones and targets. The work to-date appears to have been underpinned by effective programme management, partnership working and a structured and coherent work programme that is consistent with the original application.

Progress:

The partners consider the project to be progressing in line with expectations. This first phase of the project has been concerned with crystallising key roles and responsibilities, undertaking foundation activities and forming an effective and strong partnership.
Issues & Actions: there do not appear to be any significant or critical issues that are affecting or have the potential to affect the success of the project at this point however there are a number of issues that the partnership might wish to, or should, consider to ensure that the project maintains its momentum and ability to achieve its key objectives and deliverables.

In general, these issues are:

- The partnership continues to adopt the structured approach it has taken to date.
- Improved communications between partners and practitioners in the next phase of the programme
- A greater emphasis on, and more “visible” programme management by the lead partner and the project leads for Work Packages 3 and 4 to ensure that the partnership remains on its current trajectory and continues to make steady progress against key milestones, particularly in between meetings

Coherence of Work Programmes and Activities:

Assessment: At this point in the project lifecycle, the project is considered to be on a positive direction of travel and is undertaking a programme of activities that are both coherent and appropriate and which is in line with the original work programme.

Interviews with the partners, both in advance of and during the Madrid partnership meeting, revealed that they all considered the project to be delivering a programme of work and activities that is both of a high quality and coherent with the work and activities anticipated in the original bid.

To date, the partners consider the project to be making good progress and, at this juncture, to be on course to achieve its key milestones and deliver objectives on time. The activities undertaken to date are consistent with the original work programme.

Importantly, partners consider that a structured yet flexible operating framework underpins the project and has helped the partnership’s activities and work thus far. One strength of the partnership and project is the fact that there is no ambiguity over the roles and responsibilities of partners and the tasks that need to be completed. Partners are clear about what needs to be done and by when and what role they are expected to play. This means that there has been no divergence from the original work programme.

A key factor in this has been the adoption of a range of systems and standardised approaches. This project is underpinned by a series of standardised templates and processes that have been developed by individual partners or the wider partnership.

In undertaking WP2, the adoption of standardised research templates has assisted the partnership to undertake a programme of structured and comprehensive research. The use of such templates has also reduced the risk that partners digress from the core objectives of the project.
In addition, the inaugural partnership meeting, and to a lesser extent the second meeting in Madrid, has enabled extensive debate and discussions, often in small working groups, which has enabled the partners to have clarity over what is expected of them and the partnership more widely in each phase of the work programme.

This balance of partnership and group work has provided a greater degree of focus and clarity over the key tasks that need to be undertaken between the partnership’s regular and scheduled meetings.

Effectiveness of Work and Processes:

Assessment: The Bridging the Gap project is relatively structured and linear in nature with the completion of one Work Package, generally but not always, being essential to, and driving forward, the start of the next. The partnership has completed the first key phase of the project and has produced a robust evidence base.

To ensure that a successful methodology, the Bridge Model, was adapted for use in other countries it was envisaged that a programme of research would be undertaken to establish a clear picture of need across the participating countries and to determine how the model could and should be adapted and transferred.

The partners have, over the last six months, focused on the delivery of Work Package 2. This has resulted in a very comprehensive programme of research being undertaken. All partners have been involved in this and have made strong contributions and the outcome of this research is a robust evidence base that will help inform subsequent phases of the project.

The partners have undertaken an extensive programme of research to understand the state of entrepreneurship in each country; policies, systems and development and the needs of the VET sector. From this, the partnership, led by Dutch partner, has collated a comprehensive and high quality piece of research.

The research was discussed at the Madrid partnership meeting. It is clear, from both reviewing the research and discussing this with the partners, that the work undertaken so far has been incisive, in-depth and of a very high standard.

“the work undertaken to this point has been thick with content”.

“we have produced a high quality bank of evidence and information.”

The research is detailed and robust and, importantly partners believe, will provide the partnership with a clear steer and set of parameters for subsequent phases of the project.

As touched upon previously, and this is evidenced by observation and discussions with the partners, one factor that has accounted for the high standard and quality of the work to-date has been the existence of structured processes and documentation. The partnership has adopted a quality systems approach, drawing upon the good practice of systems such as ISO, to ensure that the work of the partnership as a whole, and each partner, is consistent and of a high standard.
Certainly, looking at Work Package 2, this has enabled the partners to undertake a highly structured programme of research that enables partners to compare and contrast approaches and systems in each of the countries and, which will enable the development of a training tool that can be used across the participating countries and address local needs.

**Programme Management & Communications:**

**Assessment:** Programme management has, up to this point struck an effective balance of effective yet light touch programme co-ordination and empowerment, ensuring that all partners play a role in the effective development and delivery of the programme.

Allium Research and Consulting was keen to understand how effective the programme management had been to date.

The Bridging the Gap project is led by a private sector business who is co-ordinating a project for the first time. The partnership brings together a range of private and 3rd sector organisations, all of whom have experience of managing or being involved in similar TOI projects. What is clear from talking to partners is that they consider the project to be well managed.

"programme management is effective and efficient"

"the style of management is timely, light touch but effective"

Bridging the Future are considered to have provided effective programme management to date. The organisation maintains regular contact with partners, on an individual or group basis, through e-mail and skype and issues reminders of impending deadlines and milestones. This ensures that the programme remains on course to meet key milestones.

Partners appear to like and appreciate the approach that has been adopted by Bridging the Future. These include:

- Focus on clarity – all partners reported that they were clear about the roles and responsibilities of the partnership as a whole and those as individual partners. Bridging the Future has allowed appropriate time and space for discussion between partners on the nature of the work that needs to be done. These discussions appear to have been in-depth and have enabled significantly greater focus and clarity and by extension less ambiguity.

- A positive approach to empowerment – partners indicated that Bridging the Future played a strong co-ordinating role but didn’t over co-ordinate. Instead, they delegated responsibility to partners to take forward elements of the work programme and effectively empowered them. During Work Package 2, the Dutch partner appears to have embraced this degree of empowerment and successfully co-ordinated the delivery and completion of Work Package 2

- Working within a structured yet flexible operating framework – partners suggested that they are working to clearly agreed timescales and objectives but within the overall context of the project and individual work programmes there is some flexibility.
Issues & Actions: Notwithstanding this, partners did feel the need for the programme management, both in general and for Work Packages 3 and 4, to be a "little less light touch" and more "visible" during the next, and arguably more crucial, phases of the project. There is a consensus that, for the project to achieve its key outcomes, the partnership and project must continue to maintain the momentum that has been developed so far. The project is entering a critical phase where key tasks in Work Packages 3 and 4 must be completed on time.

To that end, there is a view that:

- Bridge to the Future will need to ensure that more regular communications, updates and reminders underpin the next phase of the project. Partners are not advocating a significant increase in the volume of communications and programme management however they believe that, particularly over the next 6 months, there is a need to be kept appraised about progress against key milestones and to be aware of emerging issues or the likelihood of milestones not being met.

- The lead partners on Work Packages 3 and 4, work closely with Bridge to the Future and also issue regular Work Package updates; providing updates on the partnership’s overall progress and that of individual partners, alerting partners to delays or issues and communicating with them to identify appropriate, remedial action.

- All partners enter into a greater dialogue between meetings 2 and 3; providing updates, sharing good practice and flagging up issues so that the partnership can respond accordingly. There was a sense that communications dipped a little after the partnership meetings and that momentum needed to be maintained.

With the relatively short window of time to commence and complete a number of key tasks in Work Packages 3 and 4, and the need to "maintain speed" if not accelerate, partners did believe programme management and communications does need to be improved.

Innovation:

Assessment: The focus of the project, namely the development of learning tools and a focus upon entrepreneurship is not considered in itself to be innovative. However, the Bridge Model is considered to be innovative at a number of levels: the use and adoption of structured processes and systems to achieve key goals, a greater flow of information and knowledge and the development of a model and materials that will enable use across the EU and by partners to engage with groups it might not necessarily engage or work with otherwise.

Partners considered the project to be innovative at a number of levels:

- Promoting Entrepreneurship in the VET sector – the research undertaken by partners, and this was further articulated in our discussions with partners, indicated that in general whilst there was a Europe wide focus on, and need for, increasing levels of rates and levels entrepreneurial activity there were structural issues, not least the lack of understanding by many in the VET sector (schools, colleges and training providers) as to
how to encourage and support potential entrepreneurs. This project will develop innovative materials that can be used to capacity build the VET sector to offer enhanced levels of support.

- The Transfer Process – many Transfer of Innovation projects involve the transfer and relatively limited adaptation of an approach or methodology. This project is considered to be innovative in the sense that the transferor, Bridging the Future, is not “precious” about the model being transferred and is allowing each and every partner to contribute to the development of a flexible tool and set of learning materials that will be of use across the EU.

- The product – the final learning materials that will be developed by the partners will be of use not just to the partners in the participating countries but will be of use to any organisation, be that a VET organisation or other body with an interest in encouraging entrepreneurship. Feedback from partners suggests that the needs of every country are slightly and subtly different and that there is a “mosaic of need" but that this project brings “together all the different jigsaw pieces” and will produce a clear and easy to use toolkit for use by any organisation.

- Capacity building the partners – all of the partners are knowledgeable about entrepreneurship, enterprise and associated issues. In fact, it was suggested, from experience, that one strength and innovative feature of this project (not necessarily by design) was the fact that each partner was highly knowledgeable and experienced and that there was “no stronger or weaker partner.” However, one message that was conveyed by partners was that participation in the project was supporting innovation, or had the capacity to support innovation, at a local level in that the model could and would be used by partners to engage with different groups of individuals, not just their traditional client groups, and would challenge their “comfort zones.”

**Partnership & Transnational Working:**

**Assessment:** The partnership is strong, empowered and equal. All partners appear to be committed to the development and delivery of the project and have played a key role up to this point. The partnership has been vocal and active.

The partners themselves consider this partnership to be strong and effective.

“the partners offer a good fit..”

From both observation of the partners working together and talking to each of the partner organisations there are a number of factors that appear to account for the strength and effectiveness of this partnership. These are set out below

- Partners are knowledgeable and have extensive delivery experience. As touched upon above, there appears to be no weak link in the partnership. All partners bring extensive knowledge, experience and expertise. This has resulted in the partners having valuable debates and sharing information and knowledge that will support the development of this project.
Different Backgrounds. There is a useful and effective balance of larger and smaller organisations and private and 3rd sector bodies. This provides a useful range of insights and knowledge that can help the project.

Good allocation of roles and responsibilities. All partners are treated equitably in that they share the workload, roles and responsibilities. Each partner is expected to lead on a key element of the project. This has helped the partnership bond and work together. During Work Package 2, the Dutch partner was considered to have been highly effective in managing and co-ordinating the research activities and ensuring that the work was completed on time and to a high standard. Their approach, it was suggested, was a model for managing and communicating progress on Work Packages 3 and 4.

Focus. The partners have extensive experience of delivering similar projects and are focused on delivering the key measures of success and deliverables underpinning this project. They do not appear to focus on the minutiae of the project rather they concentrate on the key issues.

Vocal. Each partner, and every individual, makes an active contribution to the project’s development. Discussions are lively and partners make useful contributions. Discussions are of value and help shape the project’s work programme. The discussions have also helped the transfer of good practice, experience and knowledge.

Issues & Actions: there are no significant issues relating to partnership and transnational working however it is important that individual partners continue, supported by the project co-ordinator, to maintain momentum in between the transnational meetings and drive forward key work programme tasks. It is important that Merseyside Expanding Horizons and Business Incubator Gotse Delchev work together to co-ordinate their activities.

Dissemination & Mainstreaming:

Assessment: It is relatively early in the project lifecycle however there is emerging evidence to suggest that the partners have begun to lay the foundations for the effective dissemination and mainstreaming of the project and any lessons learned. Until tangible products and materials are produced, it is typically a challenge to undertake effective dissemination and mainstreaming activities.

From a review of project documentation and discussions with the partners there is evidence to suggest that:

- Partners are seeking to promote the project to, and engage, a range of organisations at a local level.
- Partners are attempting to engage key stakeholders, including Government Departments, at a regional and national level. The partners such as Business Incubator Gotse Delchev have sought to engage a couple of Government Departments, key policy makers, and promote the potential of the learning materials.
Each partner, in undertaking the research as part of Work Package 2, has sought to raise awareness of the project and engage a wide cross section of organisations; organisations operating at a national, regional and local level and organisations involved in the VET sector as well as the delivery of business support.

Each partner has good local networks and appears to be undertaking local activities to promote the project. Indeed, where possible e.g. in the case of Merseyside Expanding Horizons, attempts have been made to align this programme with a national pilot programme, “Talent Match”, in order to both test and promote the model to national policy makers.

**Issues and Actions:** what is evident is that more needs to be done to engage the VET sector in subsequent phases of the project’s work programme. Whilst the partners recognise this and have made progress in engaging the VET sector during the research phase it is essential, for the model to be widely disseminated and used, that trainers operating in the VET sector are involved, and more widely, in subsequent testing and development activities. For the project to be considered a success, the model needs to be used, shaped and owned by individuals operating in the VET sector, namely those who have little experience of encouraging entrepreneurship,

During Work Package 3 and 4, in particular, the partners need to engage individuals and organisations from the VET sector. Their participation in the testing and development phases will be essential to ensuring that the materials developed by the partnership will be attractive to, and used by, the VET sector in future and not just limited to practitioners.

**Impact**

Assessment: Clearly at this point in the project lifecycle it is difficult to evidence any significant or long term impact arising as a result of the project. Accordingly, Allium Research and Consulting has sought to explore the extent to which the conditions for the project having a long term impact are present.

The full extent of the impact of the Bridging the Gap project will become evident over the lifetime of the project however at this point there is some evidence to suggest that the project has the potential to have some significant impact and leave a meaningful legacy.

- **Use of the Model and materials** – each of the partners are experienced in working with individuals looking to start and grow a business. The Bridge Model, and the Bridging the Gap project, is considered to have added value and expanded their knowledge and capacity to work with entrepreneurs, in particular with different groups. The project has added to the range of tools and approaches that they can use to encourage individuals to become more enterprising.

- **Intelligence** – the research has provided a detailed and comprehensive overview of enterprise related issues in the participating countries and has helped knowledge transfer. This has not just helped partners improve their understanding of the approaches adopted in each country to stimulate levels of entrepreneurship but has helped crystallise the needs of each partner and how and where the model can be developed to add greatest value.
• Initial interest – it would appear that stakeholders and other organisations across the participating countries are interested in the model and its potential

**Issues and Actions**: The key challenge, as touched upon in the section discussing dissemination and mainstreaming, for the partnership is the need to meaningfully engage the VET sector in subsequent phases of the project and to lay the foundations for its use in the vocational education and training sector.