

## LEARNING IN THE MOUNTAINS OF KRAKONOŠ

According to folklore, Krakonoš has been the guardian of the mountains and the surrounding district of Semily, in the North Eastern part of the Czech Republic, for many centuries. Apart from dictating the weather, this wise old man has watched over the local people, ensuring good things happen to those who are kind, and punishing those who are bad. With such a well-known and emblematic figure, it is hardly surprising that Krakonoš has been chosen to represent Semily's EQUAL project, *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions*: "If Krakonoš cannot come down from the mountain to a computer, why not bring the computer to him!"

This slogan captures perfectly the essence of the project: to bring learning opportunities directly to people living in remote, rural locations, people who have been severely affected by acute structural changes that have occurred across the Czech Republic in recent times.

Prior to the 1990s, Semily district was traditionally based on agriculture and the textile industry. However, since that time, the opening up of markets and increased exposure to global competition, particularly from China, has led to the rapid decline of this thriving economy. And what is now left is a region in a state of transformation, having to adapt in order to remain a prosperous place to work and live. But this transformation has not been easy: local people have lacked the skills and knowledge to take on new jobs in emerging sectors, such as tourism; younger and more qualified people have been moving to nearby towns and cities; more vulnerable and less mobile populations have been left behind or at risk of exclusion, including women with childcare responsibilities, the over 50s, people with disabilities, the low-skilled and those laid-off from work; Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have not been fully embraced owing to their high cost and accessibility; and limited public transport services and infrastructure have formed a major barrier to accessing work and learning opportunities. All of these trends put together have led a growing divide between the urban and rural areas of Semily district, and serious concerns about preserving social and cultural life in the countryside.

*Facilitating of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* has been set up to help counter these worrying trends. Under the leadership of the Semily Labour Office, the project has established a partnership never seen before in the area, between local villages, and educational, political and expert organisations. Through this partnership, the project has been able to develop and test new ways of making learning an important, integral and - to come back to old Krakonoš - accessible part of rural life.

### INSPIRINGLY SIMPLE

On the face of it, bringing learning to people living in rural locations may seem like a simple idea. But behind this idea lies a really inspiring approach. So, let's look in more detail at this approach.

The starting point for the project was to conduct a survey across ten villages in the Semily district. The purpose of the survey was to find out exactly what the problems, needs and interests of villagers were in relation to learning. A key message from the survey was the cost, accessibility and manageability of learning; the courses had to be free of charge, nearby and in short, convenient chunks of time if they were to be a realistic option. Aside from the learning format, the villagers also stated preferences in terms of content; many of them quoted difficulties in securing a job or running their own business because of insufficient ICT, linguistic, accountancy and technical skills.



Based on these survey results, as well as the views and insights of the project partners, *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* has now developed a training system that

offers courses in foreign languages, ICT, book-keeping, welding, logging and working with a saw chain. The key features of the courses are that they:

- are delivered in a modular format, comprising short 1.5 hour lessons over several weeks, or slightly longer courses at the weekend;
- are ultra flexible, being offered outside of working hours (in the afternoon and evening hours), and during the week or weekend;
- fit in with other work and family commitments, such as seasonal employment, school holidays and public festivities;
- take place in very close and familiar surroundings, such as the local village hall or school;
- are accompanied by support services in the form of childcare and the loan of study materials; and above all
- are free!

All of these features have proved effective in engaging local people who would not otherwise have been open to learning. As the Mayoress for Paseky nad Jiserou village recounts: "*...and so now, in the evenings, you can see students on our local roads rushing to their courses, eager to gain new knowledge and skills. Organising these courses has given an importance to the achievement of knowledge and skills that local habitants have not had before.*"



Paseky nad Jiserou is not the only village to have seen the rush of newly-fledged 'students' on its streets. Indeed, all ten villages have witnessed an amazing level of participation. During the first semester (September 2005 to January 2006), 45 courses took place, with 692 villagers participating and a retention rate of 93%. The clear success of these courses has led to another 58 courses being organised in the second semester, and the level and choice of subjects being extended; now villagers are moving on to Advanced lessons in German or branching out into Digital Photography!

Aside from the educational benefits of the training system, it is also important to highlight the social and cultural value.

*"In the courses, the local inhabitants meet other inhabitants who, despite living in the same village, they would not otherwise meet in their daily lives. And all of this is of great importance to us. Thanks to the time we spend together in learning the past tense in German, or the countable and non-countable nouns in English, or taking it in turns to use the computer mouse, new friendships emerges which can become the basis for co-operation in the village."*

Another example of this rural cohesion can be found in the village of Bělá where the Mayor, along with council members, visited every village household personally to explain the purpose and benefits of the project. And in the words of the Mayor himself:

*"I have to say that ESF – EQUAL has brought excitement into our village, where during four evenings and a whole Saturday, our inhabitants are on their feet, being busy and taking part in education."*

The villagers have not been the only ones in a state of excitement. The trainers have also shown significant enthusiasm towards *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions*. Firstly, they have benefited in employment terms, receiving additional remuneration for running the courses in their 'spare'time. Secondly, they have established stronger links and relations with the rural areas. And finally, they have the prospect of further support and training (currently being considered by the project), which will undoubtedly strengthen the quality of learning provision across the whole Semily district.

## E-LEARNING ON THE CARDS

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Apart from the above training system, *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* also has e-learning on the cards - something that not only draws on the expertise of the project partners, but also the experience from outside the Czech Republic.

Staff in VCT Turnov, one of the project partners, have taken the lead on this e-learning work. So far, this has entailed researching possible IT solutions, forming a team of e-learning tutors and developing the system (which is now available on <http://www.vctu.cz/moodle>). In terms of content, the system will in the first instance be offering two courses in English and German, as well as one on specialised computer technologies (digital photography and computer graphics). Based on the feedback of partners and the insights gained from the villagers themselves, the option of e-learning is a very attractive one. Learning in a virtual environment gives added flexibility and accessibility to those living in remote areas. That said, the social contact will not be lost: the e-learning system has been designed in a 'blended' way such that face-to-face lessons or tutorials will be combined with online study.

So where does the outside dimension come into this? Well, thanks to the partnership with EQUAL projects in France, Wales, Belgium (Walloon), *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* has been able to exchange experience and ideas on distance learning. For example, the project staff took part in a transnational workshop with the Belgian DECLIC project in May 2006. The workshop focused on methods and systems for the effective delivery of e-learning, and provided useful theoretical insights for the on-going development of *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions*' own e-learning system. Another positive outcome from the workshop was the decision to collaborate in the longer-term: *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* will be contributing to DECLIC's database on e-learning measures, methods and initiatives, a tool aimed to increase the visibility and accessibility of information on e-learning at a European level.



## PARTNERS ACROSS THE REGION

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Whilst the transnational partnership is clearly bearing fruit, it is important not to forget the project's domestic partnership. Indeed, this is a fine example of successful collaborative working through EQUAL. Aside from the Semily Labour Office (employment service), the partners can be briefly introduced as follows:

- Bridge to Education – a non-governmental organisation for the promotion of education and tasked with the day-to-day management of the project.
- Four educational organisations associated with the towns of Turnov, Vysoké nad Jizerou, Semily and Hejnice (respectively Harrachov). These organisations have been responsible for designing and delivering the courses across the various villages.
- Council representation from ten villages, with population sizes being as little as 200.
- Political and expert organisations, namely the Council of the Liberec Region, Euroregion NISA, the Giant Mountains National Park Administration and AIVD ČR (Association for adult education institutions).

Whilst many of these organisations have had experience of collaborating on a bilateral basis before, the project has given them the first occasion to work multilaterally. This in turn has provided a strategic and all-embracing approach to learning provision across the Semily district, and borne insights and experiences that would not have been possible if the partners had worked in isolation. Here are a few examples:

- The educational organisations are really mixed, in terms of being non-governmental, public and private. Therefore, for the first time ever, the project has been able to compare their different approaches to training, with the view to drawing the best from each.
- The village councils have been able to meet with and talk to policy makers, both at national and regional level, including with representatives from the Ministry of Labour and

Social Affairs. So even the remotest and smallest of villages has been able to engage in national policy debate on learning and education provision for the Czech Republic.

Kateřina Baladová, from Bridge to Education, describes this approach to partnership working perfectly:

*"Now all of the partners are together on the same footing. For the first time, they are able to learn from each other. This has created a common realisation that rural people need support and qualifications."*

There have been a number of practical success factors to this partnership approach. They include regular visits to meet with the village representatives in-between the partnership meetings – to maintain the personal contact and rapport. Another factor has been organising colloquia to enable all the partners to share their expectations and ideas, and ultimately come to a consensus as to what the project is seeking to achieve and the part that everyone can play in it. Capacity-building has also been a key to success. For example, several of the village mayors were not sufficiently computer literate to use the project's online communication platform. But this was not a problem for *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* – it simply set about organising IT training for the partnership.

## WHERE FROM HERE?

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So where does *Facilitation of Lifelong Education in Rural Conditions* go from here? The future plans for the project are wide-ranging, including further survey and evaluative work with the villages, accreditation of some of the courses and testing of the training and e-learning system in other parts of the Czech Republic. And as for sustainability beyond the lifetime of EQUAL, things look promising: 50% of the villagers have already said they would be prepared to finance the courses themselves in the future. And if results like this continue, Krakonoš will certainly be taking keen interest in the project!

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