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[EVALUATION]

IT Forest Innovative Training in Forest Biomass for
Sustainable Rural Development

Partners



Funding agency



Collaborators



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1. Presentation

The project IT Forest Innovative Training in Forest Biomass for Sustainable Rural Development has been carried out in Castellón and Vistabella del Maestrat from 14th to 25th July 2014. This evaluation is part of the outputs that were established in the initial form submitted and approved to the OAPEE for the Erasmus Intensive Programme Call for Proposals.

This evaluation has been conducted by Laura Menéndez Monzonís, Consultant in Development Cooperation with experience in international projects in Europe and Latin America. It aims to support the participant universities in **knowing the impact of the project** and it counts with the **participation of students, professors and collaborators**.

The evaluation process includes **three phases**:

1. **Preparation** (discussion with the participant universities about the scope of the evaluation, design of the methodology and tool to obtain the information, identification of the sample, coordination of logistics and resources).
2. **Field work** in Castellón and Vistabella, where representatives of students, professors and collaborators have been interviewed with the questionnaire designed in the preparation phase.
3. **Data analysis and elaboration of the evaluation report** with the goals and methodology, context, data analysis and conclusions and recommendations. After the report has been developed, it has been discussed with the project coordinator.

2. Goals and methodology

The **main goal** of this evaluation is to assess the impact of IT Forest according to the initial project form submitted to the OAPEE. This process is oriented towards learning and it would like to contribute to the future course of action.

To achieve this, a **specific goal** has been established:

To analyse how the project has contributed to implicate the university students, if it has provided to the participants with new skills and if it is considered as an added value to the already existing degrees.

Regarding the **methodology**, it has been designed a qualitative process with a sample integrated by 34 people. Among them, 26 were students, 6 were professors and 6 were collaborators (local government, enterprises, civil society organisations). The technic used has been the in-depth interview and the tool has consisted of a semi structured questionnaire with 10 questions (see the questioner in the annex).

3. Context

IT Forest has been carried out from 14th to 25th July 2014 in Castellón and Vistabella del Maestrat. The participants have been **26 students and 6 professors from 3 universities in 3 countries:**

- Universitat Jaume I, Castellón (Spain)
- Universitatea Vasile Alecsandri, Bacau (Romania)
- Karoly Róbert College, Gyöngyös (Hungary)

Its **main objective** has consisted of familiarize the students with the use of forest biomass in energy production to promote new sustainable economic opportunities in rural areas and to do so from a global point of view. Students have worked to develop a plan of action for using forest biomass as an energy resource for a specific rural area (Vistabella del Maestrato, Spain).

The main **activities** have been:

- 1) Specific training for students in energy production from forest biomass in rural areas, with seminars and visits to projects on best practise.
- 2) Student work in multidisciplinary teams to implement the plan of action in Vistabella supervised by experts from different stakeholders: university, cooperatives, forestry enterprises, local administrations, NGOs, etc.

Through this programme, the expected student **learning outcomes** are:

- To integrate practical engineering solutions in additional dimensions (social, economic, environmental, rural), improve language skills, develop group working abilities and appreciate the importance of the integration between technical knowledge and other actors: enterprises, administration, civil society, etc.

4. Data analysis

The analysis of the information obtained from the primary and secondary sources has been structured in three sections: students, professors and collaborators. The consultant has facilitated the process collecting the views expressed by the participants in the project.

4.1. Students

In reference to the **objectives** of the project, the majority of the students consider that it has contributed to appreciate the importance of the integration between universities and other

actors: enterprises, administration, civil society, etc. In general, most of them express that the IP has served to develop group working abilities.

For a better achievement of the objectives, they suggest to increase the time, to improve language skills not just during the project, to visit more companies and to include other renewable resources apart from biomass.

Regarding **the implication of the students** in having an active role and proposing solutions to the real, current and local problems, almost all the interviewed agree in remarking that the IP was an opportunity to exchange knowledge and experience with different cultures and disciplines. Nevertheless, some of them explain that the language was sometimes a barrier, especially in Vistabella, where local people speak only Spanish.

All the students consider that the project has provided the participants with skills to work in **multidisciplinary international groups**. Some of them highlight the importance of a proactive attitude and “being able to listen to different opinions and at the end choosing the best option”. Others remark that now they are “more open and communicative”.

There are different opinions about the better knowledge of the **reality of the rural areas**, due to the fact that some students are coming from areas with similar characteristics to Vistabella, but for others it has been a new scenario. Most of them recognize that the immersion in the village has contributed to learn about the daily rural life.

Some of the main **difficulties** that the students have found while participating in the project there are:

- Language barrier (use of English in the groups and communication with Vistabella population)
- To deal with the different points of view during the work in groups
- To understand the cultural differences
- The schedule was very intensive (more free time would be better)

When asking the students about how they would **improve** the IP in the future, the majority says to be satisfied with the programme. One of the suggestions is that students from other countries could be invited to have a better knowledge of the European dimension.

Among the **strengthens** of the project the students mention:

- Meeting the other participants
- The knowledge they have learned about the topic
- The interaction with local people in Vistabella, “we feel we are welcomed here”
- To exchange information about biomass in Romania, Spain and Hungary
- To learn how to work in teams with different language skills
- The quality of the speakers
- The self-confidence after being able to speak another language in another country

Finally, in their **additional comments** the students acknowledge the universities for the opportunity to participate in the programme and express their wish to be part of future initiatives in the future.

4.2. Professors

All the professors participating in the Erasmus IP (2 of each university) express their **general satisfaction** with the project outputs and experience. In addition, they think that this collaboration has created the **base for future cooperation** among the universities and participants. One of the best examples of this cooperation is the new Erasmus + (Key Action 2) prepared by the consortium and submitted to the OAPEE in April 2014.

In reference to the main **challenges** that the students have faced while participating in the project, the professors remark the use of English and the organization of the group. During the IP they have guided to the students about how to distribute the tasks so the work can be shared in an equilibrate way. In this sense, they consider that the students have been motivated to find the best solution that can be applied for the use of biomass in Vistabella.

They also emphasize the active role of some of the Spanish students that have been previously in Hungary, as they knew the group and have prepared extra-curricular activities for the Romanian and Hungarian students. In the professors' opinion, this has contributed to create an **enjoyable environment** with a positive influence in the learning process.

Both, the work in international groups and the extra-curricular activities, have contributed to the promotion of the **European citizenship** because the students share not only technical solutions but also share their opinion and vision about life and European Union. Reinforcing this aspect, one professor thinks that "the work in the international groups creates the possibility to appear as a big family interested in the future development of European area".

To **improve in the future**, some of the professors recommend increasing the amount of financial resources, especially for the students coming from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds. They also suggest including new concepts in the energy efficiency field, from the point of view of related disciplines such as electrical engineering.

As additional comments, the professors agree in the **strongest points** of the project: the organisation, location, topic and good relationship among the participants. In this sense, almost of the interviewed highlight the relevance of the interaction with the local population to learn about a real situation and to link their engineering studies with other related areas as economy or social cohesion. From their experience the success of the project is due to the fact that "students from different nationalities work together, people from different specialization work together with the wishing to make a common project for isolated communities".

4.3. Collaborators

The **local stakeholders** include enterprises, local governments, NGOs and educational centres. In general, they consider that the grade of achievement for the following **objectives** has been high:

- To familiarize the students with the use of forest biomass in energy production to promote new sustainable economic opportunities in rural areas
- To improve language skills
- To develop group working abilities
- To appreciate the importance of the integration between universities and other actors: enterprises, administration, civil society, etc.

They opine that the project has contributed to implicate the university students because they have **identified themselves with the population** in Vistabella. Moreover, they express that the students have learn **new skills to work in groups** due to the fact that the teams were composed by students from different degrees and nationalities. From their point of view, another positive aspect of the project is the **immersion in Vistabella**, that has helped them to discover that not all the places have an easy access to electricity and renewable energies can be a solution for remote rural areas.

When asking about the project to the **people in Vistabella**, all of them have expressed their support to IT Forest. They state that it has been a good opportunity for the **internationalization** of the village that will contribute to the visibility of the area at European level. In addition, they consider that it contributes to the **economic development**, due to the fact that the participants have been living in local houses and eating in the village restaurants.

Last but not least, they agree in the relevance of increasing the **knowledge about biomass**, because this is a real problem in Vistabella and they recognize that new and creative solutions are needed to find out the best alternatives to take advantage of the forestry existing in the county.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Right after there are presented the main conclusions and recommendations identified from the **analysis of the reflections and views** of the students, professors and collaborators in the project IT Forest. For the elaboration of this section it has been done a **review of the results and products** of the project, according to the initial form submitted to the OAPEE.

The comparison between the planned and achieved **goals** shows that the grade of accomplishment is, in most of the cases, high and very high. The students have familiarized with the use of biomass, improved the language skills, developed working abilities and appreciated the importance of the collaboration among development actors. One

recommendation for the future would be to reinforce the integration of practical engineering solutions in additional dimensions (social, economic, environmental).

The idea of working in a **specific problem** (use of biomass) and in a **particular context** (Vistabella) has helped the students to deal with a real problem. If the task had been more general and big, the learning process wouldn't have been so effective. In fact, some of the students have expressed their interest in keeping the research about this topic for their final grade project or a future PhD. It has also been very positive to mix people from **different degrees and nationalities**, because each person can contribute from his/her experience and learn from the others.

This experience can be considered as a seed for **future cooperation** among the universities. To ensure it, it would be advisable to work further in the identification of common interests and needs, because the daily work can make difficult extra collaborations if they are not included in the already established curricula.

Academically, it has been very appropriate to combine a theoretical week in Castellón and a practical week in Vistabella. Although the schedule has been quite intensive, the presentations in Vistabella have contributed to provide a vision about the work and ideas of young rural people looking for local development and economic sustainability.

The **management** of the project has been a challenge, because some of the procedures were new for the universities and some of the administrative tasks have been quite complex (such as the approval of the protocol or the publication of the scholarships to select the students. This load has been reduced thanks to the support of all the universities in the consortium, that have demonstrated the commitment and institutional support to the IP.

About the **logistics**, the effort of being in two different places (Vistabella and Castellón) has been worthy. This option has given the Spanish students and professors the opportunity to share housing with the Romanian and Hungarian students resulting in an excellent daily coexistence. In these sense, for future projects, it is suggested to organize more free time and social programmes for the students.

After these considerations, it can be affirmed that the goals established in the project have been achieved. This IP can become the **starting point** of a further interuniversity cooperation strategy in the renewable energy area. In this sense, the following step could be to reinforce the collaboration among the partners to contribute in solving real problems and extending the coverage to other related fields.

Annex

Semi structured questionnaire

IT FOREST

QUESTIONNEER FOR THE EVALUATION

The data provided in the interview will be strictly confidential. It will be very useful to assess the impact of the project IT Forest in its multiple facets, to identify gaps and/or areas of potential intervention.

1. Do you think that the following objectives have been achieved? In which grade?

Objective	Low	Medium	High
a. To familiarize the students with the use of forest biomass in energy production to promote new sustainable economic opportunities in rural areas			
b. To integrate practical engineering solutions in additional dimensions (social, economic, environmental)			
c. To improve language skills			
d. To develop group working abilities			
e. To appreciate the importance of the integration between universities and other actors: enterprises, administration, civil society, etc.			

2. In your opinion, the project has contributed to implicate the university students in having an active role and proposing solutions to the real, current and local problems? How?
3. Do you consider that the project has provided to the participants with skills to work in multidisciplinary international groups? Why?
4. Do you think that the project has helped to bring the participants to the reality of the rural areas and the energy related problems?
5. Do you consider that the project has created a base for future cooperation among the participants? Which kind of cooperation?
6. From your point of view, the work in international groups of students has contributed to the promotion of the European citizenship? How?
7. Which have been the main difficulties that you have faced while participating in the project?
8. What improvements would you recommend for future projects?
9. Which have been the strengthens of the project?
10. Additional comments

THANKS FOR YOUR COLLABORATION!!

