

2021



Deutsch-Baltische Handelskammer
in Estland, Lettland, Litauen
Vokietijos ir Baltijos šalių prekybos rūmai
Estijoje, Latvijoje, Lietuvoje



"AC Konsultācijas"

***SkilledUp* project partnership and implementation quality evaluation**

22.11.2021.

Client: Deutsch-Baltische Handelskammer (AHK)

Contact person: Olga Dmitrijeva, SIA "AC Konsultācijas",
o.dmitrijeva@gmail.com, +371 29747969

Executive summary

This project partnership and implementation quality evaluation aims to provide the analysis of the project quality management following the objectives set in the *SkilledUp* Quality Assurance Plan (QAP). The defined objectives were:

- Smooth management
- Execution of all planned outcomes and results
- Quality results

The first section of the report provides an evaluation of the project partnership that was responsible for the project management, including partnership composition, collaboration and commitment, achievement of participation goals, evaluation of the project lead performance.

As a result of the project all 27 deliverables were achieved across all 8 working packages. The second section of the report provides the project implementation evaluation, including main challenges and success drivers, internal communication analysis.

The third section focuses on the analysis of the quality assurance tools implementation (based on the QAP) and suggestions on how the approach could be improved in the future projects.

The final section summarises the project implementation strengths and weaknesses and introduces a road to action, consolidating suggestions on current findings integration in the future projects to emphasize careful planning, deliberate action, and attention to quality, depth, and sustainability.

Evaluation methodology

To evaluation of the *SkilledUp* partnership and the quality of the project implementation, including tools used for quality assurance took the following stages:

1. Initial **unstructured interview** with the Project Lead allowed to collect the basic information and develop a better understanding of the project implementation, define the direction of evaluation and main topics to focus on.
2. A **survey** involving all project partners was run to explore the opinions and insights about the partnership efficiency and project implementation quality. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of the information received from the partner lead as well as available tools for partnership and project implementation evaluation (Ayoubi, 2013; *European Commission*, 2017, 2021) (see the survey form in Attachment 1). It should be noted that overall evaluation was very positive, therefore, the analysis focuses on relative, not absolute, scores revealed by the survey. This means that in most answers the items (statements) were compared to each other, not to absolute benchmarks to reveal their impact in the project.
3. **Analysis of qualitative and quantitative monitoring tools.** The QAP developed at the beginning of the project indicated tools aiming to ensure quality results and processes during the project implementation. The current report provides the evaluation of the practical implementation of the tools. Documents being analysed include:
 - *SkilledUp* Quality assurance plan
 - Evaluation of the curriculum for further training
 - Summary and recommendations based on case studies from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania
 - *SkilledUp* Communication plan
 - Description of the final conference – *SkilledUp*

1. PROJECT PARTNERSHIP EVALUATION

1.1. Overall project partnership evaluation

There was not a unified opinion regarding the quality of the project partnership on behalf of partners. The partners evaluations ranged from excellent to average; no one evaluated the partnership as below average. Most partners, five out of nine, evaluate the quality of the partnership as above average. Two partners evaluate the quality of the partnership as excellent and two as average.

1.2. Partnership composition

Generally, partners were satisfied with the composition of the partnership and note that it was well balanced across actors, representing business and education.

Composition description and partner choice

All partners agree that the composition of the project partnership was appropriate and diverse, uniting representatives of the relevant areas (higher education, associations, vocational education and training, business/industry) with according qualifications that ensured operational capacity and the achievement of the partnership goals.

The partners were selected with due regard to the purpose of the project. Allocation of tasks across the partnership also ensured professional capability match to direct project partner functions. All those involved in the project were acknowledged to be reliable partners over the course of the project. However, some participants were more active, others less so. Also, certain partners had an opportunity to provide only limited specialist resources (in particular, with a restricted language capacity and/or limited professional knowledge). As a result, other partners had to adapt and sometimes fill in the gaps during the project. Nonetheless, all the planned activities of the project have been completed; however, that required additional effort and dedication on behalf of the partners taking on unexpected responsibilities, who found it difficult to execute.

The partners from the academic field especially appreciated involvement of entrepreneurs to the project, which provided a more practical dimension and value. In addition, it was noted that involvement of experts from the governmental institutions, especially ministries of education, could have strengthened the work on curriculum development and enriched the partnership.

Operational improvements

Several partners mentioned that the partnership efficiency would have been improved if there was a mechanism on the information and processes retention in the event of a project staff rotation. Although it is crucial to have highly motivated staff, the information and processes should not be centred in one individual.

A suggestion was made by one organisation emphasizing that some of the project challenges could have been solved with less effort if there was only one leading partner per country. Although, this was an opinion of a sole partner, it should be noted that, potentially an alternative project management structure should have been considered, perhaps, only in the countries with incompatible or weak leads.

1.3. Participation benefits and achievement of project objectives

Overall, the project partners admit that participation in the partnership has benefited their organisations. They strongly believe that the participation in the partnership brought better results than individual efforts would.

The partners indicated that their organisations benefited from the participation in the project because it:

(in descending order according to the reported impact)

- Increased the competencies of their training/teaching staff (relevant for educational establishments) and resulted in new partnerships and cooperation (for all partners);
- Contributed to the international network broadening, improved their geographical visibility and spread;
- Provided with better understanding on teaching process in other countries;
- Provided with useful insights via experience and good practices exchange, learning from other partners;
- Improved the competitiveness of their organisations, strengthened their position on the market and contributed to the missions of their organisations.

In addition, as a result of the participation in the project, the partnership members enhanced project management skills and/or research activities of their organisations; however only moderately. There was a moderate synergy between the project activities and other projects in the portfolios of participants. The project resulted in student and/or staff interest in this or similar projects, however, the impact was quite modest. For most partners, the project did not lead them to other project (already confirmed or planned); nonetheless two partners reported significant benefits with this regard.

One of the partners provided a comment, that during the project their organisation gained useful business contacts, got acquainted with the system of specialist training in Lithuania and other countries. A lot of valuable information was gathered about the need for qualified specialists in the wood working sector companies and the mechanisms and possibilities for their training.

There were five objectives defined upon initiation of the project. It is important to highlight, that partners agree that all objectives of the project have been achieved. However, the level of agreement was not consistent (see diagram 1, indicating also the average score, out of 5). The obtained answers reveal that:

- Partners strongly believe that the project implementation strengthened cross-sectoral cooperation between VET institutions and industry representatives; corresponds to Objective 1.
- Partners strongly believe that the project provided strategy and instruments to address skills shortages in wood processing sector; corresponds to Objective 3.
- Partners strongly believe that the project fostered economic development and innovation of the sector by preparing specialists corresponding to labour market needs; corresponds to Objective 4.
- Partners believe the project contributed in understanding that digital technologies, mobility and zero-waste production are drivers of change; corresponds to Objective 5.
- Partners also confirmed that the project outcomes improved the quality of VET institutions by introducing WBL program with internationally recognized qualification in line with EU quality instruments (corresponds to Objective 2). However, this result was less pronounced than in other objectives.

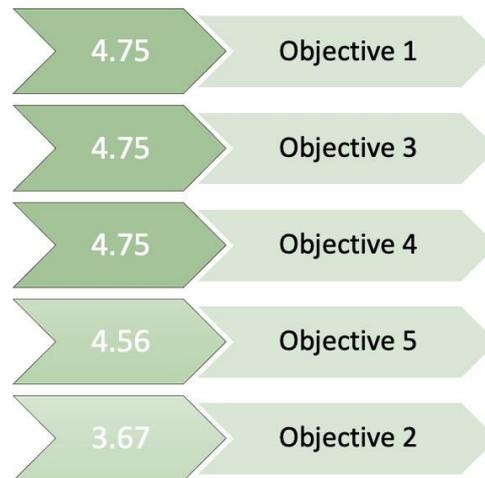


Diagram 1. Evaluation of the project objectives achieved (scores: partners average out of 5).

1.4. Achievement of organisations’ goals for participation

Overall, the participants think that they have attained the goals their organization planned and/or anticipated to achieve as a result of the project. Most participants (6 out of 9) indicated that their organisations have achieved their goals to a great extent. Three out of nine participants specified that their organisations somewhat achieved the set goals.

1.5. Partners Commitment

Remarkably, participants evaluated other partners’ overall commitment to the project implementation as higher than their organisation’s commitment. Overall scores are 4,11 for partners’ commitment and 4 for own commitment (out of 5). Out of nine partners, only three evaluate the commitment as equal (4/4), three partners evaluate their commitment higher and three partners think that other partners contributed more to the project outcome. One of the partners evaluated their commitment only as average, whereas other partners’ as excellent.

1.6. Project lead evaluation

Overall, the project participants evaluated the performance of the project lead partner, AHK Baltics, as excellent (overall score 4.63 out of 5). Three partners provided an above average evaluation and five – excellent (AHK Baltic did not answered this question).

1.7. Partners reference for future projects

Most participants would strongly recommend AHK Baltic as a partner for future projects (6 out of 8). Two participants would recommend AHK for future projects (AHK Baltic did not answered this question). The overall score for this question is 3.75 out of 4.

On the contrary, only one partner indicated that they would strongly recommend others *Skilled-Up* partners for future projects. Other participants could recommend the partnership members as future project partners (overall score 3.11 out of 4). One of the partners commented that they would recommend some of partners who were more active in the project, but not all. Thus, the obtained results demonstrate that there was more trust and connection between the project lead

and the partners than horizontally between partners. Nonetheless, it was problematic for certain partners: they felt it was unfair that some organisations are more engaged, whereas, others are less motivated. This issue could have been potentially addressed if more planning and time was allocated for partner choice, pre-project debriefing and timely and more definite introduction among the partners at the beginning of the project to build trust and facilitate collaboration.

2. IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

2.1. Overall project implementation evaluation

The evaluation of the project implementation quality was unanimous – all partners agree that the project implementation quality was above average.

2.2. Main implementation challenges

Nonetheless, partners provided some ideas on how the project implementation could have been improved (suggested changes to the project implementation) if there was a possibility to go back to the beginning of the project. The analysis of the answers allowed to distinguish 5 main challenges the partners would like to improve given the opportunity. The hierarchy of the difficulties that would need to be addressed is shown on the Diagram 2.

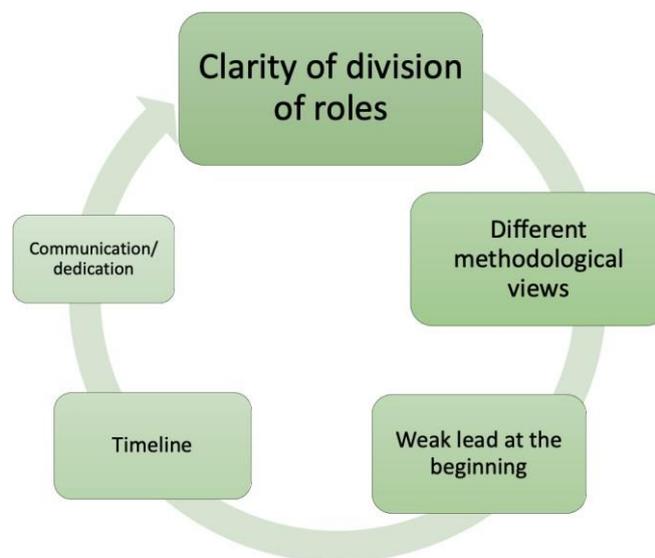


Diagram 2. The hierarchy of the main difficulties of the project implementation.

Clarity of division of roles

Almost all partners mentioned that more clarity of the division of tasks and designated responsibilities among the partners would have been crucial, especially at the beginning of the project. In addition, several partners note that the management scheme, including the reporting structure, was not completely understood that brought difficulties to the work of the project managers within the organisations. In particular, assigning several lead partners to a country could have been re-evaluated.

Overall, successful start of the project was impeded by very little initial understanding of the project scope for some partners. Only little preliminary information was provided before the

kick-off event in January, 2019. Given tight timeline and no allocated time for clarifications the partners had to embark straight to the detailed work with the training modules; however, several of them still lacked a general picture of the project even after the kick-off meeting.

Lack of clarify of the division of roles and responsibilities resulted in certain confusion regarding finances: which partner is responsible for particular expenses and how much resources are required and/or allocated for a task. For example, which part of the training process expenses should have been covered by an education institution and which by an employer.

Different methodological views

The partners' feedback made it clear that more time and resources allocated for the methodological discussions of the project processes and the intended results would have been beneficial at all stages of the project implementation. Even at the end of the project the partners still haven't reached the consensus regarding the project concept. The project goals have been reached and all deliverables successfully submitted; however, several partners still think that applying another methodological approach, i.e., having one general curriculum form for all three Baltic states, program licencing done by partners individually as the post-project activity, focus on distance/blended learning plan, would have been more beneficial for the project. Some additional opinion exchange sessions and more thorough partner involvement at the project proposal and application stage would have helped to align the methodological and instrumental ideas, while targeting the project goal. In addition, as suggested by one of the partners, a dictionary of special terms relevant to the project would be valuable at the beginning of the project, to support the ability to "speak the same language".

Weak lead at the beginning

From the organisational perspective, the project beginning was a problematic stage of the project implementation. Several partners indicated that the first project manager allocated by the lead organisation lacked experience to lead an international partnership of such a scope as well as required communication skills. This led to difficulties in establishing a fully productive work environment at the beginning of the project. In particular, there was a clear need for more clarifications and more regular communication between partners at the initial stage of the project. Partners mention the need for more formal meetings allowing to communicate expectations, discuss the practical issues related to the project implementation as well as less formal meetings aimed to build trust, get to know each other and encourage collaboration among partners. More attention to the partners' needs at the beginning would have addressed the difficulties that emerged at later stages of the project implementation. In particular, running an introductory seminar regarding best practices in preparing evaluation forms and discussing other bureaucratic procedures would have been very useful.

The situation has significantly improved after changing the project manager at the lead organisation.

Timeline and deadlines

A pronounced issue during the project implementation were recurrently missed deadlines for tasks and activities. As indicated by a partner, the feasible timeline became coherent and clear quite late to the project implementation. Earlier prepared project time schedule (Gantt diagram) and meetings plan would have helped with the time planning and resource allocation.

Nonetheless, keeping to the agreed deadlines is not guaranteed by the time schedule. Some procedures to facilitate time planning and respect to the deadlines should have been introduced at the project implementation: i.e., control measures and stronger position on the missed deadlines on behalf of the lead partner and/or delegating this task to partners by building engagement level and dedication to the project outcomes.

Communication and dedication issues

Following the challenging start of the project, partners missed the opportunity to get to know each other better and build connections and the optimal work environment early in the project implementation. At the later stages, there was not planned enough time and activities to support communication between partners to fill the gap and facilitate connections. The following Covid-19 crisis and travel restrictions further negatively impacted the communication flow. More solid connections between the partners would have eased transfer to digital environment after the beginning of the crisis.

There were certain dedication and motivation issues on behalf of particular partners. This was related to both external issues like staff turnover, where the information about the project was not properly passed to other colleagues within organisation when some colleagues left. Internal issues were related to an organisation’s overall motivation to engage in the project. More careful evaluation of partners’ motivation and commitment to participation would have benefited the project implementation. Alternatively, some activities to build commitment and strengthen motivation could have had place at the initial stage of the project, in particular, during the kick-off meeting.

2.3. Project implementation success drivers

The analysis of the partners’ answers related to the successful solutions implemented in the Skilled-Up project allowed to identify the driving forces behind the project implementation. The answers were clustered to reveal the hierarchy of the project implementation successes/strengths (see diagram 3).

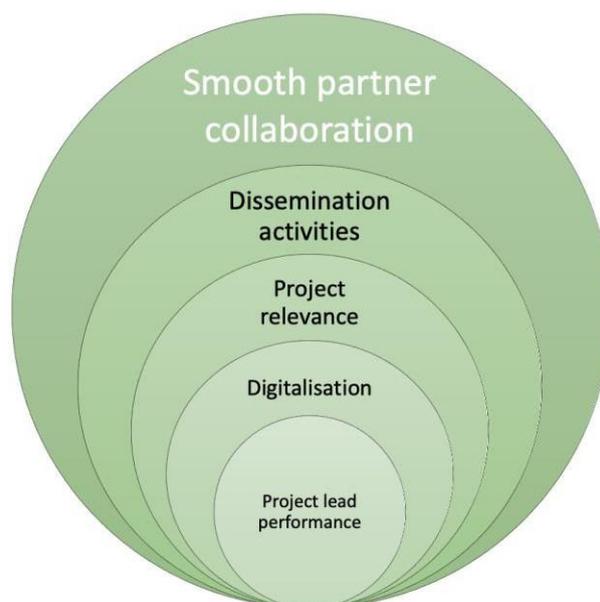


Diagram 3. The hierarchy of driving forces behind the project implementation

Smooth partner collaboration

All partnership members highlighted the smooth and efficient collaboration within the partnership. The communication flow, meetings, including digital or hybrid meetings were proved a success and significantly contributed to the project achievements. Regular project meetings were well prepared and held regularly. The pace of the meetings was sufficient: weekly AHK internal meetings and monthly communication meetings with the partners. The operational management and decision making also proved its efficiency. Additionally, in person experience exchange sessions proved to be very valuable from both operational perspective and also from the perspective of partners getting to know each other and strengthen efficient collaboration environment.

Another significant positive aspect of smooth partner collaboration was regional work teams within the participating countries. For the regional work teams, especially efficient collaboration was in Latvia and Estonia, where partners note excellent team dynamics, efficient communication in EG meetings both in person and online, facilitating the management of the project and the cooperation between the partners.

Dissemination events

One of the implementation successes were the organisation and outcomes of the project progress dissemination events. The thorough dissemination events schedule organised by both the main lead (largest public events) and the partners who informed the general public in local languages using available different tools and platforms allowed to reach various target audiences: employers and employees of wood processing and other sectors, governmental institution representatives and decision makers, industry organisations, education institutions. The partnership composition consisting of industry representatives and educators resulted in an enhanced degree of credibility for the activities of the project among general public.

As a result of the successful dissemination events, highly motivated students and guest lecturers were attracted to the project. The participants also noted the successful switch to online conferences with involvement of project participants and representatives from industry.

Project relevance

Besides addressing the pressing issue existing in the woodworking sector, the project proved to be very timely and relevant from the political perspective. In Latvia and Estonia, the idea of the project fell in line with an actual political agenda. For instance, in Latvia, the time perfectly fitted the parliamentary debate on the amendments to the Law on higher education and vocational training. The results and opinions generated within the Skilled-Up project provided arguments for the decision makers to use in the debates.

In addition, a possibility to a wide range of communication and discussions regarding the training of qualified specialists, provided all the partners with a clearer view of the challenges that might arise in the future and the possibilities to overcome them.

Digitalisation

The partnership members prize the effort to digitalise the process of the project implementations, namely switching to online conferencing and online meetings. The digital or hybrid team meetings, similarly as well organised e-training and final conference events, which also was broadcasted on YouTube, were highlighted by the members as a successful organisational approach.

Project lead performance

Overall AHK leadership was highly appreciated and named as one of the project implementation’s driving forces. The specific and rigorous organization of the processes assigned to the project coordinators allowed to achieve the project goals. The partners found the weekly AHK internal meetings and good communication from the side of the lead partners as being crucial aspects of the project successful implementation. However, it should be noted, that this appreciation is relevant only to the later stages of the project implementation.

2.4. Factors facilitating implementation quality

The partnership members all being professionals and always acting to the highest standards without needing a formal framework was the most important quality assurance aspects that helped the partners to focus on the quality of the process and outcomes. Nonetheless, they highly appreciated having a quality assurance plan from the beginning of the project, which was rated as the second most important aspect. The next factor that contributed to the quality of the outcome was having a strong and competent project coordinator, who also was a designated partner responsible for quality assurance. The presence of the strong lead was reassuring for the partnership members. Completing the interim and final reports was perceived as somewhat important but not enough to ensure high quality by itself, along with having a formal external quality assurance expert panel. All in all, the participants did not rely on external tools such as reporting or extraneous evaluation as an instrument for quality assurance; however, more focused on own performance. Partners quite disagreed with a statement that quality assurance was embedded in the project work processes as such, since they reported it as the least important aspect that helped them to focus on the quality.

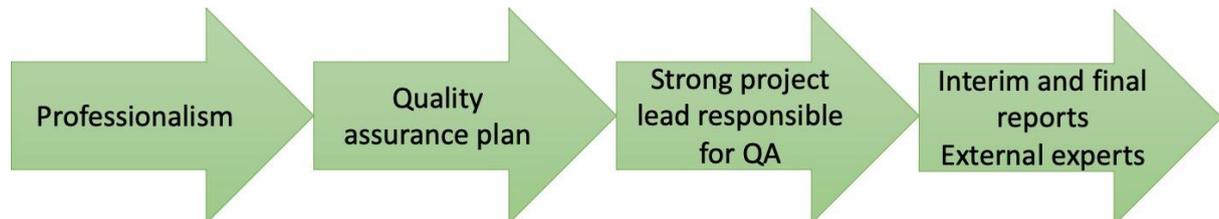


Diagram 4. The hierarchy of aspects that helped to focus on the quality of the implementation

2.5. Project implementation difficulties for organisations

The difficulties encountered by organisations during the project implementation were analysed from the perspective of the combined amount of negative impact on the project implementation within the partnership. Specifically analysed cases, when a partner reported a significant or moderate (pronounced) negative impact.

Table 1. Implementation difficulties for organisations.

Total score*	Difficulty	Comment
20	Lack of personnel allocated for the project tasks, schedules and deadlines conflicting with other tasks and roles in the organisation	The most problematic issue for the partners. For one of the partners this issue had a significant negative effect to their performance. Only one partner indicated that this factor was not a problem at all during implementation.
12	The language barrier	The second most import issue negatively impacting the project implementation. Five of nine partners indicated that they had problems with the project communication language. Two partners indicated that it had a moderate negative impact.
11	Lack of engagement/commitment on behalf of the decision makers Lack of clear understanding what a partner should do, absence of clear guidelines	Five of nine organisations indicated that they have encountered a negative effect of a lack of decision-makers involvement to a different extent. One of the partners noted that lack of thorough involvement on behalf of the decision makers of the organisations had a pronounced negative effect. A very similar result obtained for the problem of clear guidelines absence: five out of four partners experienced it to a different extent, for one partner it was an issue that resulted in a moderate (pronounced) negative effect.
10	Too tight deadlines, not enough time allocated for tasks Lack of engagement/commitment on behalf of the implementation team Complicated communication with other partners	It should be noted that the problem of the lack of engagement on behalf of the organisation decision makers had more negative impact in comparison to the lack of commitment of the implementation team. Two partners indicated too tight deadlines as a factor that had an obvious negative effect on their performance. However, for five partners too tight deadlines were not a problem at all.
8	Lack of clear understanding when the tasks are due Lack of clear feedback on the performed tasks	In addition to the previous block, lack of clear understanding when the tasks are due was also relevant to four partners. Lack of clear feedback on the performed tasks had a negative effect on three partners' performances. Whereas, two of them reported a noticeable negative effect due to insufficient feedback.
5	Personnel turnover	Personnel turnover was an issue for two partners; one of them reported its definite negative effect on the project implementation.
4	Communication with the project lead	Communication with the project lead had a small negative effect on two partners' performance.

* Total score for each item

In addition, a partner indicated Covid-19 pandemic as a factor of a significant negative effect on reaching the planned results in the designated time frame and quality.

2.6. Internal communication evaluation

Most participants indicate that they were satisfied with the internal communication flow. Only two participants were very satisfied with the communication flow within the partnership. Overall score for the internal communication evaluation is 4.22 (out of 5).

2.7. Internal communication enhancement

Although, the partners were overall quite happy with the internal communication, they have provided a number of suggestions on possible improvements in similar projects in the future. The three main areas to be emphasised: more space for building connections with other project partners, more clarity on planning and instructions, addressing the language difficulties.

Strengthening connections

For the partners, communication between the partnership members was one of the most challenging aspects during the project implementation. There was a clear lack of an established efficient network interconnecting the partners horizontally. The problematic beginning of the project has considerably compromised the build of trust and horizontal connections. Further Covid-19 crisis exaggerated the connection gap between the partners. Despite the successful delivery of the project outcomes, many partners suggested that regular formal and informal meetings, common events with other partners would have strengthen the cohesion. Holding face to face meetings is a preferable option to build trust and connection, therefore, in a situation of an unexpected transfer to the online environment, the issue of strengthening connections should have been given even more planning and consideration, allocating more time and attention.

Clarity on planning and instructions

The partnership members would prefer to have more clarity on the processes and tasks, have a chance to clarify uncertainties. Operational planning could have been strengthened by setting very specific dates for consultation meetings in advance and defining the agenda for the upcoming meetings – the issues that will be discussed. Potentially, short weekly meetings to discuss work in progress would have been useful, however this would be an additional administrative burden, which practicality should be verified.

Addressing language barrier

The partners who encountered difficulties related to the command of English suggested two approaches how the situation could have been improved: by introducing an opportunity to interpret during meetings and by improving their own language deficits. Allegedly feasible, both approaches have considerable drawbacks. Interpretation has not been foreseen in the project budget thus, the funds allocation during the project implementation might have been problematic. Language deficits improvement might be a lengthy process, and, perhaps, not realistic during the length of one project implementation. On the other hand, one of the goals of *Erasmus+* partnerships is to improve internationalisation, including strengthening the language skills. Nonetheless, certain measures should have been aken at the partner selection stage to make sure they have an operational language command that would allow them to participate in an international consortium without unnecessary discomfort.

2.8. Strengths of internal communication

To evaluate the internal communication within the partnership, the partners were offered to indicate their degree of agreement with the statements describing good communication practices within a consortium.

All partners agreed or strongly agreed with all statements, except two undecided answers for statements “Our organisation always got adequate feedback about our progress in the project” and “Our organisation was always and in a timely manner provided with adequate information about critical changes”. The undecided answer (a partner was not sure if they agree or disagree with the statement) may indicate a potential difficulty with these aspects. It should be also noted that overall agreement levels with these statements were lower than to other aspects. The obtained results summarised in table 2.

Table 2. Strengths of internal communication.

Score (out of 5)	Statement
4.63	The communication between our organisation and the project lead was sufficient.
4.56	The lead partner put all efforts to keep us informed about the project implementation progress.
4.56	Our organisation is happy with the level of appreciation and recognition of our contribution to the project success.
4.56	We felt that our feedback and recommendations regarding the project were taken seriously.
4.44	The internal communication within our organisation regarding the issues related to the project was sufficient.
4.38	We were always provided with accurate and timely information from the lead partner.
4.38	Our organisation always got adequate feedback about our progress in the project.
4.33	We felt we can directly influence and alter the project implementation if relevant.
4.33	Our organisation was always and in a timely manner provided with adequate information about critical changes.
4.11	The communication between our organisation and other project partners was sufficient.

In comparison to other communication aspects, the communication between partners was the most challenging. The challenging issues were also obtaining adequate information about critical changes in a timely manner and the feeling of the project ownership: the partners were not completely sure that they can directly influence and alter the project implementation if relevant.

On the other hand, the overall communication between the partners’ organisations and the project lead was indicated as the most successful aspect of communication within the partnership followed by the partners’ confidence that the lead partner put all the efforts to keep them informed about the project implementation progress. The obtained results also indicate that the partners were satisfied with the acknowledgement of their contribution to the project implementation.

There were no major issues with the internal communication within the partners’ organisations regarding the issues related to the project implementation.

3. EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

3.1. Achievement of planned outcomes and results

The section four of the *SkilledUp* of the project’s QAP described outcomes and results expected to be achieved: a total of 27 deliverables across eight working packages. All results have been achieved and tangible deliverables (reports, Quality assurance and Communication plans, etc.) submitted to the project supervisory authority.

All planned events/activities took place according to the time schedule:

Event/Activity	Date
WP1 Project Management	
Set up steering group & management group	November, 2018
Kick-off meeting	November, 2018
WP2 Preparation	
Set up local expert groups	March, 2019
Focus group	November, 2018
VET teacher enterprise visits/’internships’	March, 2019
WP3 Implementation I – Curriculum Development	
Joint EG meeting in Estonia	June, 2019
Implementation II – Training Program, accreditation	
Training is running in all PP countries	September 2019 – September 2021
Completing 1 st batch of students	October 2021
Admission of 2 nd batch	September 2020
Students’ and teachers’ mobility	October 2019 – May 2020
WP8 Dissemination & Exploitation	
Information campaign	January 2019 – August 2021
Dissemination events	July 2021 – September 2021 (please add dates of events)

3.2. Quality assessment activities during the project implementation phase

The QAP included seven measures to monitor the quality of the project processes and deliverables during the project implementation. These self-assessment tools aimed to monitor the quality of deliverables and identify the quality related implementation risks as soon as possible. Therefore, the first level of quality assurance has been exercised by the responsible partners, mostly the project lead, who collected and analysed the feedback on the project activities. The fully achieved goals and approved deliverables of the project prove that the quality assessment activities were sufficient for the project, nonetheless, the analysis below provides evaluation of the implementation of each tool and suggestions on how the approach can be improved in the future projects.

3.2.1. Partner meetings evaluation

According to the QAP, the partner meetings evaluation was planned after each meeting via filling in a standard questionnaire. The indicated feedback collecting was implemented at the

initial stages of the project implementation; however, it became obvious that with a considerable number of additional administration burden it provides little valuable information. Therefore, the standardised evaluation of the meetings has been discontinued by the lead partner, at the same time encouraging the partners to provide suggestions or additional comments directly with the lead as soon as they arise. According to the implementation evaluation analysis (see Section 2 of this report) this approach proved to be efficient, since the vertical communication (project lead-partners) was appraised as one of the strongest aspects of the partnership.

3.2.2. Intellectual outputs evaluation

A common module template was developed and used by the partners. Initial evaluation of the developed module compliance with the structure of the template was done by the lead partner. In parallel, internal non-formal evaluation was constantly run via routine meetings and content discussions among partners. The mid-term report and evaluation proved it to be an acceptable solution.

Further, the evaluation of the 10 developed modules was run by Resenheim, a project partner not directly involved in the development of the modules. The assessment was based on the experience and knowledge of the specialist lecturers at the Resenheim and was focused on the structure and content of the modules with the aim to improve them, if necessary. The results are available in the *Evaluation of the curriculum for further training* report. The evaluation was based on the developed criteria for compiling the content, taking into account the aimed versatility and practicality for various countries in close connection with the actual situation on the market. However, the criteria were very convincing and thoroughly elaborated, the actual analysis was missing in the report, jumping immediately to suggestions and recommendation section. More description of the analysis and specific findings would provide valuable information for the module development as well as recommendations for further projects

3.2.3. Training performance evaluation

To monitor and evaluate the developed training program, the survey among the participants (students) was run in all three countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) and among the teachers in Lithuania and Estonia. The results of the survey are presented in the *Summary and recommendations based on case studies from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania*.

The main purpose of the participants survey was to evaluate the students' satisfaction with the training content, its alignment with the market needs, teaching quality; aspects for improvement were identified. Although, the obtained feedback and insight were valuable and important, it would be recommended to produce a unified questionnaire for all three countries, to allow the cross-country comparison of the results. It is also not clear if the identified suggestions for improvement were taken into account and integrated in the final version of the training modules.

The main purpose of the teachers' questionnaire was to find out their opinion about the work in the project. Valuable feedback was received regarding the optional length that should be allocated for certain topics and its organisation (i.e., it is preferably to have groups with similar level of computer skills), collaboration with education establishment administration, teachers' qualifications. It would be recommended to run identical surveys in all participating countries to allow cross-country analysis. It is also unclear if the identified suggestions for improvement were addressed in the final version of the training modules.

In addition, it should be noted that there was only one round of evaluation run, however, the QAP suggested that there will be a mid-term and a final evaluation of the programme approbation in VET institutions using a standardised evaluation form.

3.2.4. Employers' Satisfaction evaluation (with EQAVET indicators 6 and 9)

The employers' satisfaction evaluation was run after completion of the training course to evaluate the perceived impact of training. According to the QAP, special attention was intended to be given to utilization of acquired skills at workplace (EQAVET indicator 9) and mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market and evidence for their effectiveness (EQAVET indicator 6). The results of the evaluation are presented in the *Summary and recommendations based on case studies from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania*.

The employers' satisfaction evaluation format was not defined in the QAP. As a result, there were quantitative survey run in Lithuania and Estonia and a case study in Latvia. The identification of employees' needs via interview and surveys was run in Latvia and Estonia at the beginning of the project. The implemented approach provided with valuable information, however, implementing a unified method across three countries would allow more thorough information as well as the cross-country analysis. The EQAVET indicators were somewhat addressed, however, more emphasis on them would be beneficial, especially within the after-training satisfaction evaluation. It is also unclear if the identified findings and suggestions for improvement were addressed in the final version of the training modules.

3.2.5. Collaboration report

According to the QAP, the collaboration report summarised the collaboration between all involved partners: what challenges the partnership addressed, what lessons were learnt. As a part of this report, and based on Case study reports, the Recommendations sections aimed to provide support to other communities/partnerships/countries intending to introduce WBL training programmes in their educational policies was developed. The results of the evaluation are presented in the *Summary and recommendations based on case studies from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania*.

Besides describing the results of the training performance evaluation and employers' satisfaction evaluation, the report provided useful information about the preparation process for module development, including the woodworking sector analysis, choosing and training teachers and companies for participation, communication aspects, approaches to apply EQAVET blocks. The report was organised in blocks, summarising the situation in each country.

The recommendation section was also structured by countries. The section aimed to target other industries and educational institutions as well as political decision makers at the national and European levels. Although for the main section of the report the by-country reporting approach was relevant and useful, the Recommendations aimed to provide support to other communities/partnerships/countries, therefore, the section would be improved by providing overall suggestions not restricted by a particular country. In the recommendation for political decision-makers section, there is only one proposal from Latvia. Feedback from Lithuania and Estonia and/or overall suggestions would have improved this section and would highlight the European added value of the project by suggestions on improving, i.e., legal certainty, greater effectiveness or complementarities, etc., beyond the region.

3.2.6. Multiplier events evaluation

According to the QAP, each event of the project was supposed to be evaluated and analysed to confirm achievement of the event objectives. A unified evaluation form (a questionnaire) was developed as the QAP attachment to be distributed to event participants during or at the end of each event. Nonetheless, the participants surveys were not run during the project implementation.

The organisation and impact of the final conference, which took place in Riga on 16.09.2021, was highly appreciated by the partners during the project partnership and implementation quality evaluation. The conference took place in a hybrid format hosting about 150 participants offline and about 320 online. The hybrid format was proved to be a successful solution (see Section 2 of this report), the availability of the recording on YouTube additionally contributing to the dissemination efforts. As a result of the conference, the Letter of intent was signed by all partners to reaffirm the commitment to promote and advance the developed intentions of the VET project across Europe. Nonetheless, no formal evaluation was run for this event either.

More attention to multiplier events evaluation would have strengthened the partnership effort to disseminate the results of the partnership. Collecting feedback from participants, i.e., using the developed questionnaires, would have enhanced the quality of the events and provide operational additional feedback from the sector representatives useful for the modules development. Collecting information about the multiplier events participants would have also helped to broaden the network and potentially attract more interested individuals from the industry, both employers and potential students, as well as governmental institutions.

3.2.7. Dissemination evaluation

The dissemination plan was described in two documents: the QAP and the Communication plan. The updated version of the communication plan also provides information about the dissemination results by compiling the deliveries and links.

The tools and expected deliveries were well described in the documents, however, quantitative goals were not set, except the number of publications on partners' websites (at least 6 per year), at least two social media posts per month and at least one interview of project participants in media in every Baltic country.

During the project implementation, the project website was set up and regularly updated. However, the partners failed to reach the goal of at least 6 publications on their websites. For instance, the partner "Latvijas finieris" provided quite detailed account of the project but only in a single publication; there was no information available on the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies website. The same is applicable to the target of information dissemination via social media posts. Only the lead partner was active on social media, with some activity from Tsenter. According to the report, the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies had published some information on their Facebook page, however, the page is not available at the moment. The project participants interview on mass media was run only in Latvia.

More realistic dissemination plan would have been advisable for the project dissemination activities with closer control of the delivery during the whole length of the project implementation. Defining clear targets not only to the number of publications/activities but also individuals reached (i.e., website visitors, web analytics) would have provided benchmarks to evaluate the dissemination effort during the project implementation and adjust its scope, channels, messages if necessary.

SUMMARY

***SkilledUp* partnership and implementation strengths**

- The partnership composition is well balanced across business and education representatives, strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation between VET and the industry;
- Involvement of the sector entrepreneurs in curriculum development;
- Allocation of tasks across the partnership directly matching the professional capabilities of the project partners;
- Operational capacity and communication of the project lead, including the language skills: Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian, as well as English and Russian all being the working languages of the project;
- Digitalisation efforts, including digital and hybrid meetings, efficient transfer to online environment after the Covid-19 crisis outbreak;
- Strong regional teams especially in Lithuania and Latvia;
- Successful dissemination events, including an enhanced degree of credibility for the activities of the project, among the general public due to partnership composition (industry and education);
- The project relevance from the perspective of the political agenda in the region.

***SkilledUp* partnership and implementation weaknesses**

- Problematic beginning of the project, lack of explanations and clarifications at the initial stage of the project;
- Insufficient information regarding the project tasks and objectives at the project application stage provided for the partners;
- Limited resourced and insufficient commitment on behalf of several partners.
- Language barrier for certain partners;
- Lack of personnel allocated in organisations and conflicting tasks;
- Insufficient clarity of the division of tasks and designated responsibilities among the partners, including financial responsibilities;
- Lack of consensus regarding the project concept and implementation among partners;
- Several organisation's overall inconsistent motivation to engage in the project, lack of commitment on behalf of decision makers;
- Insufficient horizontal communication (between partners);
- Insufficient feeling of ownership of the project on behalf of several partners.

Road to action

- More space and effort for building connections with other project partners as well as overall productive work environment, matching the scope and volume of the project.
- More clarity on planning and instructions, especially at the beginning of the project;
- Take into consideration and address possible language difficulties;
- Additional opinion exchange sessions and more thorough partner involvement at the project proposal and application stage;
- Avoid situations when information and processes are centred in one individual;
- Incorporate feedback from teachers, employers, students, collected during the implementation;
- Involve experts from the public sector (as partners and/or external) to strengthen the training program development;
- More careful evaluation of partners' motivation and commitment to participation;
- More attention to multiplier events evaluation, collecting feedback from participants.

Literature

Ayoubi, R. M. (2013). A model of re-evaluating international partnerships in universities: a UK example. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 3(2), 220-234.

Hjeltnes, T., Fox, A., Hjeltnes, T., Strand, K., & Storvik, M. (2019). Quality assurance and evaluation in Erasmus+ projects, a case study. *INTED2019 Proceedings*, 8758-8764.

Macnamara, J. (2018). A review of new evaluation models for strategic communication: Progress and gaps. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(2), 180-195.

ERASMUS+ 2021 Guide for Experts on Quality Assessment (2021). Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture *European Commission B-1049 Brussels*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/default/files/eplus-guide-experts-quality-assessment-2021_en.pdf

Toolkit for the evaluation of the communication activities (2017). Directorate-General for Communication Unit COMM.D1 - Budget, Accounting and Evaluations, *European Commission B-1049 Brussels*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-evaluation-toolkit_en.pdf#page=59&zoom=100,90,137

Attachment 1 The questionnaire form

**Project partnership and implementation quality evaluation questionnaire for the project
“Skills for Baltic Wood Industry – European Quality in Vocational Education and Training/
Skilled-Up” partners**

Q1

How would you overall evaluate the **quality of the project partnership**?

- a. Excellent
- b. Above Average
- c. Average
- d. Below Average
- e. Very Poor

Q2

How would you overall evaluate the **quality of the project implementation**?

- a. Excellent
- b. Above Average
- c. Average
- d. Below Average
- e. Very Poor

Q3

If there was a possibility to go back to the beginning of the project, which **changes in the project implementation** you think would be useful? Please list below three main suggestions you would offer:

1.
2.
3.

Q4

Please list, in your opinion, three the most successful organisational and/or administrative **solutions implemented** in the Skilled-Up project:

1.
2.
3.

Q5

In your view, what quality assurance aspects helped you to **focus on the quality** of the process and outcomes the most? *Please, rate the following in order of importance from 1 as least important to 7 as most important.*

Having a designated partner with responsibility for quality assurance	
Having a quality assurance plan from the beginning of the project	
Quality assurance is embedded in the project work processes	
Having a formal external quality assurance expert panel	
We are all professionals and always act to the highest standards without needing a formal framework	
Completing the interim and final reports is enough to ensure high quality	
Having a strong and competent project coordinator	

Q6

How would you describe the **composition of the partnership** (the pool of partners)? Was it perfect for the purposes of the project? Do you think the composition could have been strengthened? How? *Please describe [open question]*

--

Q7

How participation in the partnership has **benefited your organisation**? Please assign each statement a score from 1 to 5 where:

1. Not benefited
2. Slightly benefited
3. Moderately benefited
4. Benefited
5. Very benefited

Please assign a **“0”** if the statement is not applicable to your organisation.

Provided useful insights via experience and good practices exchange, learning from other partners, that enhanced the quality of our operations	
Increased the competencies of our training/teaching staff	
Enhanced project management skills	
Improved the competitiveness of my organisation, strengthened its position on the market	
Contributed to the international network broadening, improved our geographical visibility and spread	
Led us to other projects (already confirmed or planned)	
Enhanced synergy between cooperation activities, we found common links with other projects in our portfolio	
Strengthened our cross-sectoral cooperation between VET institutions and industry representatives	
Advanced the research activities of my organisation	
Contributed to the mission of my organisation	
Resulted in significant student/staff/faculty interest in this or similar projects	
Provided with better understanding on teaching process in other countries	
The participation in the partnership brought better results than individual efforts would	
Resulted in new partnerships and cooperation	
Improved the quality of our institution by introducing WBL program with internationally recognized qualification in line with EU quality instruments	
Provided strategy and instruments to address skills shortages in wood processing sector	
Fostered economic development and innovation of the sector by preparing specialists corresponding to labour market needs	
Invested in understanding that digital technologies, mobility and zero-waste production are drivers of change	
Other [please indicate]:	

Q8

Do you think you have achieved **the goals of your organisations** you planned and/or anticipated from this project?

- a. To a great extent
- b. Somewhat
- c. Very little
- d. Not at all

Q9

How would you overall evaluate the **commitment of the partners** to the project implementation?

- a. Excellent
- b. Above Average
- c. Average
- d. Below Average
- e. Very Poor

Q10

How would you overall evaluate the **commitment of your organisation** to the project implementation?

- a. Excellent
- b. Above Average
- c. Average
- d. Below Average
- e. Very Poor

Q11

What were the main **difficulties** you had encountered during the project implementation at your organisation? Please assign each statement a score from 1 to 4 where:

- 1. Wasn't problem at all
- 2. Small negative effect
- 3. Moderate negative effect
- 4. Significant negative effect

Please assign a **"0"** if the statement is not applicable to your organisation.

Lack of engagement/commitment on behalf of the implementation team	
Lack of engagement/commitment on behalf of the decision makers	
Lack of personnel allocated for the project tasks, schedules and deadlines conflicting with other tasks and roles in the organisation	
Personnel turnover	

Language barrier	
Lack of clear understanding what we should do, absence of clear guidelines	
Lack of clear understanding when the tasks are due	
Lack of clear feedback on the performed tasks	
Complicated communication with other partners	
Complicated communication with the project lead	
Too tight deadlines, not enough time allocated for tasks	
Other [please indicate]:	

Q12.

How would you overall evaluate the **internal communication** flow within the partnership?

- a. Very satisfied
- b. Satisfied
- c. Neither
- d. Dissatisfied
- e. Very dissatisfied

Q13.

Based on your experience with this project, please provide your top 3 suggestions/recommendations on how to **improve internal communication** in similar projects in the future?

1.
2.
3.

Q14.

Please think about the **communication** during the Skilled-Up project implementation. To which extent would you agree to the following statements. Please assign to each statement a score from 1 to 5 where:

- 1. Strongly Disagree
- 2. Disagree
- 3. Undecided
- 4. Agree
- 5. Strongly Agree

The lead partner put all efforts to keep us informed about the project implementation progress.	
Our organisation always got adequate feedback about our progress in the project.	
Our organisation was always and in a timely manner provided with adequate information about critical changes.	
The communication between our organisation and other project partners was sufficient.	
The communication between our organisation and the project lead was sufficient.	

The internal communication within our organisation regarding the issues related to the project was sufficient.	
We were always provided with accurate and timely information from the lead partner.	
Our organisation is happy with the level of appreciation and recognition of our contribution to the project success.	
We felt that our feedback and recommendations regarding the project were taken seriously.	
We felt we can directly influence and alter the project implementation if relevant.	

Q15.

How would you overall evaluate the **performance of the Lead Partner, AHK Baltics**, in this project?

- a. Excellent
- b. Above Average
- c. Average
- d. Below Average
- e. Very Poor

Q16.

Would you **recommend AHK** as a partner for future projects?

- a. Strongly recommend
- b. Recommend
- c. Undecided
- d. Would not recommend

Q17.

Would you **recommend other Skilled-Up partners** for future projects?

- a. Strongly recommend
- b. Recommend
- c. Undecided
- d. Would not recommend