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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Until 2005, existing projects, networks and research studies only gave little space to NGOs, which are the main facilitators of informal learning for citizens in practice.
This led to research designs in which major stakeholders were not directly involved - for instance those organisations working with “difficult” target groups, those which do not have the resources (either financial or skills) to carry out intensive evaluation and those in which the “activity” of the educated citizens is very difficult to discover (e.g. in closed groups as socially disadvantaged youths, victims of violence, back warded communities etc.).
It can be concluded that despite multitudinous research activities on Informal learning and Active Citizenship in most of the cases the beneficiaries (learners) as well as “their” NGOs were not involved in research and thus being mainly regarded rather as research subjects than as research partners.
The research-practice project ACT-NET aimed at offering an alternative approach to the issue by actively integrating grass-root projects in evaluation and research activities.

There are certain system built obstacles concerning the remit to evaluate the impact of informal learning because of a rather unclear terminology and understanding of central concept of Informal Learning.
This was a rather unexpected discovery the recognition of non-formal and informal learning are seen as vital in improving social inclusion and in increasing economic productivity and thus range at the top levels of the political agenda and in the programme documents of the Lifelong Learning Programme[1].
Consequently, an additional remit evolved to investigate relevant literature and local and regional projects to clarify the meanings and uses of the terms informal, non-formal and formal learning to clearly describe research design and its basic assumptions.

Active Citizenship
Having researched a large part of European literature about the issue, it must be stated that meaning and scope of definitions concerning Active Citizenship vary largely with the backgrounds and the motives of authors and the intentions of the awarding authority. They may be politically influenced, relate to formal or rather informal learning environments, follow utilitarian approaches (inclusion in working environments) and strongly depend on either communitarian or liberal positions of the authors.
For ACT-NET, this instable explanatory model was a major problem since the large variability of meaning also limited a comprehensive description of citizenship competence. How can Active Citizenship Competence be evaluated if the concept varies to a large extent, especially in a not-formal learning environment?
In contextualised learning, in real life, beyond the walls of schools or universities, relevant citizenship competence can only be regarded in connection with the living context of the individual. From a learning perspective this means that learning topics, objectives and reference systems have to be focused on the subject.

[1] Official Journal of the European Union (2006) Decision of the European Parliament and the Council establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning; (13): “adult education’ means all forms of non-vocational adult learning, whether of a formal, non-formal or informal nature; There is a need to promote active citizenship (35); Leonardo da Vinci objective d: to improve the transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning; also mentioned in Article 33, Transversal programme”.

This has been a rather uncomfortable conclusion because an individualistic approach is not easy to handle and hampers the implementation of generally admitted citizenship competence.
On the other hand, only an individualised approach respects the demands of the singular citizen. This is why, especially in respect to non-mainstreaming target groups, the research setting was designed in a way that examines citizenship competence rather from a demand-oriented (learner) approach than from a supply-oriented point of view (educational institution).
This consideration is also backed up by reality:
Non-mainstreaming groups, e.g. disadvantaged beneficiaries, are in most of the cases looked after by social or grass-root organisations that do not follow any fixed learning objectives. Staff members from these organisations are sometimes not even aware that they deliver learning.
For those stakeholders the main point of interest is the success of their service, the impact on their beneficiaries. As they are targeting to improve relevant key competence and work for a better integration of beneficiaries in society, it can be concluded that the work of the grass-root organisations will lead to a development of specific, contextualised citizenship competence.
This setting[2] can be described as typical "informal learning for active citizenship".

According to their revised model informal and incidental learning is characterized by the following factors:

- Integration in work and daily routine
- Internal and external impulse
- Not a conscious process
- Often introduced by coincidence
- Contains an inductive process of reflection and action
- Often interconnected with learning from others (group learning)

Informal learning can be supported by different means:

- To deliver room and space for learning
- To check the environment in respect to learning opportunities
- To link the attention to learning processes
- To strengthen ability to reflect
- To create a climate of cooperation and trust

With regard to informal learning the following hypothesis was formulated:
As *only a reflected activity* can be measured and evaluated against certain criteria, the pure incidental, non-reflected informal learning activity should be excluded from the scope of the observations.

Consequently, we state that the evaluation of non-formal and informal learning activities needs the following requirements:

1. An aim or objective (in contrast to formal or non-formal learning not a learning objective (competence) but an activity-related objective)
2. There must be a process with describable activities
3. There should be a recordable output

[2] There are other settings like extracurricular school activities that are to a large extent informal. They should not be excluded here and were also evaluated in the course of the project.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The ACT-NET challenge - A multivariable research approach with a transnational team of practice and scientific stakeholders

The following chapter deals with the choice and development of methodology and instruments that was determined by the following factors:

- The general setting of ACT-NET and the requirements arising through practical-oriented research and in particular by the large variability of different micro-projects, settings, target groups and objectives,
- The disposition of the evaluating teams and
- Considerations concerning transnational collaboration.

ACT-NET is situated in the European social sector. It is a typical practice-research project. The envisaged outputs should not only be restricted to scientific reports but should also lead to an improvement of self-evaluation instruments and approaches for the actors in the field. From the beginning the research-practice project faced the challenge to find develop theory and practical solutions for certain contradictory targets:

- A transferable approach should be developed to describe and evaluate processes that are purely individual and cannot be standardised.
- Consequently, the outputs should be flexible (to adapt to different groups) but at the same time transferable,
- The outputs should show positive effects (“extra value”) for individual organisations but should be at the same time comparable,
- They should be usable in practice and somewhat easy to handle (in the field), and at the same time delivering new theory that could be fed in European research.

The research-practice project shows a large variability concerning:

- Analysed micro-projects in terms of:
  - Activity area,
  - Target groups,
  - Objectives of the social projects,
  - Learning activities,
  - Roles and pre-knowledge of the experts who are the interfaces between research and practice.
- Evaluating teams in terms of:
  - Roles and pre-knowledge (scientific and professional background, counselling competences) of the evaluators,
  - Area of work and expertise (formal/non-formal/informal contexts),
  - Pedagogic background and evaluation approaches (different scientific disciplines from social sciences to engineering),
  - Cultural background and traditions (Nine European countries).
- Transnational collaboration:
  - European transnational collaboration of different stakeholders is a relatively new phenomenon, especially with regard to the “new” European countries
  - This means that ACT-NET has been facing an evaluation setting which is characterised by a lack of activity references. Transnational collaboration in

the evaluation of informal LEARNING[3] is still rather unknown territory in the scientific community.

- These general ideas led consequently to a qualitative research approach.

2.2 Qualitative Research

Taking into account all the considerations mentioned above, an open methodology had to be chosen. A qualitative research design was applied, aiming at investigating the why and how of decision-making, as compared to the what, where, and when of quantitative research. Quantitative research, being rather conclusive, did not meet the requirements as an explorative approach was applied to discover new findings from European grass-root projects and to combine them to create new theories.

Qualitative methodology had to be employed because:

- There was no clear cut theory that had to be verified/falsified
- Contributions of the actors themselves had to be taken into account[4]
- Flexibility in the research process was necessary and interim results changed the research process
- Interaction with research subjects was needed
- Quantitative methods cannot consider the specific properties of the research groups, following the approach mentioned in chapter 2, the research approach has to consider in an utmost way the individual context and properties of the research subjects
- The envisaged research topics (AC-competences cannot be evaluated with quantitative methods, e.g. questionnaires -> Feasibility of the evaluation)
- Due to the variability of contexts, the assessment methodology must also be flexible. For some groups quantitative methods were feasible; others used interviews or observations (flexibility in assessment).
- The project is aimed at producing patterns to create a kind of typology. These interpretative patterns cannot be established by quantitative means – they have to be discussed and further developed, related to different contexts – thus an ideal setting or qualitative research as it categorises data into patterns as the primary basis for organising and reporting results (data interpretation).
- Research takes place in informal learning contexts. Whereas quantitative methods can be applied in de-contextualised (school) environments with an emphasis on cognitive competence, the informal learning situations afford flexible and comprehensive research methods that also take into consideration affective and activity related competence dimensions.

The qualitative methodological approach ACT-NET can be further specified. It is based on the methods of a further developed Action Research (DE: “Handlungsforschung”) and the Grounded Theory approach.

[3] In contrast to the field of Recognition of informally acquired competences which is also often called “Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Learnring

[4] This is especially the case in respect to informal learning since, according to Overwien (2005), informal learning always has to acknowledge the learner’s perspective.

2.3 Action Research

„In der Handlungsforschung sind jene Menschen und Menschengruppen,
welche von den Wissenschaftlern untersucht werden, nicht mehr bloße Informationsquelle des Forschers, sondern Individuen, mit denen sich der Forscher gemeinsam auf den Weg der Erkenntnis zu machen versucht.“
Kurt Lewin, 1890-1947

Against the background of diverging definitions and attitudes towards action research as research method the author favours a fairly broad definition which is widely approached in the social and welfare sector:

Action Research is “based on the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Practitioners and researchers shape evidence from data to expose unjust practices or environmental dangers and recommend actions for change.
In many respects it is linked into traditions of citizens’ action and community organizing.
The practitioner is actively involved in the cause for which the research is conducted.

With regard to the research strategy the researcher is actively participating in a social (relation) system, cooperating with the research objects. On the basis of the first analysis researchers introduce processes of change which are described, controlled and validated in relation to their efficiency.

In contrast to traditional research approaches and settings the researcher becomes part of the evidencing process and consciously influences the research objects for the sake of improvement of practice.

Thus, Action Research is heading for an impact which shows concrete effects, changes and meaningful improvements in the practical field.

Action Research is based on the central principle of social change which, for the researcher, means to “dive” in the social reality with the goal to modify it for the sake of the people.

It functions according to the following claims:

1. Researchers leave their passive role (which meant a fundamental paradigm change in social science these days
2. The researchers are not independent witnesses anymore but may even take over an influencing role
3. The selection of research topics and themes will rather be determined by social demands than by pure epistemological (theoretical) research objectives
4. The collected data will not be interpreted in an isolated way but as parts of a real process
5. Thus the problem/research situation will not be regarded as an isolated variable but as a research “field”
6. Finally the Role of the “researched persons” will change from “objects” to “subjects” in the research process

Action Research Procedure:
A typical Action Research procedure shows a circular (or better a spiral) sequence.

It is based on development circles or feed-back loops that are typical for a large part of current management systems like Quality Management[5] (ISO, EFQM, KTQ) or Environmental Management Systems (EMAS[6]).
The first step is to set goals based on a profound examination of the idea in the light of the available means. Frequently it is required to find more facts concerning the situation and to collect more data in order to secure and back up the initial thesis.
If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, “an overall plan” of how to reach the objective and, secondly, a decision with regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea.

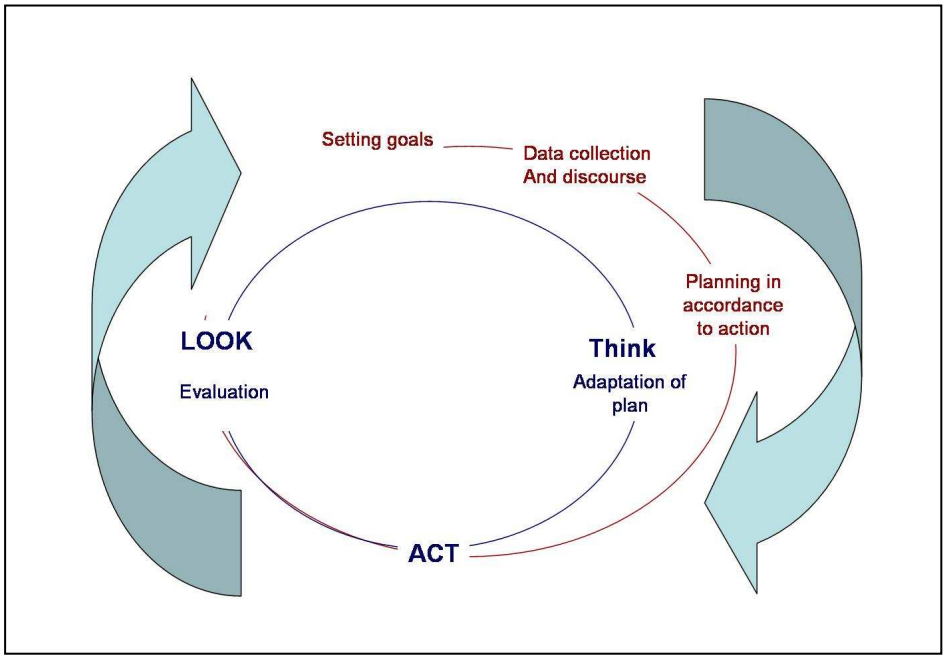

Figure 1: Action research circle (spiral)

The next step is composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and if need be, to modifying the overall plan again.

The History of Action Research

In terms of setting, research procedure, outputs and valorisation the research-practice project was developed and executed on the basis of Action Research methodology thereby considering the fundamental principles of this research method to a large extend.

Action research was developed by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) who was a pioneer of modern social psychology and the founder of group dynamics.
Originally coming from the Berlin School of Gestalt-Theory with Wertheimer, Köhler and Kottka he migrated to the US in 1933.
While at the University of Berlin, Lewin "found many of the department's courses in the grand tradition of Wundtian psychology irrelevant and dull. His thinking was changing to emphasize social psychological problems” (Hothersall, 1995).

[5] QM-Systems: International Standard Organisation, European Foundation for Quality management, KTQ = German Hospital Quality Management System.
[6] EMAS = Environmental Management Auditing System.

He wanted to establish a centre for the research group dynamics – this was realized with the founding of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT in 1944.
Lewin's model of action research (research directed toward the solving of social problems) was used in a number of significant studies into religious and racial prejudice. Later his ideas found their way into marketing and organisational development.

The research needed for social practice can best be characterised as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin, 1948).

The origins of Action Research are rooted in Gestalt Theory. Based on the Aristotle principle that "a whole is more than the sum of its elements" a gestalt is a coherent whole. It has its own laws, and is a construct of the individual mind rather than 'reality'.
Basic considerations of Gestalt Theory were developed by Christian von Ehrenfels stating that Gestalt is a transposable whole[7].
It was developed as an alternative to structuralism und classic behaviourism as it connected phenomenological and experimental research actions.

Lewin integrated the psychological component in Gestalt Theory stating that behaviour was determined by the totality of an individual's situation, environment and needs. He developed his Field Theory, which is sometimes called the "Second generation of Gestalt theory", in which a 'field' is defined as 'the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent'.
The whole psychological field, or 'life space', within which people act, has to be viewed, in order to understand behaviour.
Individuals participate in a series of life spaces (such as family, work, school and church), and these are constructed under the influence of various force vectors (Lewin 1952).

The individual in a distinctive situation can be represented mathematically in a vector model as Kurt Lewin drew together insights from topology (e.g. life space), psychology (need, aspiration etc.), and sociology (e.g. force fields – motives clearly being dependent on group pressures).
Thus, behaviour is a function of the field that exists at the time the behaviour occurs:
(B = f(P,E))
And it is thus a function of personal (internal) and environmental (external) factors.

Action research did suffer a decline during the 1960s due to its association with radical political activism (Stringer 2007).
Action research has gained a significant foothold both within the realm of community-based and participatory action research as well as as a form of practice geared towards the improvement of educative encounters (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

In Germany the methodology "Handlungsforschung" (action research) was revitalised in the 1970s, especially in the researchers group at the University of Bielefeld.
Action research was originally developed by Lewin and exported to the USA where it was mainly used as a form of effective intervention in organisations.
Among others (Klafki (1973), Moser (1975)), the Bielefeld work group around the sociologist Heinze (1975) was most important for the development works on the concept of action research in Germany.

[7] „Es gibt Zusammenhänge, bei denen nicht, was im Ganzen geschieht, sich daraus herleitet, wie die einzelnen Stücke sind und sich zusammensetzen, sondern umgekehrt, wo – im prägnanten Fall – sich das, was an einem Teil dieses Ganzen geschieht, bestimmt von inneren Strukturgesetzen dieses seines Ganzen. …"

In the 70s, the German term “Handlungsforschung” had a slightly different connotation than the American term “action research”. The approach has three fundamental dimensions: an epistemological, a political, and an ethical one:
From the epistemological point of view one can state that all relevant stakeholders should be included in the process of cognition. This of course has a strong link to the paradigm of Lifelong Learning and also conveys the concept of the active learning citizen.
The research object should influence the research process himself/herself thus being located on the same (societal) level as the researcher. So, in a more ethical interpretation we can state that the researched subject should become a research partner rather than a research object.
In the case of ACT-NET, the setting is also consisting of a 3rd intermediate group between researchers and researched subjects – these are the group leaders, organisers, consultants and other facilitators. This intermediate group has a strong influence on the evaluation process because only these stakeholders are able to build up the reference systems, to evaluate the groups or test persons and interpret the results.
Also in terms of reliability the gap between researcher and research subject had to be minimised. External persons and standardised quantitative methodology are simply overstrained in this situation.
Due to this setting an action research approach, namely in the further developed German interpretation is the only feasible research design in ACT-NET.
This description also meets another objective of action research: Consolidated findings should lead to a direct influence in practice. This goal is identical with the ACT-NET objectives: the project was supposed to lead to an improvement of the evidencing of learning effects in social organisations thus enhancing the emancipation of researched groups. One could go so far to state that the research itself leads to an improvement of informal learning because it serves the self-determination of the grass-root stakeholders.

In some of Lewin’s earlier works on action research[8] there was a tension between providing a rational basis for change through research, and the recognition that individuals are constrained in their ability to change by their cultural and social perceptions and the systems of which they are a part.
Having ‘correct knowledge’ does not of in itself lead to change, attention also needs to be paid to the ‘matrix of cultural and psychic forces’ through which the subject is constituted (Winter, 1987). This momentum is to a large extent considered by the ACT-NET approach since all relevant factors and topics should be included in the contextualisation of the informal learning situation, and, of course, the activity and affective dimensions are integral part of the LEVEL5 approach.

In contrast to Action Research, empirical approaches very often just bring forth arguments for (and thus serving the) political and administrative top-down approaches, not taking into account the intentions, needs (and, if you want, the will) of the researched groups.
Especially in sensitive research areas, the trustful relation between researcher/facilitator and research subject is evident – this is why action research methodology is especially suitable. Of course the connection between the scientific (delivering objectivity, neutrality and methodological (evaluation and assessment) competence) and practical stakeholders (proximity to the target group, contacts, inside knowledge) bears many advantages. The practical transfer of gained knowledge may serve as a validity test (Reason & Heron, 1995).

From a critical point of view, it is very often mentioned that theoretical foundations in action research are missing. There is a systematic conflict between the practical claims (practicability, fast results) and properties related with profound research practice (quality criteria such as validity, reliability, objectivity). This contradiction is one of the major threats in research-practice projects (Hopf 1984). In practice, there is no need of comprehensive

[8] E.g. Lewin and Grabbe 1945.

justifications and explanatory statements – the functioning itself is the validation. Stakeholders in practical projects normally focus on finding innovative solutions which can be better achieved by testing and moderation than by profound research activities. As a consequence, the research part of the project was sometimes under pressure by these practical requirements[9].

Apart from that one cannot expect that stakeholders from the field are always acquainted with professional research skills. In the project we agreed that the social research part in ACT-NET was not supposed to be only a means to produce acting recommendations. It shall lead to a new type of knowledge, i.e. theoretical statements that have been grounded in intensive research that contribute to a critical and productive discussion in society. In the case of ACT, this contribution should lead to a development of a theoretical and practical approach to measure and to evidence active citizenship competence in informal learning contexts.
According to McTaggart (1996) "Action research is not a 'method' for research but a series of commitments to observe and problematize through practice a series of principles for conducting social enquiry[10]".

There have been questions concerning the scientific rigour of Action Research, and the training of those undertaking it.
There is a fundamental scepticism that classical research principles (scientific rigour) is neglected in the framework of action research projects.
Other critiques argue that the scientific discourse is completely different from pedagogic practice by nature and that Action Research is thus simply not a scientific method[11] but that it is teaching and counselling.

On the other hand research is, as Smith (1996) states, a frame of mind – 'a perspective that people take towards objects and activities'. Once we have satisfied ourselves that the collection of information is systematic, and that any interpretations made have a proper regard for satisfying truth claims, then much of the critique aimed at action research disappears.

The criticism seems less profound against the background that Action Research was developed as a means to create more proximity between social sciences and social reality.

It was and is an antipode to a research without social impact[12] and as such is an answer to "laboratory research carried out in classical behaviourism and structuralism" (Lewin 1946).

In comparison to rigorous empirical research action research yields less reliable results that are, on the other hand, in context of societal reality probably more valid since action research examines and constantly feeds back assumptions and results from the field in the planning, action and checking process.

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9 E.g. stakeholders had to be convinced to elaborate their reference systems carefully; interview questions had to be elaborated more intensively than used by practitioners.

10 Concerning the procedure he states: "The notion of a spiral may be a useful teaching (or counselling) device – but it is all too easily to slip into using it as the template for practice" (McTaggart, 1996).

11 For example, Carr and Kemmis provide a classic definition:
"Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

12 "Research that produces only books is not sufficient" (Lewin, 1946).

For the research-practice project ACT-NET the principles of Action Research formed the basic traits of research and transfer into societal reality as it was situated in the triangle of research, societal practice and individual properties and demands:

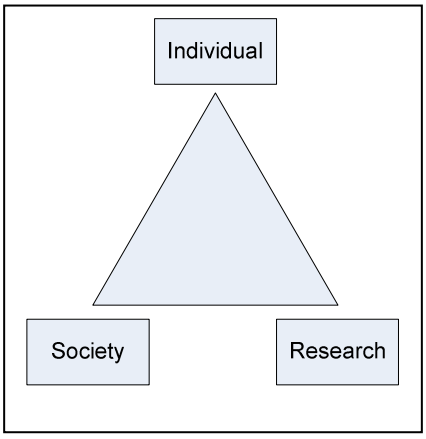

Figure 2: Action research context triangle

The following arguments formed the background to apply Action Research (AR) in connection with the research design in relation to the research, the individual and the societal dimension:

Research Dimension

- AR delivers new impulses for research actions in social sciences
- AR interconnects of research and practice
- AR integrates dynamic (process-oriented) elements
- AR invents dialogic elements

Individual (Human) Dimension

- AR recognises the human being
- AR considers emotions
- AR reduces doubts and fears
- AR brings in the emancipatory dimension
- AR considers cognitive, activity-related and affective states of mind

Societal Dimension

- AR works in societal contexts
- AR is democratic
- AR contributes to conflict solving
- AR is changing
- AR reduces the concentration of power.

The Action Research approach is oriented to problem-solving in social and organisational settings and therefore has a form that parallels Dewey's conception of learning from experience (Smith, 2007).
Both, Dewey and Lewin, argue that democracy must be learned anew in each generation and that it is far more difficult to attain and maintain democracy out of a social structure than it is out of autocracy.
Obviously there is a close connection in theory building and research between the two pioneers of educational science, and major traits of their spirit of thinking can also be found in the ACT-NET project.

2.4 Evaluation of Outcomes (Procedures and Instruments)

As described above, a certain part of observations and analyses had to be carried out by practice partners and intermediates.
They received support and instruction regarding the utilisation of the evaluation approach by descriptions and links on a web-based ACT-NET-portal and by acting recommendations distributed in form of so called manuals. After consultation the decisions about the applied specific procedures were finally taken by the practice partners themselves in equivalence to their own project aims and their possibilities and resources. A knowledge base on these topics was put on the ACT web-portal (www.act-eu.org).
The learning projects and the learners were evaluated and the results in terms of competence developments were recorded and displayed in the LEVEL5 software.
These partner evaluations were not subject to this evaluation
In the final project phase the partners and informal evaluators were asked to comment on the main procedural elements and the instruments applied in the ACT approach.
For this purpose a quantitative questionnaire was combined with qualitative evaluators' reports that were guided by open questions.
Both instruments tackled the following topics:

- Usability and feasibility,
- Effort and acceptance,
- Pre-knowledge and skills of staff and
- Transferability

of procedures and instruments.

3. Results

3.1 Summaries of Micro Learning Projects

In the following one exemplary micro project per partner country will be summarised according to setting, objectives, basic learning characteristics, outputs and evaluation. The evaluation method will be shortly presented together with their lessons learnt in reference to the ACT approach. Detailed project descriptions and project posters are provided in the appendices to this survey and on the websites.

In the following a list of evaluated micro projects is provided:

	Title	Sector/Target group	Content	
1	Intertool	Transnational informal/non-formal course	Intercultural management	DE
2	Ida - Integration through exchange	Youth exchange/ internship in foreign countries	Mobility, new possibilities in labour market	DE
3	Integra - Producing a Radio Programme with Migrant Women	Unemployed Migrant women	Development of intercultural podcast, integration	DE
4	EMPOWERMENT 25+ Training centre for methodological skills	Unemployed people 25 + with different placement handicaps	Empowering long-term unemployed people, new directions for a return into working life, application strategies	DE
5	Training Course – The Art of Networking	Transnational non-formal course	Networking on European Level	AT
6	BASIC LIFE	Family Learning	Family Learning Activities, especially ICT Learning (Web 2.0)	AT
7	Job student as “cultural receptionist” in the Landcommanderij Alden Biesen	Internship, Local Initiatives	Cultural Heritage, customer relationship management, client orientation	BE
8	Accompanying path Oral History by the Local History Circle Wibilinga	Members of Local History Circle	Cultural Heritage, Oral history	BE
9	Self-organised volunteer group for rural heritage renewal	Villagers, volunteers in rural renewal project	Building a strong local team and create an information centre	ES
10	European Voluntary Service (EVS) of Dynamo-Amo Promoting EVS in deprived neighbourhoods in Brussels	Social Street Work	Supporting the European Voluntary Service and help people from deprived areas	ES
11	House Painting: A bridge to outside	Prison education	VET and informal learning in a special surrounding. Support for prisoners to find their way back into labour market easier after their discharge	FR
12	Assessment of Traveller’s familial area of Cenon	Travellers	Creation of a new living area (new buildings) but also production of a	FR

	Title	Sector/Target group	Content	
			magazine about the life of the travellers in this area	
13	Food 4 the Hood	Youngsters with migrant backgrounds and a bad image (criminals)	Improvement of image of youngsters from the Antilles and reducing prejudices	NL
14	Training course Youth Football Coach	Young people becoming a football coach for very small children	Good trainers also for very young players, good quality of training	NL
15	Developing of creativity of the office of personal belongings theatre	Local initiative, mentally disabled people	Learning through theatre especially team work	PL
16	Give yourself (European Voluntary Service)	Volunteers (EVS)	Intercultural Learning for young people	PL
17	Centre of Social services and educational programmes for women victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Psychological counselling)	women and girls victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, aged between 25 and 45 years	raising awareness among women and the hole society about the important role that women plays in family and society	RO
18	Centre of Social services and educational programmes for women victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Social Assistence)	women and girls victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, aged between 25 and 45 years	To assist the victim in overcoming the crisis situation (exit from the cycle of violence) To assist the victim in implementing the new solutions	RO
19	Psychotherapy services	families that are confronted with problems that are affected by the dysfunction of the couple	To assist the clients in overcoming the problems that affect their family life and to assist the clients to change some dysfunctional behaviors	RO
20	Training course - Evaluation of social services	social workers, psychologists, directors that work in different public institutions or NGO's	To know the importance of social services qualitative assessment and to be able to use the evaluation system LEVEL5.	RO
21	FESTIVAL - preparing a festival for the people living in the housing area Hässleholmen in Borås	Unemployed migrants	Social competences, Dealing with leadership	SE
22	UIB – Unemployed Immigrants in Borås	Unemployed migrants	Knowledge about the Swedish language and society to increase their possibilities to be integrated in the Swedish society and to to find an employment.	SE

Table 1: List of micro projects evaluated in ACT-NET

In nine case studies the scope of the informal/non-formal learning projects was provided below in a condensed format. All evaluated micro projects are provided in a comprehensive compendium.

3.2 Evaluation of Micro Projects

The evaluation of the micro-projects revealed many examples of proven practice in informal learning. In all projects competence development was recorded and evaluated.
The achieved outcomes were based on different project activities and a broad variety of methodologies.

For the evaluation different topics of the inventory were evaluated.
Almost all topics were chosen at least once (except of ”decision-making“, “conflict-solving“ and “empathy“. Two topics were additionally added (“blended learning design“ and “environmental protection“). Therefore, the concept of an open inventory turned out to be very useful..

The following table shows an overview on the topics which were chosen in the projects described above for each section:

Topic	Number of choices
Knowledge related topics/Specific knowledge	
Institutional knowledge macro level	1
Institutional knowledge micro level	4
Culture	2
Environment	1
Diversity	2
Activity related topics or competences (Key competences/soft skills)	
Communication	6
Cooperation	3
Decision-making	1
Negotiation	0
Expression	2
Management	3
Endeavour	0
Conflict solving	1
Getting and using information	3
Commitment	3
Participating in community with others	1
Topics related to Affective Competences and Attitudes	
Orientation towards change	2
Self-esteem	6
Tolerance	3
Ambition	0
Willingness to interact with people from other groups	7
Willingness to accept diversity/neglect discrimination	3

Table: 11: Inventory selected of topics

Firstly, what can be concluded from these results is that the inventory contains topics which are relevant in different settings of informal learning. Some topics seem to be more relevant to many projects whereas others are only of minor importance.

According to the clustering the topics related to key competences prevails (N=28) followed by the topics related to affective competences and Attitudes (N=21). Knowledge related topics are relatively far behind with only 10 choices.

One can state that obviously the “knowledge related topics” in the chosen informal and non-formal learning settings are of less importance whereas key competences and also affective competences are more in the focus of the informal learning providers.

Of course the general titles can only roughly document the preferences of the learning project owners in regard to their most important envisaged learning outcomes and it has to be seen in detail how these topics have been differentiated. However, also on this general level it is interesting to have a look on the distribution of topics:

The most relevant topics of each section in this sample were:

Topic	Number of choices
Knowledge	
Institutional knowledge micro level	**4**
Soft Skills/Key Competencies	
Communication	**6**
Topics related to Affective Competences and Attitudes	
Self-esteem, Willingness to interact with people from other groups	**6/7**

Table 12: Most relevant topics per cluster

Knowledge Part
As the majority of the ACT-NET projects related to the third sector the civic knowledge part is determining the area of work of the grass-root organisations. The fact that the topic “Institutional Knowledge on the Micro Level” was mostly selected hints at the roots of projects in the local area and that the necessary learning outcomes in regard to knowledge of the beneficiaries refers to issues, stakeholders and organisations on this small scale level.
In other cases, civic knowledge is related to cultural and environmental issues.

Key Competencies
The majority of the projects chose “communication” (44%), together with “expression” (18%) – two topics that are related to verbal skills and the capability of expression.
Topics like “management”, “cooperation” and “commitment” and ”getting information” play a medium important role and “conflict solving” and “decision-making” were once selected by the partners (9%).
The findings show that for the experts (intermediate persons) in the grass-root projects communicative skills are the most important key competencies for their beneficiaries.
The cooperation and management skills were important both in grass root and in European projects and “commitment” is also a rather cross-cutting issue throughout that cannot be assigned either to grass-root or rather non-formal character like EU-projects or the job-student project which has a clear vocational impetus.

Topics related to Affective Competences and Attitudes
Commitment is certainly an important topic which has a strong affective component as well. Due to these rather unclear and overlapping frontiers between the topics the partnership decided not to cluster the topics in the working process but to treat them as just headings for a rather open inventory. However, on the attitudes and affective dimension both self-esteem and willingness to interact prevail.
In the grass-root sector this is a strong sign that informal learning projects are heading for empowerment of their learners and that they are often located in living situations where the interaction with other groups is key.
It is not astonishing that “Willingness to interact with other groups is also chosen in all informal and non-formal projects with a transnational learners’ audience.

4. Application of the ACT Approach in the Micro Projects, Experiences

The evaluation runs in the micro-projects provided a basis for a collection of experiences by applying the ACT-NET methodology in different fields of informal learning. The ACT-NET practice-partners reported in their descriptions about benefits and obstacles of the approach. In the following, these experiences are summarised and discussed. In order to receive an additional and also more systematic feedback with regard to the application in the micro projects two evaluation instruments were additionally applied in the partnership:

- A quantitative questionnaire
- A pattern for an experience report[13].

The quantitative questionnaire includes the following sections:

- Usefulness/helpfulness
- Practicability
- Effort
- Transferability
- Pre-knowledge and skills of staff

Each section contains statements which can be rated on a scale from “very much“ to “not at all“.

The pattern for experience reports includes the following sections:

- Usability and feasibility
- Effort and acceptance
- Pre-knowledge and skills of staff
- Transferability

Each section includes leading questions which aimed at assessing detailed aspects with regard to the different sections.
The results of both assessments, which were carried out in the last phase of the project, are taken into account in the following considerations

4.1 Feasibility and Usability

The ACT- NET approach has been applied successfully in all projects in the partners’ contexts. All partners achieved good and very good results when applying the LEVEL5 evaluation methodology. Consequently, usability of LEVEL 5 was highly appreciated in terms of *very much* „relevancy in the project context” and „improvement of work processes” as well as *much* support for „project personnel to justify their work”, „to develop their competencies” and „to provide documentation/evidencing in field projects” (see figure 1 below). Low scores of usability have been appreciated on *daily routine*, which is inversely correlated with *time and effort* indicator. In other words, partners appreciated that is hard for the methodology to be integrated in daily routine as long as it proves to consume much effort & time to be implemented. It is expetected that LEVEL 5 will be applyed as a daily routine methodology as long as it takes less effort & time.

[13] Please find both instruments in the appendix.

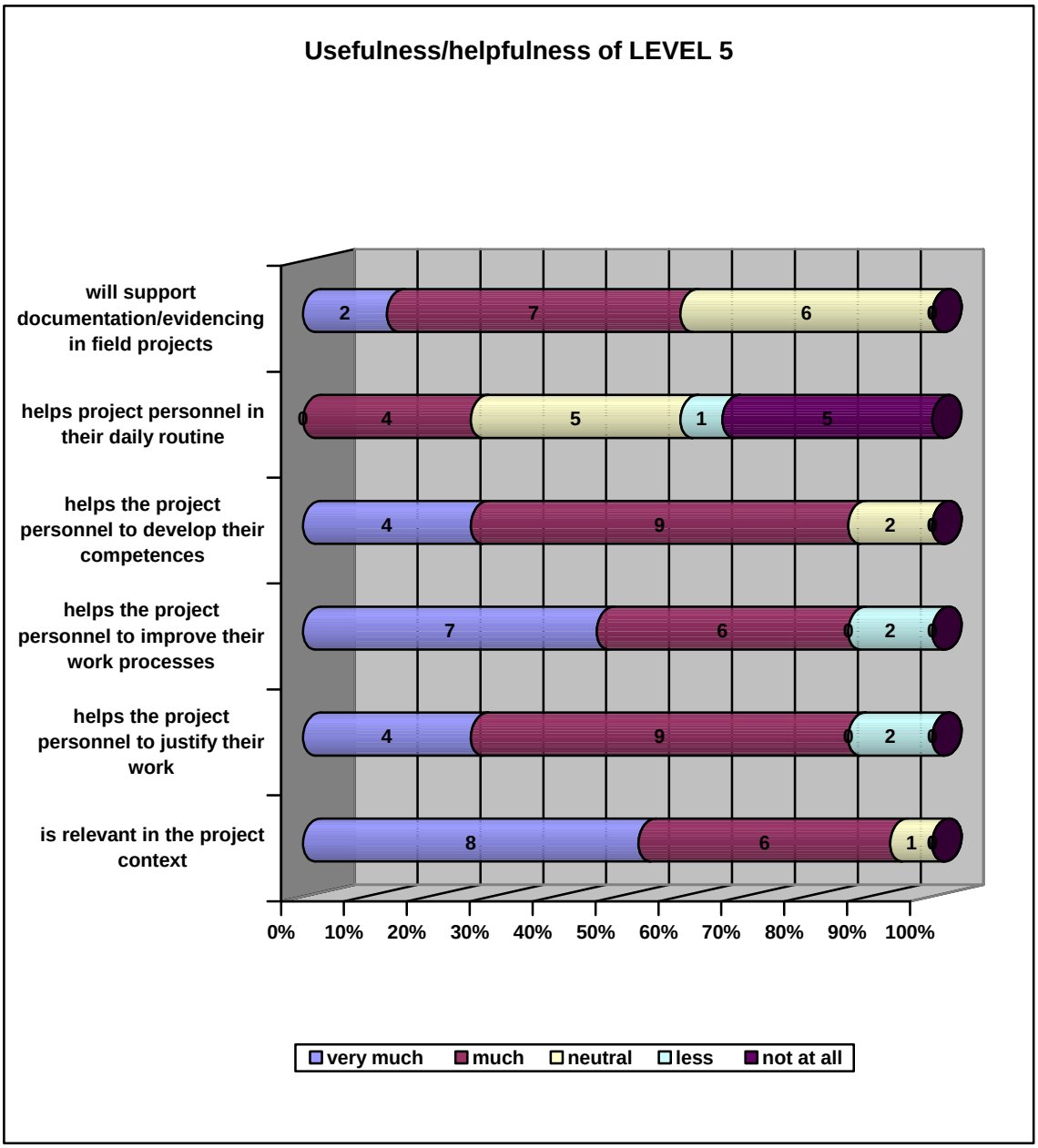

Figure 4. Usefulness of LEVEL5

This is reflected by the following exemplary statements from the experience reports:

The impact of the application of this system should not only be measured in direct terms but also in terms of thinking processes generated and an introduction of a culture of evaluation.

This is a good thing for those who are really interested in the general idea of assessing and evidencing learning outcomes and improve their learning projects. For others, who don't see the meaning it may be too much work and too less effects

Practicability of LEVEL 5 is *very much* dependent on the degree of „understanding" and *much* dependent on „daily routine" and „helping tools". The attitude towards the need for an

external consultant is rather neutral, partners considering that external consulting would be necessary especially for first-time users to understand the whole procedure (see figure 2 below).

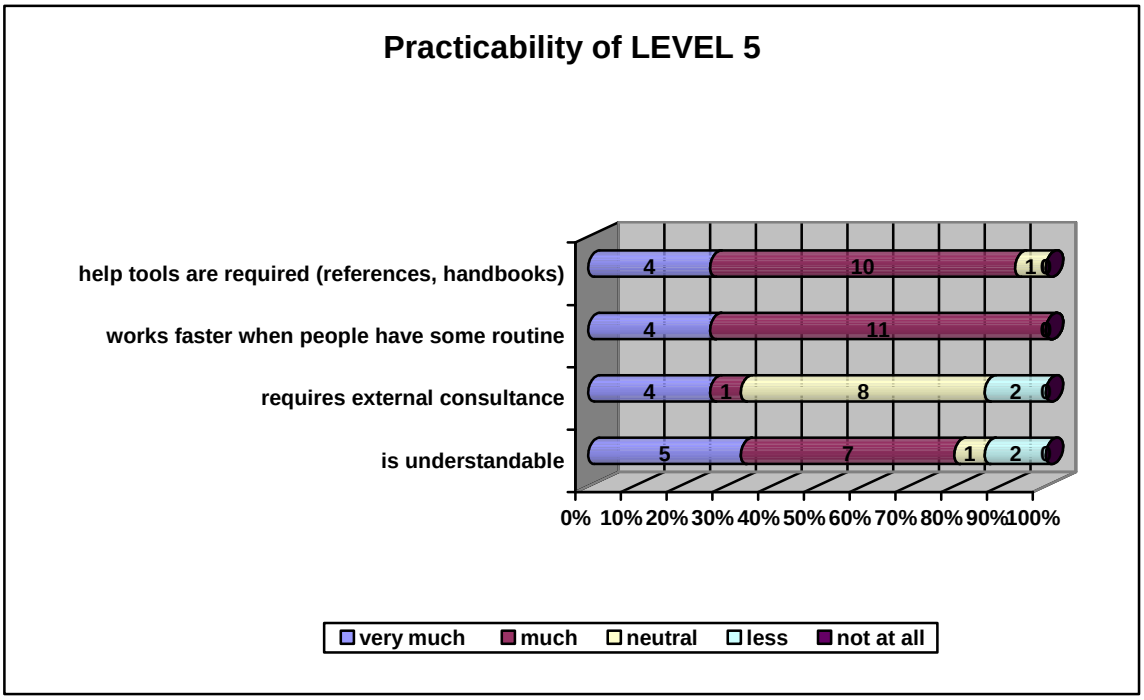

Figure 5: Practicability

Exemplary statements from the experience reports:

The strength of LEVEL5 from our point of view is its applicability as a formative evaluation instrument that can guide the learning process of individuals.

This is a flexible method for evidencing competence development, giving feedback to participants and focusing project evaluations that deal with competence development.

The 3D stage system proves to be very useful, once the preparation work of setting up the reference system is done. Breaking down a specific competence in 3 dimensions (cognitive, activity and attitude) and a specific scale and descriptors for each dimension allows to gain specific information of where is the learner in a certain point in time, and where the learning could move further.

The 3D-stage system is definitely a suitable approach to describe competence development provided that the stages are described in a correct way and that the evaluation is done accordingly. External consulting is definitely needed in grass-root projects but an organisation could work independently in later stages.

This system is complex in its development and application. Thus, external consultation will be needed if an organisation intends to use it, at least this is the case in the voluntary sector. The amount of consultation needed will depend on the organisational knowledge and capacity of the organisation that employs it.

One of the strengths of Level5 is that the 3-dimensional visualisation gives a profound and comprehensive picture of the participants progress. The system is useful, the process of choosing topics, formulating the subtopics and adapting the scaling to your target group helps to identify and define the aims, the contents and the structure of the course. It is also a useful tool when evaluating a complete course or a rather informal learning project in order to find out ways to improve the learning and the setting.

In general it might be of need to have an interpreter. In our case we had no need of an external consulting. Our students know us already and are used to the way we work, a great advantage according to our opinion.

This methodology offers a visual representation of the participants' progress and can open eyes for further progress. Therefore it should not be viewed only as an assessment tool, but as a motivation tool for the learner, as well as a useful tool for future learning of the participant.

The application of Level 5 has been piloted both at group level (Case 1) and at individual level (Case 2) showing the feasibility to use Level 5 at both levels.

It was very satisfying, because it seemed, that using the instruments were beyond evaluation: it helped the person we evaluated, Ivan, to get a job as a youth coach. He considered it as very useful. Not only for himself "I know the results" , he said, but also to make it visible to third parts, sponsors ,professionals, authorities.

Generally speaking we are satisfied with the project as regards the increased self-esteem and the increased spirit of community in the group. We ourselves developed our competences through these projects and have received a widespread awareness as regards our students. It has been of great importance for the students to implement a real project. The process has involved taking one's own responsibility for planning and carrying out. The students have also taken part in the evaluation of the project.

Level 5 is learner centred. Thus, it needs to be reminded that it doesn't evaluate the qualities of the learning environment, even if it can describe some properties of it.

4.2 Effort and Acceptance

Partners appreciate that LEVEL 5 affords a lot of effort but it has also a good input-output ratio. Some opinions do not emphasise a balance between input-output, but at the same time are able to distinguish between the hardest and the easiest parts, which is related to the pre-knowledge and skills of the staff (see Figure 3 and Figure 5 below).

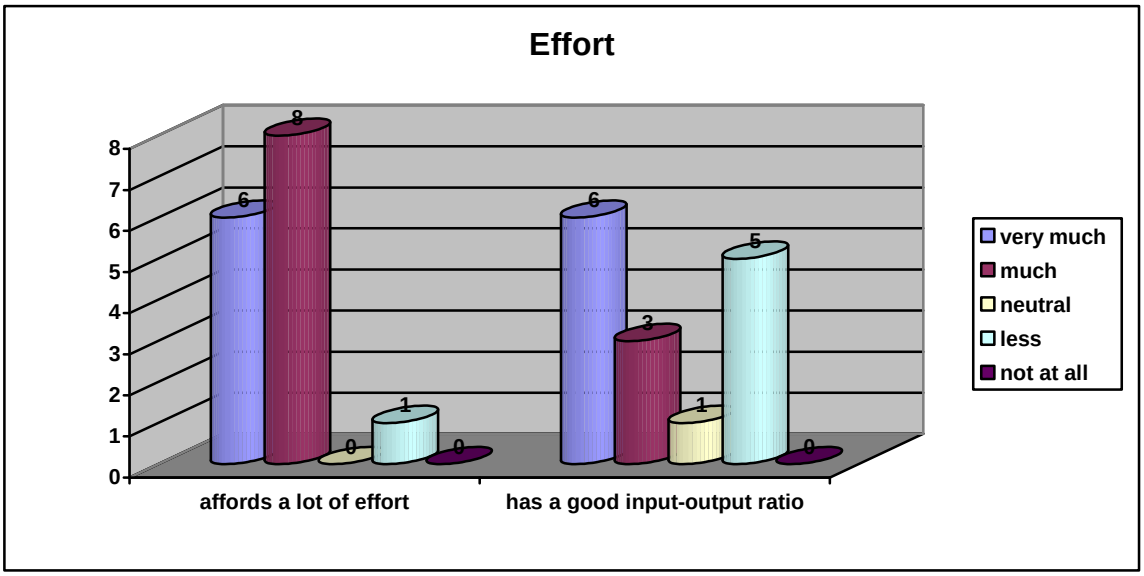

Figure 6: Effort

Exemplary statements from the experience reports:

The input-output ration is good as long as the developed system is used with a fair amount of learners.

The teamwork considers that the methodology was a very good way to share and to compare our point of view on the travellers. Most of time, we have informal debates on this question and most important, nothing precise to evaluate the trainees. So the effort was real at the beginning but the result very interesting finally: the input-output ratio was good beyond our hopes.

The people in charge of applying the methodology appreciated the system and consider that their efforts were not in vain since the programme results show that, at the end of the sessions, the beneficiaries were empowered to act independent and to look for external resources that can help them.

The leader acquired the knowledge how to assess the progress of his group during the process of informal learning. The time spent during the training session on 3D-stage system was not wasted because in can be used in his other project. He learned that he can use inventory to identify the topics present them to his students and show the results later. They will be more motivated to put more effort to achieve the higher level.

As long as there is no strong case for using the system and it needs "convincing", it will be difficult to find regular users in the field.

The lowest effort and time consuming tasks were selection of the relevant topics and inserting data of 1 person per competence while the highest effort and time consuming ones were assessments and completing one 3 D-system for 1 topic/competence (see Figure 4 below).

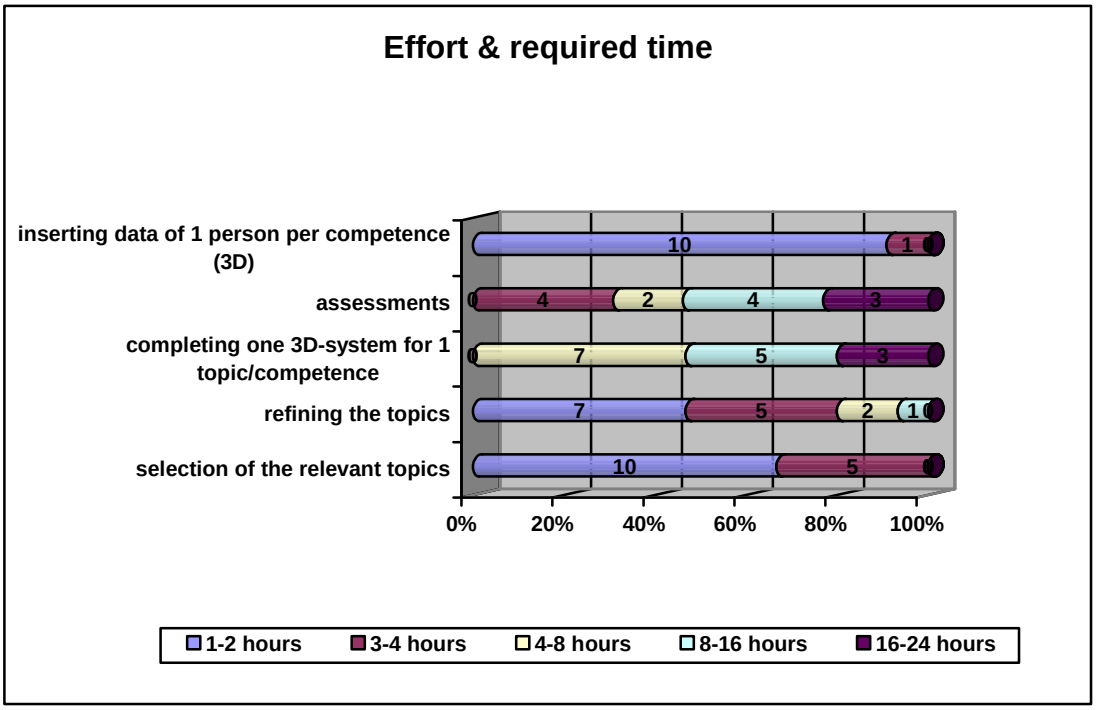

Figure 7: Required time

Exemplary statements from the experience reports:

The easiest step was the creation and definition of the levels, the most difficult one was the assessment and 'measuring' of the individuals

The setting up of the reference system turned out to be the most challenging part of the evaluation. Setting up 15 individual descriptors for three dimensions of an individual topic, while setting up a coherent scaling both inside an individual dimension and of each level in the 3 dimensions, is both hard work and challenging.

Other statements pointed out the importance of a routine in applying the system and the required time:

One of the most difficult steps was to apply the methodology. Even if the personnel applying it were already specially trained to do this, each meeting with the beneficiaries lasted between 1 and 2 hours. In some cases, the items needed to be explained several times and usually the woman feels the need to exemplify the situation and to think about the question asked. Being a sensitive subject and difficult to handle, the personnel gave time to each person to express and make sure that each item is fully understood. The methodology was easily created once that the reference system was established. The evaluation of the results proved not to be so difficult, since the person in charge worked with this kind of system before.

You must be aware of that it might take a longer time if you use the Level5-system for the first time. The easiest step when working with the LEVEL5 is to define the subtopics (refining), the most difficult step is to find accurate measurement tools (questionnaires, self-assessments, role-plays, observations etc).

Working with the same leader doing group and individual evaluation helped us to develop the reference system and indicators much easier and quicker on second time. I think about 50% of time was saved on the second time.

Partners were able to identify concrete lessons that they acquired as a consequence of their time and effort consuming work. The process itself was needed in order to obtain accurate evaluations of the beneficiaries.

We learnt that *is necessary to spend much time on choosing the appropriate topics and also to define subtopics that are relevant to the assessing group.*
We also learnt that *to find out the best measurement tools/methods is a crucial part of the work. You have to synchronize the tools with the descriptions in the scaling of the topics.*
It is time consuming to choose topics, define subtopics and decide on measurement tools. You have to know what you are asking for in the questionnaires and so on. The measurement tools have to be similar, if not exactly the same at the two assessments, otherwise you can´t see if there has been any change/progress. It is also important to concretize the scaling as far as it is possible in order to facilitate the rating.

4.3 Pre-Knowledge and Skills of Staff

Implementation of LEVEL 5 methodology requires mostly assessments skills and knowledge about the LEVEL5-approach (cube) (see Figure 5 below).

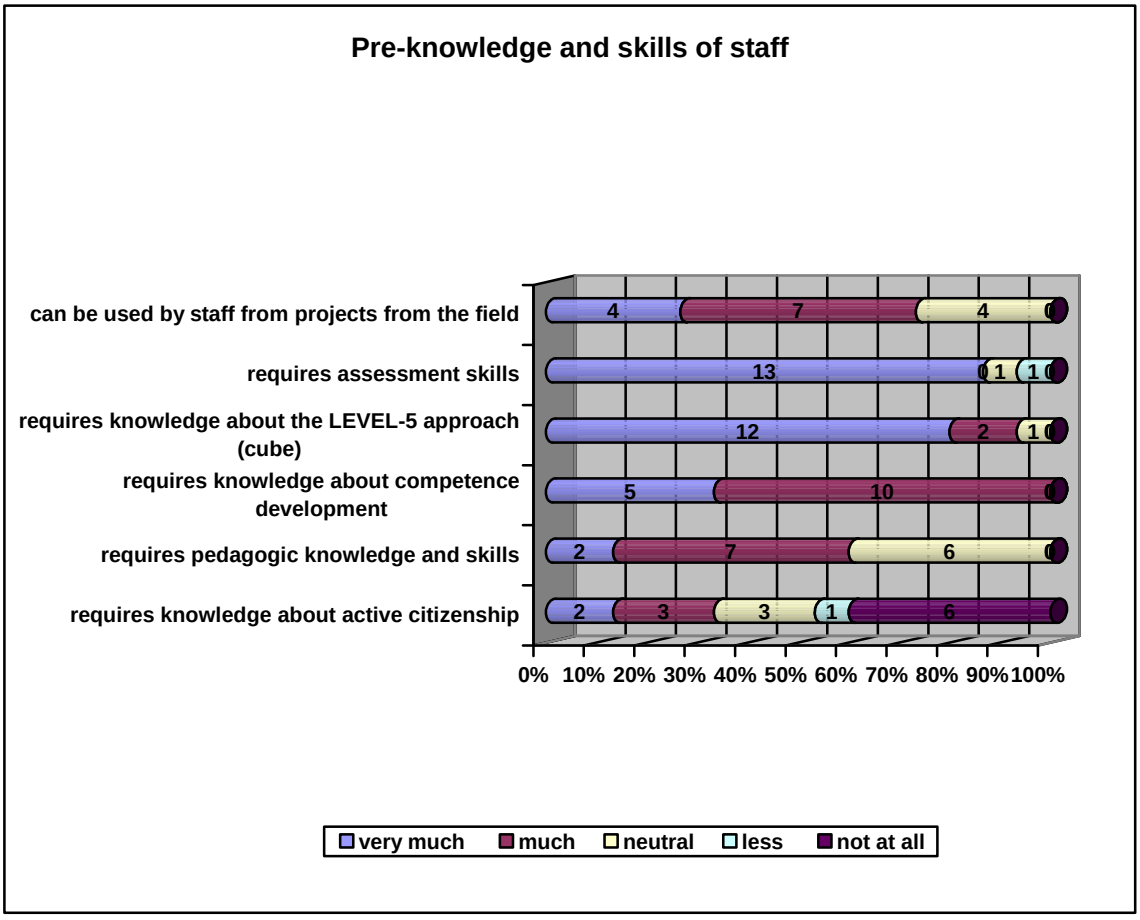

Figure 8: Pre-Knowledge

Exemplary statements from the experience reports:

We found it useful to also use supporting material (e.g. literature on learning in the family in micro project 2) and not just rely on our own perceptions of the project. It is important to have supporting material and the manual to remember which steps have to be taken and how the systems must be built.

People need to know about general evaluation techniques, about indicators and evaluation instruments. At best they should have an educational, human resources or social background or being supported by a person with this background.

Supporting materials proved to be very useful: we needed a video projector (in order to show the participants how to fill in the monitoring charts) and the monitoring forms.

Since the system and the approach has been seen as rather abstract, most partners suggested a preliminary counselling/training on how to apply LEVEL 5. Content of the training was variously described by each partner.

The hard points in this process probably are the definition of the levels, the indicators and the measuring. A training in these aspects would be useful.

An effective training for the personnel and the trainers' abilities to elaborate their own evaluation instruments ensure the project's success.

Training should include: LEVEL5-approach (the procedure), assessment methodology, working with the LEVEL5-software, Competence development, communication and moderation, all very practical in blended learning (5 days Grundtvig 3 course with a preliminary and a follow up phase).

I would expect that the more trained I am in applying this procedure the more exact and fitting will be my descriptions and my own reference system. This is another strong point: I build my own system, this means the quality is dependent on my (only mainly my own) performance. Counsellors are more guides than decisive persons – in the end it's up to me which quality I'm able to deliver.

The system and the approach can be used also from persons with less pedagogic background. The methodology is relatively easy to use and one is able to develop routines in a fast way. Anyhow at least an initial consulting is strongly recommended and European training courses will be of high value.

More emphasis should be given in the training in how to address difficult areas in the building of the reference system: how to identify indicators, how to make sure that the scaling is always similar between two steps, how to assure that the 3 dimensions and their scaling can be approached both vertically and horizontally, providing a coherent whole.

The evaluation levels don't represent singular behaviours, but evolution stages that reunite several behaviours. Because of this, even if a different evaluator observes different behaviours at the same person, our reference system determines him to do the evaluation following certain criteria that evaluate the personal development stage and not the behaviour itself.

4.4 Transferability

LEVEL 5 is appreciated as having a high potential of transferability in social and educational projects (1), in other projects in partner's field of activity (2) as well as in other projects from the region/country of the partners (3). With the support of the current informal network, the evaluation methodology of LEVEL 5 has been already transferred to other micro-projects.
The results are insofar very encouraging since all answers regarding to transferability ranked form "very much" (between 35-70%) and "much" between 30 and 40%.
Only 10% rated the question "application in other projects in my activity field" as neutral and another 20% answered that they did not yet transferred the methodology in other micro projects which is in reverse an extraordinary good rating since it means that 80% of the partners did apply LEVEL5 in other projects.

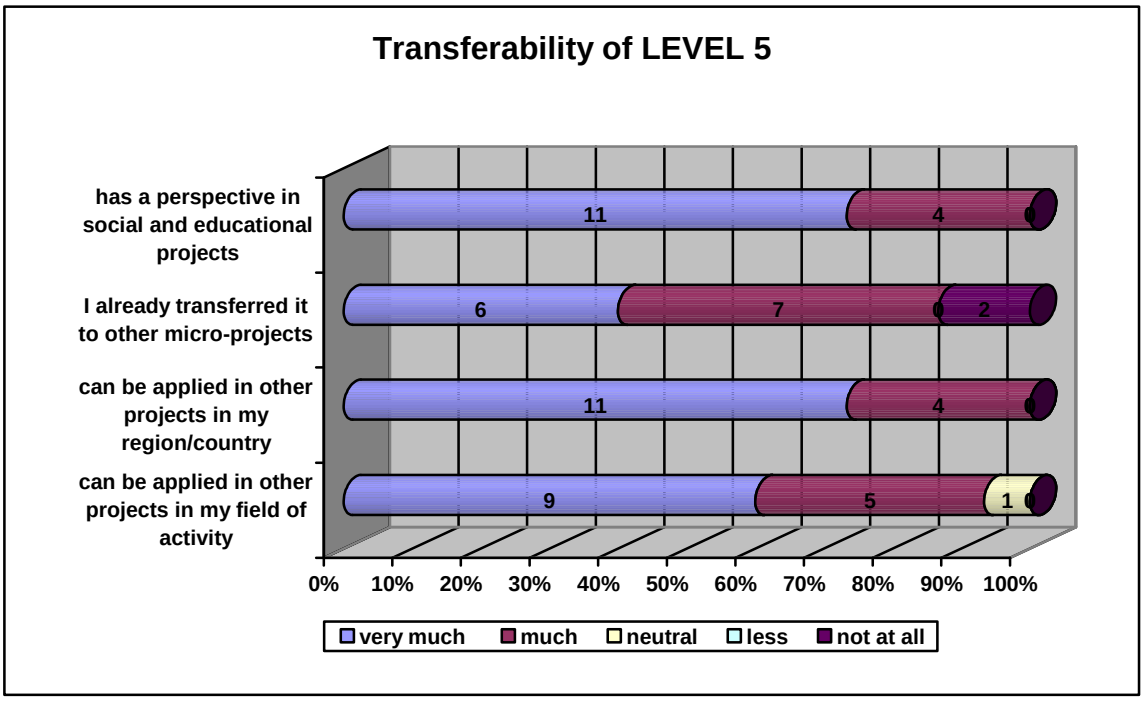

Figure 9: Transferability

This exceptionally high rating in terms of transferability is also reflected in the partners' statements:

The transferability of the system is very high. It can easily be employed in various settings and is especially useful for informal learning contexts. It is interesting to know that despite the claim for lifelong learning and learning in everyday life feasible evidencing systems for the evaluation of these complex situations in informal learning are missing. This also corresponds with our literature research about measuring AC-competences.

Since the system is tailor-made to specific contexts, one of its main characteristics is flexibility. Flexibility also applies in the use of data gathering for assessment and its application to the different target groups. Flexibility is one of the strongest points of this system.

The system is flexible and very adapted to our training centre because until now, we had disseminated tools for the trainees. The LEVEL5 system allows its users to adapt to the target groups whatever aims, competences or levels.

We used it in more than 5 projects by now from very different sectors and target groups like migrants, youths, seniors, in vocational and adult learning, in cultural, environmental and European intercultural projects.

We intend to use the LEVEL5 approach as an intern procedure and to introduce it within the pre-qualifying training system.

We will use the results in the selection process of next years' job students.
We will be able to steer the 'intake' and training of the new job students in a better way
We are more aware of the situation of these students and be able to tackle their problems in a better way.
We will use the definitions and indicators in info days on deontology, ethics and job definition for civil servants
The methodology and thinking processes are definitely applicable in many human resources and training situation
The system is very flexible and applicable to many situations.
I do think that different assessing personnel from an NGO could use the elaborated reference system to document the competences of the beneficiaries.

In the experience report many partners also stressed the high flexibility of the system:

One of the advantages of the system is its flexibility for application in very diverse settings as the system can be built from scratch in every project. On the other hand it can easily be transferred between similar projects (provided that the system is taken through a "reality-check" in the new situation).

The flexibility of the model makes it possible to adapt the system to different kinds of target groups
We are convinced that the system is flexible enough to describe practically every situation if its characteristics are taken into consideration in the respective reference system.

The system is flexible since it is adapting to our institution because until now, we had few specific instruments for the victims. The I LEVEL5-system allows its users to adapt to the target groups.

No limitations at all because of the open frame (inventories and individualised reference system).

Limitations are mainly only mentioned with regard to the people who apply the system who should have sufficient (pre-)knowledge:

As mentioned earlier, the reference system is easily transferable to other projects. Nevertheless, when evaluating the levels and describing competencies it is important that the evaluator has some theoretical and practical background on dealing with evaluation for collecting data with respect to knowledge, attitude, and activity.

Limits lie in the competency of the evaluators, or rather in the consultants.

The system is flexible but time consuming – and it needs people who had a special training to carry out the method.

These last statements hint at the learning and training of informal evaluators and educators. In this connection Eisner stated in 1985:
“Educators have to become critics and connoisseurs.”
He explains *connoisseurship* as the art of appreciation whereas *criticism* is the art of disclosure.
Consequently, “the critic must learn his or her evaluation craft” (Smith 2001, 2006).