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## SUSTAINABILITY PLANS OF ONLINE TRAINING PROGRAMS AS HERITAGE OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS

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**Abstract:** *The European Union invests in education through funding opportunities such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and Digital Europe Program. A common trait of all these funding schemes is the requirement of foreseeing the long-term impact of the selected projects, especially after the end of the funding period. A specific set of challenges is prominent for projects focused on online training programs. The paper focusses on analyzing sustainability plans of EU-funded online training project and presents a case study on the sustainability of VirtualEdu project and a comparative analysis of several such projects. This analysis contributes to this understanding through a definition-based evaluation framework that provides systematic information on sustainability approaches, outcomes, and best practices.*

**Keywords:** *sustainability plan, EU-funded projects, VirtualEdu, online training programs, comparative analysis.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has been massively investing in education through various funding opportunities in the past decade [1]. For the period 2021-2027, the Erasmus+ program budget is €26.2 billion, with a 78% increase from the 2014-2020 budget [2]. Most recently, funding programs such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and Digital Europe Program became an important vehicle for educational innovation, digital transformation, and social inclusion across EU member states. A key requirement of such funding schemes is the demonstration of long-term impact and sustainability beyond the formal project period.

To maintain their benefits and maintain impact beyond the funding period, projects must promote ongoing collaboration between consortium partners and actively involve other stakeholders [3]. A specific set of challenges is prominent for projects focused on online training programs, especially in the context of the EU requirement of creating Open Educational resources that are easily available to all interested parties [2]. Despite EU's focus on sustainability of projects and the specific requirement of certain funding programs for the

development of an exploitation and sustainability plan, the literature lacks comparative analyses of sustainability plans that would benefit project consortiums through best practices and lessons learned, on the one hand, and interested stakeholders that could observe the evolution of such documents along with other major social, technological and economic changes, on the other hand.

Oftentimes, online training projects require ongoing technical maintenance, content updates, and institutional support to remain effective and relevant over time. There are two main research questions the paper aims to address: *1. How does VirtualEdu project perform in terms of sustainability compared to other EU-funded projects? 2. What are the key features covered in the design of sustainability plans for EU-funded projects focused on the development of training programs?*

The paper focuses on analyzing sustainability plans of EU-funded online training projects and presents two case studies on this topic: a study on the sustainability of VirtualEDU project and a comparative analysis of several such projects. Therefore, the paper is structured as follows: introduction, brief literature review on EU-funded projects sustainability plans, a

comparative analysis of multiple EU-funded projects focused on online training programs, discussion and conclusions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the EU, a project sustainability plan describes the continuous delivery of benefits to project beneficiaries and other stakeholders for a long-term period after the end of the funding period [3]. In this context, sustainability plans for EU-funded projects represent the recognition of the long-term commitment of consortia members to continue the work done during the lifetime of the project and transform isolated initiatives into a heritage at institutional, organizational and societal levels [4, 6]. This commitment can be interpreted in various ways; therefore, there is a common need for consistency in terms of best practices [5].

With regards to projects aiming at online training programs, it is interesting to observe what are the key components of the sustainability plans that ensure long-term effects. The literature reveals four interrelated elements that underpin long-term sustainability: online platforms as learning environments, external funding, stakeholders' engagement and Open Educational Resources (OERs) [7-12].

Firstly, the management and delivery of online training programs call for robust and adaptable online platforms (often Moodle or comparable web-based systems) that rely on features such as modular design, continuous evaluation, and quality assurance measures to keep content up to date and user support responsive [6, 8]. In addition, to secure post-grant continuity, external funding sources are vital [10]. Access to EU funding opportunities or national sources needs to be combined with aligned policy frameworks and cost-benefit analyses [8, 10]. Third, the participation of stakeholders is another success factor for the sustainability of the project, due to their ability to mobilize interdisciplinary teams and international alliances, host community events, and build lasting networks [5, 9, 10, 11]. Finally, a common practice in the EU is the delivery of content in the form of OERs, which can be complemented by collaborative updates, and standardized self-assessment tools [11, 12].

The combined effect of the four elements leads to capacity building, relevant and accessible resources and the potential of upscaling the project results [13]. The most frequently encountered implementation strategies are as follows: delivery of OERs; online training programs in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs); interdisciplinary or joint development programs, and use of innovative pedagogies such as problem-based learning, challenge-based learning, case studies and impact analyses and tailored quizzes.

## 3. VIRTUALEDU PROJECT AND ITS SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

The VirtualEdu project, entitled "Upskilling and certification scheme for virtual educators, managers, workers" is an Erasmus+ project focused on developing and implementing a certification scheme for educators, workers and managers who perform their jobs remotely [14, 15]. In addition, VirtualEdu aims to certify remote-friendly companies, as a framework to recognize the companies that implement remote work policies and practices [15].

The project focuses on development of a MOOC comprising dedicated training curriculum for four major roles: remote educator, remote worker, remote manager and trainer of trainers [14, 16]. The MOOC is delivered through a Moodle platform and enables trainees to select their learning journey based on the role they are interested in, complemented by a certification scheme that provides European-level recognition of acquired skills and knowledge by European certification and Qualification Association (ECQA) [16, 17].

The project consortium is formed by three universities (West University of Timisoara, Romania - project leader, Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania, and University of Rijeka, Croatia), two companies (BICERO, Slovenia, and Denkstatt, Romania) and ECQA (Austria). Due to the specific requirement of the Erasmus+ funding scheme, VirtualEdu finalizes with a sustainability plan after the end of the project.

Table 1

**Presentation of VirtualEdu's Sustainability plan (authors' own conception).**

| <b>Sustainability plan feature</b>   | <b>Details</b>   |
|--|--|
| Definition of key stakeholders   | The key stakeholders include professionals (mid-level managers and analysts), e-learning course participants from companies (IT, telco, services), public administrators, entrepreneurs, researchers, and future employees/managers who are currently university students. Additionally, SMEs, entrepreneurship associations, and companies in technoparks and industrial centers are stakeholders. The target groups for accreditation and certificates are the original post-project consortium, new training organizations, and consortium members. |
| Coordination mechanisms  | A "Certification consortium/body" will be established by the project partners, who will sign a sustainability/exploitation agreement. This body will join the ECQA workgroup and will be responsible for overseeing client inquiries and project results after the project is completed.   |
| Resource allocation  | BICERO will be responsible for supplying and maintaining the learning management systems (LMS), digital infrastructure, and other technical resources. The revenue generated from paid consulting services and certification fees will cover the costs of the certification consortium, learning material updates, and operational costs (web hosting, e-learning hosting, project dissemination, updates).  |
| Development of a communication strategy, including stakeholders' engagement and impact assessment                | The communication strategy involves informing experts in e-learning and non-formal training about the project instruments. Information will be provided to personnel of institutions (trainers, administration, management) on project tools for analysis, testing, and peer-to-peer training. A digital presence on major social networks will be ensured to keep people and organizations informed about project events, actions, and outcomes.  |
| Implementation of the training program (training needs assessment, training delivery, monitoring and evaluation) | The training program will be added to the portfolio of ECQA certifications and included in the curricula of participating colleges. Pilot trainees will receive certifications. The training materials will be made openly accessible (OER) under a Creative Commons license. The self-study version of the online course will be available for free, with additional consulting services (coaching, tutoring, mentoring) offered as paid services.  |
| Defining a budget and financial plan   | The financial plan is based on a revenue model where income is generated from paid consulting services (online learner coaching, tutoring, and mentoring) and the issuance of certificates to remote employees, managers, and businesses. This revenue will cover the certification consortium, learning material updates, and running/operational costs.  |
| Customized business plan   | The business model involves offering a free self-study version of the online course to the public while providing more extensive consulting services as paid options. This revenue model is designed to ensure the financial sustainability of the project's outcomes.   |
| Potential partnerships   | The project will involve technology partners for supplying essential systems and infrastructure for online course delivery, such as content management systems (CMS), video conferencing platforms, and LMS. Service providers will manage the daily operations, upkeep, and technical assistance for the LMS and other digital resources.   |
| Regular reviews and evaluations  | Service Level Agreements (SLAs) will be established with technology partners and service providers to set precise performance metrics, response times, and standards for service. These SLAs will include specifics like system uptime, technical issue resolution timelines, and customer support availability to gauge service quality and compliance.   |
| Sustainability of project deliverables   | The training materials will be made openly accessible as Open Educational Resources (OER) under a Creative Commons license. The project's outcomes will be sustained through the "Certification consortium/body," which will continue to offer certifications and manage the project's results. The revenue model is designed to provide ongoing funding.  |
| Certification of people and companies  | A "Certification consortium/body" will be established to issue certificates to remote employees, managers, and businesses after the project is completed. Pilot trainees will receive certifications as "remote worker," "remote manager," and "remote educator." Pilot organizations will obtain "remote work friendly organizations" status upon meeting the requirements.   |

As per Table 1, the main features of the sustainability plan are as follows:

- Definition of key stakeholders;
- Coordination mechanisms;

- Resource allocation;
- Development of a communication strategy, including stakeholders' engagement and impact assessment;
- Implementation of the training program (training needs assessment, training delivery, monitoring and evaluation);
- Defining a budget and financial plan;
- Customized business plan;
- Potential partnerships;
- Regular reviews and evaluations;
- Sustainability of project deliverables;
- Certification of people and companies.

Therefore, the sustainability plan is comprehensive and aims to address all key components of long-term implementation of the training and certification scheme. However, the relevance of Virtual Edu's sustainability plan cannot be properly assessed unless there is a basis for comparison. Thus, the next sub-section presents a comparative analysis of multiple Erasmus+ projects focused on development and provision of online training programs.

#### **4. CASE STUDY: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ONLINE TRAINING PROJECTS' SUSTAINABILITY PLANS**

##### **4.1 Methodology**

As per the literature review presented in section 2, the authors concluded that project sustainability for online training programs relies on four main *dimensions*:

- (1) *Intended benefits continuation*, that refers to the ability to maintain the delivery of the project benefits/effects that justified its development.
- (2) *Outcomes maintenance*, a dimension characterized by preservation and accessibility of the outputs, resources and deliverables.
- (3) *Sustained impact*, which translates into the long-term continuation of the changes and benefits intended by the project for the defined target beneficiaries.
- (4) *Relevance preservation*, that is the ability to maintain significance and value as contexts evolve.

Each dimension was assessed using a five-point Likert scale based on identified

characteristics for the above-described dimensions. Each value on the Likert scale was associated with the same number of 'stars', with the main aim of generating an outcome that enables a visually appealing representation of the comparative analysis results. Therefore, the scale is as follows:

- Five-Star Rating (i.e., five points) indicates outstanding performance in the respective dimensions, with comprehensive strategies, robust implementation, and clear evidence of exceptional sustainability outcomes.
- Four-Star Rating (i.e., four points) represents strong performance with well-developed strategies and effective implementation, though with some limitations or areas for improvement.
- Three-Star Rating (i.e., three points) indicates adequate performance with basic sustainability approaches but with significant gaps or limitations that constrain long-term effectiveness.
- Two-Star Rating (i.e., two points) reflects limited performance with minimal sustainability strategies or significant implementation challenges that substantially constrain long-term viability.
- One-Star Rating (i.e., one point) indicates inadequate performance with little evidence of sustainability planning or implementation, suggesting high risk of project failure to achieve long-term objectives.

The overall score was calculated as an average of the ratings for each dimension.

The authors performed an online identification of EU-funded projects that have as a main objective the delivery of online training programs. The main sources of information were the project websites. The authors proceeded to identify key information for the results retrieved by Google search engine.

The main limitations encountered during the research process were the following: (1) Website and deliverables availability is limited for older projects; (2) non-English language projects cannot be included due to risk of poor assessment; (3) to ensure similarity of projects, only the Erasmus+ projects were selected.

The authors aimed to address the limitations and, at the same time, proceeded to identify

projects that published their sustainability plans covering the four dimensions presented above (i.e., intended benefits continuation, outcomes maintenance, sustained impact and relevance preservation).

Seven projects were selected to represent the diverse approaches to online training delivery across different domains and target populations. All claims in this analysis are supported only by information that was directly observed or accessed from verified sources during the research process.

Figure 1 visually highlights the key steps of applying the methodology for a comparative study of sustainability plans for selected EU-funded projects focused on development and delivery of online training programs.

### 4.2 Comparative analysis of sustainability plans

By performing the analysis as per the described methodology, the seven projects identified were:

- VirtualEdu [18]
- SLIDE (Service-Learning for Inclusion, Diversity & Digital Empowerment) [19]
- Green Leap (Green Leadership Program) [20]
- SMILE (Sustainable MobILity in school Education) [21]
- BRAND (Boosting youth towards Responsible and sustainAble choices in fashion inDUstry) [22]

- Digital Generations (Intergenerational Digital Skills Development) [23]
- CREATE (Women co-create sustainable fashion garments) [24].

Table 2 presents the results of the comparative analysis based on the methodology described in subsection 4.1. Thanks to the association between the five-points Likert scale and the star ratings, the table conveys a visually appealing representation of the results.

A notable observation is that the VirtualEdu project has a 4.8/5 rating, being placed above other projects due to the extended coverage of all four dimensions assessed in the study. Project SLIDE also has the same rating as VirtualEdu, demonstrating that many EU-funded projects focus on long-term viability of the project results.

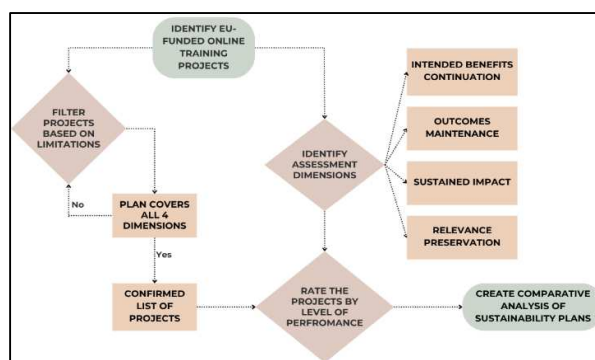


Fig. 1. Flow diagram reflecting study methodology (authors' own conception)

Table 2

Comparative analysis of sustainability plans for selected projects (source: authors' own conception).

| Project name | Project's main objective   | Rating | Benefits continuation | Outcomes maintenance | Sustained impact | Relevance preservation |
|--------------|--|--------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| VirtualEdu   | Professional certification of remote educators, workers, managers and remote-friendly companies                                  | 4.8/5  | ★★★★★                 | ★★★★☆                | ★★★★★            | ★★★★★                  |
| SLIDE        | Building capacity among teachers and students for community engagement and social responsibility                                 | 4.8/5  | ★★★★★                 | ★★★★★                | ★★★★☆            | ★★★★★                  |
| Green Leap   | Bridging sustainability skill gaps in SMEs and startups, combat greenwashing, and develop sustainability leadership competencies | 4.5/5  | ★★★★★                 | ★★★★☆                | ★★★★☆            | ★★★★★                  |
| SMILE        | Enhancement of teacher capacity for climate  | 4.0/5  | ★★★★☆                 | ★★★★☆                | ★★★★☆            | ★★★★☆                  |

|                     |  |       |       |       |       |       |
|---------------------|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                     | change education delivery through Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) approaches   |       |       |       |       |       |
| BRAND               | Aims to raise awareness about fast fashion environmental impacts and empower young people toward eco-friendly fashion choices  | 3.8/5 | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ |
| Digital Generations | Addresses digital inclusion challenges by connecting younger and older community members in mutually beneficial educational relationships, reducing digital divides and enhancing social inclusion | 3.3/5 | ★★★☆☆ | ★★★☆☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ |
| CREATE              | Sustainable fashion awareness through creative skills development and women's empowerment initiatives, combining environmental education with practical creative capabilities                      | 3.3/5 | ★★★☆☆ | ★★★☆☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ |

## 5. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis reveals several strengths and weaknesses for the analyzed projects. With regards to the identified strengths, the high performing projects proved elaborate institutional integration, developed comprehensive digital platforms and stated explicit maintenance plans. Also, the top performing projects were those that engaged multiple categories of stakeholders, proving their ability to build resilient support structures. Nonetheless, the objective of addressing persistent challenges is also a success factor for long-term sustainability of the analyzed projects.

With regards to the weaknesses identified in the analysis, many projects proved the absence of comprehensive planning of technical maintenance after the end of the project, limited consideration for long-term assessment and measurement of the project impact and poor performance in terms of potential content updates and evolving best practices.

Therefore, the mere existence of sustainability plans is not sufficient, if the larger

objective of transforming these projects into EU's educational heritage is aimed for.

Finally, as Mikroyannidis et al. [4] proves, multi-dimensional approaches to sustainable long-term effects of these projects are the sole solution for long-term viability of EU's investments in educational opportunities.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The paper aims to address the problem of EU-funded projects' long-term sustainability and the approach these projects have to the matter. Also, a topic of discussion in the paper is the case of Erasmus+ projects that aim to develop and deliver online training programs in various fields.

One of these projects is VirtualEdu, which developed a training and certification scheme for professionals working remotely that lack the specific skills for high performance in such a work arrangement. To measure the relevance of the sustainability plan of VirtualEdu, the authors developed an assessment methodology based on four dimensions related to the long-term

viability of projects focused on online training programs. The dimensions were identified based on the literature review.

The proposed framework was applied in the case of seven Erasmus+ projects identified as having the same main objective of developing and delivering online training programs. The comparative analysis revealed strengths and weaknesses of the sustainability plans. Also, the results of the comparative analysis proved the necessity of further perfecting the approach to sustainability of such projects.

The main limitations of the study are the reduced number of projects analyzed, with prospective expansion of the study on larger samples, and the possibility of biased results generated by observation-based information gathering.

The paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge around sustainability and project exploitation after the end of the funding period for EU-funded projects. The assessment methodology can be further developed and applied to numerous categories of EU-funded projects to observe larger characteristics and potential flaws in the development of sustainability and exploitation plans.

## 7. SCIENTIFIC CONTRACT

The content of the presented article is related to the research activities developed for the implementation of the VirtualEdu project – “Upskilling and certification scheme for virtual educators, managers, workers” (Erasmus+ KA220-HED - Cooperation Partnerships in Higher Education, 2022-1-RO01-KA220-HED-000086331, <https://virtualedu.eu/>).

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### **Planuri de sustenabilitate ale programelor de formare online ca patrimoniu al proiectelor finanțate de UE**

Uniunea Europeană investește în educație prin oportunități de finanțare precum Erasmus+, Horizon Europe și Digital Europe Program. O trăsătură comună a tuturor acestor scheme de finanțare este cerința de a anticipa impactul pe termen lung al proiectelor selectate, în special după sfârșitul perioadei de finanțare. Un set specific de provocări este proeminent pentru proiectele axate pe programe de formare online. Lucrarea se concentrează pe analiza planurilor de sustenabilitate ale proiectelor de formare online finanțate de UE și prezintă un studiu de caz privind sustenabilitatea proiectului VirtualEdu și o analiză comparativă a mai multor astfel de proiecte. Această analiză contribuie la înțelegerea acestor aspecte prin intermediul unui cadru de evaluare bazat pe definiții, care oferă perspective sistematice asupra abordărilor, rezultatelor și celor mai bune practici în materie de sustenabilitate.

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