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IDEA Inclusive tertiary Education in the West BalkanS (IDEA)

Mid-Term Quality Monitoring Report & Recommendations



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Introduction

The project's overall aim is to improve access, establish inclusive education learning conditions and develop employment opportunities for SwD and students with learning difficulties in the Western Balkans through building capacities of the Student Service Units, faculty, administration, students and governing bodies of the partner countries' collaborating HEIs and their respective Ministries of Education, developing modern inclusion practices, assistive technologies and networking, which will also benefit disadvantaged groups in lower educational levels (primary and secondary education).

The Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA) project proposal is innovative, in the sense that it introduces new ideas and methods related to the inclusion, accessibility of SwD in HE in the Western Balkans. In spite of legal provisions in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro regarding the accessibility, all-inclusiveness and diversification obligations of HEIs towards SwD, as has been demonstrated at the start of this section, the reality leaves much to be desired.

In addition, a number of services to be developed with the help of technology are also innovative, as they are to be applied for the first time in the Albanian language, thereby benefitting not only SwD, but also pupils with disabilities. These are digital services providing accessible learning materials and services for the purpose of removing barriers against print disabilities. These services support the cycle of conversion and supply of academic textbooks in Albanian to various accessible digital formats according to the type of disability.

In order to improve its equity of access overall aim, the project is working to accomplish the following objectives:

- Create and/or enhance institutional support structures and protocols to enable access to Higher Education and foster the consolidation of a social integration and accessibility culture within partner universities.
- Enhance the managerial and administrative staff capacities of partner HEIs dealing with and implementing inclusive education practices.
- Equip the Disability Support Units with effective and relevant assistive technology.
- Increase external relations cooperation to improve Higher Education access and employment of disabled students.
- Increase public and students' awareness and understanding on the importance of inclusive education within HE for the society.

This report is a part of the IDEA project Quality Plan and Monitoring Work Package 3. Respectively this report represents activity 3.3. Mid-term report. As described in the QA Plan, the overall aim of Quality Assurance is to monitor and evaluate all project activities. To do this, a number of tools have been developed. This mid-term report aims to provide a detailed overview of the progress and processes of the respective activities of Work

Packages 1 through 4 realized until November 2022. It will further provide an overview of the impact of the activities implemented on the target groups, taking into account the key progress and performance indicators which were defined in the QA Plan.

In order to track the progress and achievements of all project activities, we have asked all of the consortium partners to share a questionnaire with the members of their institution who are actually engaged with the project activities, reports and dissemination. This is the first report dedicated to this activity. Below in the annex section of this report you can find attached the questionnaire used to collect information for monitoring and evaluation.

Chapter I : Overall Project Feedback Analysis

ADRF in coordination with all of the consortium partners has attended and received feedback from partners in each partner meeting including training, management and activity implementation. In general, QA team acquired a good overview of the activities carried out in the 5 different Work Packages. To get a deeper insight into the progress of all work packages and to identify possible strengths and weaknesses during implementation, we asked respondents to answer the questions sincerely, report any issues as well as provide honest feedback in order to address any given issue to the steering committee, partners and project coordinators.

Project Implementation of activities according to respondents from partner institutions

ADRF in coordination with all of the consortium partners has given effort to measure the implementation level of activities. Given the difficult times of operations of the institutions, it is important to highlight that many partners have face various governmental restrictions which hindered the implementation of many activities physically. While this does not apply per se' to project activities only, institutions in general were forced to come up with alternative ways of activity implementations in their institutions. In general, activities requiring physical presence were organized in blended and/ or in virtual ways.

The activities organized in virtual ways are:

- 3 Remote Study Visits:
 - 1. 12-14-18 May 2021, in the National Kapodistrian University, Athens.
 2. 24-25-26-27-28 May 2021, in the Masaryk University,
 3. 14-15-16-17 June2021, in the University of Limerick, Ireland

Alongside them, online trainings were organized in the framework of the study visits:

1. 12-14-18 May 2021 with National Kapodistrian University, Athens.
2. 24-25-26-27-28 May 2021 with the Masaryk University, Check Republic
3. 14-15-16-17 June2021 -with the University of Limerick, Ireland

Following activities organized on site once traveling was permitted include:

1. Study visits at the University of Brno, Czech Republic, from 08-11 May 2022
2. Study visit at the University of Limerick from 20-24 June, 2022
3. Study visit at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens from 9-12 November 2022

Activities organized in a blended method (both physical and virtual) include:

- Steering committee meetings
- Project collaboration meetings
- Dissemination activities
- Workshops
- Training
- Focus groups
- Data gathering
- Partner meetings
- Info Sessions with stakeholders

Project Management and Communication

Partners' feedback approves the management strategy as well as management activities conducted so far. Consortium expresses the satisfaction of project management, coordinator approach as well as coordinator's willingness to always provide information and support for project partner in different phases of project implementation.

Overall project management strategy and its implementation receives "full grade" and positive feedback by consortium respondents. There are no reported issues regarding project coordination, management or steering committee by any of the contacted, respectively engaged respondents.

Project Outcomes

Regarding the achieved project results, partners express their satisfaction and highlight some of the drawbacks of the implementation. However, all of the outcomes achieved prove good cooperation and positive results. As highlighted some minor drawbacks such as delays in outcomes and lack of physical presences in promotion and disseminating outcomes are due to Covid -19 restrictions and impact.

In general, there are no project outcomes that have not been attained as planned by project timeline for this period of the midterm reporting. Almost all partners respond that they have a clearer understanding of their research capacities and what they need to do in order to further strengthen and cooperation in the region and further develop their research capacities. This proves that by small steps the general project outcome and aim is also being accomplished.

Chapter II: Overall evaluation of implemented project activities

As can be seen in the detailed answers below, regarding implementation of the IDEA project at their own Higher Education Institutions (HEI)/organization, partners are in the great majority highly satisfied; the proposed timeline of activities was both realistic and feasible for partner organizations and 70.2% are very or completely satisfied with the progress of activities in their institution. 92.3% of respondents declared that they didn't have any difficulties with the implementation of activities. 7.7% report difficulties/challenges with implementation, which are further explained in the replies to the following questions. A number of these difficulties are related to Covid-19 and its effects on implementation/cooperation. Specifically, some of the partners stated that they had problems as a result of Covid-19 was virtual meeting instead of real meeting brings challenges in interaction. The awareness level of the project is was described by the majority of partners as "excellent" 54%; "good" 35% and 10% describe it as "fair".

The description of activities implemented so far that partners have provided shows that all partners have been actively involved in diverse project activities. The following activities were held by the partners: the Kick-off meeting, workshops and trainings, which established the project management structures, the development of new protocols and the drafting of a policy paper with normative suggestions for Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, supplementing existing normative and regulatory framework to address the challenges of inclusive tertiary education accommodating the needs of SwD and SwLD.

a. 10 New Protocols were prepared from each WBs HEI-s partners in this project

b. The Policy Papers with Normative Suggestions, on country level are under preparation from each Consortium, and as foreseen will be delivered in the respective Ministries in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro;

c. Accessibility Units have been established in the participation partner countries' HEI through the knowledge of visiting Accessibility Units of the homologue Centre at Masaryk University and the University of Limerick in order to study all aspects of how the units operate (normative, regulatory, technological, psychological, HR, communicative, managerial, administrative, etc.)

d. Assistive technology equipment has been purchased, indispensable for accessible tertiary education, to thereby establish or enhance their Accessibility Units;

e. Trainings of the participating partner countries' HEIs from the programme countries' HEIs-Academics, administrators, governors and managers were conducted with the groups to provide accessible HE services for SwD and serve the needs of SwLD:

- Initial Training of Registrar Office, Voluntary Support & Transport Services' Coordinator 21.02.2022 -25.02.2022, in Podgorica
- Training of Built Environment Accessibility 14.03.2022 – 18.03.2022, in Tirana
- Initial Training of Academic Advisors: support services for SwD; Training of Academic Advisors on Inclusive Teaching, Learning Assessment Methods;

- Initial Training of International Relations Offices' Coordinators & Career Officers between 04.04.2022 - 08.04.2022, in Podgorica.

After the training sessions, Accessibility Units at POLIS University, Aleksander Moisiu University, Medical University of Tirana, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi, The Catholic University "Our Lady of Good Counsel", Epoka University, International Business College of Mitrovica, and Universum College, were established and have become operational.

Evaluation of implemented project activities

The following replies have been provided in response to the Evaluation Questionnaire, which aimed to gather feedback about general implementation of project activities at each HEI/organization, about Management and Communication and Outcomes achieved so far.

Fig. 1: How do you rate the work carried out by the project team at your own HEI/organisation?

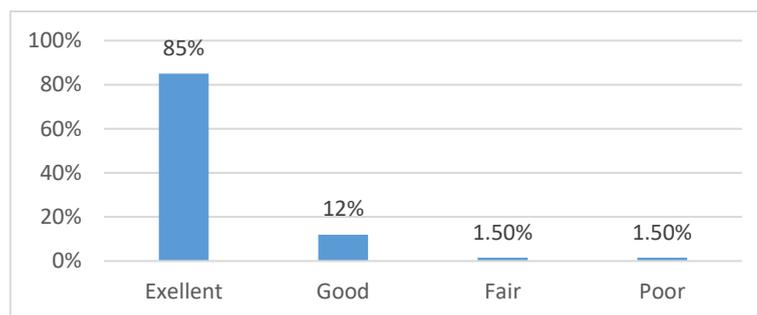


Fig 2: Was the proposed timeline of activities realistic and feasible for Your HEI/organization?

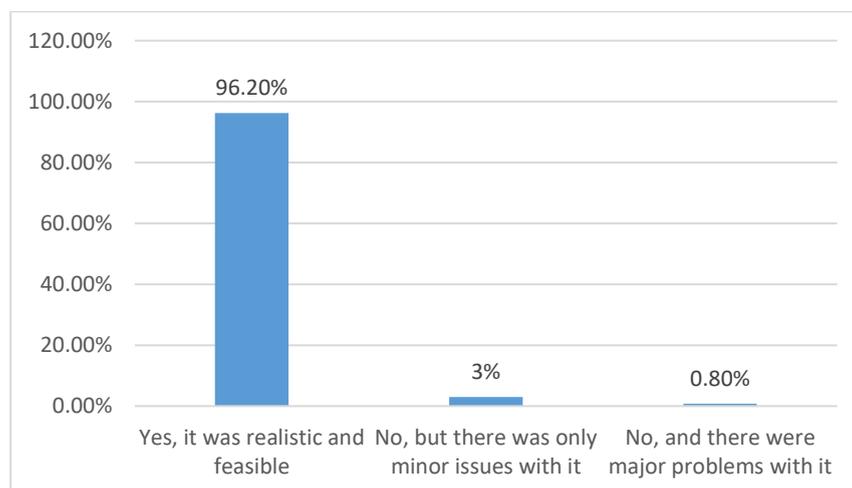


Fig. 3: How satisfied are you with the progress of activities in your institution?

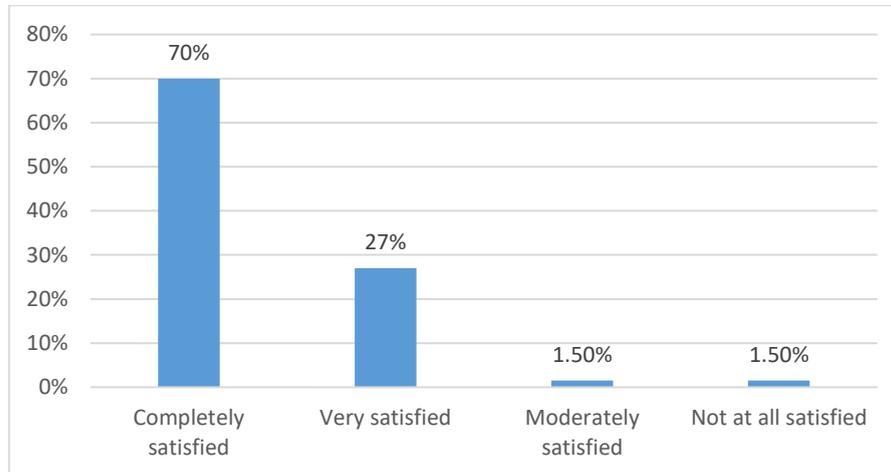


Fig. 4: Did you have any difficulties/challenges in the implementation of the activities?

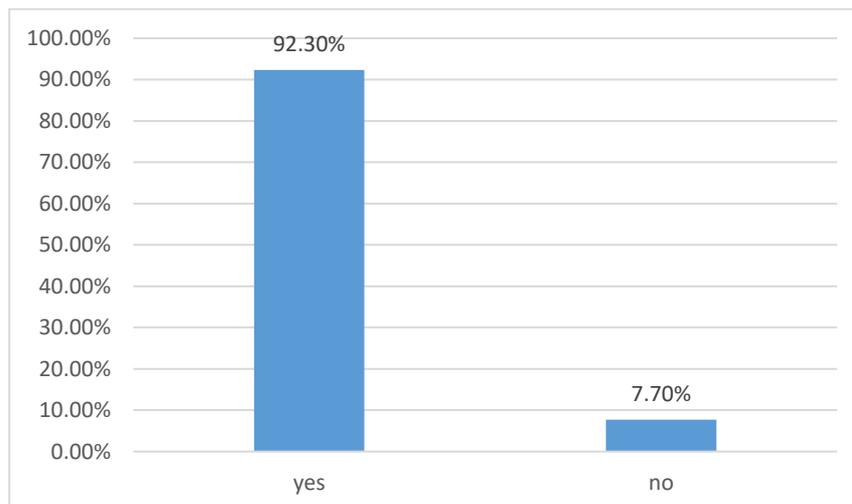
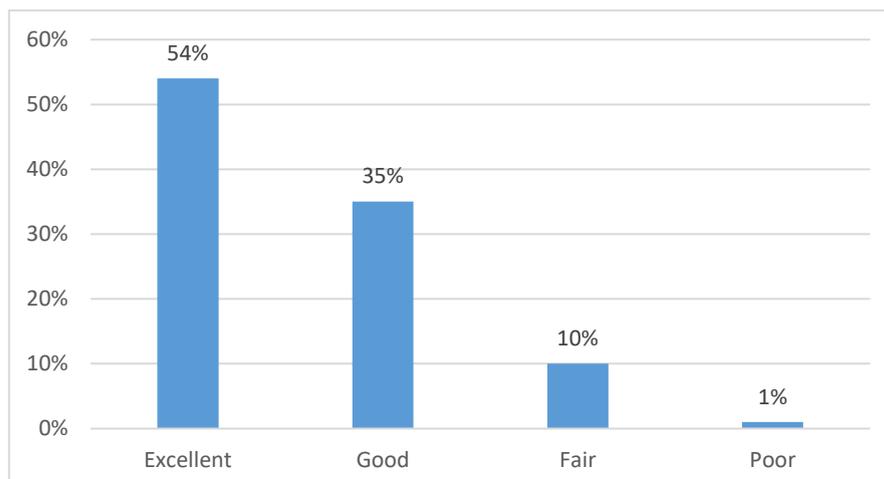


Fig. 5: What is the awareness level about the project in your institution?



Management and Communication

The feedback on Overall Management and Communication of the IDEA project is positive. As can be seen in the detailed answers below, the evaluation for overall project management and coordination is 77% “excellent” and 23% “good”, while financial management is rated by 61.5% of partners between “excellent” and by 38.5% as “good”. Overall time management has a slightly lower evaluation: 74% responded that it was “excellent”, 23% “good” and 3% “fair”. Communication between partners is evaluated by 80% of partners as “excellent” and by 12% as “good”, and 8% as “fair”. Overall visibility and communication activities have an outstanding evaluation of 70% as “excellent”, 24% as “good” and 6% “fair”.

From the further recommendations on Management/Communication provided, one can extract the following advice for future implementation:

- 1) Web page to be updated on time.
- 2) If possible, try to organize the remaining training activities physically and not substitute them with online or hybrid training.
- 3) Using the dedicated website for info broadcasting and exchange for everyone to access.

Fig.6: How do you rate the overall project management and coordination of the project?

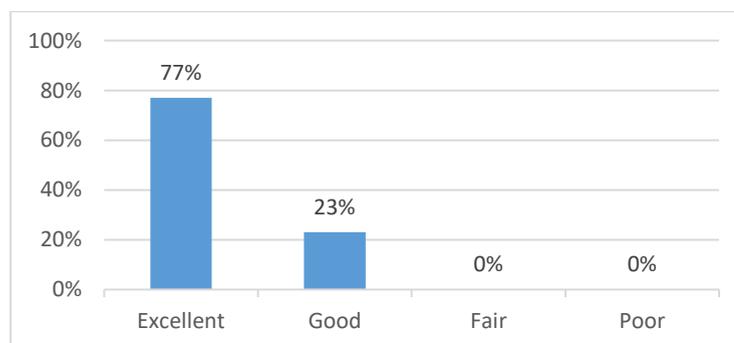


Fig.7: How do you rate overall time management and respect of agreed deadlines in the project?

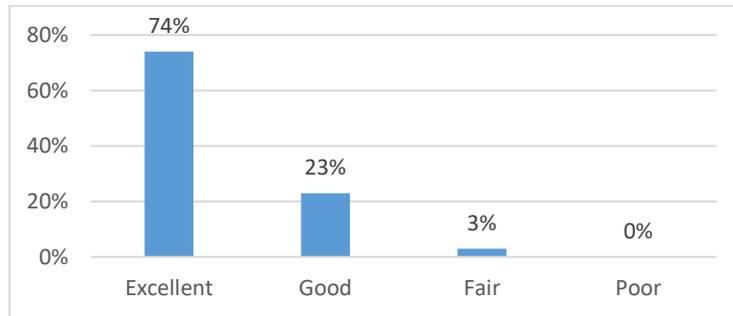


Fig. 8: How do you rate the quality of communication among partners and projectmanagement team?

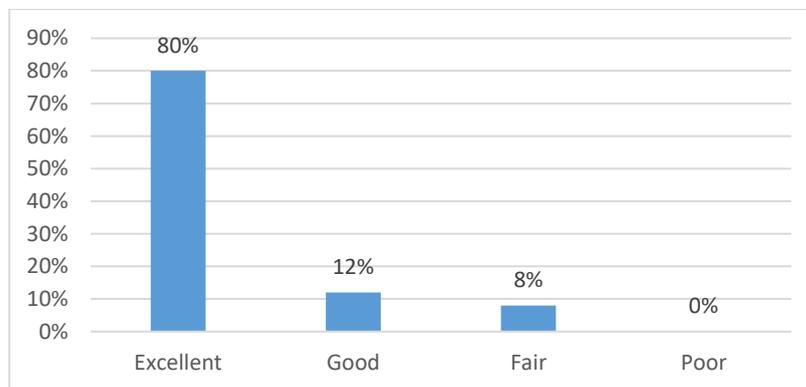


Fig. 9: How do you rate the efficiency of visibility and communication means at project level?

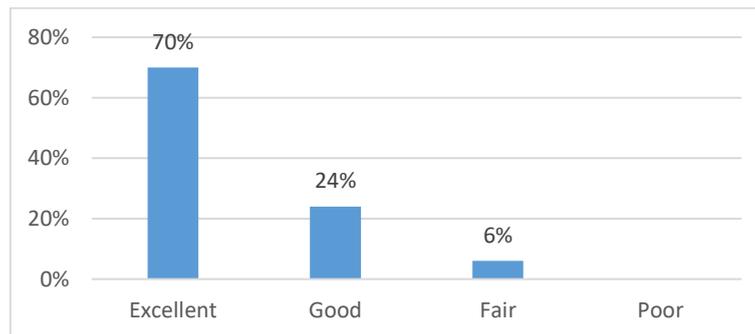
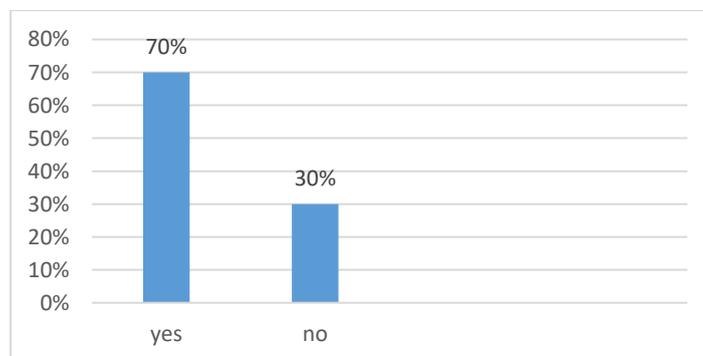


Fig. 10: Did your institution undertake any visibility/communication activities to promote DRIVE?



Visibility/ communication activities undertaken

It is a positive thing that 70 % of partners report having undertaken visibility/communication activities and the other part that decelerate that they didn't undertake any visibility/communication activities to promote IDEA includes 30%. Below are specified the activities that are undertaken from partners to promote IDEA:

1. Through own Institutional Web/ social media
2. Sharing info on the project objectives and results in department, faculty meetings; sharing the project website; various posts in the partners websites and social media on project activities, mail communications with the staff regarding equipment and the library access provided by the project, info on the project provided to the ministry;
3. Apart from communication emails and newsletters related to the IDEA project, the institution has also developed individual and collective meetings, social media and website activities in order to inform, involve and engage further academic staff and students. Such a process was fundamental for the proper implementation of the activities in our courses.
4. Promotion of project activities at official university website and social media.
5. Publication in the organization's websites, newsletters, social media

Outcomes

According to partner responses, generally the project has achieved all of the foreseen outcomes based on the timeline. Respondents highlight that although the Accessibility Units that were established in some universities, are still at the pilot phase, yet they have started to see the positive impact that those units have at the universities. The training and workshops held for staff members prove to be very effective and those trainings as outcomes are highly appreciated by project partners. Respondents, generally welcome study visits, trainings, workshops, awareness raising events organized, as they have all contributed to create and/or enhance institutional support structures and protocols to enable access of PwD to Higher Education and foster the consolidation of a social integration and accessibility culture within partner universities; to enhance the managerial and administrative staff capacities of partner HEIs dealing with and implementing inclusive education practices; to equip the Disability Support Units with effective and relevant assistive technology; to increase external relations cooperation to improve Higher Education access and employment of disabled students and to increase public and students' awareness and understanding on the importance of inclusive education within HE for the society. Outcomes produced and networking will help participants to come up with innovative and new ideas in the future. One of the respondents, however, anonymously has expressed his/her/they dissatisfaction regarding project results and outcomes.

Chapter III: Final remark and conclusion – Lessons learnt

Partners respond that they personally have learnt a number of different things, among these:

“I learned personally that there is still gap in providing equality to education opportunities for students with disabilities in HEI.”

“I learned a lot on accessibility.”

“Accessibility does not refer only to accessibility of built environment, but also access to information, transport.”

“Access to information is related to provision of assistive devices and technology, including access to sign language interpretation.”

“Yes, I have learnt a lot about new approaches in providing for inclusive education for students with disabilities.”

“I have learned a lot about disability and new approaches of treatment of disability, human rights-based approach being the most appropriate one.”

“I have learned a lot about disability and persons with disabilities, through the opportunity to interact directly with active disability organizations in the Western Balkan countries.”

“Study visits in the Universities in Ireland, Czech Republic and Greece was a good opportunity to better understand how in practice accessibility units operate for students with disabilities.”

“Yes, personally I learned a lot during this period thanks to this project.”

“Got information about resources needed to introduce accessibility units for students with disabilities in HEI.”

“We could exchange a lot during the trainings.”

“Yes, learned best practices of Inclusive Education in HEI, I have especially appreciated the training on all aspects of providing for accessible and inclusive education HEI.”

Missing information or knowledge

There seem to be no major lack of information or knowledge. Some comments of partners, however, show that partner institutions need:

There is still lack of active engagement of all staff during the project implementation activities

Very good experience of involving partners from the disability community, more intensive and sustainable cooperation with disability organizations can help to implement better in some cases the project

There are still some activities foreseen in order to have possibility to frame all information to be updated

Due to covid, the institutions involved found it hard to organize face to face meetings

I think we need more cooperation with other institutions.

Additional human resources would be helpful more trainings to strengthen the staff capacities.

ICT basis & logistics needs to be more comprehensive, powerful, upgraded and widely used;

I wouldn't consider any skills that are lacking but I think we must develop further mutual exchanges between academic staff and stronger link between the universities and organizations representing persons with disabilities and disability service providers, in order to exchange and also coordinate in providing supportive services to students with disabilities.

This innovative experience should be carefully monitored and noted down, in order to assess further needs and improvement needed, but also to contribute in facilitating the process replication in other universities in all countries of Western Balkan, that were partners in the project.

We have been learning by doing. Visiting EU partner research institution and their centers has helped. But there should be a follow up process of these institutions closely monitoring, mentoring even beyond the project end.

Further recommendations and comments

Partners have provided a number of further recommendations and comments:

- More training opportunities that we cover all aspects of inclusive education for students with disabilities of various typologies, such as students with hearing impairment/ hearing loss; intellectual disabilities; student with visual impairment/ visual loss; those with physical disabilities and with complex needs.
- Networking events EU HEI but also with the disability organizations and disability service providers.
- Motivating a network of HEI that set up accessibility units, and professionals.
- Inclusion in the activities of more academic staff from each Institution.

- Working in groups, collaborations with institutions.
- There could be organized periodic meetings to discuss the implementation of the project.
- Strengthen collaboration among HEIs of the region in the areas of accessibility and inclusion for student with disabilities.
- It would be great to have more physical activities and also include more students' opinions on Inclusiveness, critical stand points but also in general to include more their perspective.
- Project outputs and results to be transferred outside the partnership.
- It would be beneficial to have more information exchange with other partners.
- How to assess the impact of what we are doing?

Evaluators Conclusions and Recommendations

This report is based on the survey conducted with partners and their engaged staff on project activities. Members of partnering institutions were asked for feedback on activities, cooperation with partners, overall management and communication as well as impact on target groups and partner institutions.

All partners contributed to the survey and have provided an overall positive assessment of the project activities and project progress.

In general, **implementation** has been somewhat hampered by the effects of the Covid-19 crisis. For instance, physical events were delayed or postponed to an unknown time. Some online activities and workshops did not produce the overall outcome as expected or there were delays and modifications to the activities in order to ensure everyone's safety. However, all partners are confident that the delays or online and blended way of implementing activities, did not pose a fundamental problem for implementation.

Another reason for a positive assessment and optimistic view on the further implementation of the project activities is the **management and communication**, which are described by all partners as "good" to "excellent".

The **dissemination activities** of the IDEA project have been very well guided by the original dissemination plan and activities as described in the corresponding WP (can be found in project description) many dissemination activities have taken place and more is yet to come in the following year. All partners keep on utilizing social media channels and their communication methodologies in exploiting project results. Nonetheless, it is very important that all partners intensify their dissemination activities over the next few months in order to make the project more visible among relevant actors and target groups, both inside and outside their institutions.

As far as the **results** of the project are concerned, the answers of the partners are divided: while some are satisfied with what has been achieved so far, others state that there is still more to be done.

Overall, the partnership shows quite a high level of satisfaction with implementation of project activities. The cooperation between partners seem to work well overall and overall management and coordination is rated as satisfying as well. We would like to highlight positively that all

partners have submitted their feedback. We wish that the commitment of partners to provide feedback will remain as high in the next project years, as it is very important to get a comprehensive picture of the implementation progress and possible issues that require attention.

Below, we have put together a number of suggestions for the partnership:

Management and Coordination: Regularly organized meetings at shorter intervals (e.g. monthly) would support the overall management and coordination of activities as well as the communication between partners. In this way, partners would exchange regular updates on ongoing activities and important deadlines. Partners should provide management feedback on more frequent basis in order to secure the quality of coordination. They should not wait for the surveys to be disseminated and provide feedback to coordination only through survey. There should be more willingness to directly speak to coordinator more frequently.

Clear communication about project activities, deadlines and reminders: further to regular online meetings, e-mail updates with clear instructions about deadlines, and possibly, short reminders before important deadlines would help all partners in the timely implementation of activities.

Partners should remind and check each other depending on their WP leading. They should always send reminders monthly basis about the upcoming activities and events.

Quality assurance: the information on the impact of activities provided by partners should be more detailed. For future QA surveys it will be important that partner try to report as exact as possible impact numbers, so that the partnership will have a clear picture, both inside and outside for the reports to the European Commission in this regard.

Dissemination efforts should be strengthened by partners; both regarding internal dissemination (raising awareness inside the own organization/HEI) and regarding external dissemination with stakeholders outside the own organization/HEI. The WP Leader of Dissemination has prepared a Dissemination Strategy and a number of products (e.g. project flyer) which can guide these activities. The website and social media pages of IDEA are already filled with information and updates; in order to present a more complete picture, it would be desirable that all partners contribute to the updates and provide the WP Leader with pictures and short.

Annex

Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Questionnaire

HEI/ Organization's name

.....

Implementation at your HEI / organization

In the following questions, please rate the IMPLEMENTATION of activities at YOUR HEI/organization.

1. How do you rate the work carried out by the project team at your own HEI/organization?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

2. Was the proposed timeline of activities realistic and feasible for Your HEI/organization?

- Yes, it was realistic and feasible
- No, but there were only minor issues with it
- No, and there were major problems with it
-

3. How satisfied are you with the progress of the activities in your institution? *

- Completely satisfied
- Very satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Not at all satisfied

4. Did you have any difficulties/challenges in the implementation of the activities?

- Yes
- No

4.a If yes - please explain difficulties and challenges you have experienced during the implementation of activities.

5. What is the awareness level about the project in your institution?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

6. Which activities have you implemented in the first year of the project at yourHEI/organization?

Management and Communication

In the following questions, please rate overall management of the project and communication among partners.

7. How do you rate the overall project management and coordination of the project?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

8. How do you rate overall financial management of the project?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

9. How do you rate overall time management and respect of agreed deadlines in the project?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

10. How do you rate the quality of communication among partners and Project management team?
- Excellent
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
11. How do you rate the efficiency of visibility and communication means at project level? *
- Excellent
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
12. Do you have recommendations for improvement of the overall project management and communication among partners?
13. Did your institution undertake any visibility/communication activities to promote IDEA?
- Yes
 - No
14. Please shortly describe visibility/communication activities undertaken
- Outcomes*
15. Do the project results achieved up to date meet your initial expectations? Please motivate your answer.
16. What did your institution learn thanks to this project?
17. What information, knowledge are still lacking at your institution to improve the implementation of the activities?
18. Please, provide your recommendations and comments to the future activities to be implemented.



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