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New learning environment for Very Small Enterprises: learning exploring and sharing

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The project LEXSHA aims at exploring a new model of training for Very Small Enterprises (VSE), focusing in their own knowledge and developing skills to share this knowledge with their peers.

In the EU more than 99% are SME and over 90% of them are Very Small Enterprises (less than 10 employees). VSE constitute more than 30% of the potential job market. The fewer is the number of employees in a given VSE, the more functions are assigned to them, and as the priority is generally given to production/commercialization, **the entrepreneurs and their staff do not take the necessary time to participate in training**, do not validate their skills and knowledge, and ignore ICT tools that could improve their competitiveness.

The aim of the project LEXSHA was to develop and test a user-friendly environment for training VSE, allowing knowledge sharing among entrepreneurs and employees of VSE who represent the beneficiaries of the project.

The project was developed with **a consortium of partners from 8 countries** gathering 2 Universities, 2 IT companies, 3 Training & coaching providers and one incubator. This partnership gathered skills in pedagogy, e-learning, remote Training & Coaching, and Web technology, all useful for the project.

The approach of the project was to verify the needs locally in each country, define a pedagogical model, create contents for a training “How to share knowledge with peers”, test this training locally in each country with a group of employers or employees of VSE and guide them to the production of knowledge, evaluate the process and its impact, and propose next steps for the future.

The first major result of the project is the **open access LEXSHA platform**: <http://lexsha.virtual-campus.eu/en>, which contains the training produced by the partnership and the contents (knowledge to share) produced by entrepreneurs and employees of VSE. All contents are in a short format (mainly video) and each module has been called a "LEXSHA". The second major result is the **pilot editions of the training “How to share knowledge with peers”** which has been run in 7 countries of the partnership. 82 persons have followed the training on a blended format (Face to Face and/or on-line training), leading the participants to create 84 LEXSHA, stored on the LEXSHA platform.

The final conference held in Bordeaux by the end of the project was a major moment to promote the project, its results and the future. The recordings of the day are available on http://www.teletoile.u-bordeaux2.fr/2015_2016/Lexsha/index.html.

The LEXSHA website www.lexsha.net presents the project, the partnership, the approach, the results, and give access to the conference website.

To pursue the work done during the project, the partners agreed on a business model and on specific actions which will be held during the next coming years. An agreement has been signed between the partners.

LEXSHA is a project, a platform, a short module on line and a state of mind. LEXSHA can be promoted and used for itself or within other projects or activities.

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1. Project Objectives

The overall aim of the LEXSHA project is to increase the performance of the VSE' employers and employees by developing the knowledge sharing with peers. The project planned to engage VSE from each participating country in a process of producing knowledge on a digital format and share it with others in an international e-environment.

The detailed objectives were:

- to deliver a pedagogical model designing an e-platform suitable for sharing in a long term objective, and describing a 16 hours course aimed to train and accompany target users (VSE) in the production of first digital contents gained from experience on the working place;
- to provide this e-platform including a space for training and a space for sharing;
- to produce a set of short training modules, activities and assessment corresponding to the course, and accessible from the e-platform;
- to deliver supporting tools for trainers in order to make possible the multiplication of training sessions in other contexts;
- to gather 80 VSE to participate to the pilot edition of a blended training using the developed materials, and to have them produce at least 70 short modules to be shared on the platform;
- to describe a sustainable business model to develop the results to other target users.

2. Project Approach

The project started in January 2014 for 2 years with 8 partners, and was led by the University of Bordeaux. The goal was to create an e-environment compatible with VSE needs, enlargeable and replicable.

Project management

To ensure the good quality of the project results, and create the good dynamic to reach the results in due time, the project was monitored all along the 2 years by the project coordinator, the Work Packages' leaders and an external evaluator. All partners were involved in each phase of the project. The main decisions were made by the steering committee representing all the partners. A group Quality gathering 3 partners and the external evaluator, was set up to validate the Quality Plan. Later, to organize the final conference, a specific group of 4 partners was created.

Several tools were used to plan and monitor the project:

- The internal portal based on Wiggio was created at the very beginning of the project and was very efficient for the organization of the documents and the messages linked to personal mailing box.
- 4 partnership meetings were held as planned in the application, allowing real collaborative work and problems solving. However, after few month it appears to be necessary to set up a monthly online meeting to keep the project on track and efficient.
- Personal communication was also used during the project by the project coordinator and the WP leaders. Mails, personal calls and online meetings were very useful to set up the organization of a starting WP, to welcome new comers in the project, and to clarify the expected work and results when needed.
- To monitor each WP, each Work Package leader had to elaborate a WP quarterly report, including the actual values of the indicators to be reached.
- The external evaluator of the project prepared specific questionnaires of evaluation after each partnership meeting and at the end of each WP. The related reports were discussed to set up corrective measures when needed.
- As planned with EACEA, the project interim report was submitted and feedback was analyzed for corrective measures. The final report completes the final external evaluation report of the project.

The project was structured in 4 main phases

- Specification and design

The study made for the application was completed by a desk and field research, in each of the 8 countries, for a better understanding of the local contexts and common point all over EU. Each country produced a local research report according to the proposed research methodology and templates.

Based on these results, the specification and design of an e-environment has been developed. It includes the platform functionalities and the description of a 16 hours training course on “how to share knowledge with peers with digital contents”.

- Development of the e-environment and contents

According to the specifications defined in the Pedagogical Model, the e-environment has been developed. The e-platform has been installed and customized, while the learning contents including activities and assessments have been produced and integrated. This phase has been the most demanding in terms of man-hours. All partners have been actively involved by producing the training resources and then translating them to their national languages (available in English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Greek and Lithuanian). Along the development work, an effective procedure was set up to support the delivery, testing, revision and required updates. Besides a Moodle platform was also developed. The learning contents have been structured as a training program, organized by units of learning outcomes with self-assessments for the user to be able to validate the competencies gained.

- Implementation of the training with a pilot edition in each country

Under the methodology defined by the partnership, each partner held his own promotion plan in order to identify potential participants for the training. Meanwhile, facilitators were selected and trained to become familiar with the platform, its contents and the process of creating LEXSHAs. Their role was to accompany the participants to produce their own LEXSHA, following the recommendation of the platform. 7 groups of participants were set and the training was run during 4 months. As defined per the consortium, the training was run either fully on line, either on a blended format mixing face to face workshop, online sessions and self-training using the platform. By September 2015, 84 LEXSHAs produced by participants and facilitators were online on the platform. To analyze the results of the pilot edition, a survey was organized to question each participant about his/her motivation for joining LEXSHA, and his/her satisfaction with the training. This allows the production of a report containing corrective measures for sustainability of the model.

- Design and construct the exploitation of the results for future uses

The business model was first discussed at mid-project during a partnership meeting, and reviewed later after the pilot editions in each country. The partnership decided to focus mainly on actions to be run in the next following years. These actions were presented during the final conference. By the end of the project, a Business model describing the generalization of the results achieved in the project was elaborated as well as a Memorandum of Understanding describing the engagement of each partner to continue with LEXSHA.

Dissemination

Furthermore, all along the project, project information and achieved results have been disseminated in order to make the LEXSHA model known, to get people involved in the local programs and to prepare the valorization of the results. The main dissemination action was the final conference held in Bordeaux on November 25th 2015.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The project LEXSHA has provided a pedagogical model and an e-environment which has been experimented in 7 countries. The achieved results lead to the definition of actions to be held in the next few years to enlarge the LEXSHA model.

The pedagogical model

The pedagogical model, deliverable of the project, contains the results of a desk and field research held at the beginning of the project, the e-platform specifications, and the contents of the training “How to become a knowledge sharer “.

- Desk and field research

The desk and field research gathers one report per country and a synthesis. It contains actual practices, state of the art, needs of VSEs regarding training, and expectations.

- E-platform specifications

The e-platform specifications describe the organization of the platform in 2 areas. The “LEARNING area” is meant to give access to the LEXSHA course “How to become a knowledge sharer” while the “SHARING area” is meant to give access to all contents to be produced by VSE, and shared with peers.

- Training specifications

The training is designed in respect of the ECVET recommendations: learning outcomes, learning units, and assessments. The 5 learning units of the 16 hours course are described and split in short modules (5 to 20 minutes) which are called LEXSHA (as the project and the platform)

The platform and the SHARING area

The LEXSHA platform <http://www.lexsha.virtual-campus.eu/en> is the main support tool for the Learning-Exploring-Sharing

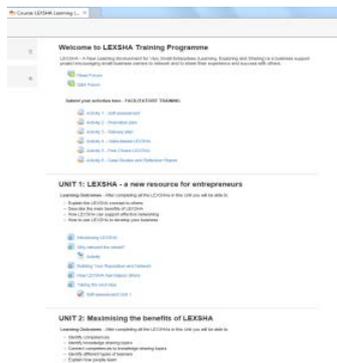
concept. All the LEXSHAs (those created by the partnership for the training and those created by the VSEs during the pilot editions) are available here for consultation. New users can register by creating an account and

can then publish own LEXSHAs. The LEXSHA platform is available in 7 languages (French, Portuguese, Swedish, English, Dutch, Greek and Lithuanian). By choosing a language when entering the platform, the visitor has access to all the LEXSHAs produced in this language. It is also possible to access the LEXSHAs by categories, either under categories “Business” (for the LEXSHA created by the VSEs) or under the categories “How to...” gathering the 5 learning units of the training.



Furthermore, the platform allows to search for a LEXSHA with key-word or authors, and to enter the LEARNING area.

The LEARNING area: a moodle platform



The learning area is based on the LMS (Learning Management System) Moodle. The learning contents have been structured as a training program, organized by units of learning outcomes with self-assessments for the user to be able to validate the competencies gained (inspired in the ECVET model). This organization allows self-learning and is a good tool to support a blended training with facilitators.

As for the SHARING area of the platform, the LEARNING area is available in each of the 7 local languages.

The training contents: "How to become a knowledge sharer"

The 16-hour training course includes contents, activities and assessments, in English and all local languages.

The course is structured in 5 units.

- Unit1: LEXSHA, a new resource for entrepreneurs
5 LEXSHAs and pedagogical activities to present the LEXSHA platform and the interest of LEXSHA for developing networking and businesses.
- Unit 2: Maximising the benefits of LEXSHA
4 LEXSHAs and activities to explain how to identify one's own knowledge to be shared and understand how people can learn from you.
- Unit 3: How to become a contributor LEXSHA
10 LEXSHAs and pedagogical activities to construct a LEXSHA: identify knowledge to share, define contents, prioritize the contents, define learning objectives, create a scenario, verify the objectives have been reached, give elements to go further.
- Unit 4: How to communicate with LEXSHA
11 LEXSHAs to choose the right format for a LEXSHA and learn some tips.
- Unit 5: Master LEXSHA
11 LEXSHAs to go deeper in the process of knowledge sharing: prepare a presentation, build your network by following authors, and update a LEXSHA.

In the LEARNING area (Moodle), each unit is described with the learning outcomes, access to the 4 to 11 LEXSHAs of the unit, and assessments. These LEXSHA are also available directly in the main platform, either one by one, using the search function by key-words or under the category "How to". All together 65 short modules (contents, activities and assessments) have been created for the training.

The LEXSHAs produced for this training are mainly video made from slides with audio, although some of them combine recording of talking people and texts.

Specific files are annexed to some LEXSHA for application, examples or assessments.

The training course includes also supporting tools for trainers (called “facilitators”) in order to promote multiplication of such trainings. These tools are available directly from the SHARING area, under a specific category “facilitator”.

The Training Pilot editions

As planned in the application, training pilot editions have been held. In each country of the partnership, a group of employers and employees of VSE was formed to follow a training and guidance by facilitators, in order to produce their own LEXSHA.



As a first step, facilitators were identified and trained to the platform and the sharing process. The facilitator training was a learning-by-doing process, run by online meetings and production of materials by the facilitators: delivery plan and personal LEXSHA.

The local pilot edition was then run in each country with different approaches, either full online or blended learning. The LEXSHA platform was the main support for this training, the produced LEXSHA

were uploaded step by step, and locally, sharing workshops were organized.

In France, at the University of Bordeaux, a group of 16 students following a BSC level training course in a dual system (3 weeks in a company, one week at the University) were also introduced to LEXSHA, on a voluntary basis. 4 of them completed a LEXSHA, based on their experience on the working place, and useful for VSE. They have been uploaded on the platform.

For the pilot edition, the objective was to gather 10 VSE participants in each country. This number was not reached by all countries which faced difficulties to motivate VSEs to enter the program. Although the LEXSHA model interests the VSEs, it was difficult to have them engaged and take the necessary time for the training within the schedule of the project.

In total 17 facilitators and 82 participants were involved in the LEXSHA training pilot edition. A good balance between men and women can be observed for these 99 persons involved in the training (56% men and 44% women).

Out of the 82 participants, 77 were from micro-enterprises (VSE), the focused target.

The day after the final conference in Bordeaux, an international sharing session took place to complete the pilot editions. This meeting gathered the people who came to the conference: facilitators, participants and partners. It was constructed on an interactive format, in English, and was a very efficient moment to engage local participants in an international communication.

The pilot editions end up with an evaluation report including recommendations for further use of the platform LEXSHA.

The LEXSHAs produced and uploaded on the platform

57 persons (facilitators and participants to the training program) have created 84 LEXSHA during the pilot editions, which have been uploaded to the LEXSHA platform.

The format used for these LEXSHA was either a full video, slides with audio or pdf files. They have been created in 7 local languages (French, Portuguese, Swedish, English, Dutch, Greek and Lithuanian) or in English.

They are accessible from the LEXSHA platform <http://www.lexsha.virtual-campus.eu/en> under the categories "Business" or by searching by key-words or authors.

Materials and actions to promote the project and its results



The first tool created to disseminate the project LEXSHA was the website: www.lexsha.net

A poster and a flyer were also created. 4 newsletters were set up and disseminated by each partner.

Social network were also used to communicate on the project:

- Facebook: Lexsha.NET
- Twitter: @LexshaEU and the hashtag #ICBL2015 for the final conference ...
- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/LEXSHAnet-8139202>

Each partner used these tools and materials to promote the project and recruit participants for the pilot editions. Some complementary materials were created locally by the partners.

The final conference

The final conference took place in Bordeaux on 25 November 2015.

The target audience was representatives of VSE related organizations, public and private bodies operating in the field of training and supporting small businesses, professional trainers working with VSE, entrepreneurs and staff of VSE.

The objective was to valorize the project and its results and introduce discussion about the situation of SMEs and VSEs in Europe.

Gunilla Almgren, head of UEAPME (The voice of SMEs in Europe) was invited as a guest speaker. Her speech was completed by a discussion with local heads of French SMEs organizations.

The partners made short speeches to present the project and its results, including the actions planned for the future. 7 participants and facilitators were interviewed on their experience gained with LEXSHA, during a panel format.

Furthermore, 1 LEXSHA per country were nominated. The authors were interviewed and rewarded with a LEXSHA trophy.

By the end of the day, the conference ended with a visit of Coh@bit (www.cohabit.fr), the technical center of innovation at the Technological University of Bordeaux.

The final conference was simultaneously translated in English and French. It was also recorded and broadcasted to allow foreigners to follow the conference remotely. The recordings of the conference are now available on line on Canal U, the television of the French Universities, and reachable from: http://www.teletoile.u-bordeaux2.fr/2015_2016/Lexsha/index.html.

Furthermore, a short 3 minutes video on the conference is on line on Youtube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbssGsPxusE&feature=youtu.be>

92 persons registered for onsite attendance, 16 persons for online attendance.

70 persons came to the conference during the day.

A specific website (<http://conference.lexsha.virtual-campus.eu/>), linked to www.lexsha.net was created for the conference. It contains the program, the speakers' short bio and a function for registration.

The event was very positively evaluated by the participants and the external evaluator.

Property rights

All the LEXSHA uploaded on the platform will be under CCBY, the lower level of the Creative Common Licenses, meaning that you can distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the original work, even commercially, as long as you credit the original creation.

Documents and commitment to continue LEXSHA after the project.

By the end of the project, the creation of a business plan was a difficult task according to the fact that the profitability for such platform is very unpredictable. The partners agreed on the fact that the model starts on a free basis model. The first thing is to involve more people in the process of sharing using the LEXSHA platform. Finally, each partner decided on several actions planned for 2016. These actions were presented during the final conference and written down in a Memorandum of Understanding to be signed by each partner.

The identified actions can be summarized as:

- Promote the platform in national network & other European projects.
- Use the LEXSHA materials and the platform to engage more people in the process of knowledge sharing.
- Get new LEXSHA members on the platform.
- Create and upload new LEXSHAs.
- Set new groups of people for a LEXSHA training program and production of new LEXSHAs on the platform.
- Promote and develop the knowledge sharing "state of mind" among students.

A business model was also written to set up the different possibilities for LEXSHA in the future.

4. Partnerships

The quality of the consortium LEXSHA

The project has been run by a consortium of 8 partners representing 8 countries:

- 2 Universities
 - Université de Bordeaux, France: Project coordinator
 - ISM, University of Management and Economics, Lithuania
- 2 IT companies
 - Virtual campus, Portugal
 - Bestcybernetics, Greece
- 3 Training & coaching providers
 - Exponential Training and Assessment, UK
 - SMEBox, Sweden
 - August Horch Akademie, Germany
- and one incubator
 - Stichting Business Development Friesland, The Netherlands

This partnership met the skills and knowledge necessary for the project and its future: Pedagogy, E-learning, Remote Training & Coaching, and Web technology.

Furthermore:

- The consulting firms focusing in offering SMEs services could be able to integrate the LEXSHA results in their service offers.
- The University partners could use the results to enrich their training and involve students in a knowledge sharing process.
- 5 of 8 partners have already interacted in the Grundvigt project Bizlearn.net 52011-2012), which constitutes the first step of the concept of "knowledge sharing" developed by LEXSHA.
- 2 partners are ICT companies and have all relevant skills to set up the needed platform for the project.

At mid-term of the project, the German partner left the project. The tasks were redistributed to the 7 remaining partners in order to keep the project on tracks and reach the expected results.

The partnership enlargement

The partnership has been enlarged through dissemination actions to promote the project and construct a sustainable solution for VSE.

- In France, the University of Bordeaux has promoted the project with the regional agency of innovation (Aquitaine Development Innovation - <http://www.aquitaine-developpement-innovation.com>), and regional business clubs.
- In Portugal, Virtual Campus takes every opportunity to present LEXSHA project within its regular activities with clients and partners. Although no formal agreement has been established with local organizations, VC was in contact with Spin Logic (university incubator) and the training department of AEP (Portugal Entrepreneurial Association), which have been involved in the field research work.
- In UK, ETA promoted LEXSHA and introduced it to several new audiences including a long-standing and active employer networking group (Konnect2Grow); the Chartered Management Institute and its members including its sister organizations Women in Management and the Institute of Consulting. ETA own databased of customers and network (over 6K) received information about LEXSHA regularly via the Company's newsletters and social media channels
- In Netherlands, the Business Development Friesland Foundation (BDF) has established good relations with the Dutch Incubation Association that had an important role supporting the dissemination of the project results on a national level. BDF's director - Mr. Lennard Drogendijk - is Vice-president of the EBN (The European Business Innovation Centre Network), which also was great opportunity for dissemination and exploitation.
- In Greece, BEST CYBERNETICS has encouraged and established a network of members of the Federation of Small Businesses and of the Association of firms in Communication and Information Technologies, that have contributed to the recruitment of participants to the pilot edition, to the dissemination and sustainability of the project results.

5. Plans for the Future

The project ends but the partners agreed to continue with LEXSHA in accordance with their own activities and projects.

The LEXSHA platform will be available at least until the end of 2018.

The Memorandum of Understanding, defining the planned actions, is on its way of signature among the partners.

By the end of 2016, the former LEXSHA partners will have had at least one meeting to summarize their activities related to LEXSHA and decide how to continue.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The project LEXSHA has been designed to contribute to EU policies. It is meant to reach specific objectives and follow the EU priorities which have been selected for the project:

Specific objectives of the Lifelong Learning Programme:

- *LLP-Obj-e: To help promote creativity, competitiveness, employability and the growth of an entrepreneurial spirit.*
- *LLP-Obj-h: To support the development of innovative ICT-based contents, services, pedagogies and practice for lifelong learning.*

Specific objectives of the action "Multilateral Projects for the Development of Innovation" this application addresses:

- *LEO-SpObj-a: To support participants in training and further training activities in the acquisition on the use of knowledge, skills and qualifications to facilitate personal development, employability and participation in the European labour market.*
- *LEO-SpObj-b: To support improvements in quality and innovation in vocational education and training systems, institutions and practices.*

Priority addressed by the project:

- *Priority 1: Implementing ECVET for transparency and recognition of learning outcomes and qualification.*

LLP horizontal policies

- *Discr: Promoting equality between men and women and contributing to combating all forms of discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.*

With the LEXSHA results related to these objectives, participants to the program LEXSHA, VSE, VSE network and training institutions have gained benefits from the project.

Benefits for the pilot editions participants

The LEXSHA training contents focus on the capacity to identify ones own knowledge and transform it in a transferable format, using ICT tools. This training develops also communication and ICT skills applicable to everyday work in a company, job-seeking and entrepreneurial activities.

By producing their own LEXSHAs, the participants contribute to the development of their own creativity. This production and the contribution to the sharing process enhance the development of self confidence and personal development which are levers for employability and entrepreneurial state of mind.

Benefits for the VSEs:

All modules developed within the program (and further) could be used within the involved companies to improve their competitiveness. Within the companies, the process of "producing and sharing contents" could be used efficiently for knowledge management and reception of newcomers. These practices could be extended to SMEs.

The communication and ICT skills enhanced by the LEXSHA training is applicable to the everyday work in the companies, for internal or external communication purposes (management, meetings, presentations, marketing tools...), contributing to its competitiveness.

The sharing process established during the program LEXSHA should enhance the VSEs' capacity to collaborate and enter the European market. By a further enlargement of the network, others companies could be involved in a process of "producing and sharing" and will gain benefices from the project.

Benefits for the Training Institutions:

LEXSHA proposes an innovative user-friendly learning environment for VSE developed specifically to meet their needs of just-in-time and flexible training solutions.

All partners from the LEXSHA consortium develop trainings in their activities and could be able to use LEXSHA as a tool for these activities. The involvement of trainers who have other personal activities enlarges the number of "training" persons involved in the project.

For several partners, the project was a good opportunity to enter the social networks and gain skills in this domain.

Students from University have been exposed to the project and coached to produce their own contents in a LEXSHA state of mind. This involvement contributes to the construction of innovative teaching methods giving the main space to the learner.

The project has enhanced the capacities of the training institutions participating to the program to propose pedagogical frameworks based on ICT tools to their customers.

Therefore it will be possible to develop new and innovative practices by transferring collaboratively experiences and expertise between participating institutions and countries, and later, to other organizations and end users.

Benefits for ECVET policies:

The project addresses ECVET by structuring the training with ECVET recommendations: learning outcomes, learning units and learning assessments.

For the partners, the project was an opportunity for a first level of understanding ECVET.

Benefice for equality between men and women:

The project's issue was addressed to men and women and was implemented with actors equally from the 2 genders.

All together:

- In the partnership, 26 women (63%), and 15 men (37%) were involved in the project
- And the national pilot editions gathered:
 - Facilitators: 10 women (59%), and 7 men (41%)
 - Participants: 34 women (41,5%), and 48 men (58,5%)

The program has been promoted in the specific actions such as "Women into Management" (WIM), by the partner from UK.

7. LEXSHA as a new word

Finally, as a conclusion of the project, one could say that the project has created the new word LEXSHA.

LEXSHA, standing for LEARNING, EXPLORING and SHARING is ...

- a project,
- an e-platform,
- a short module uploaded on the LEXSHA platform,
- and a state of mind.

LEXSHA's state of mind is the engagement in a process of sharing knowledge: to be able to ...

- identify one's knowledge,
- create digital materials to be shared on line
- use available digital materials,
- and get engaged in a network of knowledge sharing.

LEXSHA is supporting the sharing economy.