External evaluation executive summary

ACTION

Executive summary of the final external evaluation report by
Isham Education and Community Ltd

In 2019 the European Commission issued a call through the Erasmus+ Programme for proposals with a focus on social inclusion and common values: contribution in the field of education and training[1].

In response, a consortium of six partners from four EU countries proposed the ACTIon project, with the aim to:

promote active citizenship through civic education and active online participation of youth role models from socially disadvantaged groups in both formal and non-formal/community- based education settings.

The ACTIon consortium consisted of:

- **nexus** Institute for Cooperation Management and Interdisciplinary Research (Germany)
- Health and Social Development Foundation (**HESED** – Bulgaria)
- Open Space Foundation (**OSF** – Bulgaria)
- **All Digital** (Belgium)
- Action Synergy (**AS** - Greece)
- Coalition of Youth Organisations (**SEGA** - North Macedonia).

ACTIon comprised two interventions[2]: Digital Participation and Active Citizenship (DigiPAC) and Model for opinion leaders activation (MOLA). These were designed to support young people develop citizenship skills and knowledge needed in the current digital environment, and develop their capacity to engage with peers on these themes. Based on the desk research to develop the methodologies, the ACTIon skills agreed as indicators for the purposes of evaluation were:

- Knowing what information to believe online
- Supporting friends
- Getting involved in activities with others
- Taking action to help others
- Understanding others' opinions
- Effective expression of opinions

As a Key Action 3 (KA3) project, partners also had a responsibility within the project to promote policy reform in the area of social inclusion and common values.

ACTIon set out to achieve its aims by:

- Conducting desk research and analysis to identify resources and delivery content which could inform intervention design

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:C2019/358/03&from=EN

[2] https://www.erasmus-action.eu/the-project/

- Adaptation of existing good practice (GP) models
- Training trainers from each delivery country in the adapted models (Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, North Macedonia)
- Planning and implementation of pilot programmes in each delivery country.

ACTIon's achievements against its stated objectives are summarised below.

General objective: Develop and implement innovative methods and practices to foster inclusive education and promote common values

- ACTIon successfully created and piloted two GP models: DigiPAC and MOLA, and demonstrated the capacity of both methods to enhance young people's social and civic competences
- Young people participating in DigiPAC reported an improvement in five of the six ACTIon skills areas. These were particularly marked in the areas of getting involved in activities with others, taking action to help others, and knowing what information to believe online.
- MOLA as an entirely community based was more likely to target young people with lower starting points when it came to social and civic competences, and subsequently had a stronger impact in improving these skills. Young people participating in MOLA reported an improvement in all six ACTIon skills areas.
- Of the 92 practitioners piloting ACTIon good practice models, 79% said that they intended to continue delivering DigiPAC or MOLA, and a further 20% stated it was a possibility, exceeding the project target of 75%.
- The majority of practitioners (95%) participating in ACTIon training felt confident or very confident to deliver training that enabled young people to develop civic and social skills.

Specific objective: Enhance the acquisition of social and civic competences, fostering knowledge, understanding and ownership of values and fundamental rights

- As a result of engaging in ACTIon interventions, 84% of young people expressed a readiness to get involved in activities with others, exceeding the project target of 75%
- Young people overwhelmingly reported a positive experience with the piloted models. Across both practices, 85% of young people said they were likely or very likely (66%) to recommend engaging with the programme to a friend. For DigiPAC, the figure was 84%, and MOLA 96%. Only 6% of young people were unlikely or not at all likely to recommend participation in DigiPAC to a friend. The project target was for 70% of reach youth target groups to provide positive feedback
- Young people's report of improved skills in civic and social competences also reflected a raised awareness of the project's themes.
- For young people engaging in DigiPAC, they were more likely to report improvements in 'getting involved in activities with others', 'taking action when I

see something is wrong', and 'knowing what information I can believe online. This reflects the nature of DigiPAC sessions, where a focus on online misinformation and fact checking, along with collaborative activities, were prominent features of the sessions.

- For MOLA, 'knowing what information I can believe online' was the area young people expressed the greatest improvement, reflecting the extended analysis by many of online profiles and posts, and an evaluation of how they were responded to.
- 'Supporting my friends when they have a problem', and 'taking action when I see something is wrong', as the second strongest areas of impact also illustrate the community aspect of the MOLA GP model.

Capacity building

- ACTIon delivery partners involved a total of 174 organisations in the project as a result of their networking efforts
- Piloting took place across four regions of Bulgaria, three regions of Greece, three regions of North Macedonia and in Berlin and Brandenburg in Germany, involving 93 practitioners and 1909 young people in the process.
- Through capacity building activities, partners reached a further 622 practitioners (teachers and youth workers) beyond the 92 who were involved in the piloting
- Partners also engaged stakeholders from other organisations, of which 27 were from local, regional or national government
- Delivery partners implemented a consistent stakeholder engagement strategy from the start of the project, ensuring other organisations leading and contributing to KA3 were engaged and synergies were established
- In Bulgaria, OSF and HESED engaged the municipalities of Turgavishte and Veliki Preslav to promote and embed the aims of ACTIon
- In North Macedonia, SEGA secured a cooperation agreement with the municipality of Bitola to pilot the GP models in the city, and extended the project's reach to other towns through a partnership with Victory, an NGO with national reach
- In Germany, nexus engaged three secondary schools in the piloting of the method, and a youth engagement NGO to deliver DigiPAC as part of its summer school programme. The NGO continued to incorporate DigiPAC activities in its winter holiday programme.
- In Greece, AS established a national network of over 100 schools to promote and embed the ACTIon good practice models.

Policy recommendations

As partners analysed the results of the project, they reviewed policy priorities and initiatives at local and national level to formulate a series of policy recommendations. These are listed as general recommendations. These are based on the outcomes of the **All Digital Summit, Zagreb**. They are followed by recommendations partners have generated at country level, focusing on the particular, local circumstances.

General policy recommendations

The pace of change in the functionality and (mis-)use of online technologies are making digital citizenship a priority area for education. The consequences of young people not being equipped to engage effectively with what they find online could undermine democracy. In the meantime teachers, schools and youth organisations need strong guidance on how to develop their own and young people's skills in this area.

*At national and regional level, government departments should review their citizenship curricula to ensure there is **explicit reference to digital citizenship and active participation**. Curricula content should include participatory teaching and learning guidance, as well as content. Curricula should encourage the concept that citizenship is as much about how students (and teachers) behave as about students' understanding of citizenship and democratic structures. The nature and consequences of corruption should also be an important part of such a curriculum.*

*Policy makers are also encouraged to revisit how curricula themselves are reviewed and updated. They should **seek more flexible and responsive mechanisms for change to the curriculum**, so that it remains contemporary and addresses topics of importance as they emerge. The curriculum should also be designed to allow flexibility for schools and teachers to decide the focus of lessons relating to citizenship, history etc, so they can tailor activity and content to prominent issues of the day.*

During the course of the project, it became apparent how separate youth citizenship spaces are from those occupied by adults - young people are rarely represented in forums where real decisions are made, and how money to support local communities is spent.

*Organisations providing or overseeing funding for the benefit of young people should design **processes which explicitly include young people in decision-making** and the discussions around it. This should include involving young people in the drafting of funding applications. Organisations which support young people should be required to provide:*

- *details in funding applications of how they intend to involve young people in decision-making within the programme / project*
- *evidence of how they have involved young people in monitoring reporting.*

*Local policy and decision makers should also consider how **schools can be open to and used by the community** to remove barriers between the generations to discuss important topics. This could include holding local forums and consultations on school premises, and at times when young people are able to attend and participate. It could also include local officials and decision makers attending school assemblies to explain decisions that have been taken to affect them, why and to take questions from young people.*

It became apparent among some participants involved in ACTIon, how detached from politics young people – and adults – can be.

*Policy makers at local level should **have active participation as a continual focus**, so that promotion of citizenship activity and culture is stable and continuous, and that funding is available on a stable basis to ensure this.*

ACTIon has generated two practical guides for the implementation of DigiPAC and MOLA, and the practices themselves have produced positive results in developing skills and dispositions young people need to be active citizens in the digital space and among their communities.

*Policy and decision makers with responsibility for teacher education and professional development are encouraged to **include the guides in their programmes for citizenship and online education**. More broadly, activities in the guides can be applied to training in how to facilitate dialogue and groupwork in the classroom.*

*Decision makers overseeing teacher education and professional development should promote a **culture of active citizenship** at all levels of education, this includes schools leaders, practitioners and students. Activities in the ACTIon handbooks can also be used in teacher training sessions and meetings, and also in mixed forums where leaders, practitioners and students use the tools to improve their skills in communicating with each other. More broadly, project partners recommend greater collaboration between schools and peer-to-peer professional development activities, with a focus on those skills promoted by DigiPAC.*

Bulgaria

MOLA is a well-tested model with a track record of success among Roma communities and as such is well placed to support the implementation of the National strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for equality, inclusion and participation of Roma (2021 - 2030).

For its part, DigiPAC directly addresses requirements contained in the civic education curriculum. It also provides pedagogical tools which will support issues in the country

concerning teacher training. This includes that fact that 17% of teachers have a high need for training in pedagogical competences, and 23% in ICT skills[3].

*This underlines the value for Bulgaria of policy and decision makers with responsibility for teacher education and professional development **including the DigiPAC guides in their training programmes.***

*At national level, policy makers should **consider emulating the 21st century Skills Labs[4] in Greece**. This will allow the development of important life skills in children and young people such as digital skills, critical and creative thinking, social empathy and accountability etc. This process can be supported by the implementation of training methodologies such as DigiPAC / MOLA in formal education*

Experience from DigiPAC and other European project has demonstrated when given the opportunity to participate, principals and the pedagogical councils are prepared to use their autonomy to implement new good practices and experiment with new methods of work and training.

Policy makers should use the evidence and examples where school have changed practices to achieve results to encourage school principals to be creative in addressing issues in their schools and enriching citizenship activity and education.

Germany

Against a background of threatened funding cuts to civic education in Germany, national and regional governments are still obliged to strengthen this area of learning through:

the National strategy for youth participation

- regional strategies such as the Master Plan for Youth in Baden-Württemberg, and the Youth Strategy in Rheinland-Pfalz.
- In addition, there is an urgent need for schools and youth organisations to do more to develop critical thinking at a time when extremist politics are becoming more prevalent.

Policy makers at the Federal Agency for Civic Education in particular are encouraged to consider the introduction of DigiPAC guides in training programmes and schools, as a cost-effective way to develop understanding of citizenship pedagogy, and practical ways it can be implemented

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[3] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/81d18411-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/81d18411-en#section-d1e3641

[4] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/greece-21st-century-skills-labs-ergastiria-dexiotiton

At federal level, ministries for education should:

- look to incorporate digital citizenship as a distinct strand in their curricula, and ensure there is clarity of the distinction between digital skills and digital citizenship
- allow / encourage teachers to exercise more discretion in what they teach in this area, along the lines of the Greek model
- attach higher importance to digital literacy in digital skills teacher training programmes.

Greece

Greece's 2019 National Integration Strategy[5] is the central policy document providing a steer for greater social integration. One of the objectives of the strategy is to 'foster interaction, collaboration, dialogue and constructive criticism'.

Local government and civil society organisations, such as community associations, and NGOs working with diverse groups, are encouraged to review DigiPAC model as a basis for the 'social integration initiatives', the Strategy encourages.

In 2022 the Greek Ministry of Education revised the national curriculum to ensure 'a focus … on students and their well-being; curricula that are functional and open to social challenge, so that students grow into creative human beings and active citizens'.[6]

Given the widespread adoption of DigiPAC by teachers in Greek schools, the Ministry of Education is encouraged to review the ACTIon case study produced by Greece as the basis for promoting the approach more generally as part of its support for the revised National Curriculum.

North Macedonia

ACTIon interventions have a role to play in supporting North Macedonia's National strategy for social inclusion of young people[7]. Municipalities are also obliged under the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies[8], to establish youth councils. However they are making slow progress on this: to date only around one quarter have done so.

In addition, current demographic change in the relative size of ethnic groups not only means there is a general need for people to engage constructively in civil

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[5] https://migration.gov.gr/en/migration-policy/integration/politiki-entaxis-se-ethniko-epipedo/

[6] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/greece-national-curriculum-revision

[7] https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/fr/node/1118

[8] https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/14-youth-policy-decision-making

society, but also for schools to be able to integrate young people from different backgrounds well. In the Prilep Municipality, for example, where DigiPAC was introduced, there is a projection that more primary schools will be accommodating children from the Roma community for the first time in the coming years.

Policy makers at municipality level are encouraged to:

- promote DigiPAC among schools and youth organisations as an intervention to develop young people's confidence in expressing themselves and taking the initiative
- organise forums where schools, youth organisations and NGOs can explore an approach to youth participation at municipality level. These would also be an opportunity to organise training and consider how best to pool resources and use the budget for promoting youth participation.

Policy makers at those municipalities that have not yet established youth councils are encouraged to engage with SEGA and Prilep Municipality to understand how this can be achieved.