



Mid-term Report

Evaluation TCA VENet

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



Graz, July 2006

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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The VENet is a transnational cooperation project involving 4 different development partnerships of 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 goals of the transnational cooperation are the mutual exchange and dissemination of products, knowledge and an exchange of national findings, ideas and results. The product 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, Graz, (ZBW) acts as the external evaluator of the TCA-project on behalf of the project coordination team. We 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 which have been designed by the TCA to reach the aims of the project.
- A content evaluation that will focus on the output and outcome which derive from the transnational partnership's work and on the processes to reach these results.
- This mid-term report within the frame of the TCA project concentrates on findings which belong to the formal evaluation as described in the Terms of Reference of the evaluation. This report covers about the first half of the project duration.

The findings presented in this interim report are based on five major sources:

1. Feedback questionnaires, which were handed out to the participants at the end of each meeting (three surveys in total: October, 2005, January 2006, May 2006)
2. Participating observations during each meeting (October, 2005, January 2006, May 2006)

3. 1 satisfaction and social network survey among all partners (December 2005)
4. Personal interviews (3 by telephone, 1 face-to-face-interview) with 4 national project managers after the 3rd meeting (May/June 2006)
5. Continuing analysis of TCA documents

In addition, particular findings were reported to the TCA secretary directly.

Integrating the findings of the aforementioned evaluation activities, this mid-term report displays the results the TCA achieved to date. Thus, the findings do not represent a final assessment of the transnational collaboration. However, it is possible to highlight some important characteristics of this transnational collaboration even at this stage of the mid-term report. This report thus covers issues such as

- the organisation and management of the transnational collaboration
- the communication and collaboration of the transnational partners
- the processes of product development and goal achievement
- and horizontal issues such as gender mainstreaming

Based on the findings, the final chapters contains a concise summary of the critical success factors which should be taken into account in the second half of the transnational collaboration.

On this occasion, 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 are needed to develop this report. We would like to thank all the partners for completing sometimes quite burdensome questionnaires and for supporting our work in many different ways.

2 Meetings

The first chapter of this report concentrates on the analysis of the workflow at the project meetings, on the outcomes of the meetings and the satisfaction of the participating partners with the meetings.

In the reporting period, three meetings took place:

1. The kick off meeting of the TCA VENet project took place from 12th to 15th September 2005 in Nicosia (Cyprus), hosted by the Cypriote partner organization “National Youth Board”. The emphasis of this first meeting was on getting to know each other personally, on showcasing the national projects, introducing the TCA concept to all partners, discussions and setting up a working plan for the first 6 months of the project.
2. The second meeting in Graz, January 16th – 19th, 2006, was hosted by the Austrian DP “BAP – Beruf und Arbeit im Pakt”. The major issues of the meeting comprised the development of the VENet Model both in practice and its virtual representation as well as a plan for the mainstreaming strategy and, finally, the particular responsibilities of the partners in the transnational work plan.
3. The 3rd meeting was held in Werl, Germany, from May 15-18th, 2006, hosted by the German DP “Quinta”. The main issues were the further development of the internet platform and the representation of the VENet model, the mainstreaming process with emphasis on the final event and Gender Mainstreaming.

At each meeting, the participants were invited to answer a standardized questionnaire addressing issues such as contentment with the organization and administration of the meetings, contents, particular thematic sessions, involvement, problem-solving, decision-making, satisfaction with the outcomes and general satisfaction with the meeting.

Regarding the first three meetings of the TCA, a general high quality level of transnational collaboration can be reported. Overall, the ratings of the three meetings that took place to date, indicate a good development. In the subsequent sections, the different indicators and their changes from the 1st to the 3rd meeting shall be presented in greater detail.

2.1 Environment of the meetings

In the feedback questionnaire of the meetings the partners were asked to rate their contentment with the general conditions of the meeting, such as the organization, the meeting venue and its infrastructure, the agenda and the moderation of the meeting. The findings

indicate that for most of the dimensions, the ratings improved or remained on a high level (see figures 1 to 4).

Figure 1: Contentment with general organization

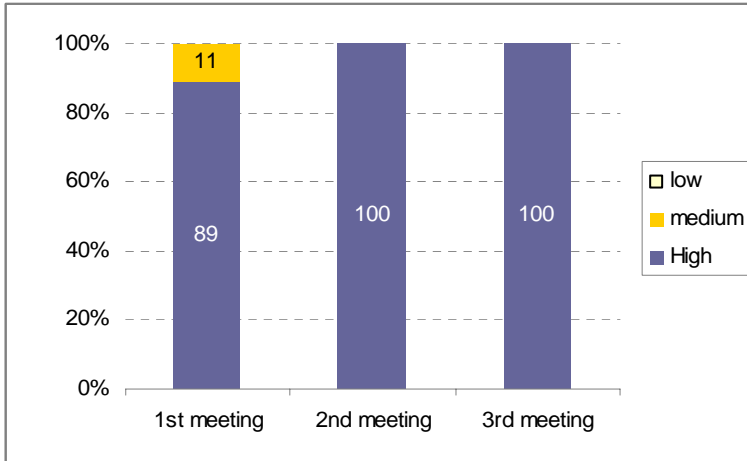


Figure 2: Contentment with meeting venue & infrastructure

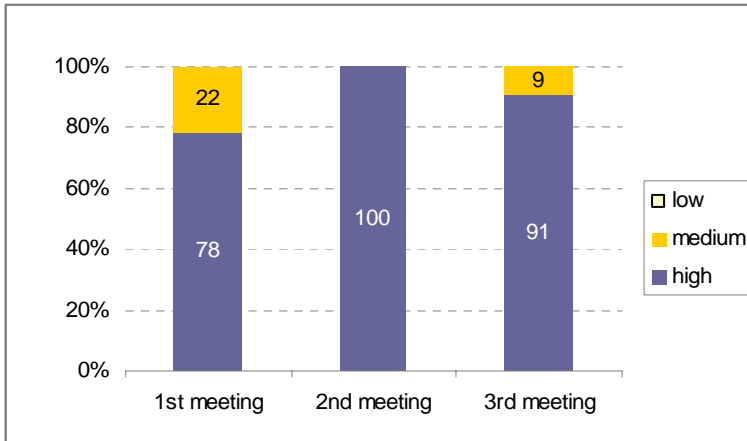


Figure 3: Contentment with agenda

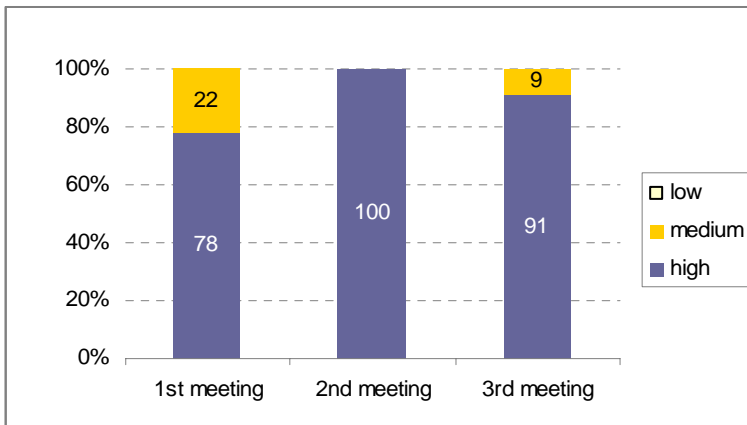


Figure 4: Contentment with moderation

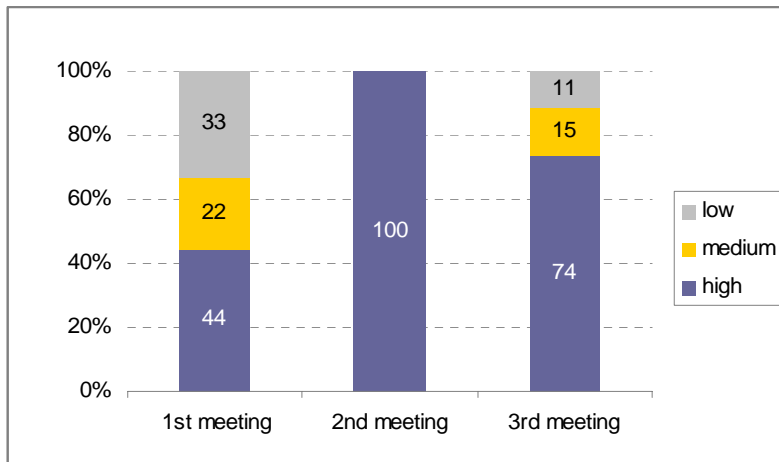


Figure 5: Contentment with timeframe for agenda issues

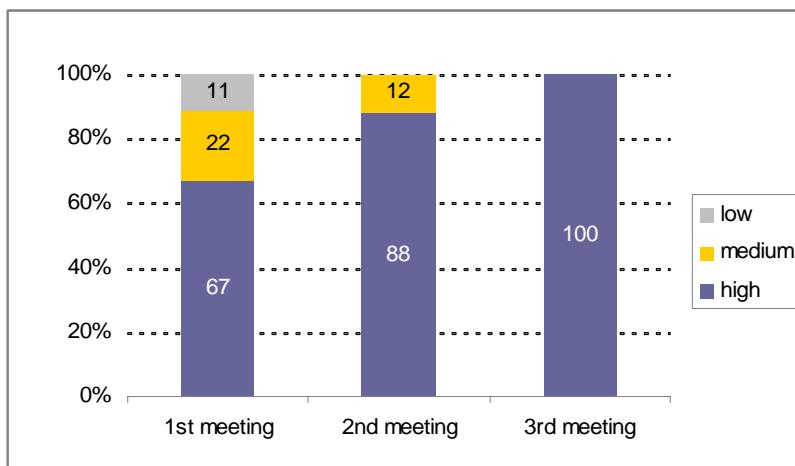
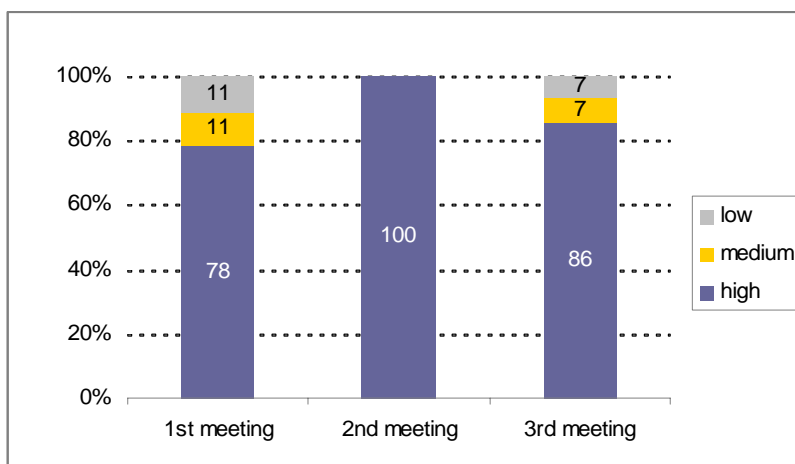


Figure 6: Contentment with duration of the meeting



The ratings show that the general conditions of the meeting ranging from the organization before the meeting to the meeting venue have been perceived with high contentment by most of the partners.

2.2 Moderation

A significant improvement has been achieved with regard to the moderation of the meetings. While the moderation in the 1st meeting received high contentment only from 44% of the participants, it received very good ratings in the 2nd meeting from all participants, with a slight decline of positive ratings in the third meeting, however, still significantly better than in the first meeting. This is a clear result of a set of improvements which were proposed already in the first interim report of the evaluation in January 2006. The improvements implemented after the 1st meeting comprise three main actions:

- a separation of roles and functions of the moderator after
- improved preparations of the subsequent meetings
- a reinforced commitment to the genuine tasks of moderators (“facilitating-not-guiding-policy”).

Among other factors, these improvements supported the discussions and processes of decision-making in the second and third meeting, too. However, the half of the partners stated that the length of discussions, particularly the discussions on the internet platform, have been too long, a fact which was rated as a “main weakness” of the second and the third meeting. With regard to the internet platform, it should be noticed that, although the partners felt the discussion was very long, it touched vital issues of the TCA. In particular, discussions dealt with such important issues such as the target groups of the VENet model, the representation of the model, the support system as well as the tool box and gender mainstreaming, which are the main products respectively aspects of the TCA, of course. One can assume that these discussions paved the way for good progress.

2.3 Agenda

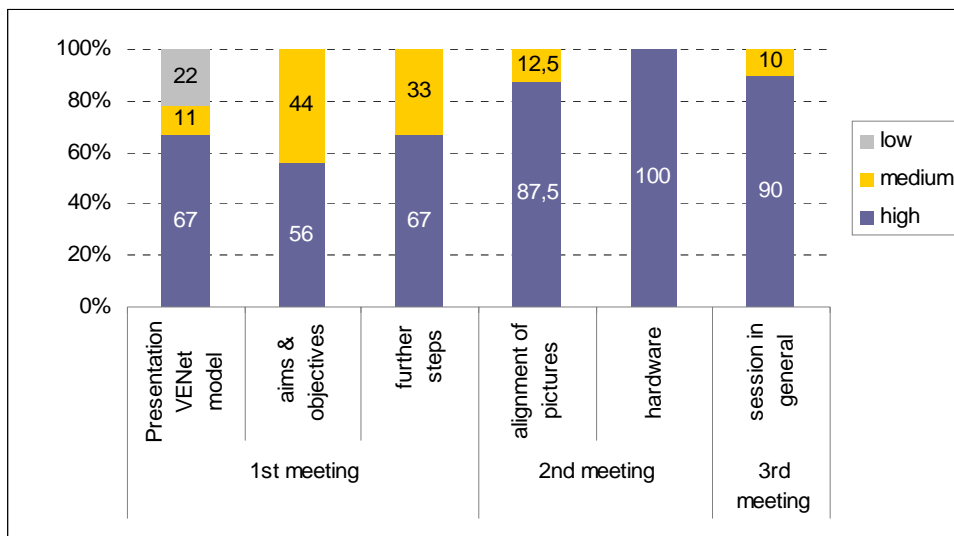
The overall contentment with the agenda of the meetings was high at the kickoff meeting and received even better ratings in the subsequent two meetings (see figure 3). Although the particular items and sessions of the meetings varied, they were dedicated to the core issues of the TCA throughout the meetings, of course. This variety was slight and refers to the status how an issue was treated. E.g., in all meetings, the VENet model was on the agenda, however, the thematic focus changed slightly from meeting to meeting (e.g. from “aims” and “objectives” to the “VENet model and its hardware components” and further to the “representation of the VENet model” on the web). These slight thematic changes represent the pro-

gress of the TCA at different stages of the transnational work. Thus, it is interesting to monitor the development of the different ratings of the main issues of the TCA, since the details of the developments covering the first three meetings become more visible on closer examination.

The findings of the first meeting provided evidence that, inspite of a general high contentment, there was a quite important variety regarding different agenda items that divide the working sessions into sessions with high contentment and sessions with low contentment.

If we draw our attention to the further developments, one can notice a growing degree of contentment. The sessions on the VENet model may serve as a first example here. In the first meeting, there were three sessions on different issues of the VENet model, which received ratings between 56% and 67% high contentment. In the second meeting, the corresponding values climbed up between 87 and 100% (for two different sessions on the VENet model) and in the third meeting 90% of the participants expressed high contentment with the VENet sessions. These findings clearly show that the TCA members developed a growing positive perception of the collaborative work progress concerning the VENet model.

Figure 7: Sessions on VENet model

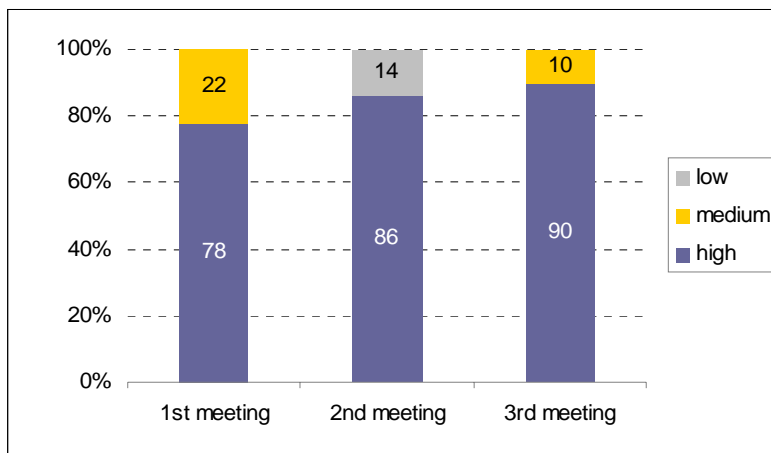


With regard to the contentment with the sessions on the VENet model in the first meeting, a straight imbalance of the country-specific composition of the participants has to be taken into account. The presentation as well as the aims and objectives of the VNEt model has been rated very positive by the German partners, and partly positive by the Austrian partners, but not positive by the Polish and the Cypriot partner. In addition, the latter partners had two representatives each at the meeting, while the Austrian partner had 5. This resulted in an overall positive rating, however, if considered by countries, the rating was negative. This was a particularity of the first meeting, and evaluation has emphasized this, since the VENet

model is at the core of all TCA activities and, thus, a common understanding of all partners was considered to be of particular significance. As the ratings of the subsequent meetings show, contentment with the VENet sessions has improved significantly.

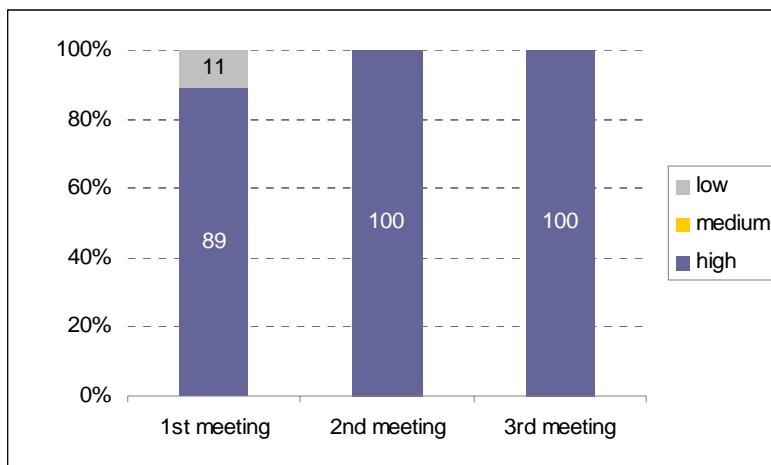
The rating of another continuing issue at the meetings also displays a growing degree of contentment of the partners. Starting with a high degree of contentment at the first meeting, the sessions on the internet platform were rated constantly at a high level.

Figure 8: Contentment with sessions on internet platform



A third major topic in the TCA is the mainstreaming, which was on the agenda in every meeting, of course. Also here, we can observe a growing contentment of the partners with regard to the way this issue has been dealt with in the meetings.

Figure 9:



2.4 Workflow

The workflow at the meetings can be described as a very good and friendly cooperation in the partnership. In all surveys, many of the partners highlighted the high personal commitment of all partners and the mutual amicability of all the persons participating. This good collaboration on a personal basis is an important basis for the entire project.

Based on the personal observation of the evaluators at the meetings and validated by the feedback questionnaire some particular developments concerning the workflow shall be highlighted here:

1. In the course of the project, the decision making processes have improved considerably and reached a high level which ensures transparent, unanimous decisions. In the first meeting, the decision making processes at the first meeting were intransparent for several reasons: The unproportional composition of partners was not resolved by appropriate rules of decision-making. Although the decisions in the first meeting were made unanimously, the unequal size of partner delegations advantaged countries with a greater number of delegates for it brought forth an unequal weight of different opinions. In particular, decisions in the steering group became asymmetric. The transnational partnership resolved this problem at the beginning of the second meeting by establishing rules of decision-making which then allowed for clear and transparent decisions.
2. While the majority of German-speaking partners in the first meeting also led to side discussions carried out in German language and disadvantaged other partner countries. Thus, they could hardly follow the discussions at certain stages of the meeting. In the subsequent meetings, there was a strict agreement to use English as the only working language.
3. It must be stressed here that both – improved rules for decision-making and concentration on English discussion – turned out to become important preconditions for a full integration and full participation of all partners over the course of the meetings. This is a success factor of transnational collaboration, too, since in the first meeting, half of the partners stated that this was a problem.
4. In the long run, improved participation in the second and third meeting turned out to foster the degree of information and exchange among partners. In particular, the Austrian and German partners had better information on the VENet model in the first meeting and the might still have better information after the third meeting, but one can observe a much greater information balance in the second and, particularly, in the third meeting. This, in turn, provides a much better basis for discussions on the representation of the VENet model, its relevance for national activities, and the future dissemination activities in the TCA.
5. As a consequence, the partners' rating on their personal involvement in the third meeting was rather high and displayed the overall good progress of transnational collaboration. In particular, partners felt highly involved in discussions and decision-

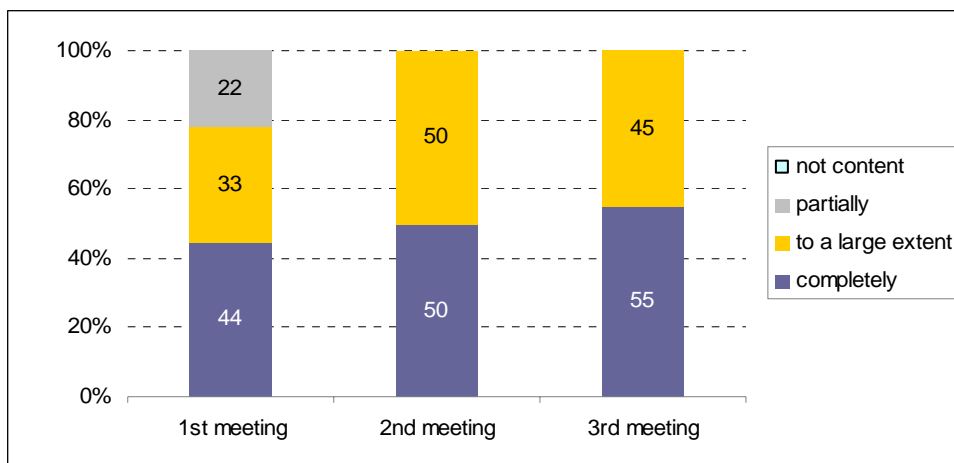
making processes (64% completely, 36% “to a large extent”) and felt highly content with the possibilities they had to contribute to the meeting and to participate in the discussions (80% completely, 20% to a large extent) as well.

- After decision-making in the first meeting turned out to be rather intransparent, the transnational DP has significantly improved its decision-making routines at the second meeting.
- This was reached by establishing clear rules and voting standards. This was an important step towards a better balance of participation of all partners and, thus, the particular national views, into the transnational work process.
- This development was supported by the moderators, who facilitated partners which have not participated so much in the first meeting, and supported their integration into discussion.
- Consequently, the partners’ contentment with the degree of personal involvement at the third meeting turned out to be high.

2.5 Outcomes

As one could observe on other occasions, the partners state predominantly growing contentment with the outcomes of the meeting (cf. figure 9). On the one hand this refers to the information they obtained about certain topics and on the other hand to the decisions that have been made regarding the upcoming working steps. In particular, it is the growing contentment with the VENet sessions that exerted a positive impact on the contentment with the outcomes of the meeting.

Figure 10: General contentment with the outcomes of the meeting



It is important to notice that a large part of the overall contentment is a result of growing contentment with the sessions on the VENet model. Since the VENet model is the core element of the transnational collaboration, the growing contentment with the exchange on the VENet model at the meetings cannot be underestimated.

This finding is even more important, since the poor common understanding of the VENet model was a major problem of the first meeting. About 50% of the partners appeared to be discontent with the presentations and the working sessions on the VENet model. The main weaknesses stated by the participants were: information overflow in the first sessions on the VENet model, not enough time for discussions about the particular design of the model and its potential use for the partners, low common understanding of the aims and objectives of the VENet model due to a highly pre-determined design of the VENet model that left less space for the exchange of visions among the partners.

Clear evidence for a significant improvement of the transnational work comes from remarks of the partners in the questionnaire, where they were invited to state the strengths and weaknesses of the meetings. With regard to the third meeting, a remarkable amount of partners stated that the capacity of goal attainment is high. When asked, what has been the main strength of the meeting, about 50% of the participants expressed their views in as follows:

- “team work, clarity of goals”
- “we always reach our goals and find a consensus quickly”, “... outcomes were again excellent”
- “the model”
- “decisions”
- “reaching goals”

Regarding the contentment with the outcomes of the meeting, the questionnaires contained three more items which are important. The first two items refer to the clarity of goals and roles, the third one that shall be mentioned here refers to the working plan until the next meeting and, thus, indicates the notion of the responsibilities of each partner. A clear improvement concerning the mutual understanding of aims and objectives can be observed as well as regarding the understanding about the shared roles and responsibilities in the partnership.

However, the nice picture is a bit disturbed by the fact the positive ratings decline in the third meeting with regard to the agreement on the work plan. Looking at the first two figures, one can detect a certain decline in the third meeting also concerning the understanding of aims and the shared roles and responsibilities. However, here the number of partners who are “completely” content constantly grows. But this is not the case with the ratings on the future

work plan: Here, also the number of completely content partners declines. This should be taken seriously, because the period between third and fourth meeting will be decisive for the final event and for the final success of the transnational partnership, too. This also includes a very good monitoring of the ongoing activities in this period by the TCA secretary and reinforced communication among partners about their particular contributions, and, last not least, a strict adherence towards the time schedule.

Figure 11: Mutual understanding of aims and objectives among the partners

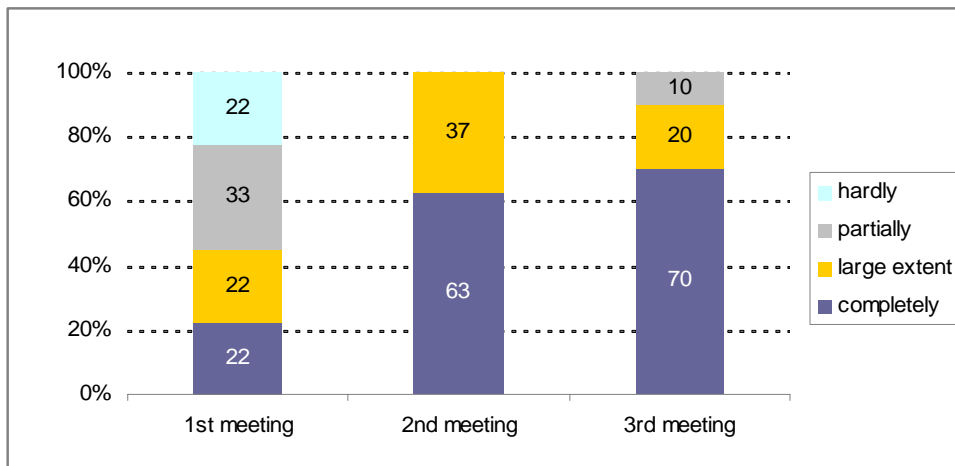


Figure 12: Clear understanding about the shared roles & responsibilities among the partners

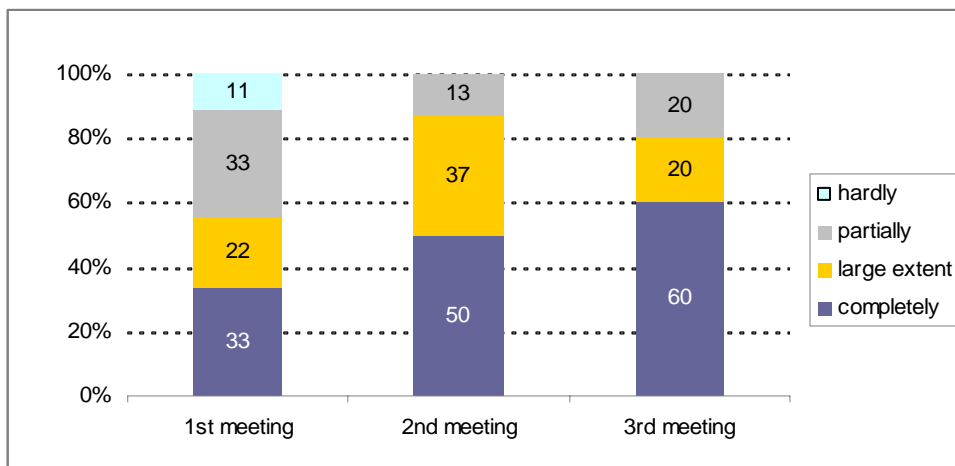
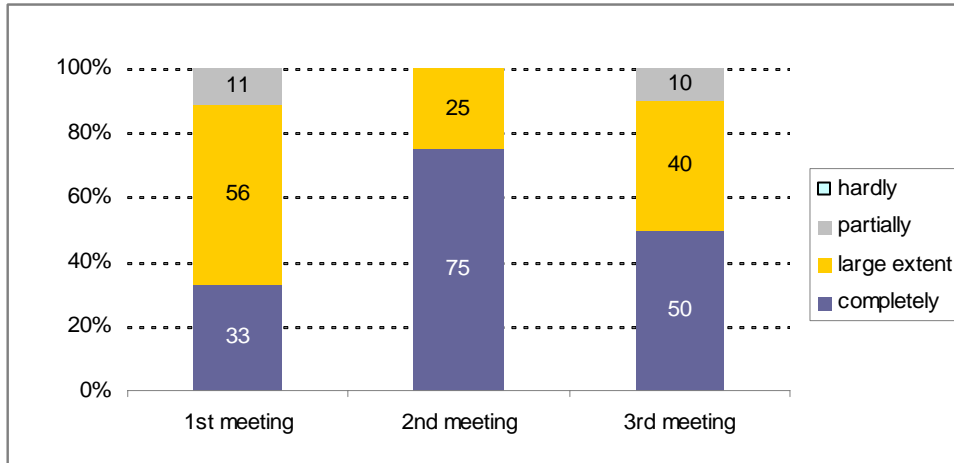


Figure 13: Agreement on working plan until the next meeting



Looking at the development, which turned from a sceptical group to a highly optimistic transnational team, the improved mutual understanding can be highlighted here. Therefore, it was very important for the transnational partnership to catch up with the initial shortcomings immediately in the second meeting. It is now up to the partnership to keep the high level of contentment with the core issues of the TCA.

Particular attention should be given to the work plan until the next meeting. Here, contentment was not as high as one could expect after the second meeting. One can recommend the partners to be very attentive, to improve the scope of contribution and provide mutual support in order to reach the goals defined in the notes of the third meeting.

The transnational secretary will have to facilitate and monitor these processes; however, partners are advised to come up with their contributions in time and good quality by themselves.

2.6 Gender Mainstreaming (GM)

Gender Mainstreaming is an integral part of every Equal project. All Equal projects have to carry out a GM strategy which means that GM-principles have to be considered at every stage of a project ranging from project development, carrying out the project to evaluating the project.

The implementation of Gender Mainstreaming principles in the TCA is a double-faceted issue: Firstly, Gender Mainstreaming can be practiced as a characteristic of the transnational collaboration itself; secondly, Gender Mainstreaming is to be regarded as a horizontal issue which must be implemented with regard to the equal representation of men and women in every product and activity of the TCA. Thus, from the evaluator's point of view, there are two levels of Gender Mainstreaming which are important: the representation of men and women in the work process as well as the representation of men and women in the products of the transnational partnership.

At the level of the transnational collaboration, Gender Mainstreaming has put in practice well. Although men and women have not been equally represented at the meetings completely, for there was a slight majority of men who participated in the meetings, the male and female participants are equally involved at all operational levels of the transnational collaboration. Thus, equal participation of men and women in discussions and decision-making is ensured against the majority of male votes, a fact that is also undermined by only unanimous decisions made so far.

Apart from the solid structural gender conditions of the partnership, it became more difficult to carry out the conceptual progress and the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming in the processes and products of the TCA. A short review on the "history" of this issue can explain some of these difficulties.

In the first meeting, actually no volunteer was found who would have taken the role of the internal Gender Mainstreaming commissioner. When preparing the TCA, the partners developed the idea to assign the evaluator with the Gender Mainstreaming issue, as is stated in the TCA agreement. After a discussion of the partners with one of the evaluators in the first meeting, the parties involved agreed this would have interfered with a serious role-taking as evaluator. Hence, the Gender Mainstreaming issue was not really covered after the first meeting. Eventually, the partnership decided to transfer GM to the representative of the Austrian DP. Then, the transnational secretary developed a GM concept until the second meeting. The concept contained a concise introduction on the principle of GM with examples, a short catalogue of goals and subgoals and the responsibilities of the TCA in terms of how to deal with GM in the transnational collaboration.

In the second meeting, some partners remarked that the GM issue has not been integrated as a horizontal issue in the relevant sessions. In particular, GM has neither been discussed in the mainstreaming sessions nor in the sessions on the internet platform. It was also an issue of low significance in the sessions on the VENet model. It is therefore not surprising that the contentment with the information received and the decisions made about GM was not very high – and was somehow gender biased, since men felt more comfortable with the superficial GM discussions than women: In the second meeting there were one women and two men who were completely content with GM, two more men but no women were content

to a large extent, one men partially, and one women was discontent. In order to enhance the developmental speed and depth regarding GM within the TCA, the partners decided to state particular tasks to be carried out until the third meeting. The most important of these tasks were:

- due to her expertise, the Cypriot representative took the responsibility to develop GM material for all partners to facilitate the familiarity of all partners with GM
- each DP had to define GM sub-goals and the modes of goal attainment
- each DP was to review to which extent the GM goals have been reached

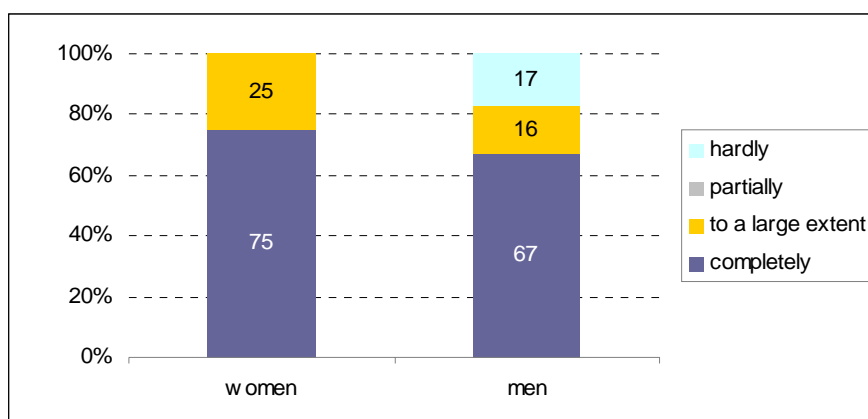
These efforts have been successful. There has been also an important contribution of the Cypriot partners who provided concise papers on the principles, methods and examples of gender mainstreaming to all partners.

In the agenda of the third meeting, the GM subgoals were a part of each core issue – VENet model, internet platform, mainstreaming, and support system. From the meeting questionnaire and from the evaluator's observation, it can be learned that GM received much more attention as horizontal issue. Finally, this meeting became the first meeting where concrete and realistic GM goals have been determined in the main fields of the transnational action. The meeting notes provide evidence for good discussions in the main sessions of the meeting. Among the various tasks which have been agreed to be worked out, one can notice:

- Mainstreaming: A newsletter containing statistics and an explanatory section on mainstreaming
- Support system: General information on GM, best practice examples, principles of equality policies
- Internet platform: Special GM button including content

Additionally, the idea to of a gender-specific VENet model was discussed. As a consequence of reinforced treatment of GM in the various sessions, the contentment with GM was quite high and received better rating from women than from men (see figure 14).

Figure 14: Contentment with implementation of GM, 3rd meeting



Regarding GM, the third meeting was a sort of breakthrough, since it was the first meeting in which GM was a point of discussion in every thematic session of the TCA and the results of each discussion were clear tasks for implementation. This rigorous agenda policy also brought forward important insights for partners which have not been too familiar with GM so far.

However, for consequent goal attainment the workout of the GM-subgoals should be monitored consequently. Here, each partner is expected to proceed with his efforts and contribute to the GM goals of the TCA.

GM has also been implemented with regard to its relevance and implementation in the final event. Here, the TCA should continue the strong emphasis on integrating GM both in terms of contents of the final event and in terms of persons (e.g. GM experts).

As a consequence, GM turned from a side issue to an important, horizontally implemented issue in the course of the TCA. On the basis of these achievements, all partners should be able to contribute equally to the implementation of GM in the products to be developed.

3 Communication & Cooperation

In the course of the evaluation, several surveys have already been made to grasp the quality of communication and collaboration in the transnational partnership. Apart from three meeting surveys carried out until now, a network analysis of communication and collaboration structures was carried out. The findings of this network analysis were presented in the first interim report, and, therefore, shall not be highlighted here in detail but in a rather comprehensive way. For detailed findings, see the 1st interim report available at the internet platform of the TCA.

The survey questionnaires contained a number of questions regarding the contentment with the information the partner received on several issues and with the decisions made on these issues. In this mid-term report, the development of contentment over three meetings regarding the important issues shall be highlighted in greater detail.

In addition, the evaluators made important observations about the communication structure during their attendance of the meetings as well as observations of the usage of the VENet forum, the platform which serves all transnational partners as means of communication and documentation. Thus, notes from the observations shall serve as an important information source on the quality of communication, too. Besides, the TCA secretary plays a decisive role for keeping up the high quality of communication which was already established after the first meeting.

3.1. Participation of partners

Involvement and participation is a prerequisite for well-functioning information flows and collaboration. In the meeting surveys, the partners were invited to rate the general possibility to engage in discussion and decision-making and their contentment with the opportunities to make contributions.

After the first meeting, only 44% of the partners were completely resp. largely content and about one third of the partners did not feel content with the opportunities to contribute to the meeting. In the open questions, partners clearly led back these ratings to the dominance and the greater amount of information of the Austrian and German partners in the discussions of the first meeting. Furthermore, the moderation in the first meeting was not really apt to compensate for this disadvantage. However, the picture changed after the first meeting, as can be seen in figure 15:

Figure 15: Equal involvement of partners

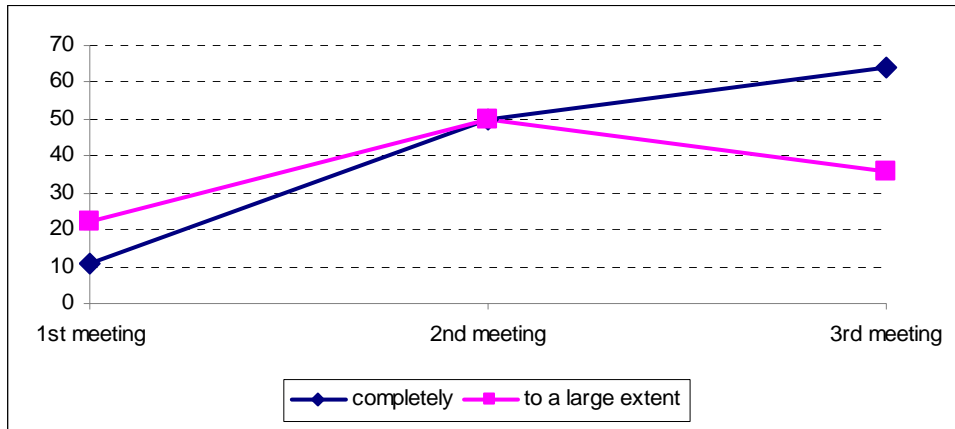
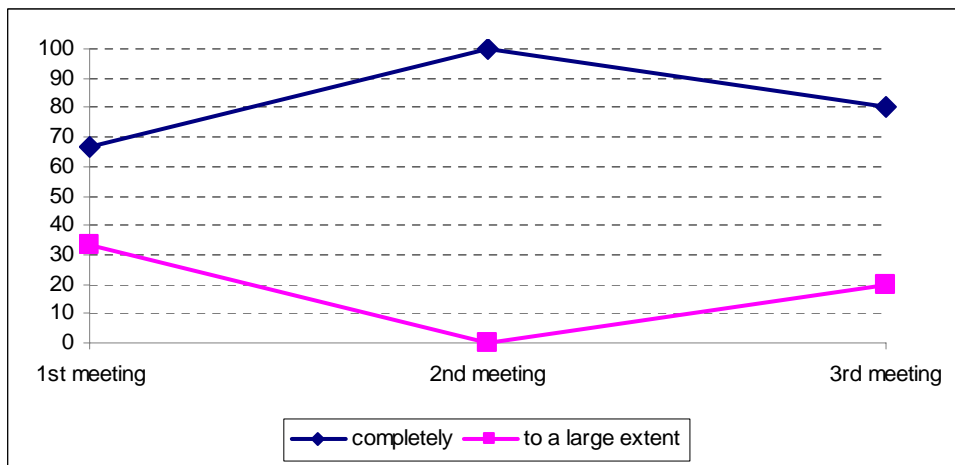


Figure 16: Contentment with possibility to contribute



The data shows that in the second and in the third meeting, the overall opportunities of involvement and contribution were rated very well. It should be noticed here that in the third meeting, three new members participated in the meeting, which had not attended one of the former transnational meetings before. This was the reason for some of the new members to mention that their intention was more to learn about the TCA than to contribute in a direct way. However, the overall development shows that the initial imbalances between partners could be removed and this achievement certainly has contributed to the maintenance of a good working climate, too.

3.2 Information and decision-making

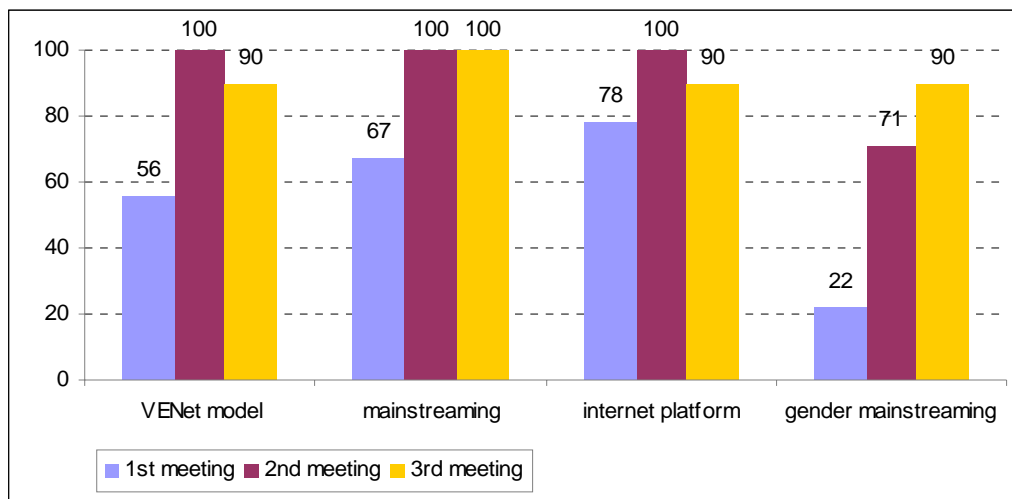
Transnational meetings are times of dense discussions and processes of decision-making. The quality of the decisions reached in a meeting are always dependent on the information base and the evidence available for each partner.

For this reason, the partners have been asked to rate their degree of information and decision-making with regard to selected core issues of the TCA from their personal point of view. Over the three meetings, four main issues have been asked at every occasion: Information & decision-making about

- the VENet model
- mainstreaming
- the internet platform
- gender mainstreaming

The core findings are illustrated in the next graph. It can be shown that the partners' contentment improved over time and remained relatively stable at a high level.

Figure 17: High ratings ("completely" & "largely") with core issues



One can easily see that in the course of the meetings considerable improvements have been reached. A very important improvement in information exchange and decision-making concerns the VENet model itself. This was a rather unclear issue at the end of the first meeting, however it improved very well in the second meeting with a slight decline in the third meeting. Also the mainstreaming issue is characterized by a good development with highest positive ratings in the second and in the third meeting. This can be stated for the internet platform, too.

In particular, the very good development of the gender mainstreaming issue should be mentioned separately. After the first meeting, the situation seemed to be a bit desperate and there were hardly TCA members who were content with information exchange and decision-making. At the second meeting, the issue had more significance at the meeting in general. It must be noted here, that the rating in the second meeting was much better, but partners mentioned in the open fields of the questionnaire that many aspects of GM have not been discussed as would have been necessary. This was said with particular reference to the sessions on mainstreaming, on the internet platform, and on the VENet model. It was already stated before that considerable effort has been made between the second and the third meeting to integrate the Gender Mainstreaming issue as a horizontal issue in the agenda. Obviously, this was an important step and an effective one. This can also be seen when looking at the meeting notes. From the notes of the second meeting, one can learn that partners discussed the relevance and the meaning of Gender Mainstreaming and that each partner should develop “a few” goals for their own product in the TCA. In comparison, the treatment of Gender Mainstreaming in the third meeting became much more elaborated and targeted with regard to the goals of the TCA. As can be read in the notes of the third meeting, Gender Mainstreaming activities are very likely to be implemented at different levels of transnational work after the third meeting.

4 The project managers' views & expectations

Some days after the third meeting in Werl, Germany, the evaluator interviewed the national project managers to receive background information on the particular perceptions of the transnational collaboration and more in-depth information on the progress of the transnational collaboration.

Here, it seems to be reasonable to call the particular objectives of the TCA into our minds. As stated in the TCA agreement, the core product shall be a concept of a Vocational Education Network as a systematic idea, which is transferable to all other European countries and all interested institutions and organisations. Therefore, five main results have been defined by the transnational partners, which shall be mentioned only briefly:

1. Definition of the whole system and its components.
2. Development of an internet platform as a tool for development, dissemination, support and communication
3. Mainstreaming of the products
4. Development of a support system to foster the adoption of the model
5. Implementation of a final activity addressing the policy-level

There are some important aspects which have to be taken into account when reviewing the progress of the transnational partnership made so far. There are several reasons for a closer scrutiny, since the following aspects may determine the partners' capacity to contribute to the TCA.

- The four partners have very different pre-experiences with the EQUAL programme: Two partners (Germany, Austria) have extensive experiences in the implementation of EQUAL projects in round 1, while for the Polish and Cypriot partners EQUAL is a new experience.
- This is not only true for the partners, but for the national support systems and other sectors of society involved, too. In short: The institutional contexts of the partners vary, and partners with low experience in EQUAL will probably have to cope with lower national support, too.

4.1 The partners' understanding of the TCA

As we have seen earlier, the partners of the transnational collaboration share a good mutual understanding of the objectives of the TCA and goal orientation developed well up to date.

Apart from the commonly shared goals and the tasks the partners are carrying out, they have particular interests according to their particular national settings, of course. Thus, the relevance of the transnational collaboration may vary in certain respects.

Germany:

The core ideas of the VENet model have been developed by the German DP Quinta as a model for a cooperation network for qualification that integrates innovative components. Very important for the model is the idea to combine theory and practice in the course of qualification, since these levels have been traditionally separated in dual systems of vocational education and training. As the basic ideas of the VENet model are largely the input of the DP Quinta, the German DP has a particular interest in the further development and to work out the core components in greater detail. However, the German DP sees a good opportunity for learning from other partners with regard to Gender Mainstreaming. Another point of interest of the German partner is the common process of optimization of the entire VENet model as a collaborative process by all partners. Here, it is in particular the experiences from the partners' practices which have a great significance for the further development.

Poland:

If we compare this view with the particular interest of the Polish partner, some differences occur. In addition to the TCA objectives, the Polish DP First Shift regards the opportunity of learning and collecting experiences as important benefits of the transnational collaboration, too. This is also due to the way, vocational education and training is organized in Poland, where occupational training is practiced by the companies only. Therefore, the combination of theory and practice is one big point of interest, and implementing this combination in vocational training centres is another one. Thus, for the Polish DP it is also interesting to learn about the organizational and technological standards of training centres in Germany. This entails a particular interest in the VENet model, too, since its implementation in Poland requires new modes of collaboration between formerly separated institutions in the labour market. With regard to the Austrian partner, the high level of organizational skills in the Austrian DP is mentioned as an important field of learning.

Cyprus:

For Cyprus, the situation is again specific. Before the TCA, no model such as the VENet model was implemented in Cyprus. For the Cypriot DP, there are two big topics of interest: First, the involvement of different sectors and partners such as companies, state bodies and training providers in terms of improved networking and collaboration. Second, it is the holistic character of the VENet model itself which integrates different aspects of a comprehensive

qualification system – skills types, organizational structures, and theoretical and practical training. However, the conditions for dissemination of the VENet model are different in Cyprus, since the model itself is not very well known among all national partners. Furthermore, it must be mentioned here that the implementation of the model in Cyprus is delayed, because even until the meeting in Werl no national funding was available for the Cypriot partner; additionally, the policy level itself needs considerable time to adopt the EQUAL procedures and standards. Both aspects made and make the continuous implementation of the VENet model in Cyprus very difficult.

Austria:

The Austrian DP regarded the VENet model as a concept which is very close to the network approach at the national level in Austria, where companies, counselling & training centres, and the labour market service are supposed to work together closely. The VENet model is a sort of meta-model for the Austrian approach that ties together particular measures and activities. It is also an important part of exchange to learn from other partners about their concrete approaches and experiences in working with different target groups.

Furthermore, for the Austrian DP the overall managerial level of the transnational collaboration is particularly important, since the TCA secretary is Austrian. Thus, there is always a double perspective on the transnational collaboration. As a partner, it is important to see for the Austrian members of the TCA that the VENet model fits with the particular national context and thus not only represents an abstract concept but a real operational model ready for application. As the coordinator of the transnational partnership, the goal attainment is of particular relevance in terms of a managerial task, too. Yet after the third meeting, the TCA secretary assesses the interim achievements positively for four reasons:

- the VENet model is regarded feasible and applicable by all partners
- the mainstreaming concept including the final event is fully agreed by all partners
- the internet platform is running well and the TCA is already in the state to think about further improvements
- the concept of the support system is agreed by all partners, too.

Eventually, all partners seem to have a good notion of their individual tasks and the further steps until the end of the TCA. Thus, it can be stated after the third meeting that the TCA seems to have set up the foundations for a successful goal attainment.

4.2 Strengths and weaknesses of the TCA

Despite the differences in the national settings which may influence the work of each DP, there is a great unanimity regarding the transnational collaboration. Almost all partners refer to the good work-flow and the good team-work which represent two reasons which make the

transnational collaboration attractive. All in all, partners emphasize that the personal and professional relationships developed in an excellent way. This is also a reason for a high level of accountability and mutual support in the TCA. Also very important for the overall progress of the TCA is the ability to find unanimous solutions based on relatively short decision-making processes. All in all, all national project managers confirm the notion that the commitment of all partners is very high to develop and disseminate a truly innovative model.

Another important aspect is mentioned and highly appreciated by all partners, namely, the work of the transnational secretary. They highly acclaim the coordination of the transnational partnership in every respect. The most important aspects mentioned were – among others: an information policy characterized by quick information exchange and reliable communication flows; very good preparation of meetings; and the feeling of good support by the TCA secretary. It is evident from these findings and from the evaluators' observations that the TCA secretary fully takes her role and thus contributes in an excellent manner to the fulfilment of goals of the entire TCA.

It is also important to state that the knowledge transfer in the TCA is a multi-dimensional one. It would be false to assume a one-way exchange from the more experienced partners to the less experienced partners. The structure of the transnational work requires a comprehensive set of skills, which cannot be fully covered by one or two partners. Thus, each partner has to contribute with particular skills and this is exactly what the national project managers mentioned in the interviews. So, for each partner there are certain aspects which are particularly interesting. To name just a few selected examples:

- the German DP learns from the Cypriot Gender Mainstreaming know how
- the Polish DP appreciates the Austrian organization and the German way of organizing training centres as important fields of learning
- the Cypriot DP realizes a change in understanding from a technical project approach towards a process-oriented working culture as a consequence of experiencing the transnational collaboration
- the Austrian DP values the long-term experiences of the German partners in establishing collaborative structures at the regional level, e.g. cooperation with firms; as well as the three-pillar concept of the VENet model, which was adopted by the Austrian DP.

This is just examples and the list could be extended by more experiences each partner made in the course of the transnational collaboration. However, some partners could play a more prominent role in the discussions, since they obviously have experiences which are of interest to others. For instance, the Polish partner could engage more in discussions, since they have very important knowledge which would be important for other partners, too: Possible themes for more exchange could be the legal framework for professional education, quality management; also the expectations and the approaches of the Chamber of Crafts and Small and Medium Enterprises, which is an active partner in the Polish DP is a fact which is not so

common on other partner countries. Here, other partners could learn from Poland more than this was the case in the past. Also the Cypriot partner should be encouraged to contribute with their own experiences and expertise not only in the field of Gender Mainstreaming but in issues of vocational education and training, too. Thus, the entire partnership should be able to reach a well-balanced dynamic of exchange.

All in all, the transnational partners have developed particular interests in each other. This development demonstrates that the partners developed a good sense of exchange where each partner knows about the advantages of this transnational collaboration.

The national project managers were also asked to explain the weaknesses of the transnational collaboration. Here, the particular national settings were referred to as sometimes irritating and hindering influences, since the transnational exchange of experiences from national implementation processes can sometimes be delayed and aggravated for several reasons which cannot be influenced by the transnational DP. This is in fact a critical issue, as the exchange of national experiences is important not only for the mutual learning but for the entire goal attainment. If, as this is the case in Cyprus, national funding is hindering the implementation at the national level, not every partner will be able to contribute with an equally developed experience base. This further means that the discussions at the transnational meetings have to take into account the particular limits at the national level. The TCA has responded to this problem and developed the idea to support the Cypriot partner by an official statement addressed to the national authorities in Cyprus. Thus, a hindering fact could be turned into a supportive action which at least demonstrates the collaboration policy in this transnational partnership nicely.

4.3. Future expectations and needs

As the half of the runtime of the transnational collaboration is reached, the transnational project managers were asked for the assessment of their expectations for the second half and of the criteria for successful goal attainment. These assessments shall be reported in short at the end of this mid-term report.

Expectations:

Partners refer to three groups of expectations: The first group of expectations refer to the direct goals of the TCA; the second expectation refers to learning effects; and the third one refers to future perspectives which point to potential modes of usage of the VENet model after the run-time of the transnational collaboration.

Regarding the direct goals, all partners express their expectations that the future steps of transnational collaboration will be carried out in accordance with the agreed time schedule.

This means that much attention must be given to the milestones and to preparing a successful final event which is a key element for successful dissemination.

For Poland, the successful development and implementation of a support system is of particular relevance, since this would bring another important innovation into the national practice of training of disadvantaged groups. In this respect, the toolbox will be a key product of the TCA because it supports the adoption of the VENet model on a broad base. Here, also the Cypriot and Austrian DP's state that the "good practice" will be a key element for further dissemination since it will enable the partners to assess the advantages of a more generalized VENet model for adoption and implementation in other regions respectively countries, too.

Thus, and this refers to the expectations regarding mutual learning, it will be extremely important for the transnational collaboration that partners implement the model at their national levels, because this would provide the experiences from practice which are then again needed for transnational exchange and assessing the scope of dissemination. Only if each partner collects good experiences at the national level, there will be good foundations for the transition from the regional level to other levels.

With regard to particular fields of learning, some partners already turn their attention to particular characteristics of the training systems in the partner countries. For instance, the Polish training system provides the opportunity to get a six month-training which combines theory and practice and participants finish with an officially acknowledged certificate. This model is particularly interesting for the German partner, since it is much shorter than German models of professional education.

Regarding the third expectation – utilization of the model after the run-time of the project - one can expect that from implementation at the national level, partners should be able to develop good bases of experiences. However, much will depend on what will be done with these experiences and how they will be processed and prepared for transnational exchange. The partners should be aware that the better the assessment of their national experiences, the more knowledge will be at hand for the final design of the VENet model and thus, for the final subjects of dissemination. The key task will be to produce an evidence-based assessment which is standardized and, thus, ensures the selection of best practices and their usage for further development and dissemination of the VENet model.

Dissemination activities:

It was interesting that the national project managers referred to the same dissemination activities which will be carried out in the next months. The main dissemination channels at the national level are: presentation of the model at national events, integration of VENet informations at the national websites, and thematic newsletters.

One has to comment that these are classical dissemination activities. However, there were no specific measures mentioned in the interviews which ensure an added benefit in terms of further exploitation of the VENet model. It must be recognized here that this is a difficult task when the specific situation of the national DP's is taken into account. All national DP's are predominantly occupied with developing national products and implementing their particular approaches. This affords much awareness raising, motivation work, concept development and other tasks, to get all partners on track at the national level. Most of the national products are thus in the state of nascence and, as partners, explicitly stated, it is difficult to amalgamate national and transnational developments respectively products and to promote them at the national level without producing confusion in the context of their national partnership. This difficulty seems to be a structural problem of the specific structure of the EQUAL programme; one cannot expect that TCAs can resolve this problem easily.

On the other hand it must be emphasized that the decision to organize a smaller final event addressing policy-makers and interest groups directly in Brussels is a very promising approach.

All in all, concrete considerations about the status of the transnational products at the national level is missing, nor are there concrete considerations about the added benefits for potential users of the model. As it stands now, some partners perceive the TCA products as a sort of "special goodie" for their work at the national level. However, the entire undertaking is too important to leave it at this state. Here, evaluation clearly recommends developing straight ideas regarding the added value of the transnational products for different target groups and implementing them as scheduled in the third meeting. The first specific agreements were made at the third meeting: E.g., addressing the main target groups prominently at the website represents a promising approach in implementing a clear dissemination strategy.

With regard to exploitation after the run-time of the project, the TCA should think about additional accompanying measures which could support the continuous utilization of the VENet model. Here, it could be considered to exploit the experiences from implementation in other projects or to go for a follow-up project which can be funded in other EU-programmes, for instance.

5 Success factors for future work

For the final stages of the project, four main success factors that could enhance the exploitation potentials of the VENet model can be identified:

5.1 Gender Mainstreaming:

At the EU policy-level, gender mainstreamed products in social and labour market policy have become standard. The TCA made a good decision to put the GM issues in greater detail in the several products. It is indispensable to provide evidence to potential users why the VENet model helps disadvantaged girls and women in particular. All partners should contribute to the gender mainstreaming of the products from now on.

5.2 Monitoring implementation practices and re-designing the model:

As was pointed out by the transnational secretary, time for documentation of national implementation processes and exchange will be very short and timing will be difficult with regard to the good design of the final products. This aspect should be kept in mind when planning the final transnational activities. Partners should be aware that the long-term potential of the VENet model will be better if a serious assessment of the national experiences is done and if the results of this assessment are used for a final re-design of the VENet model where this is necessary. This activity should receive good attention and enough time should be dedicated to this at the end of the transnational collaboration. Practically, all partners should provide a sound assessment of their national experiences based on a standardized documentation which can be subject to assessment through the transnational partners. This could focus on concrete experiences such as the acceptance of the support system or the particular inputs of the VENet model for the national products and approaches.

5.3 Two levels of dissemination:

Partners mentioned mainly classical dissemination instruments at the national level. However, it seems that the dissemination of the VENet model at the national level is regarded as a sort of “side activity”, while most concentration is dedicated to the more prestigious EU-level. Here, the TCA should be strict on the self-defined goals of national dissemination. A good monitoring system and a final assessment of the effects of the national dissemination activities should be implemented to monitor the outcomes of the dissemination activities of each partner.

5.4 Utilization of the VENet model beyond the run-time of the TCA:

There are some factors which will strongly influence the opportunity of future utilization of the VENet model. For sure, to think about this is just an option and it has not been defined as a goal in the TCA. However, it must be said that the TCA has made very good progress so far and it is on the way to produce good results. These results could be of use after the project, of course. If the TCA decides to continue the cooperation, some factors should be given attention: Among others, the maintenance of personal relations, the political support and the availability of funding will determine the scope of dissemination and implementation of the VENet. Here, the partners are recommended to start considerations about long-term financing before the next meeting takes place. At least, a plan for funding policy should be developed until the final event and should be presented to policy-makers on this occasion. Here, the transnational partnership could concentrate on continuing some selected aspects of the VENet model by exploiting other EU funding programmes.