

## LEARNING FOR ALL AND FOREVER

### A EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING



EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs) from [Austria](#), the [Czech Republic](#), the UK, [Germany](#) and [Hungary](#) joined forces to build the European network [Bridges over Borders](#) (BOB). It aimed to develop new solutions that would enable disadvantaged groups to embark on life-long learning. To this end, the partners compared and analysed country-specific models and solutions and eventually, they created products which combined their different experiences and good practices.

The partnership worked through three different structures: the transnational management group (TMG) whose leadership rotated every six months; the transnational working groups (TWG); and study visits. All partners committed themselves to lead one of the five thematic working groups, which focused on:

- Developing Sustainable Networks (Germany);
- Engaging New Learners (Hungary);
- I.C.T. Knowledge and Skills (Austria);
- Improving Skills (United Kingdom);
- Raising Awareness (Czech Republic).

What seemed to be a very ambitious and complicated course of action turned out to be a fascinating learning process that added a lot of value to the endeavours of all the member projects. *“The outcomes of BOB were overwhelming and unexpected if we take into account the struggles we had to face at the beginning. We had language problems. People assigned to transnational work kept changing all the time. We had to live with budget cuts and restrictions,”* recalls Elke Beneke from the Austrian project “Learn forever.” She proudly adds *“although we had only five transnational meetings, we were able to create innovative products useful for the target groups and also for the people who deliver lifelong learning. And innovation is not only a catch phrase here, as we REALLY developed innovative ways of passing the message of lifelong learning, of addressing target groups and of empowering them by developing their strengths and potential.”*

#### PRODUCT ORIENTATION IS KEY

Although it was controversial at the early stages of transnational work, the partners decided to make BOB a product-orientated venture. *“We have gained a lot of additional information and know-how and we discovered new ways of thinking and dealing with disadvantages and of overcoming barriers”,* says Perdita Wingerter, the Manager of the German project “Brücken zur Arbeit” (bridges to work). Elke confirms that *“now we have got excellent products and during the development process we learned from sharing our experiences. It was very motivating to observe that, although we have different backgrounds and we come from five different countries, we could create something together and we were able to find enough common ground.”*

Together, they collected and developed tools and products covering a wide range of themes and needs. These are clustered into four categories and can all be found on the [transnational website](#) of the partnership:

- [Case studies](#)
- [Hints and tips for networking](#)
- [Useful tools and instruments for networking](#)
- [Ways and ideas for networking within a conference](#)

### INTEGRATING THE GENDER DIMENSION

Most partners in this transnational cooperation were operating under the Employability theme of EQUAL and the level of commitment to gender equality and the use of gender mainstreaming

varied from country to country. Although no specific gender equality targets were set for the transnational work, the Management Group established a gender balance and in the working groups women outnumbered men. Gender issues were always on the agenda of both the Management Group's and working groups' meetings. This was mainly due to the Austrian project that focussed on combating gender based inequalities and discrimination and tackling gender gaps in terms of access to knowledge and skills. "At home" this project sought to tailor its new solutions to the needs of women from different age groups, ethnic, educational and social backgrounds with a view to improving their employment opportunities and income.

### IMPORT-EXPORT AND NEW INSIGHTS

From Austria a huge amount of knowledge, gender expertise and tools found their way to the workshop meetings as did inputs from the German partner that had made gender mainstreaming a transversal principle in all its activities. In fact, most of the gender experts who contributed to the working groups came from those two countries. They helped the groups to keep an eye on the developing products to ensure that they would be gender fair. *"We made sure, that in our workshops men and women were present and treated as equals,"* says Perdita Wingerter *"and in all our examples the language takes account of both genders. The examples also emphasise diversity by featuring immigrant, people from other ethnic minority backgrounds such as Roma and also people with disabilities. In our experience, we need less theory and more practice when it comes to implementing gender mainstreaming."* Radka Soukalová from the Czech partner project feels that it is very important to come up with approaches that include men and their needs and not only to focus on disadvantages faced by women. Summing up she says *"you have to address things with humour and a clear reference to everyday life, so that people can envisage the direct impact. Gender mainstreaming should not be perceived as a 'must-do' but as a 'must-have'."*

The latter was true for the "Gender Mainstreaming Kit" created by the Austrians which contains lots of practical information and hands-on advice on how to integrate a gender dimension into the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all activities. Everybody was keen to import the kit and it proved to be particularly helpful to the Hungarian and Czech projects because in both situations gender mainstreaming is not a big issue at national level.

Radka Soukalová from the Czech project believes that her region is just at the beginning in terms of gender issues. She explains that *"even though it is not usually admitted, women are still in the old time roles and they are behaving that way, because they feel it is expected. By opening up this issue and showing, explaining, talking about it the attitude of women and men is slowly changing and some new roles are being accepted. We have learned a lot about how to work with women and girls, how to show them other ways of keeping themselves on the job market, what works for them and what does not."*



Another example of sharing good practices and jointly developing them is the success story of an ICT product entitled "Gender Rally". This is a funny game that had originally been invented by the German DP. An internet-based version was then created by Zoltan Bodnár and Gábor Vámos, the managers of the Hungarian DP. This transnational version of the gender game was presented at the final showcasing and networking event on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007, in Brussels.

For Zoltán Bodnár, gender mainstreaming requires partnership. He is convinced that at both programme and project level it is advisable to use the expertise of public and private gender equality bodies. But he also knows that *"to tackle inequalities in the workplace, it is crucial to involve employer associations and trade unions as the key players in labour market policy. Gender inequalities are often a result of the structures in society and these cannot be changed by a single institution but only by all relevant actors working in cooperation. It is also important to show that gender mainstreaming is not a bureaucratic tool but a real consultative instrument."* The Hungarian partners also emphasised that combining gender mainstreaming with the EQUAL principles of partnership, innovation, transnationality, empowerment and mainstreaming creates a mutually reinforcing effect. They explained that *"transnational cooperation stimulates exchange of experience, whilst empowerment contributes to common benchmarking and leads to synergies in mainstreaming. Exchange and transfer can*

*boost the gender equality performance of organisations and also trigger dissemination and mainstreaming of results that were either achieved elsewhere in Europe, or jointly developed by the transnational partnerships.”*

The position of the English partners appears to be somewhat different, as they see striving for gender fairness as being part of a wider concept of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities policies. Lloyd Broad underlined that its methods and products were developed in relation to all horizontal issues including gender, disability and ethnicity and women who were lone parents, returners, older or from ethnic minority backgrounds and men from these same categories, were involved in the various aspects of the work.

## **GIVE AND TAKE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE**

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All partners acquired new knowledge and skills during face-to-face and virtual meetings. They also took a wealth of ideas home from their study visits abroad. Many of these ideas were immediately implemented in the EQUAL projects and some are expected to become sustainable and integral aspects of mainstream provision.

The BOB project is an excellent example of a transnational team developing a network and becoming more and more energised by the process. There was also plenty of “give and take” which is the trade mark of real networking. Several partners felt that they benefited particularly from the British project and its way of addressing learners. Elke Beneke is one of them. *“In Britain,” she says with admiration, “they have very innovative ways of using ICT in the learning process. In Austria, the use of ICT in a learning situation is mainly restricted to handling a computer and its equipment - switch on, switch off, printer, fax, Internet, writing e-mails, word processing, Excel and that’s it! In Britain, ILT, which is short for Information Learning Technology, is used to motivate learners to learn. The difference between ICT and ILT became a big issue in our own training the trainer strategy. How to move from being a moderator to becoming a facilitator of self directed learning processes? Thanks to the transnational work, we made that move and are now applying new approaches in Austria.”*



In this network that linked new and old Member States, there were no one-way avenues. People from the old EU15 appreciated the insight into the challenges in economically deprived regions in Europe, such as those areas in Hungary and in the Czech Republic where their EQUAL partners were active. Learning and understanding their ways of delivering education triggered new ideas and necessitated a critical look at their own practices. The Hungarian project managers underlined the crucial importance of the scope for preparation and planning that had been made possible through EQUAL. Within their project, an important aspect was accommodating the needs of SMEs, which are not always met through traditional forms of learning. Blending different types of learning such as e-learning, coaching and action learning brought about change. As Zoltán Bodnár believes that *“it made a difference through empowering the learner and the employer, stimulating further learning and progression led to promising practice, for instance in the validation of informal and non-formal skills. However, a combination of solutions is needed relating to motivation, new ways of working, and also recognition of how age links with other variables - tackling the perceptions of age.”*

All of the “networkers” who are directly involved, like the project managers and teaching and training staff, agreed that both their operational and strategic partners, at national level, have also benefited from cross-border work. In some cases, these partners participated in the transnational workshops and most of them are now using the results in their work or trying to mainstream a method or product.

The box below shows how the Hungarian partnership sums up these assets and now a number of the partners are in a position to transfer these EQUAL models to regular policies and practices.

## Benefits to partner organisations (both operational and strategic) in our DP

### Strategic and long-term:

- Participating in European networks and building contacts in other Member States open up possibilities for future co-operation and add a European dimension to our DP's workplan;
- Being linked to professional developments on a wider stage gives the chance to contrast approaches to labour market policy and practice with those in other EU Member States;
- Acquiring a higher profile and added value for a DP and its key European partners in the eyes of fellow professionals and important decision-makers;
- Increasing awareness and understanding of relevant European policy developments.

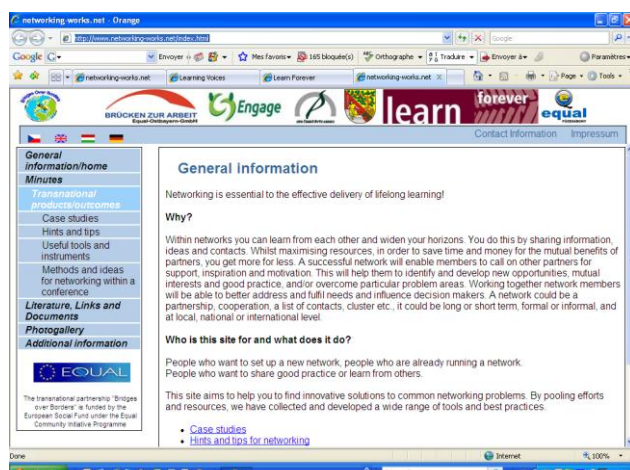
### Operational and short-term:

- Accessing new ideas and sharing and discussing your own in a wider context.
- Using international experience and expertise to test and improve existing courses, materials and methods, and to develop new products.
- Extending choice of new business partners, political allies and technical collaborators.
- Acquiring new skills and competences.
- Experimenting in areas of common interest and enhancing mutual business opportunities.

Clearly, the spirit of give and take was also spread amongst the ultimate beneficiaries. They built up considerable motivation and commitment both as individuals and as groups. *"Our clients felt part of something bigger, it boosts their self-confidence to be part of transnational work and it motivates them for learning foreign languages, which will be helpful for their work"* reports Radka Soukalová. The [website "Learning Voices"](#) that was created as a result of the contributions of the learners is the living proof of their pro-active involvement. People from all the participating Member States shared their learning itineraries and experiences and they are proud to tell the world why they started learning, what motivated them, which problems they had whilst learning and what effect learning had on their future. Their journeys are displayed as written reports, audio tapes and videos in the languages of the partnership: Czech, English, German and Hungarian. It is easy to envisage how these success stories can encourage other people, who have been out of the labour market for long periods, to embark on similar journeys.



## TAKING THINGS TOWARDS THE MAINSTREAM



Taking a closer look at the [transnational networking web site](#) reveals the multitude of products that can easily be imported to any country and then be adapted to different contexts and target groups. The [Learning Voices website](#) demonstrates that this is possible, as its learners are women and men, who come from rural and urban areas, from different ethnic backgrounds and who are able bodied or live with a disability. The people using the site did not care about the colour of skin or the background of the learner, as for them the most important thing was that the learner's story was interesting and spoke about something with which they

could identify.

Besides these web based tools, the partnership developed a Digital CV format called “New ways of presenting skills”, which was designed to help disadvantaged people display their strengths and abilities in a novel format, when searching for a job. In addition, a transnational film “Changing Learning, Changing Life” was produced, which is a collection of best practice examples from the five countries. According to Perdita Wingerter, *“this film should not only motivate learners to get involved in learning, but also decision-makers to provide enough funding for learning opportunities.”*

## TRANSFER IS UNDERWAY

The partners themselves are pioneers in terms of transferring EQUAL achievements from other Member States or those that have been jointly developed by the transnational partnership. For instance, inspired by the UK model, the organisations in the Czech EQUAL project have now opened a Job Club and a Job Counselling Service in their region. They have also introduced into their programmes additional courses that are tailored to the needs of individuals. Also, they have changed their methods of communication with their clients and are now involving them much more deeply in the process of preparing the programmes.

The Germans created their own regional version of the transnational movie. It focuses on lifelong learning in rural settings and is meanwhile being used on a regular basis throughout East Bavaria. The Brücken zur Arbeit project was also able to improve its online-job-agency for disadvantaged unemployed people thanks to the input from the UK, whilst these partners are thinking of implementing the approach of the online-job-agency in their English region.

In Hungary a Regional Service Centre will be established at the current project venue. It will use the most innovative and effective elements of the project. The idea is also to create, in cooperation with the regional Labour Service, specialist services, which will meet the medical and the labour market rehabilitation needs of disadvantaged people.

## PUSHING FOR IMPACT IN THE NEW ESF PROGRAMMES AND BEYOND

The BOB partners are very aware of the crucial importance of securing what has been achieved. The UK partners, for instance, have used EQUAL examples to inform the new ESF programme in their region of West Midlands. The German project contributed a thematic paper when the ESF programme for Bavaria was being drafted, insisting that transnationality should be included in this new programme. German and Austrian partners were building their project applications for the new ESF on their EQUAL results and striving to incorporate a transnational dimension.



West  
Midlands  
in Europe

The partnership presented its outcomes at a visibility event on, 7 November 2007, in Brussels. The event aimed to share the key messages from the work of the BOB transnational partners, at EU level. It brought together policy makers and representatives from their own countries and from European bodies. 200 people attended, including representatives of the Commission and Members of the European Parliament. The event was a perfect mainstreaming opportunity, where 17 projects could showcase their methods, products and tools. *“Highly influential decision-makers from our region came to Brussels to see which ideas and projects can be implemented in labour market policy and qualification measures”,* says Perdita Wingerter. Her Czech colleague Radka Soukalová adds *“we are happy to present what we have achieved to other organisations and within the National Thematic Networks. The meeting in Brussels was a big help. Already the invitation and the programme attracted some of the high level policy makers to our project who before had not shown interest.”*

Lloyd Broad, Senior EU Funding Officer of the City of Birmingham is quite enthusiastic about the impact of this networking and mainstreaming event. He also underlines the importance of the policy documents that were produced by the West Midlands Region for all EQUAL Development Partnerships it had been involved in. This amounts to a total of five Policy Reports and 33 Policy Recommendations. *“Of course not all of these relate to BoB”,* he says *“but some reports and many of the recommendations do. I think a crucial element of our co-operation that has explicitly linked BoB practice to EU policy is our contribution to the Lisbon targets, which is demonstrated in a special report.”* (See <http://www.learnforever.at/> under “Transnationales” and then under

“Ergebnisse”.) All these reports make a highly informative and valuable read for policy makers at all levels, ESF managers and project promoters.

Asked about their most important forward looking strategy, the answer is very much in line with the rationale of the Brussels event, as it is to trigger the political will of decision-makers for transferring successful EQUAL models into mainstream policies and practices. *“We expect this learning not only to influence the 2007-2013 ESF programmes in the UK but also other Member States and the relevant units in DG Employment,”* says Lloyd Broad. *“I think”,* adds Perdita Wingarter, *“what we should focus on in the future is not so much the development of new products. There are a lot of great products out there. They just need to be mainstreamed on a wider scale and adapted to the needs of the relevant national, regional or local institutions.”* The Brussels event was an important step in that direction.



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