



1st Evaluation Report

Evaluation TCA VENet

On behalf of the Equal TCA-Partnership
“VENet – Vocational Education Network”



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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The VENet is a transnational cooperation project involving 4 different development partnerships within EQUAL II (from Austria, Germany, Cyprus and Poland) that are sharing similar target groups and aims: to build up a competence network for demand-orientated qualification of disadvantaged persons (with low qualification or qualifications which are not directly usable in the labour market) in order to foster their integration into the labour market. All the partners are focussing therefore on the implementation of innovative qualification concepts that will help their clients to get back into labour market and fulfil the needs of regional companies for skilled workers as well.

The major common goals of the transnational cooperation are the mutual exchange and dissemination of products, knowledge and exchange of national findings, ideas and results. The goal of this transnational cooperation is to develop a concept of a Vocational Network representing a systematic idea which in principle can be transferred to any European country.

1.2 Evaluation

The Centre for Education and Economy (ZBW) acts as the external evaluator of the TCA-project on behalf of the project coordination team. We would like to thank for the reliance placed in our team and are glad to assist an innovative project such as the TCA by providing scientific support.

The evaluation of the TCA VENet can be divided into two main parts:

- A formal evaluation, focussing on the cooperative structure within the TCA and the agreed procedures to reach the aims of the project.
- A content evaluation concentrating on the output and outcome that derives from the transnational partnership and its work processes.

This is the 1st interim report regarding the initial stages of transnational collaboration. It concentrates mainly on findings that can be subordinated to the formal evaluation as described in the Terms of Reference of the evaluation. This report therefore covers the first stage of the project lasting from the Kick Off Meeting in Cyprus (September 2005) to the second project meeting in Austria (January 2006). The evaluation results are mainly based on the feedback questionnaire and the information received at the first project meeting, a satisfaction and social network survey among all partners and the analysis of documents.

We would like to thank the TCA secretary, Mrs. Judith Riessner, for the excellent cooperation and her high efforts in providing all the information and documents which were required to compile this report. We would like to thank all partners as well for completing sometimes quite burdensome questionnaires and supporting our work in many different ways.

2 Kick Off Meeting

The focus of the first chapter of this report is on the analysis of the workflow at the first project meeting, its outcomes and the satisfaction of the participating partners with this kick off meeting. This meeting took place from 12th to 15th September 2005 in Nicosia (Cyprus), hosted by the Cypriote partner organization "National Youth Board". The main purposes of this first meeting were:

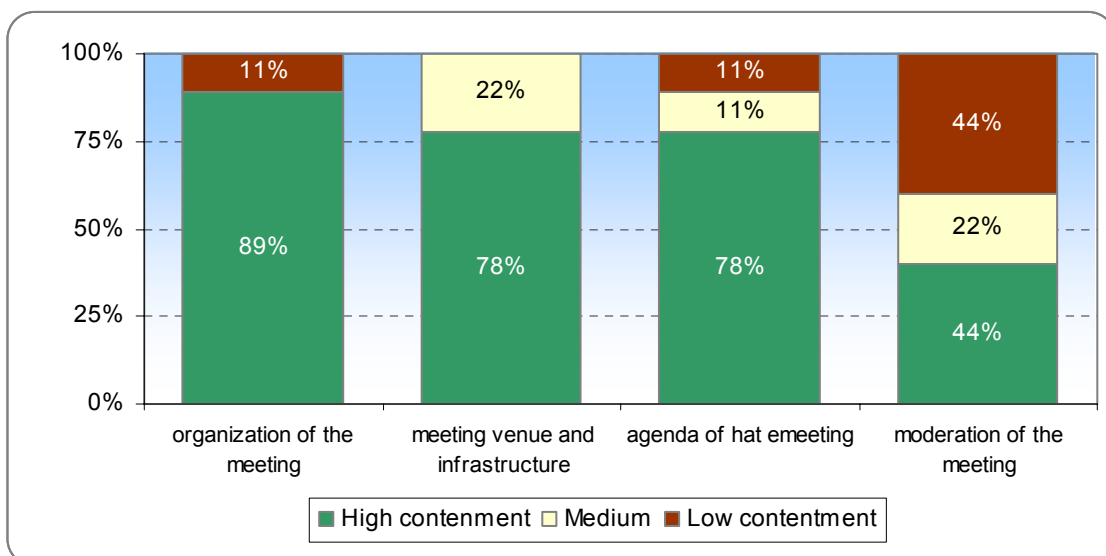
- getting to know each other personally, through showcasing the national projects of each partner
- introducing the TCA concept to all partners
- establishing a good basis for discussion and exchange
- setting up a working plan for the first 6 months of the project.

Overall, the kick off meeting of the TCA was a well-prepared meeting that corresponds with the high contentment of the partners stated in the feedback questionnaires (handed out in the last session of the meeting). The meeting therefore appears to be a solid starting point for the work to come in the next months of the project. Nevertheless, the kick off event also shows up some weaknesses that might help to improve the upcoming meetings accordingly.

2.1 Organization and frame of the kick off meeting

In the feedback questionnaire of the meeting, the partners were asked to rate the contentment with the general conditions of the meeting. One can summarize that the general conditions of the meeting - ranging from the assistance by the hosting organization to issues such as the moderation of the meeting - have been perceived with high contentment by most of the partners. In fact only one single person was unhappy with the framework conditions. Some of the questions concerned are displayed in Illustration 1.

Illustration 1: Contentment with the general conditions of the kick off meeting (N=9)



More clearly the moderation of the meeting, conducted by the TCA coordination, was criticized by half of the partners. Only 44% are explicitly content with the moderation of the meeting. This seems to be the result of three main aspects:

- The role of the moderator was not clearly defined. As the moderator acted both as the coordinator of the TCA and as a member of the steering group, the functions began to mix.
- The moderator did not guide through topics and did not preprocess topics but rather introduced topics and committed the discussions to the partners.
- The position of the moderator was too weak. He failed to shorten some discussions which then started to run in circles.

Out of these experiences one can suggest that the moderation of the upcoming meetings should be clearly separated from other important functions. Furthermore, the moderation should be prepared more carefully in order to support the discussion and decision making processes.

2.2 Agenda of the meeting

As already stated, the overall satisfaction with the agenda of the kick off meeting is high (78%). Nevertheless there is a quite important variety regarding different agenda items that divide the working sessions into sessions with high contentment and sessions with low contentment.

Sessions with high contentment (>50%): Presentation of national projects, presentation of the evaluation concept, presentation of mainstreaming ideas, session on communication tools and the internet platform

Sessions with low contentment (<50%): presentation of the VENet model, session on the aims and objectives of the VENet model and the TCA

It is important to note that - regarding the results of the feedback questionnaire - less than half of the partners were content with the two most important sessions of the meeting (VENet model, aims and objectives of the VENet and the TCA). This might be an indicator for existing uncertainties among the partners regarding these core topics. Subsequent results will prove this assumption.

2.3 Workflow

The workflow at the meeting itself can be described as a very good and friendly cooperation between the partners. In the questionnaire, many of the partners highlighted the high personal commitment of all partners and the mutual esteem of all participants. This good collaboration on a personal basis seems to be an important basis for the entire transnational collaboration.

Based on the personal observation of the evaluator at the meeting and validated by the feedback questionnaire, one can nevertheless mention some problematic issues that need to receive attention in the upcoming stages of the project.

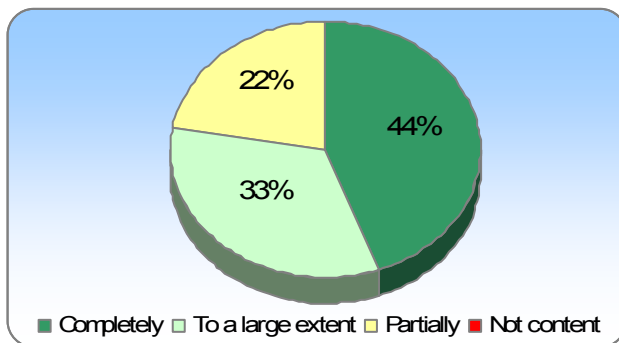
1. The decision making processes at the meeting appeared to be intransparent. This finding is based on the simple fact that the nomination of the steering group was not carried out at the meeting but was scheduled to the tasks after the meeting. As a result, there was no explicit solution for the unproportional attendance of the different partner countries. For example: Whereas the Polish partner was represented by one person, the Austrian partners were represented by 5 persons. This led to some imbalance between the partner organizations. Although all decisions at the meeting were made on the basis of consensus, the unequal size of the partner delegations was never brought up as an issue and the weight of different opinions was never put down clearly.
2. This majority of Austrians (and of German-speaking partners) also led to side discussions carried out in German language. Therefore other partner countries could hardly follow the discussions at certain stages of the meeting. These side discussions could have been avoided by stronger intervention of the moderator.
3. This – in all – leads to a comparatively low participation of non-German speaking partner countries at certain stages of the meeting. Half of the partners indicate this as a problem of the first meeting.
4. This observation was aggravated by the fact that there has also been some imbalance of information in the course of the meeting. Whereas the German and Austrian partners seemed to be quite well-informed regarding the VENet model, the degree of information of other partners seemed to be notably lower. This point will be explained in detail in the next chapter.

Overall, one can suggest that the procedure of decision making should be made more explicit at the next meeting and a better balance regarding the size of the partner countries' delegations should be sought accordingly. Furthermore, moderation should take more care of involving all partner countries equally in the discussion and working sessions.

2.4 Outcome of the meeting

Overall, the partners state predominantly high contentment with the outcomes of the meeting (Cf. Illustration 2). On the one hand this refers to the information they obtained about certain topics and on the other hand this refers to the decisions concerning the future working steps of the TCA. Nevertheless, one issue received significantly lower contentment than all other issues: the VENet model itself.

Illustration 2: Contentment with the overall outcomes of the meeting (N=9)



Concerning the VENet model, almost half of the partners state they are not content with the information they obtained and with the decisions at the meeting. More than this: Regarding the question on the mutual understanding of the aims and objectives of the TCA and the VENet, again about 50% of the partners appear not to be content at all.

The partners also had the option to explain their personal views in an open text field. The answers on these open questions offer a good explanation for this lack of contentment:

- The presentation of the VENet model and the working session on it have been quite short and filled with information. Some partners seemed to be overwhelmed by the amount of information offered.
- Compared to this, the time for discussing the VENet model and exchanging ideas regarding “What could it be?” and “What do we want it to be?” is characterized as too short.
- It was criticized that no “exchange of visions” took place but instead a presentation of a highly developed German VENet model was offered.

These results suggest that there is neither a commonly shared perception about the particular goals of the VENet nor a common notion of the relevance of the VENet. It is likely that of this fuzziness and missing common understanding regarding the VENet model some problems might arise. These problems might range from low commitment to the VENet model to severe misunderstandings while working it out at later project stages. Therefore, we suggest that a common notion based on a solid exchange of knowledge and expectations about the VENet model shall be developed at the second project meeting in Graz.

2.5 Gender Mainstreaming (GM)

Gender Mainstreaming is an integral part of every EQUAL partnership. All EQUAL partnerships have to carry out a GM strategy which means that GM-principles have to be considered at the initial stages of a project starting at project development, implementation of the project to evaluation of the project – on a formal level and on the content resp. operative level as well.

Gender Mainstreaming was on the agenda at the first meeting. It was decided that the GM guidelines would be worked out till the second project meeting and that the TCA coordination meanwhile should take the responsibility for developing these guidelines. So GM is a work-in-progress topic in the TCA. The documents so far available promise a comprehensive and feasible concept for GM.

The TCA secretary will take care of the Gender Mainstreaming process and act as the GM-delegate. Acting as this delegate in the first place means providing all partners with the necessary information required for implementation of the principles of GM in their work packages (content level) and for development of the guidelines for gender neutral representation (formal level) regarding the products of the TCA. Therefore, the TCA secretary will act as the responsible person, but not as the “implementation officer” since every partner is responsible for GM him/herself (approach with a high degree of participation). The reception and implementation of this GM strategy will be monitored and evaluated in coordination with the evaluation team. Regarding this, first results will be presented in the second evaluation report.

Furthermore, the TCA team obliged itself to widen the Gender Mainstreaming approach and to take into account other aspects of diversity, too. This means that not only gender will be an important category to analyse problems and to observe the development of the project but – depending on the certain topic – other categories shall be taken into account as well. On the formal level, this strongly addresses issues such as the representation and participation of the different partner countries. As already stated: The actual participation of partners varies strongly although an equal representation of partners in the meetings is intended in principal (with equal weight for each voice). At the kick off meeting, there was a strong dominance of Austrian and German partners. On the formal level, particularly the moderator of the meetings will have to pay attention to an equal integration of all partner countries.

The GM strategy of the project is currently at the stage of development. The documents so far available suggest a comprehensive approach towards the topic of GM. The level of implementation at the upcoming project steps will be part of the next evaluation report.

3 Communication & Cooperation

Apart from the feedback questionnaire from the first project meeting in Cyprus, this report is strongly based on another survey among the partners: a social network and satisfaction survey. This survey took place at the beginning of December 2005. All partners that were involved in project activities so far and which are members of the steering group have been interviewed via an email questionnaire. In total, 13 persons received a questionnaire.¹ 9 of these 13 persons returned their questionnaire.² Although the participation rate seems to be quite low, the main actors of most partner countries (with regard to the participants of the first meeting and steering committee) could be reached. The exceptions are Austria (illness of the project coordinator) and Cyprus (one steering group member missing without reason). This and the following 4th subchapter of this report contain the results based on this survey.

3.1 The internet forum

The VENet Internet Forum is one of the communication instruments in the project. It is used to discuss certain topics with all partners in a transparent way. Whenever a new posting is made, all forum members receive a notice of this posting via email. Until now, the forum was used for e.g. nominating the steering group members and for making a decision concerning the logo of the VENet. In the survey, the partners have been asked for advice regarding their usage and their contentment of the VENet forum.

As a result of the survey, 8 of 9 TCA partners are using the VENet forum on a regular basis. Each of these partners states contentment with the forum and proves its usefulness. The accompanying download section is rated very useful too.

3.2 The TCA coordination & secretary

The TCA secretary acts as the main coordinating person within the project. Her duties range from exchanging information among the partners, preparing official reports for the EQUAL office in order to provide a continuous monitoring of the project development. The TCA secretary takes the main project management position and is the only partner with half-time employment within the frame of the TCA (other partner mainly spend less than 5 hours per week for the TCA). In the questionnaire, the partners were asked to rate their contentment with the TCA secretary.

¹ 4 Austria, 5 Cyprus, 2 Germany, 2 Poland.

² Only Questionnaires returned till 14th December could be taken into account.

One can summarize that the partners state an overwhelming contentment with the work of the TCA secretary. This refers to the reachability of the secretary, the quality of the information provided by the secretary, the frequency of contact and the degree of support for the partners. In every respect, 100% of the partners are content with the secretary's work.

3.3 Project Management & Controlling

Regarding the project management, the TCA follows a clear structure with a good overall time schedule and useful task lists. One weakness of the project in this regard might be a less well worked-out structure on the mid-level project management. In particular, project plans that could bridge the gaps between the transnational project level and the national project levels in combination with well-designed tasks for each partner country do not exist. Therefore some information – like which partner will be cooperating with which other partners at certain stages of the project – is unclear. This might not be a problem at the current stage of the project but might turn out as a problem at more complex stages. On the other hand, the transparency for the partners decreases which might cause uncertainties later on. Some indicators for this can also be found in the survey. Regarding the project plan and the work flow in the project, about one third of the partners state uncertainties.

The project controlling within the TCA project is managed by the TCA secretary. It is based on detailed To Do lists displaying a clear structure (deadlines, responsibilities, description, quality and quantity). By now, one can rate the quality of these monitoring instruments good and sufficient for the TCA project. By now, also the punctual delivery of project outcomes by the partners was quite good. The tasks which have been determined in the beginning of the TCA took place as scheduled and only minor delays without mid- or long-term relevance for the project plan occurred. Concerning this the first phase, the work carried out at the initial stages of the TCA project are likely to ensure good implementation in the future.

The project controlling instruments of the project seem to be good and sufficient for the project so far. The partners' commitment for timely delivery is high and only minor delays occurred.

Regarding the project management, the TCA follows a clear structure with a good overall timetable and useful to do lists. One weakness of the project in this regard might be a less well worked-out structure on a mid-level of the project. Therefore the interconnection of certain work packages as well as the cooperation between the partners has not turned out transparent by now.

3.4 The working structure of the TCA

At the first stage of the project, the TCA mainly worked on three different issues:

1. European Mainstreaming and the development of the first newsletter of the TCA
2. The VENet model
3. The TCA internet platform

These tasks were divided between the partner countries so that in every case one country acted as a kind of lead partner for his task which comprised working out suggestions and getting feedback from others. Austria was responsible for the EU mainstreaming, Germany took the lead regarding the VENet model and the partners from Cyprus took responsibility for the development of the TCA internet platform. The foundations for each of this division of labour were established at the kick off meeting.

This division of labour follows a clear structure. At this stage of the TCA, the working structure is organized rather parallel than interconnected, showing up simultaneous working on different topics in different countries at the same time. The cooperation itself mainly concentrates on two aspects:

- Delivering data resp. background information for other partners (VENet model)
- Giving (written) feedback on (written) drafts of other partners (Internet Platform, Mainstreaming Activities)

Both aspects are essential elements of a transnational cooperation like the TCA as they ensure a cooperative learning process and foster mutual understanding within the TCA. This procedure seems to work out efficiently and well despite some minor delays regarding the delivery of feedback.

Nevertheless we would like to emphasize some aspects:

1. Due to the division of labour not each partner is equally participating in the development of the VENet model. This is caused by a further development stage and, hence, a closer collaboration between the Austrian and German partners. Poland and Cyprus seem to lack information about the VENet model in general, and, in addition, are not well integrated in the process of development.
2. Regarding the VENet model, one should think about whether this kind of procedure increases imbalances in information already existing, as described in subchapter 2 of this report.
3. As the VENet model is the core product of the TCA, the stages and ways of participation and contribution of all partners should be worked out more clearly and displayed accordingly. It has to be ensured that each partner country has the possibility to bring in national needs, expectations and expertise.

4. The project information also has to ensure that all partner countries are equally participating in the different tasks. As the survey shows, especially two countries might be endangered of becoming systematically less involved: Poland and Cyprus.

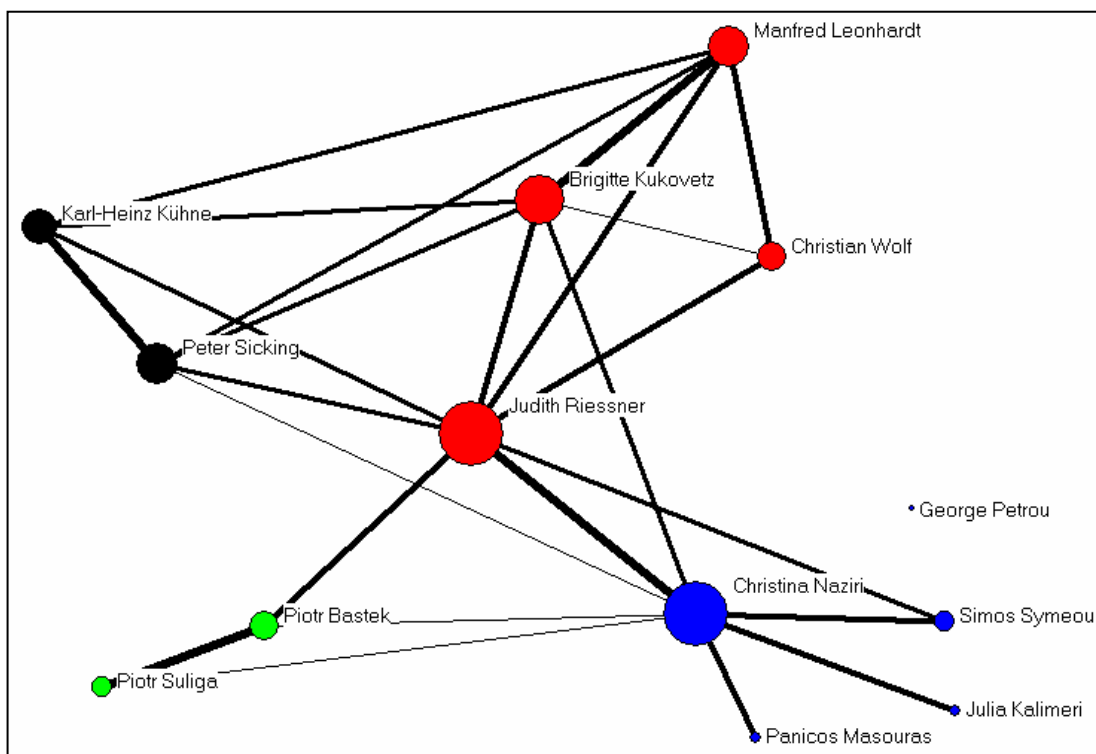
The working structure at the first stage of the project can be characterized as parallel work flow with the single countries taking the leading role for particular tasks. This organization of work has worked out well by now.

3.5 The communication structure of the TCA

The survey also contained questions about the communication between the partners. In order to analyze this data appropriately, we applied the method of social network analysis. Social network analysis is a specific method that uses relational data (e.g. communication, cooperation) to develop maps of the structures of communication and cooperation between network partners. In this report, we present a network plot regarding the frequency of communication within the TCA (next illustration).

The graph illustrates the frequency of communication between the partners in the TCA. Thin lines represent weak relations of communication. Thick lines represent frequent communication. The nodes represent the partners. The node colour represents the partner's country. The size of the node represents the number of contacts of the actor concerned within the TCA. For further details please have a look at the notes following the illustration.

Illustration3: The frequency of communication among the partners



Notes: 13 partners displayed but only 9 partners returned their questionnaires (1 missing Austrian, 3 missing from Cyprus). Therefore the links of the 4 non-respondents are displayed as non-validated answers of their connected neighbours.

Node colour: displays the country: Red = Austria, black = Germany, blue = Cyprus, green = Poland.

The node size displays the number of connections of the partner addressed. The bigger the node, the more contacts this partner has with other partners.

Tie size: The ties display the frequency of communication ranging from "once a month" = thin line over "several times a month" and "once a week" to "(almost) daily"=thick line.

The TCA seems to have evolved a well established network of regular communication. The center of the TCA network is the TCA secretary Judith Riessner. She acts as the central intermediary between all partner countries. She is one of the few having contact to nearly all other partners in the project. Without commenting every detail of the graph we would like to draw the attention to some main aspects:

1. Not all partner countries are equally well involved in the communication flow.
2. Some steering group members of the project seem to be poorly integrated into the information flow.

1) As one can see clearly in the graph: It demonstrates dense sections as well as "holes". Based on the answers of the partners, one can assume that the frequency of communication among the German-speaking partners is significantly higher than between the other partners. In fact, it seems that the German-speaking section is a kind of sub-network within the project with quite dense communication. As for Poland and Cyprus, mainly persons acting as the national project interface seem to be involved in the TCA.

This picture might be a result of the workflow at the first stage of the project. Therefore, it should not be interpreted as a negative finding. However, the partners should think about possibility that two partner countries might be systematically less well integrated into the communicative flows than others.

2) The second main aspect derives from the first one. One can see in addition that the second Polish steering group member and both steering group members from Cyprus are not well integrated into the communication flow directly. This means: They receive information about the ongoing activities of the TCA from their national project interfaces acting as intermediary. This might work out well but bears the risk of producing insufficiently informed steering group members, too. The partners should think about integrating those "isolates" of the communication network or – if not possible – develop strategies to ensure that they are well informed before steering group meetings.

The TCA seems to have evolved a well-established network of regular communication. The TCA secretary takes her role as the most central person in the communication network very well. The communication flow seems to be especially dense between the German and the Austrian partners. Poland and Cyprus on the contrary seem to be less well integrated. Especially steering group members from Poland and Cyprus show the lowest degree of integration.

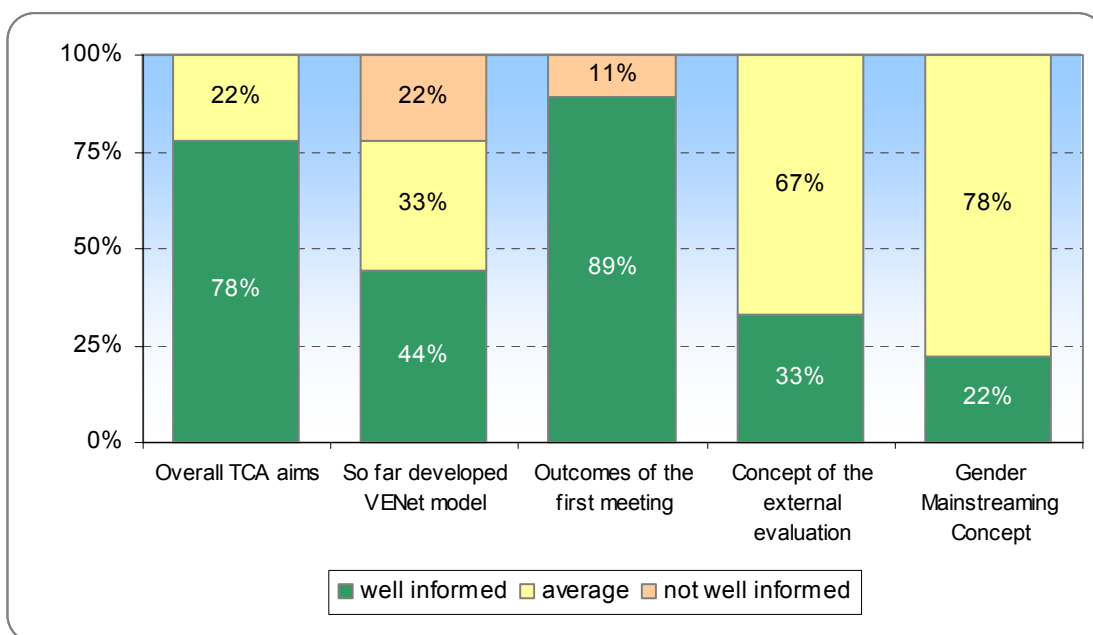
3.6 Degree of information

In the questionnaire the partners have been asked to state:

1. Their degree of information on certain topics of the TCA out of their personal point of view
2. Whether they would like to receive more information on a certain topic or not.

Some of the core findings are illustrated in the next graph. All in all, one can say that the partners are predominantly content with their degree of information regarding core topics of the TCA such as the TCA concept, the TCA target groups and beneficiaries etc. But there appears to be a lack of information concerning the so far developed VENet model. In particular, the non-German speaking partners rate their degree of information low on this item. In addition, the degree of information regarding the external evaluation concept and the Gender Mainstreaming concept appears to be low in general.

Illustration4: Degree of information among the partners (N=9)



From the answers, one can derive mainly two areas which are important for further information work:

a) Non-German speaking partner countries show a significantly higher demand of information on the VENet model. This leads to the assumption that non-German-speaking partner countries – out of certain reasons – have not been equally well integrated into the information flow regarding the VENet model as others.

b) There is a demand concerning deeper information about the external evaluation concept and the Gender Mainstreaming concept among non-Austrian partners.

Especially with regard to the second point, we recommend to send out the Terms of Reference of the external evaluation to all partners before the second project meeting and to discuss them at the meeting. The same procedure should be taken into account for the Gender Mainstreaming Concept.

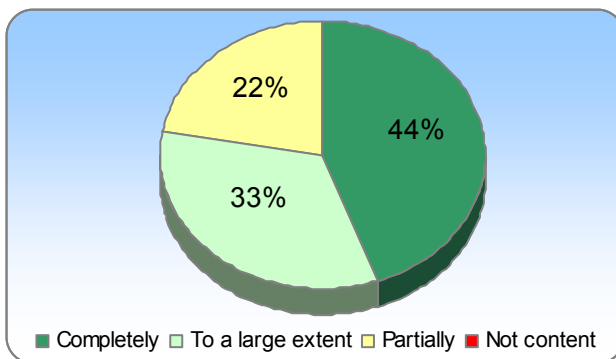
4 Satisfaction

The social network survey concentrated on general topics of satisfaction, such as the ongoing development of the project and the products so far achieved. They shall be described briefly in this subchapter.

4.1 Overall development

First of all we asked how the partners rate the overall development of the project. The results are shown in the next illustration. One can clearly see that most of the partners show high to moderate contentment with the project development so far. No partner criticizes this issue - neither in this question nor in an open text field following this question, where they had the possibility to explain their views.

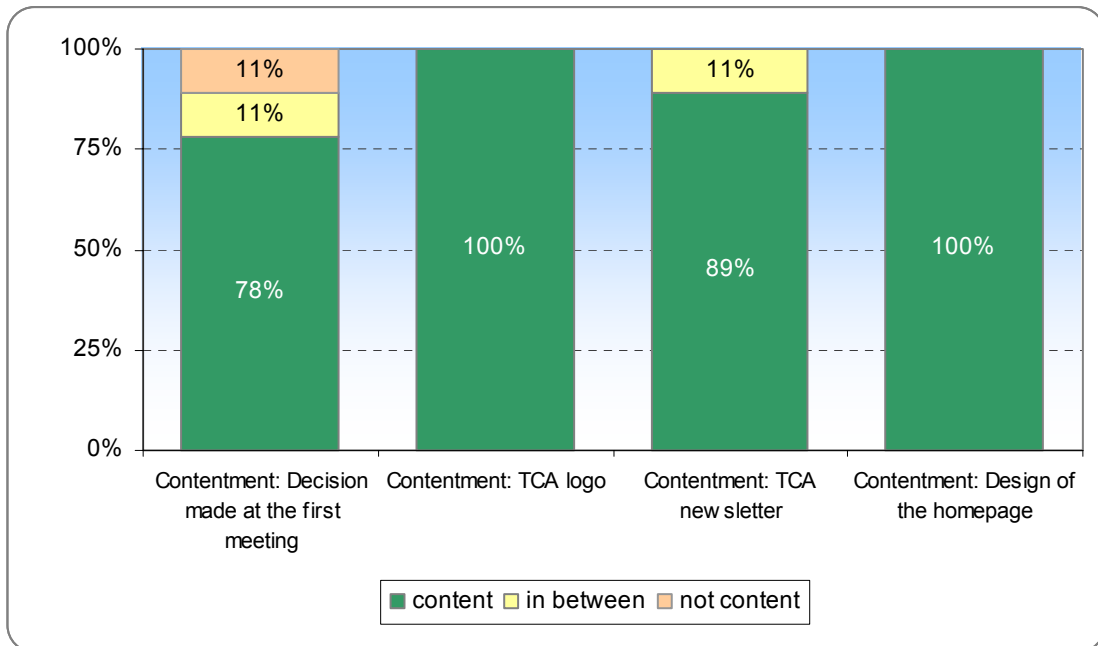
Illustration 5: Contentment with the overall development of the project so far (N=9)



The TCA partnership can be characterized by high contentment of all partners regarding the project development up to now.

4.2 Outcomes resp. products of the TCA

In one of the concluding questions in the survey, the partners were asked whether they were content with the TCA outcomes so far. Under the title of "TCA outcomes", apart from the decision of the kick off meeting, we asked for their contentment regarding the TCA logo, the first TCA newsletter and the first layout draft of the VENet homepage. The results are displayed in the following illustration.

Illustration 6: Contentment with the outcomes of the project (N=9)

Most of the partners (between 78% and 100%)³ are clearly content with the actual outcomes of the TCA. This result not only underlines the overall contentment of the partners but demonstrates the good cooperation within the project as well.

4.3 Attitude questions on the project

The questionnaire ended with some questions of attitude asking for different levels of contentment within the TCA.

Without commenting the illustration in details one can briefly describe the VENet partnership as a stable and evolving transnational partnership with high contentment of all partners on nearly all levels of the project. This high satisfaction and high commitment of the involved persons appear to be a promising starting point for the future project stages.

³ The partner who stated being not content with the decisions made at the first meeting in Cyprus is a partner that had been participating in this first event. As the feedback questionnaire at the first meeting did not show any negative opinions regarding the contentment with the decisions made, the contentment of this particular partner seems to have diminished in the course of time.

Illustration 6: Attitude questions on the project (N=9)

