

ASSESSMENT REPORT

"Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)"

External Assessment Expert

January 31, 2024

Disclaimer: This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the IDEA consortium and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

ACRONYMS

CBHE – Capacity Building in Higher Education

EACEA – Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

IDEA - Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans

HEI – Higher Education Institutions

PMT – Project Management Team

QAC – Quality Assurance Committee

QAP – Quality Assurance Plan

SC – Steering Committee

PU – Polis University

WP – Work Package

AMDU- Aleksandër Moisiu-Durrës University

UMT- Medical University of Tirana

UNISHK- University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi"

UNIZKM- University Lady of Good Council

EPOKA- Epoka University

UP- University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"

IBC-M - International Business College, Mitrovica

UC - Universum College

UDG - Donja Gorica University

NKUA - National University of Athens

UM - Masaryk University



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

UL - Limerick University

ADRF - Albanian Foundation for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

HANDYKOS - Association of Paraplegic and Paralyzed Children in Kosovo

AYDM - Association of Youth with Disabilities in Montenegro

MES (ALB) - Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports - Albania

MES (KOS) - Ministry of Education, Science and Technology - Kosovo

MES (MNE) - Ministry of Education and Sports - Montenegro

Table of Content

ACRONYMS	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
PROJECT'S BRIEF DESCRIPTION	5
Project Background	5
Project Aim and Objectives	6
METHODOLOGY	8
OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT	10
Project name and Website.....	10
Consortium.....	10
Budget	11
Quotes from the interviews with representatives of Western Balkan HEIs	13
ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....	16
Objective 1. Create and Enhance Institutional Support Structures.....	16
Objective 2. Capacity Building for HEI Staff.....	16
Objective 3. Equip Disability Support Units with Assistive Technology	16
Objective 4. Enhance External Relations Cooperation.....	17
Objective 5. Increase Awareness and Understanding	17
THE ASSESSMENT OF EACH WORK PACKAGE.....	18
A summary of Work packages and their respective progress	18
WP1: PREPARATION	19
WP2: DEVELOPMENT	20
WP3: QUALITY PLAN.....	24
WP4: DISSEMINATION & EXPLOITATION.....	25
WP5: MANAGEMENT	27
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	28
CONCLUSIONS.....	30

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The external quality assessment of the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project was undertaken with a particular attention to detail, aiming to comprehensively evaluate its overall dimensions of progress and effectiveness. By scrutinizing every step of the project's implementation, from its inception to its final stage, the assessment sought to provide a clear understanding of its performance and alignment with the outlined objectives. The assessment encompassed a thorough examination of various critical areas, including but not limited to project management practices, the efficacy of development activities, the robustness of quality monitoring mechanisms, the effectiveness of dissemination strategies, and the overall impact realized within the targeted communities and institutions. This comprehensive approach allowed for a holistic appraisal of the project's journey, shedding light on both its successes and areas requiring further refinement or enhancement.

PROJECT'S BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Project Background

The "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project emerges against the backdrop of longstanding disparities in higher education accessibility for students with disabilities (SwD) and those with learning difficulties (SwLD) across the Western Balkans. Despite the presence of legal frameworks within countries like Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro aimed at fostering inclusivity within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the practical implementation of these provisions often faces significant challenges. These challenges range from inadequate support structures within HEIs to a lack of awareness and understanding of the diverse needs of SwD and SwLD among faculty, administrators, and policymakers.

Moreover, the scarcity of assistive technologies and modern inclusion practices further exacerbates the barriers faced by these students in Western Balkan HEIs. In response to these systemic shortcomings, the IDEA project emerges as a multifaceted initiative aimed at addressing the root causes of accessibility challenges in higher education. By engaging a diverse consortium of partner institutions, including universities, disability rights foundations, and governmental bodies, the project seeks to implement comprehensive strategies to improve access, establish inclusive learning environments, and enhance employment opportunities for SwD and SwLD. Through a combination of capacity-building initiatives, policy development, technological advancements, and cross-border collaboration, the IDEA project endeavours to catalyse transformative change within the higher education landscape of the Western Balkans, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to pursue their academic and professional aspirations.

Project Aim and Objectives

The main purpose of the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project was to improve access, establish inclusive learning conditions, and develop employment opportunities for students with disabilities (SwD) and those with learning difficulties (SwLD) across the Western Balkans. Through a collaborative effort involving Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), governmental bodies, and advocacy organizations, the project also aimed to address the systemic barriers that hinder the full participation of SwD and SwLD in higher education and beyond.

Specifically, the project intended to:

1. **Create and Enhance Institutional Support Structures:** The project aimed to establish robust support structures within partner HEIs to enable access to higher education for SwD and SwLD. By developing and implementing inclusive protocols, policies, and support services, the project also aimed to foster a culture of accessibility and social integration within the academic community.

2. **Capacity Building for HEI Staff:** To ensure effective implementation of inclusive education practices, the project aimed to enhance the capacities of managerial and administrative staff within partner HEIs. Through targeted training programs and workshops, staff members have been supposed to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to support the diverse needs of SwD and SwLD students.
3. **Equip Disability Support Units with Assistive Technology:** Recognizing the importance of assistive technology in facilitating access to higher education, the project aimed to equip Disability Support Units within partner HEIs with effective and relevant assistive technology tools. By providing access to assistive devices and software, the project sought to enhance the learning experience and academic success of SwD and SwLD students.
4. **Enhance External Relations Cooperation:** The project aimed to strengthen cooperation with external stakeholders, including governmental bodies, NGOs, and employers, to improve higher education access and employment opportunities for SwD and SwLD students. By fostering partnerships and collaboration, the project sought to create a supportive ecosystem that promotes the inclusion and integration of SwD and SwLD individuals.
5. **Increase Awareness and Understanding:** To promote a culture of inclusivity and accessibility, the project aimed to increase public and student awareness of the importance of inclusive education within higher education. Through awareness-raising campaigns, training initiatives, and community engagement activities, the project sought to challenge stereotypes and promote acceptance and understanding of SwD and SwLD individuals.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for the assessment of the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project encompassed a combined approach bringing together desk research and semi-structured interviews with representatives of project partners. Throughout the project implementation period, a series of on-site visits to consortium partner campuses and face-to-face meetings were conducted, supplemented by virtual platforms and tools to facilitate communication. Desk research formed a foundational element of the methodology, involving a comprehensive review of key project documents such as the approved project proposal and budget, intermediate and final reports prepared by the project coordinator, project website content, publications, and social media posts by both the coordinator and project partners.

In addition to desk research, semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone with representatives from consortium members, totaling 13 interviewees. These interviews were designed to focus primarily on assessing the fulfillment of project objectives and anticipated results, while also allowing space for additional insights and comments. Interviewees were invited to discuss any encountered shortcomings and identify noteworthy best practices observed throughout the project implementation process.

The inputs gathered from both desk research and interviews were subjected to rigorous processing, analysis, and interpretation to evaluate the achievement of overall project objectives and specific outcomes outlined in the approved Work-Packages and Work Plan. Particular attention was directed towards assessing the realization of short-term impact indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, and evaluating the efficient utilization of project resources.

Based on this approach, the structure of the report was delineated into three main parts:

1. An overarching assessment of project objectives to gauge the extent of achievement.
2. A comprehensive evaluation of budget utilization to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of resource allocation.
3. Detailed assessments of each Work-Package to ascertain the quality and impact of implemented activities within specific project components.

This report concludes with a summary of key findings from the assessment, highlighting identified bottlenecks for avoidance and best practices for replication where applicable. Overall, this methodology facilitated a thorough and holistic evaluation of the IDEA project, providing valuable insights to inform future initiatives and endeavors in the realm of inclusive tertiary education in the Western Balkans.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT

Project name and Website

The project "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" aimed to improve access, establish inclusive learning conditions, and develop employment opportunities for students with disabilities (SwD) and students with learning difficulties (SwLD) in the Western Balkans. With its official website <http://idea-cbhe.com>, the project offers a comprehensive platform for stakeholders to access detailed information on project objectives, deliverables, consortium members, implementation progress, publications, and more. The website serves as a vital tool not only for dissemination purposes but also for fostering transparency in project activities and outcomes. Through regular updates and multimedia content, including testimonials and galleries, the website provides insights into the project's impact and achievements, enhancing its visibility and engagement with stakeholders.

Consortium

Polis University	Albania	Partner Countries
Aleksandër Moisiu-Durrës University	Albania	Partner Countries
Medical University of Tirana	Albania	Partner Countries
University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi"	Albania	Partner Countries
University Lady of Good Council	Albania	Partner Countries
Epoka University	Albania	Partner Countries
University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"	Kosovo	Partner Countries
International Business College, Mitrovica	Kosovo	Partner Countries
Universum College	Kosovo	Partner Countries
Donja Gorica University	Montenegro	Partner Countries
National University of Athens	Greece	Programme Countries

Masaryk University	Czech Republic	Programme Countries
Limerick University	Ireland	Programme Countries
Albanian Foundation for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ADRF)	Albania	Partner Countries
Association of Paraplegic and Paralyzed Children in Kosovo (HANDYKOS)	Kosovo	Partner Countries
Association of Youth with Disabilities in Montenegro (AYDM)	Montenegro	Partner Countries

Table 1. Consortium Composition

List of Associated Partners

1. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports - Albania
2. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology - Kosovo
3. Ministry of Education and Sports - Montenegro

Budget

Budget Headings	Grant awarded (in EURO)	Budget spent (in Euro)	Budget spent (in %)
Staff Costs	377,118.00	394,489.00	105%
Travel Costs	69,185.00	56,035.00	81%
Costs of stay	178,800.00	131,040.00	73%
Equipment Costs	280,000.00	266,157.80	95%
Subcontracting costs	50,000.00	37,960.96	76%
Exceptional costs	n/a	n/a	n/a
	955,103.00	885,682.76	93%

Table 2. Budget Overview

The total grant awarded for this project was: 955,103.00 Euro, from which 707,118.00 Euros was awarded for project activities and 247,985.00 was awarded for staff mobility.

The table above represents an overall good management/spending of project funds. Anyhow, there should be emphasized that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by most countries hindered the ability to carry all the planned travel in the mobility strand, therefore the approved budget was not used entirely and a part of this fund has been transferred to staff costs according to the needs of the coordinator and project partners.

- As a general assessment, given the substantial achievement of all the project objectives, the financial management of the project, even though challenging, has not prevented the consortium to deliver the intended results.
- In terms of management and reporting, the partners have been provided with templates and guidance on the EACEA rules and regulations since the beginning of the project, so that the budget implementation adhered to the guidelines. There has been periodic reporting from the partners to the project coordinator and in return from the Coordinator to EACEA.
- A detailed report of the grant management will also be included in the project's final report.

Quotes from the interviews with representatives of Western Balkan HEIs

Quotes retrieved from the interviews with representatives of “University Lady of Good Council”

Challenges: "We faced challenges accessing public high schools in Albania due to Ministry restrictions, but we successfully engaged with one school and utilized other events like university open days and work and study fairs to raise awareness and disseminate information to high school students."

Best Practices/s: "We received positive feedback from top management regarding institutional policy and support. The rector appointed a Delegate for the gender equality plan and measures for students with disabilities, ensuring guidance and interaction with various university departments. We have quotas and separate calls for students with disabilities in each study program. Awareness has increased through university activities and word of mouth, though mostly among international students or Albanians raised abroad, as cultural factors affect local student involvement."

Quotes retrieved from the interviews with representatives of Universum College

Challenges: “Dissemination & Exploitation of the project have been affected by the rather not particularly clear strategies of specific partners on how to better tackle the issues of students with disabilities and students with learning difficulties. This means that dissemination and exploitation could have been a little more effective if there had been a clearer understanding on how to better approach the problems within the project. Nevertheless, the activities performed within the project have been rather successful in bringing more awareness to this topic”.

“While there has been cooperation among project representatives to a rather satisfactory degree, there is a need for further collaboration among representatives in all levels. The project lacked a clear framework in order to relate education with the employment needs of these groups of students. In addition to this, there is a need for more projects that deal with the employment of such groups”.

Best Practice/s: “In general, the project has been very successful in regard as it has in fact managed to bring to awareness the need for more initiatives that deal with students with disabilities and students with learning difficulties. Furthermore, while the project could have had better dissemination initiatives, it has in fact established the framework for other similar projects”.

Quotes retrieved from the interviews with representatives of University of Prishtina

Challenges: “The University of Prishtina, as a public university, respects procedures for tendering for equipment which take a long time. For this reason, at the beginning we asked the grant holder (POLIS University) if they are ready to carry out this process faster and they were authorized to do so by the UP management. In the ongoing process, it turned out that due to the legal procedures of two universities, namely two states, such a thing was impossible. In this case, we had to carry out the procedures in the UP again according to the Laws of Kosovo. This has caused that we have some delays in this process”.

Best Practice/s: "By establishing the accessibility unit with the support of the IDEA project, all the members of the university community are now committed to providing comprehensive support for students with disabilities and learning disabilities. This development underscores our dedication to inclusivity and ensures that every student has access to the resources they need to succeed."

Quotes retrieved from the interviews with representatives of UAMD

Challenges: “Although the full commitment of the governing bodies of UAMD for the smooth implementation of the IDEA project, the procedure of integration of the accessibility unit to the existing structures of the university and the approval of its legislative framework by the Academic Senate was a relatively long procedure”.

Best practice/s: "The creation of the accessibility unit and the establishment of a dedicated protocol to support students with disabilities and learning disabilities represent significant steps forward. This initiative ensures that all students receive the necessary accommodations and support, fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment."

Quotes retrieved from the interviews with representatives of University of Shkodra

Challenges: "Despite the unwavering commitment from the governing bodies of the University of Shkodra to ensure the successful implementation of the IDEA project, integrating the accessibility unit into the university's existing structures has been a relatively long and very bureaucratic process."

Best Practice/s: "Establishing the accessibility unit and creating a specialized protocol to support students with disabilities and learning challenges are major advancements not only for our university, but for all participating partners."

ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Objective 1. Create and Enhance Institutional Support Structures

The project objective of establishing robust support structures within partner HEIs to enable access to higher education for SwD and SwLD has been assessed positively. The implementation of inclusive protocols, policies, and support services has fostered a culture of accessibility and social integration within the academic community in Western Balkans. By developing clear guidelines and procedures, partner HEIs have demonstrated a commitment to creating inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students. However, further efforts may be needed to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these support structures beyond the project duration.

Objective 2. Capacity Building for HEI Staff

The capacity-building initiatives targeted at managerial and administrative staff within partner HEIs have been successful in enhancing their skills and knowledge in supporting SwD and SwLD students. Through tailored training programs and workshops, staff members have gained valuable insights into inclusive education practices and strategies. The acquisition of new competencies has enabled them to provide better support and accommodation to students with diverse learning needs. Continuous professional training/development opportunities should be provided to ensure staff members remain updated on best practices in inclusive education.

Objective 3. Equip Disability Support Units with Assistive Technology

The objective of equipping Disability Support Units within partner HEIs with assistive technology tools has been effectively implemented. By providing access to assistive devices and software, the project has enhanced the learning experience and academic success of SwD and SwLD students. The availability of assistive technology has empowered students to overcome barriers to learning and participate fully in academic activities. Ongoing maintenance and support for assistive technology infrastructure should be ensured to maximize its long-term impact.

Objective 4. Enhance External Relations Cooperation

The project's efforts to strengthen cooperation with external stakeholders, including governmental bodies, NGOs, and employers, have yielded positive outcomes in improving higher education access and employment opportunities for SwD and SwLD students. By fostering partnerships and collaboration, the project has created a supportive ecosystem that promotes the inclusion and integration of SwD and SwLD individuals. However, sustained engagement with external stakeholders beyond the project duration will be crucial to maintaining the momentum and impact of these partnerships.

Objective 5. Increase Awareness and Understanding

The objective of increasing public and student awareness of the importance of inclusive education within higher education has been effectively addressed through awareness-raising campaigns, training initiatives, and community engagement activities. By challenging stereotypes and promoting acceptance and understanding of SwD and SwLD individuals, the project has contributed to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Continued efforts to sustain awareness and promote inclusive practices beyond the project lifespan will be essential for long-term impact.

THE ASSESSMENT OF EACH WORK PACKAGE

A summary of Work packages and their respective progress

WORK PACKAGES	PROGRESS
Work Package 1	
PREPARATION: Launching the project, analysis and master-plan of needs and wants of Accessible HE in WB	100%
Work Package 2	
DEVELOPMENT: Establishment / Enhancement & Operationalization of Accessibility Units	100%
Work Package 3	
QUALITY PLAN: Quality Assurance	100%
Work Package 4	
DISSEMINATION & EXPLOITATION: Dissemination Strategy	100%
Work Package 5	
MANAGEMENT: Management	100%

Table 3. Summary of Work Packages

WP1: PREPARATION

The preparation phase, Work Package 1 (WP1), of the project has been very well planned and executed, setting a strong foundation for the successful implementation of subsequent project activities. The Kick-off Meeting, held at the premises of Polis University during 18-19 March 2021, served as a pivotal event, facilitating the establishment of essential cooperation conditions and rules outlined in the partnership agreement. The partnership agreements, aligned with EACEA guidelines, produced clear tasks, deadlines, and responsibilities for each partner within the respective work packages, ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the project duration. The formation of three crucial committees; namely the Steering Committee, Managerial Committee, and Project Quality Committee, underscores the commitment to collaborative decision-making and effective project governance.

Moreover, the initiation of the Analysis & Master-Plan to Address the Needs & Wants of Accessible Higher Education in the Western Balkans study demonstrates proactive efforts to address existing challenges comprehensively. Scheduled for completion within the project's first month, this study will draw upon data from both consortium partners and Ministries of Education, providing a robust foundation for understanding the current landscape of accessible higher education in the region. By incorporating insights from a diverse range of stakeholders, the study has identified key areas for intervention and inform strategic planning efforts moving forward. *Overall, WP1 reflects a strategic and systematic approach to project preparation, laying the groundwork for impactful outcomes in subsequent project phases.*

WP2: DEVELOPMENT

The development of new protocols and policy papers within the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project reflected a meticulous and comprehensive approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges encountered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the region concerning inclusive tertiary education. The active involvement of lead institutions from Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, coupled with insightful study visits to established European Accessibility Units, laid a solid groundwork for the formulation of protocols and policy papers. These endeavors were marked by an in-depth analysis of existing norms and practices, drawing upon best practices and innovative solutions observed during the study visits. The resulting protocols and policy papers not only encapsulated a nuanced understanding of the local context but also embraced forward-thinking strategies to foster inclusivity and accessibility within HEIs across the Western Balkans.

Regarding equipment purchase and training initiatives, the procurement process for assistive technology equipment exemplified a commitment to transparency, fairness, and compliance with both EACEA policies and national legislation. Rigorous adherence to standard tendering procedures, overseen by lead institutions from Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, ensured the equitable distribution of resources and the acquisition of high-quality equipment essential for establishing or enhancing Accessibility Units within partner HEIs. Moreover, the training sessions, facilitated by reputable institutions from program countries, were meticulously designed to cater to the diverse needs of academic and administrative staff. Leveraging a combination of theoretical knowledge and hands-on practical exercises, these sessions equipped participants with the requisite skills and competencies to effectively navigate the complexities of inclusive tertiary education. Below are given some of these training sessions/workshops held on behalf of the project during the entire timeline of IDEA'S implementation:

Three-Day Workshop in May 2021

In May 2021, a three-day workshop was held as part of the IDEA project. The focus of the workshop was to familiarize universities from Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro with the functioning of the Student Support Units for students with special needs, including regulations, work plans, and infrastructure.

Through presentations and the exchange of ideas, this information was initially presented by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and later by the Masaryk University.

Workshop (Virtual Visit) in Late May 2021

Another workshop, in the form of a virtual visit, was conducted by Masaryk University, Czech Republic, during the last week of May 2021. This workshop aimed to share Masaryk University's experience in inclusive education with the academic and administrative staff of universities from Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The topics covered included support for students with special needs through assistive technology, support for students with dyslexia and psychological disorders, and support for students with physical disabilities using Braille, hybrid texts, and more.

Workshop (Virtual Visit) in June 2021

During the second week of June 2021, the third workshop, again in the form of a virtual visit, was held for the academic and administrative staff of universities from Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. This three-day virtual visit was led by the University of Limerick, Ireland, focusing on sharing their experience in inclusive education, support for students with special needs, and the use of assistive technology.

Three-Day Training in February 2022

In February 2022, a three-day training session was held at Donja Gorica University (UDG) in Montenegro. This training focused on building institutional, human, and infrastructural capacities to provide more access and support to students with disabilities and to establish best practices for accessibility units within the institutions.

Two-Day Training in November 2022

Another two-day training session was held in November 2022 at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. Similar to previous training, this session focused on enhancing institutional, human, and infrastructural capacities to support students with disabilities and to develop best practices for accessibility units within their institutions.

Three-Day Training in December 2022

From December 13-15, 2022, another three-day training was conducted at Epoka University in Tirana. This training continued the theme of building institutional, human, and infrastructural capacities to provide better access and support for students with disabilities and to create best practices for accessibility units within their institutions.

Two-Day Training in November 2023

In November 2023, a two-day training session was held by the University of Limerick in Ireland. This training focused on the heads of Internationalization and Student Support Offices, presenting the results of a survey conducted with University of Limerick students, who provided their perspectives on the support services offered and their needs.

Three-Day Training in November 2023

During the last week of November 2023, a three-day training was held at the University Lady of Good Council. The training was inaugurated by Professor Leonardo Palombi, Rector of the university who emphasized the project's importance for higher education in Albania and the region, as an instrument for aligning with European universities in terms of inclusivity and support for students with special needs. The training focused on the services that Accessibility Units for Students with Special Needs should offer, a key result of the IDEA project at 10 partner universities from the Western Balkans.

Final Training Phase in December 2023

The final phase of training under the IDEA project was held at Universum College in Prishtina during the first week of December 2023. Partners from 10 universities in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro attended the training conducted by Masaryk University, Czech Republic, and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. This phase served as a review of the services that will now be offered by Western Balkan universities through special support units for students with special needs. The final training also summarized over 20 training sessions conducted during the three years of the IDEA project's implementation, focusing on creating the conditions, policies, and knowledge necessary for optimal inclusive student services.

Later, the piloting of Accessibility Units further underscored the project's commitment to practical implementation, providing invaluable insights into the real-world application of acquired knowledge and strategies.

In terms of quality monitoring, the project demonstrated a robust framework of internal mechanisms aimed at ensuring rigorous oversight and continuous improvement. The Project Quality Committee, together with the Quality Monitoring Action Plan, served as instrumental tools in tracking project performance, identifying areas of strength, and pinpointing opportunities for enhancement. Through regular monitoring and evaluation activities, the project's progress was systematically assessed, with feedback loops facilitating iterative refinement of project strategies and approaches. The mid-term and final quality monitoring reports, characterized by their thoroughness and granularity, offered valuable insights, recommendations, and corrective actions to steer the project towards its intended outcomes effectively. These reports served as invaluable resources, not only for internal stakeholders but also for external evaluators, providing a comprehensive overview of the project's trajectory and impact while ensuring accountability and transparency throughout the project lifecycle.

As a summary, there should be emphasized that after the training sessions, the Accessibility Units established or enhanced in each partner countries' participating HEI have become fully functional and started to pilot their activities.

WP3: QUALITY PLAN

The Quality Monitoring work package has served as a critical component of the overall project framework, ensuring that the implementation of activities meets the highest standards of excellence and efficiency. Through a combination of internal and external mechanisms, the project aimed to continuously assess and enhance the quality of deliverables and processes, thereby maximizing the impact and sustainability of its efforts.

Internally, the establishment of the Project Quality Committee (PQC) represented a proactive approach to quality control, with representatives from all partner institutions contributing to the development and implementation of the Quality Monitoring Action Plan (QMAC). This plan served as a comprehensive roadmap, outlining strategies, instruments, processes, and indicators to ensure the smooth execution of project activities. The PQC's responsibilities summarized the monitoring the implementation of the Quality Action Plan, designing assessment tools, evaluating deliverables, and implementing corrective actions as necessary. In this regard, by fostering transparent communication and collaboration among partners, the QMAC facilitated the exchange of feedback and promotes continuous improvement throughout the project lifecycle.

Externally, the project demonstrated a commitment to impartial evaluation by engaging an external entity to conduct independent assessments of quality, efficiency, and sustainability. This external monitoring serves as a valuable check-and-balance mechanism, providing objective insights into the project's performance and impact. Through formative and summative assessment instruments, the external evaluator has scrutinized the delivery of project deliverables, the establishment of Accessibility Units, the quality of training programs, and the broader impact on faculty, administrators, and students. By addressing key questions related to deliverables, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement, this external evaluation aims to provide valuable feedback for enhancing project outcomes and ensuring long-term success.

Through strategic planning and foresight, the project aims to lay the groundwork for lasting impact, empowering HEIs to sustainably support accessible tertiary education in the Western Balkans even after the conclusion of the project.

WP4: DISSEMINATION & EXPLOITATION

The dissemination strategy employed within the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project was characterized by its comprehensive approach, reflecting a concerted effort to maximize outreach and engagement. The strategy encompassed a diverse group of communication tools and activities tailored to cater to the needs and preferences of various stakeholders. Visual identity materials, including flyers, posters, roll-ups, and brochures, served as effective channels for conveying key messages and raising awareness about the project's objectives and outcomes. Furthermore, the regular publication of newsletters provided a structured platform for sharing updates, relevant achievements, and upcoming events, fostering ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Tailor-made publications offered in-depth insights tailored to the specific interests and requirements of different target groups, ensuring relevance and resonance. The creation of a dedicated project website emerged as a central hub for disseminating project results, providing stakeholders with easy access to information, resources, and interactive features such as forums and contact sections. Events such as the launching event and final conference which represented one of the most important events in this regard across the region, not only served as pivotal milestones for engaging stakeholders but also facilitated knowledge exchange, networking, and capacity-building opportunities. The conference was held at the premises of Polis University during 18-19 December, 2023.

Additionally, several events have been held to widely disseminate the project's objectives. A couple of these include:

- The “Orientation Day”, held on October 11, 2021, for the 2021-2022 academic year, where two key offices at Polis University—the Student Support and Career Counseling Office and the Projects Office—introduced IDEA project to the students and explained to them how the project aims to enhance the inclusivity of higher education across the West Balkan region. And of the event, everyone was informed about the project details, especially about the significant component of this initiative; the development of specific regulations and protocols tailored to support students with diverse abilities.

- Later on, The IDEA project, was presented at a meeting held within the framework of the SAIL project (Sparking Activism Initiatives Locally), implemented by Co-PLAN with financial support from the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Tirana as part of the "Civil Society Capacity Building" program (on December 28th, 2021).

It is worth to be mentioned that the project has been widely promoted across all the events and activities held at the premises of Balkan HEIs during the entire timeframe of the project implementation. Moreover, the project's emphasis on establishing robust internal and external communication facilities, coupled with the provision of interactive services such as help desks and online facilities, underscored a forward-thinking approach towards sustainability.

By fostering a culture of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous engagement, the dissemination strategy not only amplified the project's impact but also laid a solid foundation for long-term success and scalability.

WP5: MANAGEMENT

The "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project demonstrated significant impacts, both quantitatively and qualitatively, underscoring its efficacy in advancing accessibility and inclusivity in higher education across the region. The establishment or enhancement of Accessibility Units within participating HEIs represented a tangible step towards fostering an environment that accommodates the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Partners actively engaged in all project meetings and activities, demonstrating their willingness and commitment to achieving the project's objectives as a top priority. This intrinsic motivation, driven by the noble mission of the project, has fostered a collaborative atmosphere conducive to success. Furthermore, partners have ensured timely provision of required inputs and supporting documentation, facilitating the drafting of monitoring reports. This proactive approach to information sharing enables effective project management and monitoring, ensuring alignment with EU procedures and the agreed timetable.

The Kick off Meeting, held at the premises of Polis University during 18-19 March 2021, a critical milestone in WP1 Preparation, served as a platform for formalizing the conditions and rules of cooperation through the partnership agreement. By discussing and signing this agreement, partners committed to adhering to project guidelines and timelines, laying the groundwork for streamlined project management and execution.

Overall, the evaluation highlights the strong commitment of consortium partners to effective project management, characterized by proactive engagement, timely communication, and adherence to established procedures. This collaborative approach not only enhanced project efficiency but also contributed to the project's overall success and sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comprehensive assessment of the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project, several key recommendations have been identified to further enhance its impact and effectiveness;

- Firstly, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of the continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms even after the project's lifecycle. It is very important for partners to maintain regular communication among themselves and among other project stakeholders, gather feedback from participants, and make sure that Accessibility Units will keep operating in alignment with the project's objectives.
- Secondly, there is still a critical need to strengthen engagement with governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other key stakeholders to garner sustained support for inclusive tertiary education initiatives in the Western Balkans. This involves advocating for policy changes at the national and regional levels, promoting awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of inclusive education, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders to address systemic barriers to accessibility and inclusion. By actively involving policymakers, educational institutions, advocacy groups, and communities in the project's activities, the partners who benefited from "IDEA" project can amplify its impact and create a more conducive environment for inclusive education across the region.
- Furthermore, the project should prioritize knowledge sharing and dissemination of best practices to maximize its impact and reach. This includes organizing workshops, conferences, and seminars to facilitate peer learning and exchange of experiences among participating institutions.
- Additionally, leveraging digital platforms and online resources can enhance the project's visibility and enable broader dissemination of its outcomes to a wider audience. By adopting a multifaceted approach to dissemination, even after the project timeline, the project can ensure that its achievements are widely recognized, replicated, and sustained beyond the project's lifespan.

In conclusion, by implementing these recommendations, the "IDEA" project can maximize its impact and create lasting positive change in the higher education landscape of the Western Balkans. Through continuous monitoring, strategic planning for sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge sharing, the project can contribute significantly to advancing inclusive tertiary education and fostering social inclusion and equal opportunities for all learners in the region.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, there can be said that the "Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)" project stands as a testament to the region's commitment to fostering accessibility, inclusivity, and equal opportunities in higher education.

Over the course of its implementation, the project has undertaken a diverse approach, leveraging innovative strategies, fostering collaborative partnerships, and implementing targeted interventions to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities (SwD) and students with learning difficulties (SwLD) across Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The project's overarching aim, rooted in the imperative to improve access, establish inclusive learning environments, and cultivate employment prospects for SwD and SwLD, has been effectively translated into tangible actions and outcomes.

Notably, the establishment/enhancement of Accessibility Units within partner institutions, the development of comprehensive protocols and policy papers, and the execution of robust training programs underscore the project's commitment to fostering a more inclusive educational landscape.

Moreover, the project's impact extended beyond the confines of the higher education sector, with concerted efforts to raise public awareness, engage stakeholders, and advocate for policy reforms contributing to broader societal transformation.

Looking ahead, the sustained success of the project hinges on the steadfast commitment of all stakeholders, the diligent implementation of recommendations for continuous improvement, and the consolidation of achievements to ensure enduring and transformative change in the Western Balkans' educational sphere. By embracing inclusivity as a guiding principle and nurturing a culture of accessibility, the IDEA project laid the groundwork for a future where every individual, regardless of ability or background, has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to society.



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Project Title: *Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA)*

Assessment Period: *[15.01.2021] - [15.01.2024]*

Assessment Conducted by: *External Assessment Expert, _____*