Developing Cooperation between Academia and Society through Knowledge and Capacity Building

Working Package 1: Knowledge Building

Knowledge and Good Practices Base

Visegrad Fund

Introduction

This working package aims to enhance knowledge building and learning from good practices. It consists of an evaluation of the activities of project partners within their third mission. The evaluation was based on the partners' internal experience and knowledge and the opinions of the regional actors – the external organizations – involved in cooperation activities.

The internal survey was focused on partners' experiences with implemented activities, achieved results, methods of cooperation, communication, etc. The main areas of interest were the following: (a) education, (b) applied research & dissemination of innovations, (c) employees training, (d) non-formal cooperation activities, and (e) marketing and managing activities. The survey was realized in July 2023.

The external survey helped to reveal the attitudes of external organizations towards existing forms of cooperation and find out their needs and requirements. The external organizations were defined as (a) regional government authorities, (b) local administrative units (LAU II; cities) having a population of more than 5 000 inhabitants, and (c) entrepreneurs - members of the regional chambers of commerce. The survey focused on the following areas: (a) good practices (positives), (b) improvement opportunities (negatives), (c) future intentions (needs and expectations), and (d) recommendations. External data were gathered in October and November 2023. Although the survey suffered from a relatively low response rate, it met its main aim and gave the project team information in acceptable level of detail.

The data were elaborated in this summary report which purpose is to provide a platform for building a common knowledge & good practices base shared among all project partners. The base will become a keystone for creating an online match-making tool connecting academia with society.

Cooperation Activities

The following text summarizes information from all project partners. The purpose of the text is to create an overview of the state of cooperation between the project partners and the external organizations. It is important to note that the text serves as a common knowledge and good practices basis. Hence, it does not capture the details or the solely mentioned practices.

Education

This form of cooperation is the most developed among all partners. The partners are aware of the importance of linking theoretical and practical knowledge/skills and intensively involve external organizations in teaching activities.

There are various forms of cooperation, usually involving direct teaching activities, assignment of case studies, consultation of qualification papers, lectures above standard curriculum, or excursions. This also includes career counseling and mentoring from experts. Some partners have specific courses in their curriculum that have a strong connection to practice, e.g. in the form of an internship, and provide students with specific knowledge directly linked to the needs of practice.

Cooperation in this area is the most preferred by external organizations. They see an opportunity to contact students as their potential employees directly. **Involvement in teaching activities** is often part of the organization's HR or CSR strategy and is thus supported directly by the organization's management. The fact that it is the least demanding form of cooperation, which can be implemented relatively easily, also plays a certain role. The external organizations prefer to be involved in core and extra-curricular courses, both one-off and regular.

The organizations also declare an interest in cooperation on **the assignment of student projects or final theses**. These forms of cooperation are especially interesting for smaller private organizations and public administration organizations. Solving projects by students compensates for the insufficient capacity of internal resources needed to solve a specific problem. Moreover, students can provide the organizations with new insights and diverse approaches for solution. The challenge, however, is the consistency of the requested topics and the possibility of their elaboration by the students, which is limited by students' knowledge and abilities or the content of the relevant course.

A relatively new but rapidly developing form is the **support of students' entrepreneurship skills**. The project partners take different approaches in this area. They often incorporate business skills into teaching activities or realize specialized courses. Furthermore, they provide students with experiences and good practices directly from entrepreneurs. This form of cooperation is the most preferred by external organizations. The reasons are similar to those for engaging in teaching activities. It is about the unpretentiousness of the organization and direct contact with students. The external organizations also mention mentoring, i.e., long-term guidance of promising students in entrepreneurship, as a form of cooperation. The challenge is to support students' companies – the start-ups. The project partners have little experience with this and are still looking for a suitable format for supporting students and involving partners from practice. To a limited extent, external organizations declare an interest in this form of cooperation, but it would greatly depend on the particular conditions.

Applied and Contract Research

All project partners strive for greater involvement in applied research. However, this form of cooperation is implemented with less intensity than the previous form. The project partners still need to fully utilize the potential of their partner networks. The partners thus strive to increase the number of collaborating organizations and the volume of funds obtained. They are looking for a way to better connect academic knowledge with practice needs and identify central topics for project proposals.

Although external organizations declare an interest in cooperation on applied research, **they do not have a detailed idea of its focus, conditions, and possible outputs**. If they mention any suitable areas of cooperation, the most often are the following: strategic planning, operational management, project management, and marketing. It is essential that the project helps them in solving a real problem or provides them with an advantage over the competition. Furthermore, costs, whether financial or administrative, are important for them, as well as the complicatedness of the project acquisition process. Overall, there is a space for intensive cooperation in this area. However, it will significantly depend on the ability of the academic sphere to explain this form of cooperation, point out its benefits, and set mutually beneficial conditions for a particular project call.

The project partners have some previous experience with **contract research**. This form of cooperation is usually based on ad-hoc and short-term cooperation in solving specific problems of external organizations - research contractors. External organizations are also interested in this form of cooperation. However, private organizations are very cautious in this case. They expect an output entirely usable in their business practice, which will help them to achieve their business goals. Public administration organizations offer greater scope for this cooperation, evidenced by the project partners' existing experiences.

Employee Training

Most of the project partners implement professional education as t**he MBA-type programs**, which are focused on various economic and managerial disciplines. These programs usually last 3 or 4 semesters. The programs are part of the study curriculum and are managed by the accreditation rules.

The partners are creating **an offer of short-term, one-off professional courses for employees**. These are either of a general nature, usually focused on current economic / management topics, or they are custom-made, i.e. based on an order from a specific external organization. Although the partners have some experience with this type of education, it still represents rather a supplementary activity.

External organizations declare **an interest in the education of their employees**. They are primarily interested in **one-off (short-term) courses** focused on the following areas: public administration management, project management, strategic management, human resource management, data processing, communication, and rhetoric. The price of the course and the form of teaching (primarily teaching time) are important to them. They also take into consideration whether the course is certified or not. The organizations mention **the comprehensive (long-term) courses** either. However, their demands, especially regarding the schedule of the lectures, are increasing in this case. The external organizations consider studying the accredited MBA-type programs to be an individual choice of employees; their support is not evident in this case.

Events & Non-formal Cooperation

The last form of cooperation has a more social character. It is based on **events in which representatives of the academic sphere meet personally with representatives of external organizations**. The events have various forms – e.g., conferences, discussion forums, round tables, and workshops. These events create a platform for discussion, sharing information, experience and knowledge. They are also a unique opportunity to establish personal contacts essential for successful cooperation. Even if it is more of a supporting area, it certainly has its importance. This is approved by external organizations which declare **their interest in participating in the events**. The only condition is to obtain information about a particular event far advance.

Managing the Cooperation Activities

Management of cooperation with external organizations falls under the agenda of external relations. With one exception, project partners have **relevant department to ensure cooperation activities**. It usually performs the following tasks: (a) searching for potential partners, (b) establishing contacts, (c) communicating with partners, (d) coordinating cooperation activities, (e) informing all participating entities, and (f) promoting.

A significant activity is **communication and promotion**. For reaching external organizations, the project partners use their official websites, on which a separate section is usually dedicated to the cooperation agenda, and their social networks. In addition, personal contact with external partners is the next essential communication channel.

External organizations prefer rather passive forms of communication, such as **specialized websites** or **newsletters**. The role of the websites is to present the areas of cooperation in a clear, comprehensible, and ideally personalized form and give the organizations all necessary information. The role of the newsletter is to inform organizations about the news and/or refresh the cooperation opportunities in their minds. The preferred frequency of sending the newsletter is once every six months. The most important thing is to arouse interest and conviction in organizations about the usefulness of cooperation. In general, **personalized and targeted communication** seems to be the way to establish new forms of cooperation and develop the existing ones.

The organizations prefer **presentation of the cooperation activities publicly**. Organizations are mainly interested in displaying their logos on the websites. They would also appreciate publication of a PR article about a specific cooperation activity.

Summary

The most developed form of cooperation is education. The partners have the most experience with this form, which is also the most preferred by external organizations. **They are willing to engage in all types of education activities**. They are also interested in **supporting students' entrepreneurial skills**, primarily through soft forms like knowledge & experience sharing or mentoring. This form of cooperation is well anchored and relatively easy for managing. Moreover, the external organizations often support this form of cooperation and are willing to release relevant resources.

Cooperation in employee training has great potential for the future. Project partners are aware of this and are trying to develop this form of cooperation, albeit with varying intensity. They have experience from both accredited education programs and specific professional education courses. Professional education courses, especially of a smaller scale, are attractive to external organizations. They are willing to pay for them, but they demand an adequate return value and an individual approach to a certain extent. It is, therefore, necessary to define the offer in this way, i.e., present the advantages (value) of the courses, ensure their quality, and provide the external organizations with the possibility of adapting the courses to the needs of their employees.

The most desired, but at the same time the least developed, is cooperation on applied and contract research projects. Project partners are still looking for ways how to cooperate more intensively with external organizations under the framework of a joint project. However, external organizations themselves seek this form sparingly. They do not have a sufficient idea of the possibilities that come into consideration and are unaware of project cooperation's benefits. Sometimes, they are also limited by insufficient resources necessary for the implementation of cooperation (primarily in the case of contract research). **The development of this form of cooperation thus represents the greatest challenge for the future**. The challenge lies in explaining the main idea and advantages of cooperation to external organizations through an active marketing approach.

External organizations prefer the passive forms of communication. This finding correlates with the current approach of project partners. However, the organizations want **up-to-date, correct, precise, and well-structured information in one place**, ideally with the possibility of their personalized search. They also want **simple one-channel communication**. Unfortunately, the partners have not yet reflected these requirements. External organizations are not entirely opposed to active outreach by newsletters. However, their frequency must be modest. An alternative form is based on personal contacts with external organizations during informal meetings. Therefore, **the informal forms of cooperation**, based on personal meetings and exchanging information, are important and should be developed in the future.

If we summarize the findings, we can postulate **basic premises** for the next project phase, the Working Package II, which will be devoted to development of an online match-making tool in a form of a web application that connects external organizations with the academic sphere.

1. The form of the web application will be **a virtual marketplace** (e-shop). The particular forms of cooperation or subordinate activities will represent the product.

2. The basic structure of the application will be derived from the analyzed forms of cooperation, which will form **the offer**: (1) **cooperation in teaching**, (2) **cooperation in employee training**, and (3) **cooperation in the project area**.

3. The offer will be defined **in advance** in its basic parameters to correspond to the reality of the project partners. Hence, it will be relatively general. External organizations will be allowed **to adapt the offer** within the predetermined intentions (e.g. by choosing from variants, defining areas of interest, specifying requirements). For each form of cooperation, requesting **a specific activity** that will not be included in the offer will be possible. As such, it will be possible to request the creation of a "tailor-made product".

4. The application's main purpose will be to **"sell" the product**, i.e., to arouse interest in the given cooperation activity. Its description will highlight the potential benefits for external organizations. If possible, the description will be enriched by **referencing** activities that have already occurred, supplemented by visualization, links, etc.

5. The application will allow organizations **to express their interest in a cooperation activity by putting it in "the shopping basket"**. They can check their request, fill in basic identification information, and then submit the request. After that, they will receive a confirmation by e-mail.

6. The request recipient will be a predefined employee of the project partner. He / She will see the basic parameters of the request and be able to respond to it - usually agreeing on the implementation details.

7. The application allows external organizations to **register** with the possibility of **personalization** in the following areas of interest: (a) interest in news according to the form of cooperation, (b) interest in invitations to educational and social events, (c) interest in sending a newsletter (twice a year), (d) interest in a formal partnership with a project partner. An employee of the project partner **will be notified** of the creation of a registration or changes in the registration.

8. The application will have **a news section**. It will be possible to present an up-to-date, specific cooperation activity (e.g. a specific project or an educational event) there. In case of interest (declared in the registration), the organization will receive a notification with a link to the details. It will be able to express its interest in the same way as the standard offer of cooperation activities.

9. The application will have **an "about us" section** dedicated to introducing the partner, including contact information or other details.

10. The application will enable **to present all the cooperating organizations** by their logos.

11. The application's structure will be simple, straightforward, and intuitive. The content will be as brief as possible yet concise and engaging. The graphics will be modern and attractive at first glance. Thus, **the application will be created with a strong emphasis on marketing**.

12. The application will be partially **adapted to the specifics of the project partners**. It will have mutations to national languages. It will also respect the basic parameters of the graphic design of the project partners (e.g. colors, logo).