

ME2ME project Policy Paper



Micro-enterprise Learning Partnerships - ME2ME, is an innovative project that aims to develop bespoke peer-to-peer learning networks in real and virtual environments where micro-enterprise owners can share their knowledge and skills with other business owners supported by duly trained VET professionals. The owners of micro-enterprises are the key decision makers where learning in this sector is concerned and by attracting business owners to these new learning environments the project will improve the potential for learning within each micro-enterprise engaged especially for staff or workers with low skill levels.

It has been repeatedly emphasized on the EU level that SMEs are one of the key 'driving forces' of modern economies. It is because of their contribution to technological upgrading; product and process innovations; employment generation; export promotion; etc. The numbers have also proven this conclusion. In 2016 SMEs still provided an estimated 68% of all jobs in the non-financial business economy and contributed 58.1% of the total value-added created by businesses in the EU.

At the same time because of great number of unqualified workforce and fast labour market changes the need for proper VET training is bigger than have ever been before. VET needs to be reformed to be more responsive to evolving European market ensuring that people are equipped with the right skill and taught the way that is the most efficient and convenient. It should link the worlds of work and education more effectively.

The ME2ME Project was aimed to address both of these conclusions using the opportunities for the development of innovative learning content provided by the digital era. Micro enterprises owners is the group known for lack of time and low uptake of extra training, which might be the reasons for the failures of many small businesses. ME2ME will try to bridge the gap between business owners and education service providers by bringing them together in on-line networks.

The main project objectives are to:

- grow a culture of learning within the micro-enterprise sector by cultivating positive attitudes towards learning among business owners
- develop peer-to-peer learning networks in each partner country
- help bridge the gap between business owners and education service providers
- train VET tutors to develop media-rich mini-learning-format resources that address specific skill needs in the SME sector to help make VET more responsive to the needs of business.

The focus of the consortium will be put on ensuring the convenient access to the materials thanks to the planned mini-learning format resources widely available on digital platform. The project will support the shift from the education provision that is designed along traditional lines into training courses that are

based on the social networking opportunities and are highly adaptable to the needs or availability of their users.

Introduction

The project objectives and the final outcomes

Overall, the project has reached all its primary objectives. ME2ME project partners have been successful in developing all foreseen project outputs and have been able to reach and up-skill VET professionals in all countries to introduce them to the practice of developing mini-learning format resources. While educators engaged in the project all showed interest in the training topic and were willing to develop mini-learning format resources through the training, only time will tell if this will have a lasting impact on how they improve their knowledge of the needs of MEOs and if they adopt this fully into how they provide training to MEOs. It has also been challenging to reach the MEO target group to promote the mini-learning format resources developed, however, those MEOs who have been reached on a local level have shown interest and support for this project and for the outputs we have developed.

The final outcomes correspond with the planned ones. All intellectual outputs were prepared and are presented on project website.

The CPD Curriculum is adapted to all national context and is applicable in all participant countries, being transnational developed. Also the mini-format resources that were developed within the project are matching national contexts and to the local specificity. Also, all the learning materials developed within the project are open sources being posted in the Project Portal in order to put together the SMEs and VET together in on-line networks. This contribution will help within each country to connect the business owners (SMEs) and education service providers (VET professionals).

New attributes of the project which were not included in the objectives

The project consortium worked very well together and the VET providers who were engaged through the training represent very positive outcomes of the ME2ME project, which perhaps were not fully appreciated at the time that the application was written. While the objectives haven't changed, the work and impact of the ME2ME project has been improved through these two positive factors.

In several partner countries the project found close cooperation with the target group of the local small business providers and with local chamber of commerce. The project partners found that the final project outcomes fully meet the objectives foreseen in the project. Topics of both CPD Curriculum and mini-format resources match the national demand. All materials and the possibility of creating mini-format resources materials of your own needs are available in the Project Portal to bring SMEs and VET together in on-line networks. This will help on the objective of helping to bridge the gap between business owners and education service providers.

The target group which initially was defined as micro-enterprise owners and VET tutors could now be defined as being broader. Results achieved can be useful to a lot of other users as well. The extension of the targeted group and the results transfer to other groups that initially were not included.

The most successful/most used elements of the project for target groups

The In-service Training Programme has been a very successful element of the project. The VET providers engaged in the project's transnational and local implementation activities expressed genuine interest in our approach to providing education for business owners; but beyond this, VET providers are also interested in adopting this approach in their teaching practice for diverse learner groups, including providing guidance resources to young adults and developing resources for migrant entrepreneurs relating to establishing a business. These represent significant added value for the outputs of the project, as the In-Service Programme has inspired diverse applications of the ME2ME approach to VET. From the project view, this has been one of the most successful aspects of the project.

The other successful part is the service training program, which was very well accepted by all participants and the CPD Curriculum Resources for VET Professionals. It is an up-to-date and purposefully (according the implemented Audit) selected information that both SMEs and VET requested. It could be the most used by stakeholders taking into consideration that this curriculum meets the transnational needs and has the main objective to reduce some gaps between business owners and VET professional using online platforms.

The ME2ME effect on the growing culture of learning within the micro-enterprise sector

The ME2ME project approach to VET provides access to relevant and specific learning content that business owners need, but in a format that they can access on the go and at a time that is convenient for them. This is a very positive aspect of the ME2ME approach, as business owners in the micro-enterprise sector are typically limited in the free time they have to dedicate to education programmes. If the suite of mini-learning format resources on offer to MEOs is further expanded by VET providers, it is feasible that this would have a significant impact on how VET is provided to MEOs, contributing to a growth in the culture of learning among MEOs. These additional resources should target new and emerging trends and practices in business management, including talent management, on-boarding, remote working, digitalisation of working roles, etc. so as to offer innovative resources to businesses seeking to grow and expand in today's competitive market.

There is a big need in education inside micro-enterprises but on the other hand there are some obstacles to participate in training programmes. ME2ME made a great job in promoting new ways of education for small businesses.

Within ME2ME project the developed good practices will promote a culture of learning within the micro-enterprise sector. From peer-to-peer learning modules and materials to an entire CPD Curriculum that meet business owners need, there was designed a culture of learning.

The project has developed the resources that were outlined in the application. So it has met the objectives which were outlined at the start of the project. A range of micro-businesses and VET professionals have been engaged through the project and a set of resources for both communities have been developed.

In terms of new attributes, there are two key areas of additionality. First the confirmation that there is an opportunity for the project to make a difference through supporting peer to peer learning between micro-businesses, particularly in terms of the need for tailored peer to peer learning networks for micro-businesses. Second the experience exchange between the partners in terms of understanding and supporting learning and skills development in micro-businesses.

If disseminated effectively the mini-learning resources have the potential to make a difference to micro-enterprises in acquiring the learning required to address both operational and strategic needs (e.g. through being able to be used as required).

The project has a role in growing the culture of learning through two ways. First by highlighting the importance of investing in learning and skills development when running a small business (e.g. the evidence that demonstrates the relationship between investing in the development of management and leadership skills and productivity). Second by demonstrating that there is value to both formal and informal methods of learning.

Recommendations and action plan to boost the use of ME2ME platform to reach SMEs and VETs

The ME2ME Project found that almost all micro-enterprises would benefit from engaging with the project outcomes, whether they operate in cities or country side, service providers or manufacturers.

From the project experience, micro-enterprises with less than 5 employees often would not engaged in the ME2ME project, as they are under-resourced and have little free time to engage in education and networking activities, which are not directly related to their area of business operation.

There are two other factors might be more important than size, location and sector:

- The age of the business owner, as out study has shown that older owners tend to think far less about further education.

- The importance given by the business owner to further education intrinsically.

Micro enterprises with less than 3-5 employees tended to be, as they lack the resources to participate in these types of projects. Also very small Businesses, where the owner is older and has no self-driven interest in further education and the ones that have no innovation culture within them, are close to information sharing, that think “they know everything best”.

Other reasons – what the project found - why the very small enterprises not engaged with the outcome:

- The owner-manager does not perceive there is a need to learn;
- The owner-manager does not wish to/want to develop the business;
- Learning and skills provision is not available (e.g. local peer to peer learning networks);
- Available provision is not accessible (e.g. the business does not meet the eligibility criteria);
- The provision is not appropriate to the needs of the micro-business (e.g. use of frameworks which are difficult to apply to running a micro-business).

Therefore, lack of engagement is not necessarily about the size, sector or stage of the development of the micro-business.

Targeted VET providers

From the project experience, smaller, community-based VET providers and community business schools are most open to adopting the project outcomes. Also some private VET providers and some teachers from public VET schools based on their individual interest would be interested in integrate the project outcomes into the program. Based on the project members’ experiences small and more flexible VET providers that are connected to new learning environments, are more likely to adopt the project outcomes.

In Ireland and in some other partner countries too VET is managed by the Education and Training Boards, securing the adoption of the ME2ME project approach to VET in national VET providers such as Boards is challenging due to the accreditation procedures which should be followed so as to introduce new in-service training for VET staff.

Barriers for VETs to insert mini-learning formats into their education line

From the project experience, the most significant barriers that could affect the uptake of ME2ME in the VET sector relate to

- The lack of in-service training for VET professionals to support them to develop their own mini-learning format resources and the lack of technical know-how to produce digital resources and
- The lack of IT infrastructure to host the mini-learning format resources once they are developed, to use in their teaching practice.

But this depends individually in each country, teacher and trainer and their willing to use mini learning formats.

By providing comprehensive in-service training, ME2ME has been able to provide support to VET professionals to develop their knowledge and competence in developing mini-learning format digital resources. Also, with the ME2ME project platform, we have provided space for VET tutors to produce, store and share their mini-learning format resources. However, this is not a long-term solution as the project portal will be live at least 5 years after the project ends. Even still, it is hoped that in this time, VET providers will develop alternative mechanisms to present their materials online.

In terms of VET providers, those most open to the outcomes from the project will be those who recognise that existing provision does not necessarily work for micro-businesses and/or those who see an opportunity to engage with a new market through offering a different type of learning and skills experience.

There will be two other possible barriers. First, the funding used to develop and deliver learning and skills provision. Second, perceptions of VET providers as to which learning and teaching strategies are of value. In terms of the former, there is not much that the ME2ME project can do – e.g. it is easier to deliver formal/regulated qualifications as part of ESF funded provision where you can guarantee face to face contact time with the learner and hence draw down funding. It will be difficult to shift this approach to delivery in the near-term. In terms of the latter, resources such as the Induction to Pedagogy can be used to increase understanding of the value of demand-led learning.

The hindering factors can be more additional work for VET teachers, because they would need to master another platform to create their mini-format resources. They might be already very used to what they use already to create educational resources, and usually no one wants change in their daily routines. To diminish these distances, it would require making creation of mini-format learning resources as easy as possible and as visual as possible, so that it would not take any time to master it. Also, a lot of pre-prepared information and resources would encourage to use the platform of ME2ME.

Improvement of the ME2ME e-learning portal and develop learning networks

The most used and most unused education platforms what the VETs and SMEs are using in partner countries

Many state-run VET providers such as the 16 regional branches of Education and Training Boards Ireland use an internal intranet for sharing educational materials and providing access to in-service resources for staff. There is currently no online portal where in-service training resources are provided to VET tutors outside of these regional centres. This represents a significant opportunity for the ME2ME project to provide access to in-service training resources to this target group.

The most used is old style educational courses with trainer and audience. Internet based resources are growing in last years.

In Lithuania VET institutions are quite open to at least trying new platforms. From EU initiatives in Lithuania VET teachers use EPALE (Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe) platform, and from national platforms they use EDUKA platform (Alma Littera which owns the largest and oldest Publisher of Educational content in Lithuania called Šviesa ordered a private company Mediapark to build an e-learning platform that provides all the necessary digital textbooks and a wide data base of interactive tasks). Less used educational platforms in Lithuania are UPC learning platform (created by a private company) and SMIS (Adult Learning Information System created during a project funded by European Regional Development Fund and the State Budget of the Republic of Lithuania.).

Based on experiences the Moodle platform was developed to sustain traditional learning, but also long-distance learning and different activities connected with teaching-learning and evaluation. Moodle is an online learning environment in which the learners can download learning materials and can participate in interactive debates / lessons. (<https://learn.upit.ro>).

It is difficult to say which are the most used and unused education platforms as very few of them publish any statistics on levels of use. Providers may develop their own platforms so they can tailor provision to groups that they are working with – e.g. the IOEE has its own online Campus, in part, so we can create closed communities for clients. As such work may be privately funded there is no requirement to publish levels of usage. Also, micro-enterprises may not have a choice over the use of a platform as it may be tied to the programme – e.g. college and university learning platforms.

In terms of use of the mini-learning resources, the most effective way of supporting online use may be to enable businesses and/or providers to embed them within their platforms. This may be easier in the near to mid-term than trying to embed them in other existing platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, FutureLearn, Coursera).

Using the mini learning formats

As the mini learning format resources are produced as short video lectures, they can be shared through video-hosting sites including YouTube. From the project research, the most appropriate platforms for sharing these resources with businesses and educators would include YouTube, Facebook and Slideshare. On both public sites, ME2ME partners establishing a ME2ME channel and profile

and transferring all resources there to support the exploitation and sustainability of the project outputs after the project has ended. As they are really short tools going directly to the point they can be used for the companies where free time is a barrier to attend educational courses. It is up to each partner to establish links and promotional activities in order to access those resources by learners and teachers.

The integration of mini learning formats into other education platforms mostly depends on the creators and managers of those platforms. In terms of use of the mini-learning resources, the most effective way of supporting online use may be to enable businesses and/or providers to embed them within their platforms. This may be easier in the near to mid-term than trying to embed them also in other existing other platforms: LinkedIn, FutureLearn, Coursera.

The main hurdles to integrate mini learning formats to different education platforms

To include ME2ME resources into the educational platforms of other VET providers, it would require that external organisations build a new section of their website to host these resources. It is unlikely that ME2ME partners will be able to achieve this – unless partners host their own online learning platforms. Where partners do not have access to learning platforms, it is worthwhile to consider publishing the video files developed as part of the mini learning format resources through public social media sites, including YouTube, SlideShare and Facebook, all of which can host video content, so that the largest number of MEOs and VET providers can access these resources.

The main hurdles could be the lack of resources and time from VETs. But the biggest challenge is to integrate them so that they would comply fluently to the already existing materials in the education platform. Their format and maybe even template has to match. There also could be some technical issues when integrating.

In the project experience, the greatest obstacles to their lack of use of online solutions are influenced by a lack of relevant materials provided through online learning for MEOs, and a lack of IT infrastructure to develop online learning portals as VET providers. Other reason why to use it is time flexibility, short learning lessons going directly to the point and possibility to select only important topics. It is a big challenge to promote online resources and such ways of learning among SMEs and VET providers.

Interviews with VETs have shown, that they see a large part of their added benefit within the networking and social interaction provided by coming to the courses in person. However, the SMEs have been very open to use online sources if they find specific, useful and cheap or free offers.

Usually e-learning formats are not simple enough in the beginning and people just give up on them. People are not motivated enough to learn how to use them. They are used to get everything fast and easy. Usually people start using

something after recommendations of their colleagues or people they trust. We need to have ME2ME ambassadors from VET and/or SMEs.

The main reason why SMEs and VETs may not use online solutions relates to the evidence of the benefits of face to face learning as a way of supporting experience exchange. Whilst this is possible online there are a number of challenges to effective online experience exchange (e.g. access to technology, access to stable internet connections, ability to develop trust online). This suggests that use of online learning resources could be encouraged through embedding them in face-to-face learning programmes.

The main hurdle has been balancing breadth and depth of information within the resources – e.g. you can write a two page resource on managing money but does it have any value for the owner of a micro-businesses over and above introducing basic concepts which they already know (e.g. the difference between turnover and profit)

Maintenance of the portal and new mini-learning resources

Preparation the mini learning formats

There was some difficulty in encouraging VET providers to use the ME2ME platform to develop their own mini-learning format resources. Their reluctance related to a lack of adequate Internet access to use the platform and all its features. Based on experiences, VETs would need some practice when preparing mini learning formats: they have to have information pre-prepared and during preparation the mini learning formats, technical skills needed to linking the image with sounds. To overcome this issue, the project tailored the training content to this local needs, and developed demonstrations on how to sync audio through PowerPoint rather than the online site to develop mini-learning format resources. This change meant that the ME2ME approach is now accessible to everyone, and those with access to reliable Internet connection are able to use all features of the platform.

As the mini learning format resources were developed based on the local training needs of businesses we envisage that all topics developed for the audience will be used by local MEOs to enhance their knowledge of communication, negotiation, marketing and strategic planning. The strength of our resources is possibility to select length of the course and as well the content. There are many successful topics like communication, negotiation and human resources management.

Future topics of mini learning formats

As previously mentioned, the project partners estimate that the future needs of local businesses relate to emerging trends and practices such as talent

management, digitisation, on-boarding, etc. as well as producing resources that businesses traditionally require support in such as financial planning and forecasting, social media marketing, etc. Through the partners' experience, there is a need to update the skills of VET providers in the areas of IT and e-learning. Developing online learning resources that are of high quality requires a specific set of skills which the ME2ME has begun to develop in VET providers, but which need to be further developed to fully impact how they provide up-skilling opportunities for MEs.

The project covered the most important future topics too with future business trends – digitalization, IT skills, using social media for business development, also related to HR, soft skills development, online environment for marketing, business and resources.

The most used topics will be those which relate clearly to the life-world of the micro-business owner (e.g. networking). Those which will be used less will be those more formal management topics (e.g. strategic management, supply chain management)

For the owner of micro-businesses, needs to be a clearer emphasis within the resources on enterprising skills – e.g. dealing with uncertainty, recognising opportunities, building resilience, bringing the future forward. For VET professionals, it may be useful to develop resources which assist them in understanding of the life world of the micro business owner-manager, supporting peer to peer learning and developing formative assessment methods which can be used by owner-managers to identify strengths and areas for development.

Sustainability and Innovation

Future formats of the mini-learning formats

Project partners believe that the learning formats are suitable for businesses in all sectors, however in order to make the resources more relevant to businesses outside of the micro-enterprises sector, there is a need to develop additional resources on diverse topics that address the training needs of businesses in these other sectors. In order to achieve widespread access to the ME2ME resources, it would also be beneficial to create an app which presents these resources and that is optimised for mobile and smart devices; however, this is not possible within the scope of this project, but it does provide opportunities for further adaptations of the ME2ME materials by other consortia.

As mentioned above, in order to achieve maximum impact among the target micro-enterprises audience, it is advisable that the e-learning platform is also offered as a mobile app to our target groups; however as stated above also, this is outside of the scope of the ME2ME project.

The web architecture of the online platform is such that it is not possible for VET professionals to update the content of the platform on their own. While they can

use the platform to create their own mini-learning resources, they cannot add to the web platform with sufficient training and access rights to edit the web architecture. To support VET professionals to create and publish their own resources, it is advisable that they use the ME2ME platform to generate and produce their video resources, and then share these video files with their learners through YouTube, Slideshare or Facebook.

The format should stay the same given the appropriateness of bite-sized learning in different contexts. However, it is likely that different topics will be required in different contexts – e.g. a greater emphasis on issues of civic entrepreneurship and social responsibility for local government and NGOs, different content for the finance and people modules for large businesses, legal and governance structures for social enterprises.

Expand the mini learning formats beyond SMEs

The mini learning format could be a good platform to set a collaboration between VET teachers to share pre-prepared education resources and in that way help each other to save time.

From the project discussions with local VET providers, the project partners have identified that VET professionals see possibilities to use the mini-learning format approach to offer career guidance and work-ready programmes to young adults and also to provide specific resources on establishing businesses to migrant or refugee entrepreneurs and for the young generation of entrepreneurs.



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Project Number: 2017-1-PL01-KA202-038280