

# **A holistic and strategic approach to support and promote Lifelong Learning, networking activities and regional learning**

*An EU project under the R3L initiative*

Henriette Hansen, Teija Multisilta & Anne Kuusisto

*EU Vest – TIC, Avenue Palmerston 3, B - 1000 Bruxelles; Summer University of Western Finland, Otavankatu 3, FIN-28100 Pori; Tampere University of Technology, Pohjoisranta 11, FIN 28101, Pori*

*[hha@euvest.com](mailto:hha@euvest.com); [teija.multisilta@lskesayo.fi](mailto:teija.multisilta@lskesayo.fi); [anne.kuusisto@tut.fi](mailto:anne.kuusisto@tut.fi); [www.r3l.net](http://www.r3l.net)*

**Abstract:** This paper describes an EU project within the R3L initiative. The project idea is based on the experiences of 7 participating regions, all with experience of regional work within Lifelong Learning. The main objective of this project is to develop - through inter-regional co-operation and exchange of experiences - policy recommendations, supported by a number of good practice examples, showing working methods and tools. To support the development work 5 thematic networks have been created, dealing with the themes: Lifelong Learning and Competence Councils; Lifelong Learning and ICT; Lifelong Learning and entrepreneurship; How to support Lifelong Learning by making training easily accessible for all people; and Lifelong Learning, equal opportunities and quality of working life. Within each theme, a regional analysis will be carried through, which will focus on the actors or stakeholders, who are active within the field and the activities they carry out within lifelong learning.

**Key words:** competence councils, economic growth, equal opportunities, inter-regional cooperation, learning region, policy development

## **BACKGROUND**

Successive European Councils, notably those in Lisbon and Feira (2000), Stockholm (2001) and Barcelona (2002), have acknowledged lifelong learning as a key factor in ensuring economic competitiveness and prosperity, active citizenship, social cohesion and the fulfilment of individual personal aspirations. It is the guiding principle underlying the common objectives of the education systems and policy agreed on by the Education Council for the coming decade, and an important contributor to local and regional development throughout the European Union.

Transforming the concept of lifelong learning into concrete reality will require the mobilisation of all players involved in ascertaining learning needs, opening up learning opportunities for people of all ages, ensuring the quality of education and training provision, and making sure that people are given credit for their knowledge and skills acquired. To this end, closer cooperation and partnership must be encouraged between the decision-makers and administrative authorities, the many different providers of formal and education and training, organisations with a non-formal learning dimension in the social and cultural field, associations and NGOs, the social partners, and first and foremost the citizens themselves.

The R3L initiative was set up on the basis of these statements, and was launched as a European Commission call for proposals in July 2002. The purpose of the initiative is the further development of good practice on issues relating to the learning region and to encourage a fruitful trans-national sharing and exchange of this experience. Furthermore, it aims at promoting the development of European networks between learning regions as a means of placing European cooperation in the lifelong learning field on a more durable and sustainable footing. Seven regions from Europe got together to develop a common project, and this paper describes the project, which started in May 2003, and will run until September 2004.

## **AIMS OF THE PROJECT**

### **Objectives**

The main objective of this project is to create more holistic understanding of lifelong learning than the regional activities can offer through inter regional co-operation and exchange of experiences, developing policy recommendations, supported by a number of good practice examples on working methods and tools. The project will illustrate in practical terms how regions can work in a more co-ordinated, structured, strategic and holistic

way, with LLL as an important and strategic factor in regional development. The objective is for the region to become a sustainable and well-functioning learning region.

The policy recommendations will touch upon three main questions, which are:

- How LLL can be an instrument as to support economic growth in a learning region;
- How the learning region can support LLL in the best way;
- How learning regions can measure the performance of their support within LLL and how they can ensure the quality of the learning region as such.

On a longer-term perspective, the project seeks to improve the quality of lifelong learning in regions making it more accessible for the individual. Hence, groups of citizens from the regions, such as unemployed, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, people in danger of being excluded from the labour market, senior people, people with no ICT knowledge, potential entrepreneurs, etc. will be the target groups on the individual level.

## **Innovation in the project**

The participating regions all have experience that the LLL regional learning and networking activity is not sufficiently strategic, coordinated and holistic. Therefore, the innovative part of the project is to give these regions practical tools to adopt a more strategic approach in their development work, which can be integrated within the overall regional development.

Some of the participating regions have neither international networks nor regional networks within different themes of LLL, and some of the regions have regional networks but not international ones. What is common for all partners in the project, though, is that they want to develop a system of thematic networks as it is described in this paper, so this project serves as an important catalyst and motivator for the regions to establish these networks.

For the partners in the project it is important and innovative to bring regional partners together in a project which does not focus on funding, or on cross-sector competition within education. This project focuses on co-operation, dialogue and networking and the development of the regions as a whole. The many regional organisations taking part in the project can therefore benefit from comparing and drawing upon practice with other European regions.

## **Project idea**

The project idea is based on three main horizontal themes, which are:

1. LLL and the promotion of economic growth;
2. Support Services for LLL in the region;
3. Measuring the performance and ensuring the quality of the learning region.

The three themes of the project serve as the fundamental and general questions that regions have to consider when they want to develop a learning region in a qualified way.

In addition to these themes, the project is divided into five vertical or thematic networks. The work within the vertical/thematic networks will support the overall work with the policy recommendations. They are the areas where the partners' specific qualifications will be exploited and where the participating regions have specific interest. The vertical networks are the following:

1. How do Competence Councils support LLL and regional learning?
2. How can ICT support and promote LLL and ensure SME and personal development?
3. How does LLL support entrepreneurship in the region and how can LLL ensure the development of sustainable SMEs?
4. How to support lifelong learning by making training easily accessible for the people?
5. How does LLL support equal opportunities in working life and in the society in general?

The work carried out in the thematic networks will describe and analyse the regional situation in terms of regional stakeholders, activities, regional development results and best practice examples. This work should serve as an input to the work in the horizontal network, where the main objective will be to transform the thematic and regional experiences into a set of general policy recommendations. These principles should be applicable on a European level and useful for all regions in Europe, not only for the 7 regions participating in this project. The project idea is shown in Figure 1. (The abbreviations in brackets refer to countries responsible for each topic).

We believe that this project construction is the best for an inter-regional project. It reflects a true European way of working with global and strategic recommendations on a European level. In addition it takes into account the regional interests and diversities, which are respected and developed in an individual way. This ensures all regions contribute to a better and diversified understanding of the issue.

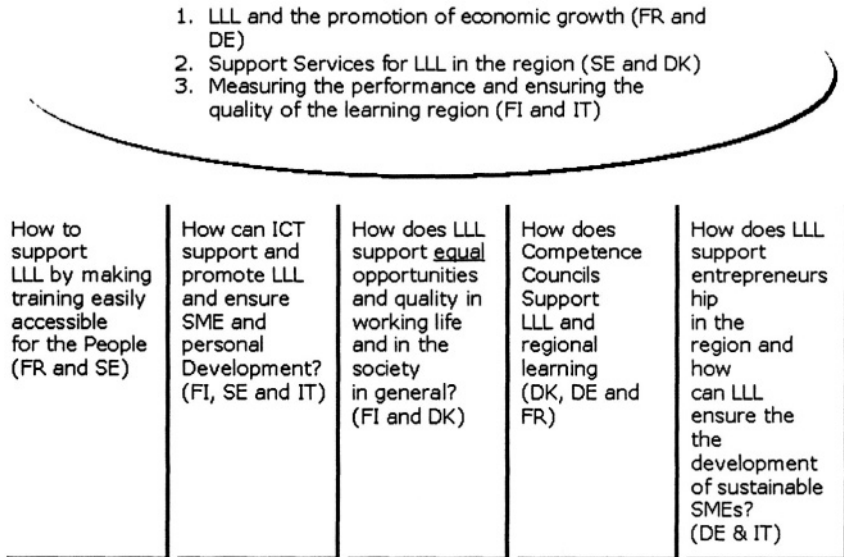


Figure 1. The project idea

## Target groups

The target groups can be divided into three levels, political/regional administration, organisational and individual level. The groups correspond to the themes described in Figure 1. The horizontal themes will target the politicians and/or the regional administration as they will implement the policy recommendations in their work.

The thematic networks will consist of stakeholders from the regions, such as educational institutions, chambers of commerce, labour market institutions, social partners and business development centres, who at the same time will be the target groups on the organisational level, as they are the organisations, which work within LLL and will be influenced by the future policy recommendations. The expected impact for these target groups will be that working with the political decision makers will be easier due to their better understanding and more holistic and strategic view of LLL. This will hopefully leave more room for the actors and stakeholders to develop new initiatives and offer qualitative LLL, to a broad spectre of the citizens.

## **Description of consortium**

The project started in May 2003 in London and will be finished in September 2004. There are seven participating regions in this project: South Denmark, Rhône-Alpes, West Finland, Stuttgart, Lombardia, East Sweden and Dorset. All the participating regions have experience of regional LLL work not being seen in a holistic and strategic way, and there is not a fundamental understanding of how LLL is important for the overall regional development.

## **Project coordinator**

EU Vest – TIC is a regional business development centre, which is established in 1997 as a public partnership institution (I/S) and is a co-operation between the county and the municipalities in the county of Ribe - located on the west coast of Jutland in Denmark. EU Vest - TIC is a public non-profit organisation with the overall objective of promoting innovation and growth within the regional business community, and all our income is used for activities and services for the SMEs in the region. EU Vest – TIC develop and implement projects together with a broad range of organisations in the region, in the role as lead partner, international co-ordinator or external evaluator.

## **South Denmark Region**

South Denmark Region (Ribe County and South Jutland County) has until recently been a region with one of the highest growth rates in Denmark, but unfortunately this growth has not been focused on sectors within 'The New Economy'. The region has established regional Competence Councils to put education and training on the political agenda, carrying through specific activities and projects so as to raise the education level from one of the lowest in Denmark.

The region has established competence centres within important growth sectors, and established networks of contact points for entrepreneurs. The project 'Ribe County – the Learning Region in West Denmark', established in December 2000 has given EU Vest – TIC practical knowledge of how to motivate networks, collect various information from regional stakeholders, and transform this into regional oriented needs, political strategies, practical activities and projects, which correspond to the needs of the region.

## **Stuttgart**

The Stuttgart region initiated the study group for 'Job Market and Employment Politics' with representatives from the continuing education and qualification sector to agree and coordinate job-market and governmental employment policy initiatives, and to initiate and promote new projects to enhance the exchange of information and experiences.

The R3L project will enrich the regional work with experiences from European partners' providing new impetus and experience from other member regions, thereby transferring their experiences onto a larger scale to assist the learning effect of the network at the regional level.

## **Rhône-Alpes**

In the project Rhône-Alpes will co-operate closely with the region of Midi-Pyrenees, because the two regions have similar challenges as mountain regions, and therefore have special needs in terms of reaching less accessible and sparsely populated areas. Moreover, the two regions have already co-operated in several development projects to 1) introduce people to ICT, 2) develop new training offers and 3) make training easily accessible by creating new public access places.

The Rhône-Alpes and the Midi-Pyrenees regions will benefit through this project from the knowledge in other regions and other organisations, which have substantial experience with the use of ICT strengthening other thematic networking activities within and outside the regions.

## **Lombardy**

The region of Lombardy has for some years established many initiatives to promote Lifelong Learning on both a regional and local level, focused on the needs of further training and education of women and senior people, with or without work. In their work with Lifelong Learning, the Lombardy region has put an emphasis on the integration between instructor and professional training and the 'hands-on' experience within the world of work.

The R3L project will support Lombardy's work in establishing new regional thematic networks with public and private stakeholders. The region has not had inter-regional activities within this field before.

## **Pori**

In the Satakunta and Pori region the concept has been actively promoted since 2002, when a new national research programme “Life as Learning” was launched by the Academy of Finland. The regional council of Satakunta and the city of Pori are actively looking for networking on the international level to strengthen the development of SMEs, ICT and training. The R3L project will promote such development bringing the various actors together. The active partners include the Pori unit of Tampere University of Technology (TUT Pori), providing education, research and product development in technical sciences and business science. The other local coordinator, Summer University of Western Finland, actively promotes the issues of equality. The Satakunta / Pori region will bring a substantial IT knowledge and a specific knowledge about co-operation between universities and SMEs.

## **East Sweden**

For the R3L project the EAST SWEDEN Association and its members (County Council and the thirteen municipalities) have established a partnership with Linköping University, Competence and Learning Centre, Distance Learning Office and the County Library. East Sweden is looking for ways to motivate its citizens to be engaged in higher education and employment as well as in specific working skills qualifications, developing learning methods to serve companies in their need for a skilled and competent workforce, as well as accessibility regarding upper secondary schools. The R3L project will be beneficial because East Sweden wants to try untraditional thinking within this project.

## **Dorset**

During 2001, the Learning and Skills Council contracted The Enterprise Connection to install and manage a broadband infrastructure for Internet access for over 30 Community Learning and Information Centres in Dorset. This service, in a highly rural area, is one of the first of its kind in the UK, providing access to lifelong education and development for adult learners. The lead partner from Dorset, The Enterprise Connection, has substantial experience within ICT facilities as an instrument for promoting Lifelong Learning, and this experience will be fully exploited in the R3L project.



## **EVALUATION**

### **Internal and external evaluation**

For each horizontal and vertical theme, two partners will be responsible for the outcome of the work. Each partner will form a regional and thematic network and produce a regional analysis within each field, but the two partners who are responsible will have the overall responsibility to collect all material from the partners and draw up common conclusions, in the form of case studies, focusing on best practice examples, which show working methods and practical tools.

All partners have produced a 'Regional Snapshot' at the beginning of the project, and it is the intention that the regions at the end of the project will have to look back on this snapshot and evaluate where and how the region has changed through the activities of the project.

We believe that the best way to test and evaluate the product and output of the project, is to let other regions look at and try out the products, and give objective feedback, as these regions have not participated in the development work. Hence, we have established a co-operation with another R3L project so that the two projects can give feedback to each other's products.

### **Feedback from the European Commission**

The project application received feedback by two expert evaluators of the European Commission who commended the project on its strong planning, with clear objectives, clear role for each partner and in its combination of overall horizontal themes and specific vertical themes. Additionally, the project design with five different thematic mini-projects carried out to gather necessary information from different resources appearing to reflect a deep understanding of what is needed to establish sound policy recommendations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This R3L project, which is implemented by 7 European regions, has received excellent feedback from the European Commission, and if the objectives are reached, namely to form practical policy recommendations in how to create and manage learning regions and activities within Lifelong Learning, it will be a useful tool for many regions in Europe.

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