



**Preliminary recommendations to the European Commission
on the implementation of Grundtvig Networks in the new
Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme**

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The background to this document

Euoweaving (www.euoweaving.com) is a Socrates/Accompanying Measures project which aims at developing practice-oriented guidance and training materials for Grundtvig and Comenius network actors on how to design, plan and manage successful European networks in education.

The project was conceived against the background that networks play an increasingly important role in European lifelong learning policies. In contrast to this growing importance it appears that the results of some of the funded networks are below expectations in terms of the expected contribution to the educational field concerned. One of the reasons for this seems that many network coordinators and partners do not have a sufficiently clear picture of the concept of a network as a specific cooperative structure and of the most suitable activities and management processes. Literature reviews showed that hardly any guidance materials on European network building –as, for instance, *A Survival Kit for European Project Management* - field exists.

The envisaged **Euoweaving** guidance materials will be tailored to the needs of network actors and based on existing good practice. To achieve this present network coordinators as well as European Commission officials and independent experts were invited to contribute their experience of networks through questionnaires and interviews.

The preliminary recommendations to the Commission for the formulation of guidelines for the Grundtvig Network Action in the Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme are based on the interim results of these interviews undertaken.

This document specifically responds to several request from European Commission officials responsible for the formulation of the guidelines of the new programmes. While these recommendations are particularly targeted to Grundtvig networks, some of them can also be of value within the context of the formulation of other standard network actions.

The scope of the findings

Networks are a specific programme instrument to promote at European level interlinking and cooperation between diverse actors in a particular field of education. Networks are expected to consist of key players in the thematic area concerned. They are also expected to be a source of information on the specific theme they work on as well as a reference point for their field. Moreover, it is hoped that successful networks could be used as stakeholders for EC policy development.

Nevertheless, the results are not optimal.

As far as the Grundtvig network action is concerned, the **Euoweaving** survey identified four key areas that needed to be strengthened in order to optimise the results of networks funded by DG EAC:

- The degree of **clarity about the concept of “network”** among all relevant actors (EU officials, external evaluators/experts and network coordinators and partners themselves).
- **The relevance of each network to the specific thematic area** they are supposed to promote and their capacity to demonstrate experience in the field. Moreover, the way network coordinators formulate their background rationale, main aims and objectives at the conceptualisation stage of their network.
- The **effectiveness of the network action**, including the **adequacy of the selection and monitoring mechanisms**, and the role which programme support structures can play to promote networks and help to increase their impact.

- The **sustainability** of the funded networks, that is, their impact on educational communities in Europe and the life of the networks beyond their funding period.

Preliminary findings and recommendations

The following are the key findings and recommendations identified by the **Euoweaving** project team as a result of the responses to the survey and interviews with the different actors.

The network concept

In the programme documents the Commission has set highly ambitious and multiple objectives for Grundtvig networks. These requirements range from providing a platform for the cooperation of the various actors, supporting thematically related projects, delivering training to practitioners, conducting research and needs analyses, identifying and disseminating good practice, to influencing educational policy at national and European level.

There is, however, often a gap between these high expectations and the actual achievements of networks.

Several reasons may account for this gap. This may be due to a lack of understanding with regard to the definition of a network (for some actors a network is defined as a large TCP project).

The research conducted by **Euoweaving** indicates that the multiplicity and complexity of objectives and activities required from networks are desirable but do not sufficiently reflect the limitations adult education institutions face when they embark on establishing a network. These limitations include their institutional capacity in terms of resources and organisation, the low level of EU funding of network activities, the complexity of the partnership (having to balance geographical diversity with variety of expertise) and the short funding periods.

Consequently, emerging European networks, need to prioritise and should be encouraged to do so.

Recommendation 1

While in principle promoting the same network programme objectives as in Socrates II, the guidelines of the new programme should explicitly inform network applicants that these set objectives are to be read as an indicative list. A good network should be able to identify, define and focus on a few core aims and activities rather than try and meet all the requirements mentioned.

In the first period of funding, emerging networks should be encouraged by the programme guidelines to concentrate on those core objectives and activities that best match their mission.

In the renewal phase, networks should be encouraged to expand their scope to some of those objectives and activities which are also desired by the Commission but not yet fulfilled.

The selection of applications and monitoring of the contract should reflect this approach.

Networks are about networking

In the first place networks are about networking. Network promoters should emphasise that creating a structure for formal and informal exchange of experience between the various actors and learning from each other is essential: a prerequisite for all other activities and end in itself.

To create, maintain and further develop relations between network actors and to establish suitable communication structures requires a lot of effort, resources and time. Many network promoters have the feeling they cannot afford to invest the resources which would be necessary because of the pressure to do implement all other items they felt obliged to envisage in the work plan. They feel that they lack the *raison d'être* of their network (which is networking) and are asked to concentrate on an often long list of expected deliverables

Moreover, as has been remarked, networking is a process-oriented (as opposed to product-oriented) activity: it is more complex to set up and it takes longer to consolidate. Establishing and maintaining a network requires the expertise and commitment of a large partnership coming from different fields and countries. Balancing geographical diversity with variety in expertise seems to be one of the biggest challenges networks face. Setting up and establishing a partnership of three times the partnership of an average project needs instruments for common understanding and time for its consolidation.

Finally, the *Euroweaving* research demonstrates that there is little networking across networks (i.e. meta networking is rare). Partners in one network could indeed benefit from examples of good practice and the successes and failures of other networks. Experienced network partners could help newcomers. Finally, promotion of a network's activities can and should be done through other networks.

Recommendation 2

Network promoters should be informed that the creation and development of a platform for exchange and learning must be the core element of each network.

As a consequence the activities envisaged to enable actors to network (both within and beyond their partnership) effectively should constitute a major element of the application.

The quality of the planned networking provision should be a central selection criterion and communicated accordingly.

The Commission should encourage further networking between already existing networks and newcomers. This could be achieved through the organisation of contact seminars, annual mini-conferences or workshops at European level, where networks can present their work, discuss their achievements and challenges and...network.

Duration of financial support

In view of the two above-mentioned recommendations, it is not surprising that network promoters stress that it takes considerable time for a newly created network to establish its own identity; build a sustainable fabric of relations and develop into a European key player which has a strong impact in the field concerned. The gap between the Commission's expectations and network achievements is also a discrepancy between the time framework granted by the programme and the one required for network development in reality.

The research conducted clearly shows that in many cases the current maximum funding period of 3 years is too short to consolidate a network as a reference point at European level.

The success of a renewal application of a previously funded network is currently based on their capacity to develop a network into something new: new objectives, new methodology, or new activities, in the specific given field. This approach does not seem to be the most suitable to foster sustainable networks.

Recommendation 3

In order for relevant and sustainable networks to develop and position themselves on the European scene, more than one funding period is generally necessary. A second period of funding, on the basis on previous network achievements, should be considered as the rule rather than as an exception.

The criteria for renewing a network should be reviewed. These should be based on the network being able to prove its relevance in the field at the European level, its networking capacity and impact beyond the core partnership group, and its operational capacity to consolidate its activities and become sustainable.

Growing strategy

Many networks would like to expand their partnerships as they are requested to do. Only a few manage to do so, since the technical possibilities of networking and opening up their activities beyond their core partnership are restricted by rigid financial regulations and the necessity to stick to a closed pre-defined work-plan.

It is important to highlight that European funded networks do not have any funding mechanism to allow them to expand their networking activity beyond the core members or to foster the active participation to the activities of the associated partners.

Recommendation 4

The European Commission could envisage the possibility (and establish the right mechanisms) of allowing networks to enlarge their partnership during the funding period. This could be made possible by allowing an extra budget for such cases, in order to ensure that newcomers to the network would be active and not silent partners.

To allow for a strategy of growth, the financial rules of the network action should allow the use of a lump sum for direct costs for the participation of non-contractual actors in network activities.

Contractual procedures

At present the contractual procedures for network contracts are the same as those for projects. This involves rather heavy administrative mechanisms with regard to amendments to network contracts due to changes in the partnership or in the work plan. At reporting stages network coordinators must account for and justify any deviation from the plan as in any other project.

Recommendation 5

The procedures of managing and monitoring a network contract should take into consideration the open-ended nature of a network. The course of a complex and diversified network is necessarily less defined than that of a pilot project leading to a joint “product”.

Amendments to the contract should be processed more lightly and quicker.

The compliance with the application form at the interim and final report stage should be treated with a more flexible approach than in a project.

Selection criteria

There are no specific quality criteria defined for the evaluation and selection of networks, as opposed to projects. Therefore, the selection criteria that external evaluators apply are not always identical.

This lack of common ground has apparently to do with the open nature of the network concept. Interviews with network evaluators have indicated the danger of subjectivity in this exercise. This has resulted at times in the applicant not having clear information concerning the selection criteria or the reasons for approval or rejection of the proposal.

Recommendation 6

It is necessary to establish clear and distinctive indicators for the assessment and selection of network applications. These should be communicated to applicants in advance in order to help them to focus their application on the crucial points and for the sake of transparency.

Selection criteria should include at least the following aspects: Relevance to the field, operational capacity of the network partnership, networking potential (involvement of multipliers), mainstreaming potential, adequacy of working methods, sustainability, and cost- efficiency.

Selection of partners

Several of the education networks funded by the European Commission do not seem to have a sufficiently critical mass of key players in the particular field on board. Sometimes partners seem to be selected rather randomly, according to geographical coverage and previous contacts.

This view is shared by all the actors interviewed: Commission officers, staff of the former Technical Assistance Office and external evaluators. It is nevertheless clear that this must be an essential requirement if a network is to become a point of reference in their field on the European scene.

Recommendation 7

The involvement of key players in the field, or at least of partner organisations with a clearly demonstrated capacity to bring along these key players (network of networks) should be made a core selection criterion.

Such key players could include policy makers at local/regional/national level, partners experienced in networking and partners with a high potential of mainstreaming and disseminating, without leaving out partners with a strong expertise on the content side of the network theme concerned.

This requirement should be highlighted in the programme documents as well as in the application forms.

The participation of key players should also be accounted for and documented in the interim and final reports.

Sustainability

The sustainability of networks beyond the period of funding by the Commission is in general rather low. And yet the Commission has designed this Action to temporarily accompany emerging networks with financial support so they can consolidate and become sustainable structures as a result.

But the research undertaken by *Euroweaving* has also identified that there is no consensus on what sustainability means for the different actors involved in the funding process.

For Commission officials sustainability normally means keeping up the organisational structure of a network and transforming it into an association or another stable form of organisation. On the other hand, many network promoters come up with different interesting yet less formal elements of sustainability (continuation of contacts, joint follow-up conferences, publications etc.).

Apparently the concept of sustainability within the context of networks needs clarification and new approaches.

Recommendation 8

Plans for the sustainability of a network should be communicated as a core activity of each network and treated as an important selection criterion.

At the same time the traditional concept of sustainability should be reviewed and a wider approach be taken.

Network applicants should be provided with diverse examples of sustainability in order to get ideas on how their own networks could continue to live when EU funding has come to end. As such, sustainability should not be regarded as continuation of funding and should not necessarily concentrate on the set up of formal structures alone.

The Commission could perhaps issue a call for tender in order to identify successful examples of sustainability of networks inside and outside DG EAC programmes. It is clear that selection of examples of good practice in this field is essential.

Interaction with the European Commission

Network promoters stress that the level of interaction with the European Commission officials and networks is not optimal. Interaction takes place primarily with a project officer, who has in general a low advisory and monitoring role. Access to policy officials is in most cases very difficult, even when a network has a policy agenda.

This makes it not only difficult for networks to fulfil their desired role as policy shapers at European level but also sends the wrong message that the EU is more interested in administrative issues rather than in the educational and policy content networks are dealing with.

European networks need to have a strong EU policy background, and should therefore actively take part in policy debates. On the other hand, consolidated and representative EU networks can be important interfaces at the European level between the Commission, national governments and educational practitioners in Europe. There is clearly a need to strengthen dialogue and exchange among the different actors.

Recommendation 9

If policy oriented networks are to play a strategic role at the European level, the Commission has to envision specific mechanisms to strengthen exchange at the policy level.

The Commission could for instance organise regular meetings with the networks concerned.

In addition to a project officer, a policy liaison person could also be nominated for each network.

If networks are to be used as reference points for policy making, network promoters should be consulted as stakeholders in the shaping of policies they are experienced in.

Role of National Agencies

The National Agencies in centralised adult education networks are only marginally involved.

It is not part of the operational agreement of Grundtvig National Agencies to give support to centralised networks. Interviews with National Agencies indicate that they would like to be more involved with this action in their capacity of interfaces for promotion, monitoring, dissemination and integration of network results into national systems. They do however, need an explicit mandate and additional resources to play this important support role.

Recommendation 10

The National Agencies should become much more involved in the implementation of the network action.

In order to make this viable, it should be included into their operational agreements that one of their duties is to support networks. Such support could involve encouraging networking among networks at the national level (i.e. organisation of national meetings of networks and exchange of expertise or training seminars on good practice of networking through the involvement of either experienced network partners or external experts).

Funding must be provided correspondingly.