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Evaluating LSP-TEOC.Pro: What we did and what we found out

Abstract. This article presents an evaluation of the LSP-TEOC.Pro project. It sets out the evaluation methodology applied, how it was implemented and the key evaluation findings. Given the exploratory nature of the project, the range and complexity of the intervening variables involved and logistical constraints, it was not possible to use an experimental evaluation approach. Instead, the evaluation used an approach based on a 'realist' and 'theory-driven' framework to test whether the 'mechanisms' implicit in the project theory of change were supported by the evidence. The evaluation showed that LSP-TEOC.PRO has progressed significantly along its 'change journey', although further effort is required going forward to support scaling up and out, so that the project has an impact at the macro level.

Keywords: LSP, realist, evaluation, theory of change, mechanisms.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the evaluation of the LSP-TEOC.Pro project. LSP-TEOC.Pro was a project that developed, tested and disseminated an innovative approach to training Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) teachers and students. It aimed to provide LSP students and teachers with a multilingual online course which allows them to acquire the competences needed for a successful implementation of teaching languages in a specific context. These competences cover nine areas, including needs analysis, syllabus design, teaching skills, materials evaluation and assessment. The developed online course targeted future and early career teachers who may not have received sufficient education in LSP teaching given the prevalent gaps in LSP teacher training in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The online course was made available to the LSP community as an Open Educational Resource (OER) implemented

as self-directed course content on a learning management system (LMS). The online course content is comprised of eight modules – an introductory module and seven core modules covering the key elements and competences needed for a successful implementation of teaching languages in a specific context. These core modules cover needs analysis in LSP; LSP course and syllabus design; LSP communities, genres and corpora; LSP teaching skills; LSP materials evaluation and design; task, project, problem-based LSP teaching/learning, and LSP assessment. The course content was available in all languages of the strategic partnership consortium, namely in Croatian, English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Slovenian and Turkish. The course was delivered and tested through extensive large-scale trials involving LSP teachers and students.

The main outcomes and impacts expected following completion of the project included increased LSP, digital and inter-cultural competences for participants; the development of trans-national partnerships aimed at providing and promoting knowledge and skills for high-quality teaching and learning of LSP in vocational education and training (VET) and in higher education and a more unified way of learning and teaching languages for specific purposes. Overall, it was expected that LSP-TEOC.Pro would contribute to increasing the attractiveness of LSP teaching in Europe.

Against this background, the evaluation approach chosen for LSP-TEOC.Pro needed to reflect its particular features and characteristics. Ideally, project stakeholders – people with a 'stake' in the project results, particularly those who fund it – look to the most robust evaluation approaches available in order to demonstrate results, impact and value. These approaches usually imply using 'experimental' methods to demonstrate results and impact – in particular the use of 'randomised controlled trials' (RCTs), which are seen as the 'gold standard' in evaluation and impacts assessment (Campbell & Stanley 1973). The attraction of experimental methods is that they are good at establishing the 'counterfactual' (Loi & Rodrigues 2012). Counterfactual evaluation involves comparing the outcomes of interest of those who have benefitted from an intervention (the 'treatment group') with those of a group similar in all respects to the treatment group (the 'comparison / control group'), but who have not been exposed to the intervention. The comparison group provides information on what would have happened to the participants in the intervention had they not been exposed to it. In the case of LSP-TEOC.Pro, this would have meant randomly selecting the participants for the online course and randomly selecting a similar group of teacher trainees and LSP professionals who did not participate in the programme, then comparing the two groups' levels of LSP, digital and inter-cultural competences following completion of the programme.

The main challenge with applying experimental methods like RCTs in the project evaluation is a methodological one. This reflects the difficulty in maintaining the 'temporal priority' required in RCTs – the assumption that a suspected cause precedes an event (for example, in clinical trials that the application of a particular drug will 'cause' the relief of particular symptoms). Evaluation challenges encountered in interventions like LSP-TEOC.Pro include complexity and unpredictable change. Problems in measuring outcomes, for example non-linear response outcomes and high rates of outcome variability, are also often encountered. Complexity and unpredictability challenges also include technical problems, such as handling treatments that comprise multiple interventions; infrequent data sampling, non-existent baselines, and large measurement error; long time lag between intervention and response; complex spill-over effects (Befani 2012; Ferraro 2009). The second main challenge in applying RCTs in LSP-TEOC.Pro is a pragmatic one. Random selection of participants and non-participants was virtually impossible logistically, given the time and resource constraints of the project and the difficulty in accessing, selecting and persuading LSP professionals who were not involved in the project to participate in its evaluation. In this context a different evaluation methodology was needed.

2. LSP-TEOC.PRO EVALUATION APPROACH

Taking the above factors into consideration, the overall conceptual framework chosen for the LSP-TEOC.Pro evaluation was based on an adaptation of the 'realist evaluation' approach. Realist evaluation allows for context to be taken into consideration when assessing interventions (Guba & Lincoln 1989; Chen & Rossi 1989; Pawson & Tilley 1997). The approach looks at how something is supposed to work, with the goal of finding out what strategies work for which people, in what circumstances, and how.

A realist approach is essentially about testing a theory about what 'might cause change', even though that theory may not be explicit. One of the tasks of a realist evaluation is therefore to make the theories within an intervention explicit, by developing clear hypotheses about how, and for whom, programmes and projects might 'work'. The implementation of the programme, and the evaluation of it, then tests those hypotheses. This means collecting data, not just about intervention impacts, but also the processes of the intervention implementation, as well as data about the specific mechanisms that might be creating change.

Two things that are crucial in carrying out realist evaluation are 'Theory of Change' and the 'mechanisms' that underpin the change process. Theory of Change tells the project 'story' – from the 'presenting problem' it addresses

through to the change it hopes to make on that problem at the end of the project and beyond (i.e. the project's expected 'impacts') (Weiss, 1995). Connecting the presenting problem and expected impacts are activities – actions carried out by LSP-TEOC.Pro, that lead to outputs – things that are produced by these activities. These lead to immediate outcomes – changes in awareness and knowledge, that lead to intermediate outcomes – changes in behaviour and structures. Underlying this 'change journey' are theories, assumptions and hypotheses, for example a theory of what is causing the 'presenting problem'; a theory of what is needed to bring about the desired solution and assumptions that if Action 'X', is taken this will produce Output 'Y', which will then lead to Outcome 'Z'. These theories, hypotheses and assumptions need to be tested as the project develops and, if necessary, revised in light of evaluation evidence.

Mechanisms can be defined as "underlying entities, processes, or structures which operate in particular contexts to generate outcomes of interest" (Astbury & Leeuw 2010: 368). Interventions like LSP-TEOC.Pro are intended to encourage the target groups they are aimed at to make and sustain different choices – for example choosing to participate in the LSP-TEOC.Pro online course. Making these choices requires a change in the participant's 'reasoning' (for example the values, beliefs, attitudes, or the logic they apply to a particular situation). It also requires a change in the 'resources' participants have available to them. For example, LSP-TEOC.Pro will provide information, skills, material resources, and support which will in turn increase participants' individual resources (e.g. in LSP, digital competences, intercultural skills) and ultimately the resources available to their institutions and networks. This combination of 'reasoning and resources' is what enables LSP-TEOC.Pro to 'work' and is defined as a project 'mechanism'. The way the mechanism works depends on the 'context' in which it operates. LSP-TEOC.Pro's course will work – or not – in different ways for different people depending on 'contextual factors'. These include the time and economic resources available to professionals and trainee teachers to participate. There is always an interaction between context and mechanism, and that interaction is what creates the intervention's impacts or outcomes: Context + Mechanism = Outcome.

3. IMPLEMENTING THE EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation approach was implemented through a multi-methodological framework and toolkit. The framework combined four different evaluation purposes and modes. First, ex-ante evaluation – aimed at embedding evaluation into the project at the start and then using learning from the ongoing evaluation to

improve the project as it developed. Second, process evaluation – aimed at tracking the evolution of the project and how it was meeting its objectives and targets. Third, summative evaluation – aimed at assessing the project outcomes and impacts and the extent to which its goals had been met. Finally, learning evaluation – aimed at contributing to supporting the sustainability of LSP-TEOC.Pro.

The Toolkit incorporated a range of data collection methods and instruments as well as analytical tools. For ex-ante evaluation the Toolkit included action learning sets, co-design workshops and a theory of change framework. Process evaluation included a process dashboard which monitored progress against key output targets and key performance indicators as well as a partner survey which assessed project partner perceptions on progress. Summative evaluation combined statistical data analysis – for example training course participation rates – with a course participant survey, participant interviews and focus groups and participant diaries. Learning evaluation focused on theory of change analysis – assessing how far the project had progressed on its change journey.

4. RESULTS

The process evaluation entailed periodic review of how the project was progressing in relation to its intended outputs. This used a 'process dashboard' to assess the extent to which output targets were being achieved. Table 1 shows the main results of the process evaluation.

On the process evaluation, key outputs indicators were used to track project performance over its lifecycle. These were also linked to key performance indicators (KPIs) which enable tracking of progress made on the indicators against baselines and targets. These KPIs are not shown in the Table because it shows the situation at project end (KPIs are 'progress' rather than 'outcomes' measures). It should also be noted that the project did not set any targets to measure against. Nevertheless, the indicators in the process dashboard give a reasonable picture of project achievements.

Progress and achievement on the 'research' dimension was measured by the number of items and good practice cases reviewed in the analysis and synthesis of existing LSP teacher education and development programmes. This aimed to gather and review the state of the art in the LSP field – particularly on existing LSP resources, their content, teaching and learning methods and associated learning outcomes – to feed into the development of the LSP-TEOC.Pro course. As the Table shows a large number of institutions working in LSP – 532 Europe-wide – were consulted in the review and 12 LSP training programmes were analysed in depth.

Table 1. LSP-TEOC.Pro process evaluation

Dimension	Indicators	Status at: 31/8/23	Project target
Research	No. Literature review items and good practice cases reviewed	532 institutions; 12 programmes	NS
Development	No. of content modules developed in target languages	8	NS
	No. issues detected and solved (IO4)	Continuous review process	NS
	No. piloting diaries completed	41	NS
Implementation	No. LSP students and teachers participating in online course	183	NS
Dissemination	No. visits to project website	597 (public) 1257 (combined)	NS
	No. contacts on social media	1894 reads 61 recommendations 34 followers	NS
	No. participants Final Conference	56	NS

Source: own study.

On the 'development' dimension, LSP-TEOC.Pro achieved its intended objective of developing a comprehensive training programme, covering 8 modules, and translated into the nine languages represented in the partnership. The course was validated through a meticulous and protracted review process involving peer review teams for each module. This enabled issues to be detected and resolved. The validation process was supported through the participation of the project target group – LSP students and teachers – who provided over 40 detailed piloting diaries identifying issues and providing suggestions for improvements.

On the implementation dimension, a total of 183 LSP students and teachers were involved in trialling the course. This number is sufficient to enable a robust evaluation of the training course to be conducted. The 'dissemination' dimension was assessed using three main indicators: number of visits to the project website; number of contacts on social media and number of participants at the project final conference. The data on website visits and social media traffic suggest that LSP-TEOC.Pro's engagement with its stakeholder constituency has been limited, with just over 1,200 website visits (combining 'public' visits with visits to the platform by training course participants) and just over 1,800 'reads' in total on social media. The Final Conference attracted 56 national and international participants, which is in line with the typical attendance for projects of this size and nature.

In addition to project website and social media data, the dissemination monitoring system implemented in the project logged a total of 64 dissemination actions over the project lifetime. Of these, 45 involved the use of partner websites and social media to raise awareness about the project and support recruitment of participants to the training course. 15 involved conference presentations; 2 were workshops and 2 were articles submitted to academic journals and Conference Proceedings. The estimated reach of the conferences and workshops covers 1,830 stakeholders, primarily LSP scholars, teachers and researchers.

The summative evaluation was implemented via a multi-methodological design. This combined quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data analysis included key output indicators, statistical analysis of participation data, and analysis of the use of the training platform, including learner analytics data capturing user interaction with the training course. This was supported by a 'pre-test / post-test' survey of training programme participants, measuring their self-reported level of competences before and after participating in the LSP-TEOC.Pro training programme, analysis of training programme participants' quiz scores, a participant survey, participant diaries and follow up interviews and focus groups.

300 teachers and students enrolled on the LSP-TEOC.Pro course. Figure 1 shows participation rates for the course.

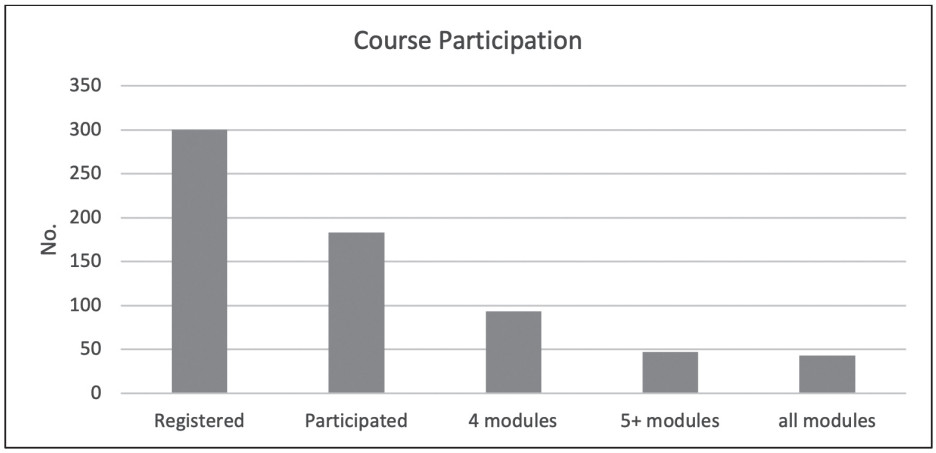

Figure 1. Participation in the LSP-TEOC.Pro training programme trial

Source: own study.

Figure 1 shows that 300 LSP teachers and students registered for the programme. Of these 183 – 61% participated in the training course; 93 – 31% – of those registered completed 4 modules of the course; 47 – 16% – of those registered

completed 5 or more modules of the course; 43 – 14% – of those registered completed the whole course (8 modules). These figures suggest a high level of interest from the LSP professional community in the training programme, together with a relatively high participation rate of over 60%, but a low retention rate overall, given that only 14% of those registered completed the course. However, the retention picture is more positive if only those who actively participated in the training are considered. This shows 51% of active participants completed at least half of the course (4 modules); 26% of active participants completed 5 or more modules of the course; 23% of active participants completed the whole course.

How did course participation affect the acquisition of competences in LSP? To assess this the evaluation included a pre-test / post-test' survey of training programme participants, measuring their self-reported level of competence in the areas covered by the eight modules in the course; an analysis of the scores posted by participants in the quizzes included in the modules and an analysis of responses to the participant survey.

The self-assessment survey asked course participants to rate their level of competence on a five-point scale from very low to very high. The survey was set up to try to capture both immediate and intermediate outcomes. To cover immediate outcomes – changes in awareness and increased knowledge – participants were asked to rate their level of knowledge and understanding of the competence covered by each module. To cover intermediate outcomes – changes in behaviour and structures – participants were asked to rate their ability to apply their understanding of a competence in their teaching practice.

Figure 2 compares the mean score on knowledge and understanding for the eight modules of the training programme as well as the mean score for the whole course (taking the 'mean of the means' for all participants who completed the self-assessment).

Figure 2 shows that measured by self-assessed rating, LSP teachers and students who took the training course significantly increased their knowledge and understanding of the topics covered. Overall, participants increased their aggregate score for the course as a whole by 40% on average – from 51 to 72 – after participating, with an average rating on the course as a whole increasing from 2.9 to 4.2 (on a scale of 1 to 5).

Figure 3 compares the mean score on ability to apply understanding of a competence in teaching practice for the eight modules of the training programme as well as the mean score for the whole course (taking the 'mean of the means' for all participants who completed the self-assessment).

Figure 3 shows that measured by self-assessed rating, LSP teachers and students who took the training course significantly increased their capacity to apply their knowledge and understanding of the topics covered in practice. Overall,

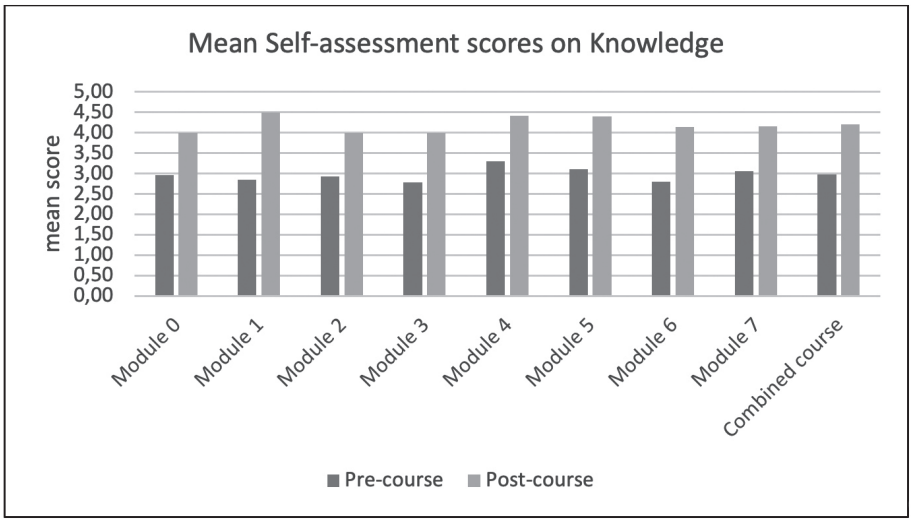

Figure 2. Comparison of mean self-assessment scores on knowledge and understanding before and after taking the training course

Source: own study.

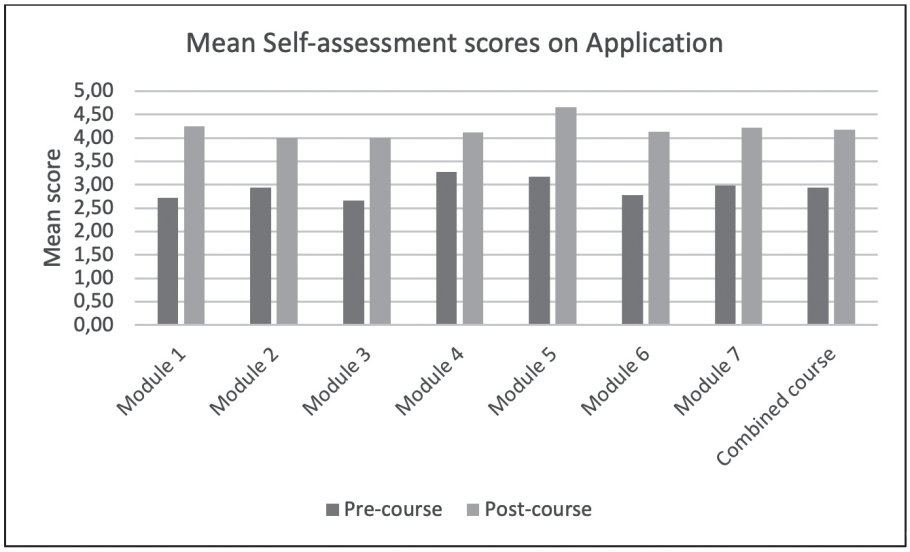

Figure 3. Comparison of mean self-assessment scores on application in practice before and after taking the training course

Source: own study.

participants increased their aggregate score on application for the course as a whole by 20% on average – from 58 to 69 – after participating, with an average rating on the course as a whole increasing from 2.9 to 4.2 (on a scale of 1 to 5).

Another indicator of changes in knowledge and the application of that knowledge associated with participation in the LSP-TEOC.Pro training programme is afforded by the results of the 'quizzes' that were incorporated in the programme. The quizzes had a dual purpose of supporting participant motivation and engagement through 'gamification' and enabling monitoring and assessment of progression. Taking all quiz scores combined, the mean quiz score for training programme participants is 87/100. Table 2 below shows the distribution of mean quiz scores for the 49 quizzes analysed.

Table 2. Distribution of mean quiz scores

	% quizzes
Over 90%	33
Between 80-90%	61
Less than 80%	6
Total	100

Source: own study.

As Table 2 shows, the mean score recorded in a third of the quizzes was 90% or above. For almost two-thirds of the quizzes, the mean score was between 80% and 90%, and for only 6% of quizzes, the mean score was below 80%. The results suggest that the LSP-TEOC.Pro participants achieved significant learning outcomes from participating in the training programme.

The user experience and satisfaction with the training course was evaluated through three instruments: a retrospective User Survey carried out with training programme participants after completion of the programme; diaries completed by participants over the duration of the programme; qualitative feedback from training programme participants collected through interviews and focus groups.

The User Survey, which was completed by just under 100 course participants, included three questions on behavioural intentionality: would you recommend this course to other LSP teachers (or students)? In the future, do you plan to return to selected modules and/or to those, which you have not chosen this time? Have you acquired knowledge that you intend to put into practice after the course?

Figure 4 shows responses to the first question.

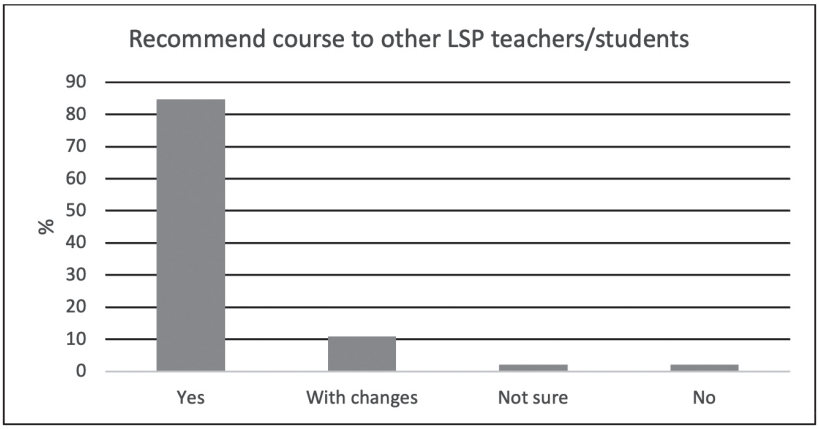

Figure 4. Participant recommendation of the training course

Source: own study.

As Figure 4 shows, 85% of survey respondents said they would recommend the course to other LSP teachers or students; 11% said they would recommend it with changes and only 2% said they would not recommend it. Figure 5 shows responses to the second question.

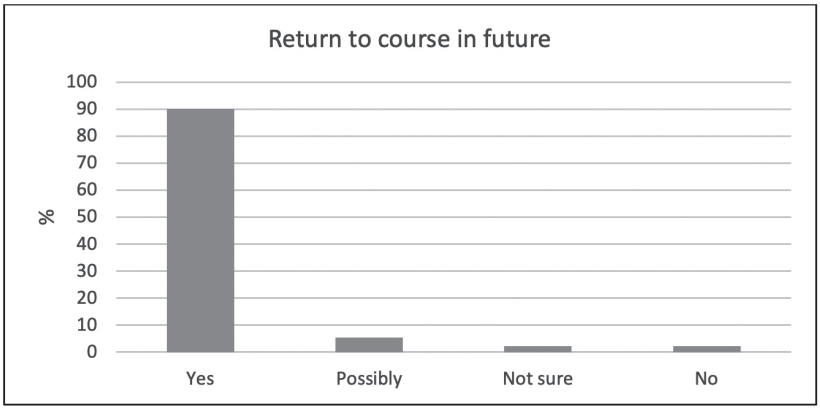

Figure 5. Participant intentions to return to the training course in the future

Source: own study.

As Figure 5 shows, 90% of survey respondents said they plan to return to selected modules of the course in the future or modules they had not previously selected and only 2% said they no intention to return to the course.

Figure 6 shows responses to the third question.

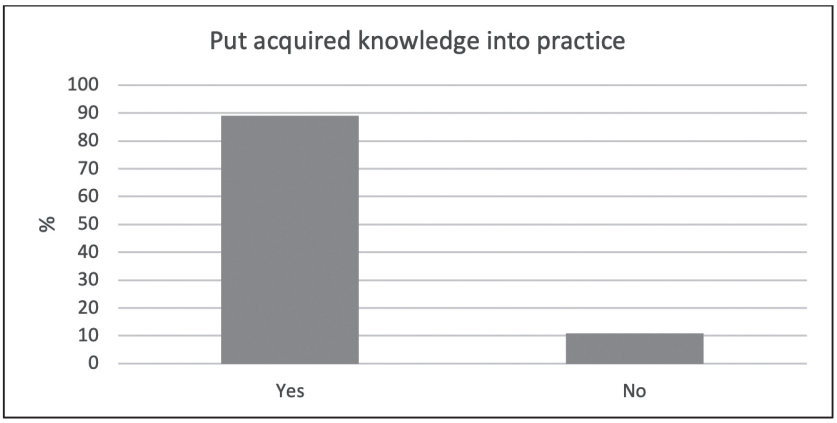

Figure 6. Participant intention to put acquired knowledge into practice after the course

Source: own study.

As Figure 6 shows, 89% of survey respondents said they intend to put the knowledge they had acquired from the course into practice in the future. 11% reported they did not intend to put this knowledge into practice. These results suggest that course participants have a very positive attitude to the training course, and they associate their participation with real practical benefits gained from that participation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation shows that LSP-TEOC.Pro successfuly delivered on many of its key objectives, outputs and outcomes. It carried out an extensive review of state of the art in LSP training programmes, with 532 institutions consulted and 12 programmes extensively reviewed. This research and its results fed into the development of a comprehensive on-line training programme for LSP teachers and students. The programme is comprised of eight modules that reflect the competences needed to deliver high quality LSP training across a range of institutional settings. 300 teachers and students enrolled on the LSP-TEOC.Pro course and 183 – 61% – actively participated in it. These results reinforce the conclusion that there is a clear need for such an innovative programme. However, the retention and completion rates for the course are relatively low, at 23% for the whole course for active participants, with over half active participants

completing only 4 modules. This evidence suggests a requirement for additional work to increase retention and progression, including more detailed analysis of the reasons behind drop-out and incomplete progression.

Course participants increased their LSP knowledge and understanding by 40% on average for the course as a whole, with significant increases in LSP knowledge and understanding across all modules of the course. Course participants increased their capacity to apply LSP knowledge in their practice by 20% on average for the course as a whole, and across all modules of the course.

As outlined in the introduction above, the evaluation test for a project like LSP-TEOC.Pro is how far it travels on its 'change journey' and to what extent the expected 'mechanisms' of the project are validated by the evaluation evidence.

The expected project mechanism – the causal chains that underpin the project theory of change – are as follows. LSP professionals and trainee teachers find out about LSP-TEOC.Pro through the project website, multiplier events, partner awareness-raising actions and networks. They see that LSP-TEOC.Pro fills a gap in their needs and sign up for the online course. Participation in the course increases their understanding of how LSP can be applied more effectively in teaching practice. Hands-on exercises, supported through the use of digital technologies, increases their competence in LSP pedagogy and gives them the confidence to apply it in practice. On graduation from LSP-TEOC.Pro, they apply their new competences in their teaching practice. This has the aggregated and cumulative effect of improving the LSP competence base. Dissemination and networking actions amongst partners lead to knowledge transfer, development of partnerships aimed at providing and promoting knowledge and skills for high quality teaching and learning of LSP in VET and in higher education; new forms of collaborations highlighting the positive impact of pan-European activities and strengthening collaboration. This in the longer term supports a base for trans-European collaboration that ultimately will have a knock-on effect on the quality of training provided for LSP teachers and students and an improvement in learning outcomes for those they teach.

On balance there is very strong evidence that LSP-TEOC.Pro successfully developed the resources necessary to promote change and applied these resources to support change. There is rather strong evidence that utilisation of these resources contributed to positive immediate changes, i.e. in attitudes, awareness, knowledge and the capacity to apply this knowledge in practice. However, the evidence is weaker with regard to the contribution LSP-TEOC.Pro made to intermediate outcomes, i.e. changes in actual behaviours of participants and in the systems and structures of their organisations. Although there is evidence from the evaluation that LSP-TEOC.Pro created favourable conditions for behavioural and systems change, and the vast majority of course participants

aim to apply what they had learned in their practice going forward, there is little hard evidence that this was achieved in practice. This is not least because assessing such change would require longitudinal data to be collected on things like teacher and student classroom practices and their career progression over a period following the end of the project.

For similar reasons, the evidence to support longer-term impacts at the systemic level is also weak. On the one hand, the dissemination activities carried out by the project reached a reasonable number of stakeholders. However, there is no hard evidence that these activities have led to significant changes in the infrastructure needed for extensive knowledge transfer. Nor is there significant evidence that they led to the formation of networks and partnerships that could lead to changes in the quality of LSP teaching provided at the European level; in new research networks and in policy formulation and delivery. However, the training course will run until 2028 and a steady throughput of trainees will provide a foundation for potential longer-term impacts. It would appear therefore that, although LSP-TEOC.PRO has progressed significantly along its 'change journey', further effort is required going forward to improve the training offer to increase retention and progression, capitalise on new trainees joining the course and support scaling up and out, so that the project has an impact at the macro level.

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Ewaluacja projektu LSP-TEOC.Pro: osiągnięcia i wnioski

Abstrakt. Artykuł stanowi podsumowanie ewaluacji projektu LSP-TEOC.Pro – opisuje zastosowaną metodologię, proces wdrożenia oraz kluczowe wnioski wynikające z przeprowadzonych badań. Ze względu na eksploracyjny charakter projektu, różnorodność i złożoność analizowanych zmiennych oraz ograniczenia logistyczne zastosowanie podejścia eksperymentalnego było niemożliwe. W zamian wdrożono metodę opartą na założeniach „realistycznych" oraz „opartych na teorii", co pozwoliło sprawdzić, czy założone w teorii zmiany „mechanizmy" znajdują potwierdzenie w zebranych danych. Ewaluacja wykazała, że projekt LSP-TEOC.Pro osiągnął znaczący postęp w stosunku do swoich założeń. Wskazano jednak na potrzebę dalszych działań wspierających skalowanie i poszerzenie zasięgu, aby zapewnić efekt na poziomie makro.

Słowa kluczowe: LSP, realizm, ewaluacja, teoria zmiany, mechanizmy.

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