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September 2022

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



Disclaimer: Funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Erasmus+ co-funded project OpenU (606692-EPP-1-2018-2-FR-EPPKAC-PI-POLICY). The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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Issues of Policy and Strategy for International Collaboration between European HEIs

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Abstract

This article investigates cross-institutional collaboration of European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from a policy perspective, using virtual mobility as a case study. In the framework of policy experimentation, two instruments to provide an evidence basis are examined: policy dialogues between high-level authorities, institutional policymakers and practitioners, and evaluation of local implementations of existing policies. We describe these instruments along with the results obtained, reflect on the methodology used, and we finally derive recommendations for the policy process.

1 Unlocking Evidence for Cross-Institutional Collaboration

Successful processes of evidence-based policy making rely on knowledge gained through experimentation in the field. One of the key challenges is establishing the flow of knowledge between the level of practice and its evaluation, on the one hand, and the policy-making level, on the other hand. Bridging this gap is the core task of Erasmus+ Key Action 3 projects. To this end, those projects typically bring together practitioners, public authorities and researchers in the field of education and training. Experimentations are then carried out at a limited scale and are evaluated by researchers to test implementation procedures, to generate innovative policy options and to assess their potential effects (Han & Mills, 2021). The evidence thus gathered is used as a basis for dialogues with and recommendations to policy makers. Well-tested methods are necessary to systematically feed the knowledge gained in these projects into the political process.

The OpenU project is one example of such EU-funded policy experimentations. It is guided by the question: How can inter-university cooperation, innovative pedagogical teaching and learning as well as academic mobility be strengthened throughout the project? With respect to the explorative character

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of the project, action research was chosen for analysing field trials, aiming at “learning from action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning” (Zuber-Skerrit 2001: 2). The incremental procedure with its feedback loops puts light on practical problems of collaborating, learning and being mobile in a transnational environment. One of the focus topics that has come to the surface (and which needs further experimentation) is *virtual mobility*. The concept stands for new forms of digital collaboration and academic exchange within an intercultural setting.

Virtual mobility is defined as “a set of activities supported by Information and Communication Technologies, including e-learning, that realises or facilitates international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching, training, or learning” (European Commission 2020, 331). However, against the background of the pandemic, the road of virtual mobility is not yet paved at European HEIs. Virtual mobility is part of the European Commission’s Erasmus+ agenda, to the effect that practitioners, policy makers and researchers are involved in strategic projects to identify and overcome critical issues for effective (virtual) mobility.

When approaching mobility, it is vital to separately examine the perspectives of the HEIs, of students and teaching staff, as Henderikx and Ubachs (2019) argue:

- From the *institutional perspective*, mobility is both a service for students as well as an instrument “to enhance their international profile and strengthen their curricula”. The forms of mobility are a result of institutional policies and strategies.
- The *student perspective* focuses on “a learning activity, a course or part of a curriculum in another university”. This opens up the opportunity of individual study plans.
- The *staff perspective* is characterised by the need to design and offer learning activities in the framework of a cooperation agreement. This promotes the creation of “new educational and mobility formats [...], based on international course and curriculum design”.

These perspectives are embraced by institutional policy-making and implementation as bottom-up strategies to support virtual mobility. In addition, a complex structure of regional, national and European policy making is at work in a top-down manner, characterised by either bureaucracy, market or autonomy (Lassnigg 2016a). This paper critically reviews the impact of ‘policy experimentations’ as a systemic instrument to foster innovative policies and practises of international collaboration in higher education. Our methodology is depicted in Fig. 1. We created two cycles to gather evidence (one evaluating institutional strategy and practice and the other to foster dialogue between practice and policy) and to generate knowledge that feeds into recommendations.

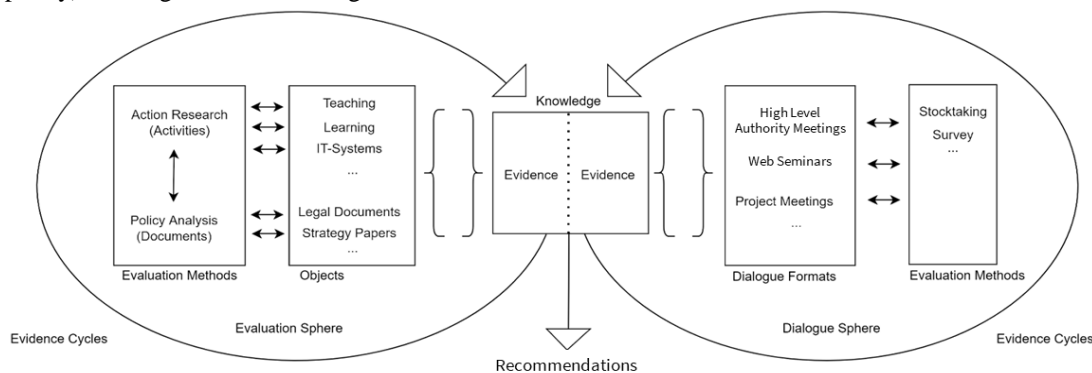


Figure 1: The policy experimentation toolbox combines evidence cycles in two spheres.

Therefore, section 2 introduces the valuable role of policy experimentation to potentially bridge the gap between policy and practice by means of building a bridge of research-evidence. The instrument of policy dialogues is discussed along with a reflection on their outcomes and methodology. Section 3 presents different evaluation methods related to strategy along with their outcomes. Section 4 concludes with recommendations for the decision makers and future research.

2 Policy Issues Addressed in Dialogue

Referring to the dialogue sphere in Fig. 1, this section introduces the methodology of conducting the policy dialogue as a process. First elaborating on the formats introduced in the OpenU project, the section further provides an overview of outcomes and identifies challenges met in the process.

2.1 Policy Dialogue as Process

To ensure continuous engagement in the policy experimentation on the part of the high-level public authorities, their activities within the project are ideally designed as an ongoing process: Instead of organising isolated events that run the risk of being disconnected from the project's progress, the 'policy dialogue as process' relies on several formats of engagement for the public authorities which ideally are strongly interlinked with the project work at the level of institutional policy and practice. A strong coordination of this policy dialogue process is a critical success factor to facilitate communication with the public authorities and the other parties in the project (work packages) as well as with external stakeholders. In other words, the policy dialogue coordinator is relied on to create an effective feedback loop between all levels involved in the project. Thus, the policy experimentation project provides public authorities with the opportunity to closely follow the iterative development of local experimentation. They witness the immediate effects of their involvement in the design and implementation of the institutional policies and practises that are tested, including insights into project-external perceptions of the policy experiments.

To further illustrate the approach, the OpenU project serves as a concrete example. The dialogue process relies on four main formats of engagement to actively involve the six Ministries of Education in the project, providing varied opportunities for exchanges with different stakeholders: (i) An initial stocktaking exercise, (ii) High-Level Authorities' Meetings, (iii) public web seminars, and (iv) virtual meetings with project partners.

At the very beginning of the project, a virtual survey was conducted among the involved ministries as a stocktaking exercise (i) clarifying their expectations and assumptions with regard to focus topics and outcomes of the project. The results provided the evidence necessary for an initial alignment of the experimentation as well as the evaluation with the ministries' priorities.

Well-distributed over the course of the project, the (ii) High-level Authorities' Meetings (HLAM) are major milestones in the policy dialogue process. Each of the Ministries of Education hosts at least one HLAM on a topic of specific national priority relevant to the scope of the project. Topics chosen in the OpenU project are, for example: Open Educational Resources and flexible study paths, inclusive digital education, or micro-credentials. The HLAM are attended by the six ministries and are open upon invitation to participants from the project consortium as well as relevant external experts, such as institutional policy makers and practitioners from HEIs, and other stakeholders at the host's regional or national level. With an average of 25 participants, the HLAMs focus on in-depth exchange between the ministries on the given priority topic, potentially unlocking synergies between the project and national or regional projects and initiatives.

Moreover, the HLAMs are the forum to present the latest evaluation results of the project's own small-scale experimentations to the group of ministries. These results can "provide solid evidence on which to constructively base the [policy] discussion" (Blanchenay and Burns 2016, 168) resulting – as a first step – in joint recommendations on the further development of the project. Hence, as immediate output of each HLAM, a report including policy recommendations with regard to the hosting ministry's priority topic and concerning project's progress is shared with the project consortium. Thus, the ministries' recommendations can have guiding influence on the next steps taken on the level of institutional policy and practice within the project. For example, ministries can voice priorities with regard to the kind of teaching and learning practises tested at the HEIs in the context of the experimentation, such as a particular focus on virtual mobilities. Eventually, the experimentation results

gathered over the course of the project should support the involved policy makers in “assessing which [new policy options] could be successfully generalised” (Blanchenay and Burns 2016, 168).

The HLAMs are complemented by (iii) public web seminars on European-level policy developments and transnational challenges in the field of digital education and internationalisation. The representatives of the ministries jointly decide on the web seminar topics and the DAAD, as policy dialogue coordinator, organises the online events inviting expert speakers and chairing the discussions. Web seminars in the OpenU project focused, for example, on “Quality Assurance of digital education” and “Quality Assurance in European University Alliance”. Thus, the web seminars are a vehicle to further extend the knowledge base of the ministries (while also disseminating knowledge to a wider audience) serving their specific recommendations for the project’s development as well as their process of formulating policy recommendations.

Particularly important for the communication among the policy makers are regular (iv) virtual meetings. Organised by the policy dialogue coordinator, they provide the space to discuss the projects’ progress in a less formal setting than at the HLAM. Furthermore, they serve as a means to inform policy makers of ongoing policy discussions, plans and roll-outs of initiatives at the other ministries providing yet another opportunity for peer learning. The virtual meetings are also regularly opened to coordinators of other work packages of the project to allow for more direct exchange with the HEI level. In addition, the policy makers are also invited to other work packages’ (virtual) internal and external events. For example, a peer learning event organised for the practitioners in the OpenU project integrated a dedicated “policy session” allowing for direct exchange between governmental policy makers and the practitioners, including institutional policy makers, involved in the project’s teaching and learning experimentation.

At the time of writing and after three years of work, four HLAM, three web seminars and eleven other virtual meetings have been organised with the ministries involved in the OpenU project. Their results feed into the final deliverable of the project: A collection of recommendations shall detail how the project’s findings and concrete solutions to challenges in policy and practice can be further rolled out on national and regional (horizontal upscaling) as well as on European level (vertical upscaling). Thus, the project should prepare future evidence-based policy making that can achieve systemic impact. First results and some challenges are reflected upon in the following section.

2.2 Results of the Policy Dialogue Process

As illustrated above, the policy dialogue functions as a feedback loop in the framework of a policy experimentation project. Its outcomes can be traced on three different levels of exchanges:

Firstly, institutional policy and practice are informed by input from the perspective of governmental and EU policy making. This regards the ministries’ current priorities, their experience and expertise, information on upcoming policy initiatives at national or EU level, and insight into policy makers’ unresolved questions. In the OpenU project, the high priority that the ministries put on increasing student mobilities, on the one hand, as well as on supporting innovation in teaching and learning using digital tools and resources, on the other hand, provided strategic guidance to the learning scenarios later tested in the project’s experimentation. However, with delays in experimentations and evaluations, which are common to project work, immediate gaps open in the ideal feedback loop: The dialogues on the governmental policy levels easily become decoupled from institutional policy making and practice and thus lose their immediate relevance to the project.

Secondly, the ministries are provided with input from the level of institutional practice. This refers to evaluations of institutional policy and practice in the context of the project, i.e., the project’s research-evidence that is presented to the ministries in the context of the HLAMs. At the same time, direct exchanges with institutional policy makers and practitioners during virtual project meetings or the public web seminars provide immediate insight into their needs, their reactions to current policy frameworks (or their ignorance thereof) and their priorities in the face of current developments on

institutional or inter-institutional level (for HEI networks) as well as national and European level. In the case of the OpenU project, the relevance of such exchanges lies in taking discussions about digital education and international collaboration from a highly theoretical, strategic and aim-based (policy) discussion into the realm of concrete, tangible practises implemented by individuals. Educators describe effects, challenges and success stories as experts for their own field. This unmediated access to practical experience is perceived as a valuable addition to the evidence provided by evaluations.

As a third result, the ministries engage in peer learning and knowledge building. At the HLAMs, they share knowledge and exchange best practises with other ministries concerning national (or regional) strategies and policy initiatives that, in the case of OpenU, support digital and international collaboration in the higher education sector. Creating strong thematic links between the ministries' agendas and the project's focus is a prerequisite to ensure HLAMs provide an added value. Only if national priority topics meet concrete issues raised in the project, cross-fertilisation becomes possible. Then, valuable knowledge is disseminated into the project from different national contexts, while the project provides the methodological frame and space to also gain knowledge with regard to the specific experimentations, their thematically relevant outputs and outcomes. Observations which are potentially transferable to the ministries' contexts and relevant to policy decisions.

An additional aspect of knowledge building is that the policy dialogue helps raise awareness of European policy agendas among the ministries. Again, with a clear connection to the concrete topics tackled in the project, such as Quality Assurance of digital education, the project context allows for thematically focused and moderated exchanges about EU-level developments which, otherwise, might not get this target-oriented attention. Ideally, stronger connections between European and national developments in the relevant fields are created. Examples for successful peer exchange in the OpenU project are, for one, that discussions at a HLAM provided input to the process of building a national strategy for the digital transformation of higher education, and that a new Erasmus+ KA3 project on a related topic was started between two involved ministries.

3 Strategy Issues as Reflected by HEI Practitioners

Referring to the evaluation sphere in Fig. 1, this section introduces the methodology to gain empirical evidence on how higher-level policies are translated into local strategy and practice. First, we describe the findings from an analysis of strategic documents in the field of virtual mobility, which is followed by a survey among institutional decision makers and practitioners on their individual perspectives.

3.1 Analysis of Strategic Documents

At HEIs, policy and decision makers seek knowledge of the capabilities and strategic needs of their institutions through reliable evaluation methods. They make efforts to gather evidence for taking appropriate decisions, establishing strategic partnerships and defining future policies. In policy experimentation projects, institutional strategies are an important starting point in evaluating whether the translation of policies into practice can be improved. Since strategic documents contain the policy framework, objectives, measures and the quality assurance processes to be applied in this translation process, they are highly indicative resources.

One of the evaluation aims of the OpenU project is to investigate the status quo of international cooperation, e-learning, virtual mobility, and related digital infrastructures before and after conducting the policy experimentation. To this end, strategic documents or similar official documents from involved HEIs regarding their virtual mobility, international cooperation, and blended learning practises were collected. The documents were received in three different languages (English, German and French) and were evaluated with regard to the following questions:

- Is there a dedicated strategy or vision for the implementation of virtual mobility?

- What are the relevant strategic elements related to e-learning, virtual mobility, digital services and infrastructure?
- What are the objectives of blended learning and international cooperation?
- How is the quality of blended learning and virtual mobility assured?

The analysis of the strategic documents started with a specification of metadata and a categorisation of the documents. Three dimensions were defined: blended learning and virtual mobility scenarios, institutional goals and outcomes, and the institution's experimentation process. The results of the analysis were prepared in three formats: a table of correlations relating the analysis factors and the single HEIs; a SWOC (strengths, weakness, opportunities, and challenges) matrix; and a set of recommendations to be drawn from the analysis.

3.2 Virtual Mobility from a Strategic Perspective

The strategic documents analysis study showed that:

- The majority of the partners have systematically anchored e-learning systems and decentralised e-learning services at their universities, while some of them offer Micro- Masters as MOOCs, especially to foreign students.
- Bilingual programs are one of the common teaching strategies in all participating HEI, at least in the Masters and Ph.D. programmes.
- Most of the HEIs recognise the valuable efforts of IT and teaching staff, administrators and students in supporting e-learning and virtual mobility.
- The vast majority of the documents does not contain quality criteria, standards or assure the quality of policy implementations.
- A small number of documents refers to the necessity of strategic plans for long-term cooperation with auditing plans and quality assurance missions.

Finally, an interesting finding is what we did not find in the strategic documents: When collecting the documents, we received in many cases the answer that there were no strategic documents available at that HEI. even when we provided examples on how broadly "strategic document" could be defined. This was quite surprising since a formal prerequisite for a European University Alliance is to have such strategies in place. However, we did not investigate further if the documents did not exist or if the people involved in the project were not aware of their local strategic documents. In both cases, it is an indicator for a 'loss in translation' in local processes of policy implementation.

3.3 A Survey on Factors Affecting Virtual Mobility

Virtual mobility activities are a difficult object of study in policy evaluation since they reflect strategies in the domains of education, internationalisation, and digitalisation. Indeed, the challenge for evaluation is to relate to the policy, strategy and practice layers in the mentioned domains as they become evident during experimentations. To this end, the previous analysis of strategic documents was combined with a survey among decision-makers and practitioners in those HEIs. The aim was to reveal further details on different perspectives regarding existence, applicability, implementation and effectivity of different policies in that field.

A questionnaire was submitted to the OpenU project partners to draw an image of the status quo of virtual mobility and international teaching at their HEIs. Respondents were asked to complete and submit the survey before the experimentations and from their individual point of view. The survey targeted several groups and stakeholders: CIO office staff and central IT staff, teaching staff and international relations office staff, administrators of student and staff mobility, e-learning service units and faculty staff.

One of the questionnaire parts measured the factors that affect virtual mobility at the project partners' universities. Decision-makers and practitioners were asked to which extent several factors (as

derived from a previous literature review) stimulate or hamper the implementation of virtual mobility. Among those factors, a number of policies on different levels were mentioned, as well as supportive infrastructure from a technical and educational perspective. Policy experimentation was targeted at different levels:

- administrative level
- teaching and staff level
- student level

After this rather general assessment, the participants were asked for a supplementary assessment of their concrete virtual mobility experiments and their policy references. Most questions were in multiple choice format with an option to add individual comments. A total of 29 respondents completed the whole questionnaire. The results are presented in the following section.

3.4 Virtual Mobility from a Practical Perspective

A central finding from the survey is that beyond the decision-making level, the applicable policies are apparently hardly known at HEIs. This refers to both higher-level policies at national or EU level and to their local translations and implementations. This is all the more surprising as the opposite picture emerged in a KA3 project on teacher training conducted at similar HEIs at a different time: In this case, all participants - from decision-makers to individual teachers - were well acquainted with the structure of the applicable policies and their implementation in teaching. Outside teacher training, this does not seem to be the norm; there is a need to catch up. Not even basic mission statements regarding virtual mobility, blended learning or overall teaching at the local HEI, let alone strategies on internationalisation, digitalisation etc., did appear in the answers.

However, despite the missing policy link, some of the project partners implement several virtual mobility initiatives through national and regional virtual mobility projects. ECTS granted for online courses are one of the universities' goals of strategic importance. The estimated numbers of online courses offered per academic year are still not in the range of expectations at most of the HEI in the project.

Most of the experimentation partners underlined the added value of the systematic review and feedback they received from those following their virtual mobility project. Also, relating their experimental set-up to the project's predefined priority actions (which could indeed be seen as a kind of policy link) was mentioned as one of the most important and positive factors for the experimentation. The following selection highlights the most significant aspects from the answers of the respondents:

- The majority of the partners implement a set of virtual mobility and/or blended learning scenarios at their universities, but their quality assurance strategies and review plans still need to be improved.
- Some of the project partners implement several initiatives of virtual mobility activities, through national and regional virtual mobility projects.
- Half of the participants consider the quality of the technical infrastructure to have a very positive effect on virtual mobility activities at their universities.
- At the teaching and staff level it was reported that existing contact between staff members and departments, educational offers potential for raising employability and the research orientation of educational offers are the affective factors for virtual mobility.
- Regarding educational formats, the majority supports group discussions for virtual students' activity. Audio files, texts, simulations and games are the types of contents that partners considered as content provided in virtual mobility offers.
- Course-based certificates and micro-certificates should be used to document students' participation in virtual mobility offers.

The process of evaluating the strategy documents and their implementation in local practice underlined that the mere existence of institutional strategies is not a sufficient indicator for their effectiveness.

Hence, evaluation in policy experimentation also requires direct communication with the practitioners about the meaning, validity and implementation of policies. In the very beginning of a policy experimentation, clear definitions of interlinkages between the levels of the experimentation must be formulated. Active participation in the downstream evaluation needs to be a clear requirement to receive the funding. This concerns both the funding line as a whole and the activities within the project.

4 Recommendations for Decision Makers

As Blanchenay and Burns point out, “[t]he difficulty of experimentation is that it requires the involvement of many interdependent stakeholders with different cultures, motivations, and time horizons, in a careful exercise of coordination towards a common goal of identifying policies that work and policies that do not” (2016, 181). In line with this strong statement about the complexity of policy experimentations, the necessary response on the part of those ‘carefully coordinating’ such experimentation is to design both the policy dialogue as well as the evaluation, as flexible instruments (cf. the evidence cycles in Fig. 1 above). Ready to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances in a multi-stakeholder and multi-level environment (Han & Mils 2021), the dialogue formats and evaluation methods should meet the explicit needs and current priorities of HEI and policymakers alike in order to serve the project’s progress and eventual success.

From our observations and evaluations described above, we derive the following recommendations for the process of *policy experimentations*:

- Independent of the respective topic of those policy experimentations (we used virtual mobility as an example here), sufficient maturity of the local policy process must be ensured. Policy experimentation needs to effectively link the levels of institutional strategy and the experimentation output on the level of institutional practice to achieve integrated outcomes that meet expectations on all levels (policy - institutional strategy - practice).
- Closing the feedback loop between policy and practice is a constant challenge for governing the experiments. It must be ensured that all experimenters are aware of the applicable policy framework, that they explicitly relate their experiments to these policies, and that they include not only educational but also policy implications in their reflections. The structure of the work plan and the approved funding must reflect this.
- Policy experimentation, if it is well targeted and focused on a specific topic, such as virtual mobility here, is a powerful means to identify, test and systematically evaluate new policies and strategic measures. This can help to ensure that institutional policies are immediately relevant and closely oriented towards institutional practises.

For the *policy implementation* process, we derive the following recommendations:

- Since the educational system is highly decentralised (Blanchenay & Burns, 2016), an awareness of the applicable policies must be explicitly established. Our evaluation reveals a “loss in translation” especially in the institutional translation of overarching policies into local strategies and regulations. In analogy to Lassnigg (2016a), we argue that the decentralised higher education system might benefit from a shift towards a kind of “hard policy making” making use of mandatory goals and obligatory control of results. For HEIs, this must be addressed by institutional policy makers in local strategy processes. However, a participatory approach should be considered to involve relevant stakeholders (Lucke et al., 2020) and to not move the loss in policy translations one level further.
- The policy dialogue proved to be a valuable instrument for the identification of respective expectations in policy and practice. While the scope of policy dialogue events was successfully limited by their national focus, alignment of thematic foci with the current project experimentations at the HEI was not achieved. Preparing policy dialogue events with steps

towards aligning knowledge as well as expectations among policymakers, researchers and practitioners is considered an effective mitigation strategy. Trust is a necessary prerequisite for this (Lassnigg, 2016b), which can be built only over time in an open process including transparency of outcomes, decisions and subsequent activities.

- The evaluation highlighted the importance of HEIs' strategic documents outlining a vision and providing strategic guidance to the practice at HEIs. A timeline for achieving the institutions' short- and long-term goals should be integrated. They should also identify institutional strengths and how to take advantage of them to find solutions to current challenges. In addition, they should identify opportunities to overcome institutional weaknesses and meet strategic targets.

Finally, for the *evaluation* of such policy experimentations, we suggest considering the following issues in future activities:

- Concrete and sound evaluations of (digital) higher education practises are needed more than ever. Their results are highly relevant to both practitioners and policy makers. Therefore, special attention should be paid to their communication.
- Decision makers are looking to standardise the digital infrastructure and to assure quality for digital education in the European Higher Education Area. This highlights the need for advisory teams and professional consultation at the strategic and policy makers level.

In summary, stakeholders from policy, practice, and research should be aware of the conditions under which they interact with each other. Whether the rules are set by bureaucracy, the market or autonomy (Glatter, 2002) has a decisive influence on the nature and success of their respective interactions. Only if all involved stakeholders consciously follow the same interaction scheme can cooperation be successful.

Acknowledgements

The work described here results from the OpenU project funded with the support of the European Commission in the Erasmus+ programme Key Action 3 under grant agreement number 2018 - 3262 / 003 - 001. This article reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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