

## Management summary

### Evaluation ESF call 'Training for the future'

#### 1/ Situation

##### CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVE

The subject of this review concerns partnership building in [ESF call 'Training for the Future'](#). The objective of the call was to develop training course(s) that respond to the competence changes that will be needed in the future. This includes the development of new training course(s) and related teaching materials, testing the trainings on a limited target audience, and/or adjusting tested trainings. The basis for developing these training course(s) are the results from the SCOPE competence projections or similar studies, which provide an overview of shifts in competences.

Europe WSE has chosen not to open the call to individual actors, but to experiment with partnerships. The aim is to gain insights on the chosen framework and strategy around partnerships based on the experience of the partnership-building process in the ESF call 'Training for the Future' and to take these insights into account when developing and organising future calls within the ESF+ Operational Programme 2021-2027.

The call was launched in October 2022. Europe WSE put forward nine themes (major evolutions in industry, soft skills, drones, energy, retail transport and logistics, renovation, healthcare, circular economy, and airport activities<sup>1</sup>) around which - in partnership - a project could be developed. The projects ran from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023.

##### EVALUATION APPROACH

As the evaluation of partnerships within the 'Training for the Future' call aims to learn deeply about the process, underlying mechanisms and conditions that explain observed outcomes, we adopt an [enlightenment approach](#) (Chen, 2015). The aim is to better understand the partnership formation process and the impact of support from Europe WSE in view of future calls.

##### RESEARCH METHODS

In a first step, the research design was refined. This included a literature review of the scientific literature on policy planning, partnerships, and organisational networks. This input served to further refine the conceptual frameworks of the study, and to identify factors and mechanisms that allow for better framing of the results later on. Based on the literature, criteria were established to select the cases for the case study. In addition, a document analysis of the substantive project proposals and other documentation from Europe WSE was also carried out to gain an understanding of the call and to establish a timeline on the partnership formation and further project execution. In addition, an exploratory in-depth interview via Microsoft Teams was conducted with those responsible at Europa WSE for the call. Based on their knowledge of the projects and the previously defined criteria, the cases for the case study were selected during this interview. The conceptual framework, approach and measurement tools were then validated in a working session with the promoters of the different partnerships and those responsible for the call at Europe WSE.

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<sup>1</sup> No project proposal was eventually submitted for airport activities.



The data were then collected in a second step through:

- ▶ **Case study of two 'positive' cases.** A positive case is a case that fulfils the precondition criteria (consensus of purpose, strong network management and governance structure, trust, partnership composition, result). 'Soft skills' and 'Energy' were selected in consultation with those in charge of the call at Europe WSE. A case consisted of an exploratory in-depth interview with the promoter(s) of the partnership, a focus group with a diverse selection of partners, and one to two in-depth follow-up interviews.
- ▶ **Focus groups with all other partnerships.** For all unselected partnerships, a focus group was organised with various select partners. These focus groups took place online via Microsoft Teams (except for one focus group that took place physically).

The data was then coded and analysed through Nvivo, based on the evaluation questions and inductive codes.

## 2/ Partnership-building interventions

The partnership-building interventions in the framework of the 'Training of the Future' project call consist of [the call](#) (with its characteristics and requirements in terms of form and content), [the organisation of the partnership-building and project submission](#) (consisting of the preliminary process, the launch of the call, the formation of the partnerships and the drafting of the project proposal), and finally [the support of Europe WSE during the project execution](#) (from the coach and manager, through the learning moments and through the organisation of project-specific workshops).

### THE CALL

On the one hand, we distinguish a number of **formal requirements** in the call. For instance, a [partnership](#) had to be formed for each project. These partnerships had to be [composed](#) of actors from education, sector/work field and innovation and a representative of a joint committee. Each partnership had to be surrounded by a [advisory group](#). In addition, a number of [budgetary rules](#) had to be met. Finally, the [duration](#) of the project was fixed. As the REACT-EU funds had to be spent before the end of 2023, a longer duration was not possible. At the start, there was a lot of uncertainty about these formal requirements, in particular the added value and expectations of working in partnerships, the definition of the different types of actors (in particular 'innovation actor'), and a number of budgetary rules. In addition, the duration was felt to be very short in order to achieve the objectives and maximise the added value of the advisory group. However, given the short duration, the flexibility given in the budget throughout the project execution was much appreciated. Retrospectively, most actors involved were also convinced of the added value of working in partnerships, and are also hugely positive about the added value of the partnerships' diverse composition. Finally, there is a demand for simplicity, minimal administrative burden and attention to privacy, which should also be able to remain respected within a partnership consisting of different organisations.

On the other hand, **content requirements** were identified in the call. The partnerships had to form around a selection of [9 relevant societal themes](#), determined by Europe WSE on the basis of the policy priorities, the themes around which SCOPE studies were developed in the ESF call of which the 'Training for the Future' call was the successor, and input from the call of interest. [Competence projections \(SCOPE studies\) or similar studies](#) were to be used as a basis. When developing training(s), partnerships were asked to include the [principles of the HILL method](#). These content requirements were seen as positive, but each provided some challenges.

### ORGANISATION OF PARTNERSHIP BUILDING AND PROJECT SUBMISSION

The organisation of partnership formation and project submission was broadly done in 3 phases.

- ▶ **Preliminary process that resulted in the launch of the call.** This preliminary process was perceived as vague and chaotic: it was not sufficiently clear to the consulted actors what the intent of both the preliminary process and the call was, and the link between the two was not sufficiently seen.



- ▶ **Forming the partnerships.** Central to this were the working sessions organised by theme. Participation in this working session proved crucial to be part of the partnership around that theme. However, due to the short timeframe, it is believed that not all potentially relevant actors were present at the theme session. The facilitation of these sessions, done by those in charge at Europe WSE, was felt to be far too limited. Europe WSE had also anticipated having the session filled in 'bottom-up'. The overarching, major bottleneck to forming strong partnerships was the very short timeframe in which this had to be done.
- ▶ **Drafting and submitting the project proposal.** In the formatting process, there was little time and little guidance/framework provided from Europe WSE. Some appreciated the freedom and flexibility, others pointed out that this was not evident. After approval of the project proposal, the project started almost immediately. Together with the limited time to work out the details of the project proposal, this resulted in a loss of time in effective implementation.

### SUPPORT EUROPE WSE IN PROJECT EXECUTION

Europe WSE's support in project implementation showed itself in three forms.

- ▶ **Support from the coach and administrator.** This was perceived as very supportive and accessible and was much appreciated. The distinction between the two roles was limited, but the actors involved did not feel the need for it either, given the limited control they experienced. The intensity of coaching and follow-up was adapted to the demand and need of each partnership. One comment that did emerge was that the coaching could have gone even further in terms of guidance, offering solutions, helping to think things through, etc.
- ▶ **Monthly learning moments organised by Europe WSE.** These moments offered a good platform for networking and exchanging experiences, and were appreciated for this. However, actors had limited experience that these moments led to real synergies between the different partnerships, nor that these moments were really focused on learning.
- ▶ **Project-specific workshops.** These were customised and usually organised or initiated at the request of a partnership. For the partnerships that experienced these workshops, they were an added value, even if they sometimes came a bit 'late' in the project's duration. This experience also shows that more frameworks could have been provided by Europe WSE throughout project execution, both in terms of content and process.

## 3/ Mechanisms for proper functioning of partnerships

Based on the experiences of the partnerships within the call, some mechanisms that ensure good functioning within a partnership can be identified. Starting point for this analysis was the conceptual framework established based on insights from the scientific literature. The theoretical insights were checked off and enriched with insights from practice.

### PARTNERSHIP COMPOSITION

A first important mechanism to achieve strong outcomes of the partnership is a **diverse composition of the partnership** in which various expertises, from different domains and from different levels, come together. Due to the criteria regarding diverse composition in the call, the diversity of expertise was, by and large, effectively present in most partnerships. The partnerships indicate that the differentiated composition ensures valuable cooperation with partners not usually contacted.

It is important to also connect this diversity of expertise sufficiently to realise synergies. For this, sufficient **cohesion in the partnership** is important. Cohesion in the partnership is achieved by strong network management, a well-thought-out network structure, an appropriate consultation and agreement framework and by a clear, supported common objective.

### GOAL CONSENSUS



Goal consensus is a second mechanism for strong partnerships. A **common goal** creates cohesion, but also creates a shared belief that working in partnership is necessary to achieve the outcome. Important to achieving goal consensus is a good balance among the various partners in 'letting go' of the organisation's own priorities on the one hand and finding a place for the organisation's own priorities in the common priorities of the partnership on the other.

It is important to make the objectives explicit at a sufficiently detailed level (especially also at lower level in the network structure) and then integrate them into the common objective at higher level. Collaborative methodologies help to achieve supported objectives. This approach is time-consuming, and given the short time span in the process, not many promoters have chosen this approach. Nevertheless, some partnerships did succeed in this, for instance by organising iterative working sessions or a broad survey of the partners and final target group. It turned out to be useful to allow the necessary time for this collaborative approach because it creates support for the objectives in the partnership.

### NETWORK MANAGEMENT

**Strong network management** appears to be hugely central to partnership success. The network manager should have good network management skills to take up the role fully. Strong network managers manage to successfully set up the other mechanisms for the good functioning of the partnership (good cohesion, goal consensus, strong network structure, well thought-out consultation and agreement framework, clear roles and responsibilities, trust).

In partnerships where the promoter was given room in the partnership (i.e. budgetary) and in his or her organisation (i.e. being freed up for the necessary hours), the promoter role could be fulfilled as a fully-fledged assignment. Besides the necessary competences, sufficient time also appears to be a very important success factor for strong network management, also given that the promoter must be able to switch very flexibly and intervene quickly where necessary.

### NETWORK STRUCTURE

A **strong network structure**, adapted to the characteristics and objective of the partnership, is also an important mechanism contributing to the success of the partnership. The network structure was partly fixed through the call and guidance from Europe WSE. Namely, the call directed a structure consisting of a promoter, sub-promoters, and advisory group(s). Examples of extensions include an additional responsible person or SPOC per training or adding an additional partnership-wide didactic role.

### ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The next mechanism concerns a **clear division of roles** within the partnership. For this, it is important to have a clear view of everyone's expertise and capacity - a challenge in a new partnership where actors usually do not know each other. Besides a clear division of roles, it is also important that the division of roles is logical and well thought-out: everyone's role should match their own expertise, interest and capacity.

Also, for a good division of roles, one ideally starts from a clear, supported and detailed objective of the partnership. Formalising the roles in a document provides good guidance. The division of roles should also be logical and well thought-out. A strategically and diversely composed partnership is important to achieve this. Practice shows that it is important to also allow flexibility in the division of roles and tasks throughout project execution and to actively monitor the division of roles and tasks. The short period of partnership formation and project submission, the vagueness of the route at the start, the difficult assessment of each other's expertise, expectations, way of working, etc. have led to a lot of partnerships shifting roles, tasks and sometimes budgets. Understanding for this from the partners and from Europe WSE was seen as an added value.

### CONSULTATION AND AGREEMENT FRAMEWORK



A **well-designed consultation and agreement framework** is important to smoothly coordinate a (large) partnership, build cohesion in the partnership, and create trust and a feeling of equality. It turned out to be of added value to offer sufficient support in the planning of consultation moments and to take a well-considered approach to the frequency and agenda setting of consultation moments at the different levels. A successful approach to this appears to decide on a consultation structure when drawing up the project proposal.

## TRUST

Cooperation requires close partnership and trust, especially when there is a need to work together across organisational boundaries. **Trust** within the partnership is therefore a mechanism that contributes to the quality of the outcome. Trust in the network manager and promoter, given his key position, is crucial for broader trust in the partnership. Important for this is the neutrality, reliability and credibility of the network manager. Trust also grows gradually through positive experiences and through clear division of work and work agreements (which are observed).

## FAST AND STRONG START-UP

Finally, given the short duration of the project, a **fast and strong start-up** proved to be a hugely important mechanism for the success of a partnership. Offering sufficient structure from the start through a clear division of roles, well thought-out consultation structure, a clear agreement framework with plan of action and milestones, clear communication channels and the necessary templates, branding, manual, ... proved to be a huge strength. In this, the network manager plays a major role.

Ideally, the necessary preparation is done when developing the project proposal or when starting the project. The first step is to -collaboratively- formulate clear, supported, joint objectives. A strong network structure, good and clear division of roles, as well as a highly sophisticated consultation structure and a clear agreement framework can then be attached to these objectives.

## 4/ Outcomes

The task of this sub-evaluation was not to evaluate the outcome of the call and the projects, but to identify possible outcomes that emerge from well-functioning partnerships. The following outcomes of successful partnerships were identified:

- ▶ Achieving an **innovative result was** not achieved if the knowledge, expertise and skills of the various partners were not united in a partnership. However, partners do indicate that more time was needed to also arrive at fully tested, validated training courses and to achieve more synergy between training courses within the same theme.
- ▶ **Knowledge and expertise building** through participation in the project, both in terms of content (linked to the development of training courses) and process (related to working in partnership).
- ▶ **Networking**, through connection with actors both inside and outside their own partnership.
- ▶ **Strengthened network thinking** among the organisations in the partnerships and the ecosystems around them.

## 5/ Recommendations

Based on the insights on the partnership-building process in the ESF call 'Training for the Future', we formulate the following recommendations for the development and organisation of future calls within the ESF+ Operational Programme.



Inherent in partnerships that are expected to solve a complex problem, and which require several partners, is that there is ambiguity about *how* the problem should be solved.<sup>2</sup> We therefore stress throughout these recommendations the importance of flexibility/avoidance of rigidity in developing and organising future calls in which there is partnership working around complex challenges.

▶ **When developing the call, thoroughly consider the most appropriate form and composition of partnerships.**

As partnerships are not the most obvious way of implementing a project, it is advisable to check whether and which form of partnership adds value to the objective of the call. In addition, it remains important to make a well-considered choice in the desired expertise and thus type of actors to be present in the partnership. Also allow for flexibility in the advisory board function, when directed. Only steer towards an 'open and dynamic partnership' when it is of long duration.

▶ **Continue to put forward a relevant, substantiated and sufficiently broad framework in the call.**

Define in advance a sufficiently broad demarcation of the themes around which partnerships can be formed and communicate transparently how this demarcation was established. Think critically about the scope of the various themes and, in case of differences in scope, consider the consequences in terms of, for instance, process supervision and financing. Finally, provide a strong, substantiated and supported substantive and methodological framework within which projects can be developed and guarantee that this framework is of sufficient quality and relevant to each theme. It is important to provide sufficient flexibility in this respect.

▶ **Ensure appropriate and clear rules regarding budget and administration.**

Ensure clarity in budget rules and highlight differences compared to previous budget rules. In addition, continue to ensure budget flexibility during project implementation. Maximise the administrative simplicity and accessibility of the Platos platform, while ensuring that the platform is adapted to the specificities of partnerships (e.g. privacy). Provide a clear description of the role of the network manager and give direction on the time investment (and the necessary budget) that should be in return.

▶ **Provide appropriate duration and timing.**

Provide an appropriate duration and timing (e.g. by calendar or academic year) for the project, in line with the expectations of the output and of the sustainability of the partnership.

▶ **Check whether valorisation is among the objectives of the project and link expectations to it.**

If valorisation is part of project implementation, link the necessary budget to it. If partnerships are expected to do it themselves, provide the necessary guidelines, follow-up and support.

▶ **Ensure thoughtful communication during the pre-project and launch call.**

Take a well-considered approach to stakeholder involvement in a preliminary phase of call development (e.g. clear objective and role of stakeholders) and carefully handle the input requested. In addition, consider which actors need to be reached with the call and link an appropriate communication campaign to it.

▶ **Provide a good framework for partnership building.**

Provide sufficient time and intensified process supervision for partnership building. Devote sufficient attention to fulfilling the role of network manager.

▶ **Ensure sufficient time for the preparation and submission of the project proposal and between project awarding and project start-up.**

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer-Keyse, J., Luksha, P., Cubista, J., (2020), "Learning ecosystems: An emerging praxis for the future of education." Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO & Global education Futures.



Allow more time for the drafting of the project proposal. This gives space to work out the vision and approach in greater detail, and to optimise the composition of the partnership accordingly. Allow time between the project award decision and the start-up of the project, so that the actors involved can organise themselves practically and free up capacity for the project execution.

- ▶ Provide a good framework for establishing a strong partnership.

There may be added value in offering more frameworks or even process guidance for establishing a strong partnership. However, it is important when offering frameworks that they should not be too narrow or restrictive and leave room for flexible interpretation. Depending on the time given and the complexity of the call and projects, it can be weighed up whether this is provided in the project proposal drafting phase or in an initial start-up phase of the project.

- ▶ Provide strong support, coaching and process guidance from Europe WSE (and possibly partners).

Remain committed to accessible, approachable and flexible support from those involved in Europe WSE, which emphasises cooperation rather than control. Strengthen the coaching role. Think strategically about organising meetings with all partnerships. Decide which objective is most relevant within the context of the call: networking, sharing experience, finding synergies, and/or learning? Depending on the objective, foresee an appropriate approach and agenda.

