



Executive Agency, Education, Audiovisual and Culture



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Executive Summary

Conventus – learning system for cooperatives was launched to create greater understanding and knowledge of situation of the cooperatives in Europe among the co-operators themselves, to strengthen their self-esteem and cooperative identity and also to enhance entrepreneurial skills. The partnership consists of six different organisations from five countries: Finland, Sweden, Italy, Poland and Iceland, and it is a combination of universities and supporting organisations of cooperatives. This approach in construction of the partnership enables inclusion of different views and perspectives and enhances our target of sustainable project results utilised in European level, as research, practical guidance and strong knowledge of working and development of ICT tools are represented.

The project story, Conventus – Learning system for cooperatives

After positive decision from the Lifelong Learning Programme, partners decided to start the project the 1st of November 2011. The kick-off meeting took place in Kemi, Finland, in the beginning of December that year.

The first step to identify different needs for the learning system was to make a gap analysis. The purpose was to understand the current situation of the cooperative movement and the existing support for them, identify the training needs, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and compare the situation in different countries/ regions. The report also provided the first draft for curriculum plan for a learning system, and was presented to partners in more detail in project meeting in Bifrost, Iceland, March 2012. The curriculum plan includes 5 modules:

1. The history, ideology and status of the cooperative movement
2. Being a cooperative member
3. Establishing cooperative
4. Managing cooperative
5. Horizontal module, complementing the other modules, identifying development needs of cooperatives and providing tools for group processes among other things.

During the project meeting and study visit in Italy, June 2012, the learning system was discussed again. Also some group processes were tested there.

All materials is available on OpenMoodle virtual learning environment, thus the system is requiring registration. The learning platform(s) can be located on:

<http://openmoodle.tokem.fi/> (Folder: Conventus)

During the second year of the project, partners concentrated on testing, piloting and developing the learning system, and exchanging of best practices during the different meetings and study visits. Modification of the learning system, as well as confirming sustainability and further use of it, was in focus during the last months, and the results were presented in final conference in Helsinki, Finland, in September 2013.

More information on www.conventuscoop.eu.

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1. Project Objectives

The objective of the project is to create greater understanding and knowledge of situation of the cooperatives in Europe among the co-operators themselves to strengthen their self-esteem and cooperative identity and entrepreneurial skills. This will be done through the meetings to learn and develop together with new contacts, using for example ICT to facilitate and give added values to the meetings. The new skills that are required for the cooperative enterprise means updating the competences to assure a better match with labour market needs to contribute to new job creation and to address to society changing (new disadvantaged categories of people, such as demographic change with older and younger unemployed).

The project will develop:

- The approach to introduce cooperation as a method and identify the group as an effective way for learning and working together. This approach will guide the interactive meetings where the co-operators are the protagonists;
- The ICT-based learning approach to create tools that will support the meetings and the activities. The use of multimedia and video is a way of presenting the same language, images and metaphors present in the working context, and in the non-formal and informal learning processes.

The project will adopt these methodological approaches as they are typical of what actually takes place in a real working context and in the non-formal and informal learning in the cooperative field. In fact, working together is often the best way for learning technical contents and skills on-the-job.

The specific target chosen is that of co-operators who need to be trained to become more aware of the characteristics of the cooperatives. Training is one of the fundamental principles and requisites for cooperatives identified by the ICA.

2. Project Approach

The project is structured in 7 work packages:

WP1	Management	P1, Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences
WP2	Gap analysis	P5, Bifrost University
WP3	Learning system	P1
WP4	Exchange of best practises	P2
WP5	Dissemination	P3
WP6	Exploitation	P6
WP7	Evaluation	P3

The partnership operates on the basis of a multi-actor approach and involves organisations with expertise in the fields of co-operative movement, ICT, entrepreneurship, eLearning. WP leaders have been chosen based on their expertise.

Partners met/ meet at 6 face-to-face meetings to ensure good cooperation and understanding of the common goals. Three of these meetings include also a study visit for cooperatives that participate in piloting the learning system.

Methods are used that are congruent with ICAs statements regarding cooperative values. Activities have been facilitated using participative group methods. Each activity aims to be life nurturing and empowering. Processes will be facilitated where participants clarify their purpose, leadership, vision, community and management. Individuals will define their role and the cooperative will define its role in its local context. This assists cooperatives to function as a whole.

Transfer of knowledge started at early stages, so as much as possible of the work can be done with local facilitators, ensuring sustainability. ICT is used to support the long term collaboration regarding training, exchange of experiences and mutual support. Evaluations are conducted using the same participative approach.

Methodology ensures success regarding (1) development of project organization, (2) development of individual cooperatives and (3) strengthening cooperative development

1. The project organization has to be well functioning. The ambition is to ensure that the organization works efficiently and acts as a role model.

2. Individual cooperatives /individuals will be offered development including entrepreneurship and skills training and learning with/from other. A structure for continuous use of this network will be built using ICT and social media.
3. Coop development will be enhanced through exchange of knowledge between cooperatives.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

One of the first main outcomes was a gap analysis. The purpose was to understand the current situation of the cooperative movement and the existing support for them, identify the training needs, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and compare the situation in different countries/ regions. The report also provided the first draft for curriculum plan for a learning system, and was presented to partners in more detail in project meeting in Bifrost, Iceland, March 2012.

Here are some of the results, providing a wider perspective to the differences and similarities in partner regions:

Comparison of co-op situation in partner countries (2010/ 2011)					
	FINLAND	ICELAND	ITALY	POLAND	SWEDEN
Number of inhabitants	5.375.276	320.000	60.681.514	38.000.000	9.415.570
Number of co-op employees	37.480	800	1.100.000	300.000	63.000
Number of co-op companies	4.227	35	43.000	9.000	12.500
Number of co-op federations	9	1	12	62 ¹	22
Largest co-op business sectors	Retail trade Banking Wood processing	Retail trade Housing Food process	Agriculture Banking Social	Housing Agriculture / Dairy Consumer	Consumer Housing Agriculture
Number of individuals for establishing a cooperative	3 ²	Not required ³	Depends on sector ⁴	5 (social coop), 10 for all other	3
Specific law on cooperatives	Yes ⁵	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, but there is a special law for economic associations
Co-op employees % of inhabitants	0,7%	0,3%	1,8%	1%	0,7%
Average no of employees pr co-op company	9	23	26	33	5

¹ 17 have national status

² But if you want to maintain your employer status and the rights for the unemployment allowances, you have to have 7 persons (min).

³ If more than 15 then the cooperative has to make detailed written resolution.

⁴ Minimum 3 for labour, social service coops; 50 for the consumer; and 200 for credit

⁵ The cooperative act (Osuuskuntalaki 28.12.2001/1488).The renewal of the legislation is going on (equivalent with the legislation of limited company legislation)

Some of the common features were identified on SWOT analysis:

SUMMARY	
STRENGTH	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training activities (FI, IT, PO, SE) • Co-operative culture/ideology (IS, IT) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited knowledge of the co-op model (FI, IS, IT, PO) • Negative attitude to co-ops (IS, PO)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased demand/interest for training (IS, IT, SE) • Using new and more sufficient methods for training (PO,SE) • Teach other co-operative organizations and cooperative enterprises have very good survival rates (SE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of new business investments (IS, IT) • Commercial companies taking over the “market” (PO)

On the other hand, there were significant differences in target groups and therefore also on training needs. This caused a lot of discussion and also some delay in getting effectively into the next steps, actual development of the learning system. As the first curriculum plan was developed after the gap analysis, partners discussed and focused it during the following months. Partners were willing to confront the heterogeneity of the cooperative systems in this consortium, which could have lead towards a gap between those having a strong and long-lasting tradition and those that are now approaching the cooperative system or that are experiencing socio-economic conditions that does not support the development of a big cooperative movement. These backgrounds lead towards different approaches in identifying and addressing cooperative’s needs and development strategies. Due such heterogeneity to be acknowledged and then managed, the achievement of mid-term results has been effected and some deliverables are a little behind scheduled deadlines. Nonetheless, this can be seen also as an added value for the project because there is a big confrontation among partners and a real exchange of practices that might enrich the project outputs and the consortium as a whole.

During the project meeting and study visit in Italy, June 2012, and in Sweden in November 2012, the learning system was discussed again. Also some group processes were tested there, as some of the cooperatives that were piloting the learning system were invited to the meetings and benchmarking visits to the local cooperatives.

The learning system consists of different approaches: consultation, training, self-learning and online training, depending on the needs. It is also possible to take self-evaluation tests (the availability of tests varies in different language versions, but all tests are available in English) on the open learning environment built under OpenMoodle platform. All materials are available there, thus the system is requiring registration. Registration allows comparison of earlier results of a certain cooperative or individual as a feedback for learning results. The learning platform(s) can be located on:

<http://openmoodle.tokem.fi/> (Conventus)

The curriculum plan can be summarized as following:

- Framework focus on practical skills training and group processes. There is limited number of sub-divisions, and focus on general part and especially nature of cooperatives. All relevant SKILLS project outcomes are a part of the learning system as well. The model should be useful at a European level and adaptable for other cooperative systems.

Module 1, The history, ideology and status of the cooperative movement	Module 2, Being a cooperative member	Module 3, Establishing a cooperative	Module 4, Managing a cooperative
Overall responsibility: Iceland SKILLS: CKUS, FTC, KTUAS	Overall responsibility KTUAS SKILLS: CKUS, FTC, KTUAS	Overall responsibility Coop Finland <i>Involved in overall planning: CKUS + KTUAS</i>	Overall responsibility KTUAS Involved in overall planning: COOP Finland, FTC
Focus on creating cooperative attitudes; highlight the background and ideology of coop movement. (Historical facts can be included and are probably available in each country, but are not critical success factor of this module). SKILLS material can be applied on this module. WP2 report can be applied also. Supplement with information on European coops.	Additional material from SKILLS As a member of coop: what rights and obligations do I have? Why become a member? For people and groups that have not started yet. <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to evaluate possible membership, consider personal situation and aims. <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to work and make decisions <input type="checkbox"/> Identify issues concerning memberships in statutes and coop legislation	Focus on dealing with practicalities of setting up the coop (e.g. it starts with the group of people who share an idea and a goal). Wheel. Approach could be orientation → base of the coop → extension → development (improvement). Note: 1 model does not suite to different groups of people. Business idea, business plan, marketing, finance, basic mechanism of business economics e.g. pricing and work cost. Start up & registration of coop. Contact information to the advisory bodies. Guidance and example documents. Point out the importance of establishing process and its human resource dimensions. <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to create, evaluate and further develop a business idea <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to create a business plan by using business plan templates <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to organize business: production, marketing etc. Several learning days spread to a reasonable schedule, including basic studying/ teaching, creating own business ideas/plans, having feedback and further development Material and tools: - "national" business plan template (commonly used, well-known among advisors and support/finance organisations, has coop dimension also?) - "national" pricing/work cost calculation model	Focus on special nature of coop. management (co- and self-); how coop differs from regular enterprise, how to sustain nature and principles of coop. What are requirements for me as a manager? How to distinguish between the roles as a member, responsible board member, employed. Management of work organization. Board: role, business plan development including vision; strategy and goals to develop coop activities. Responsibilities for the goals and finance. Employer's role + responsibility. Professionalism linked to the coop principles (also board responsibility). <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to contribute successful coop management <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to distinguish between the role of the worker and decision-maker in different situations <input type="checkbox"/> As a manager, ability to utilize coop members commitment, knowledge

		- "national" basic guides	and innovation
<p>Module 5 Overall responsibility: CKUS Involved in overall planning: FTC</p> <p>Complement to other modules. Need to train and develop existing coops to become a strong part of the market. Analyze current status and look development needs → knowledge bank</p> <p>Expanding existing coop Group process Horizontal themes Regeneration tool for cooperatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Membership: evaluation -- regeneration of membership, recruiting new members (e.g. workers->members) - Products: evaluation -- demand, profitability --> development, trash bin, new product - Customers and market: evaluation, re-segmentation, new segments or market - Organisation: evaluation -- bottle-necks, team work - Management: evaluation -- training, member contribution 			

All partners were involved in collecting existing materials to different modules on national level, also depending on their specific needs. In case that some partner was missing relevant material, we agreed others assist in finding and possibly translating the material. Modules 1-4 may be overlapping on national levels, depending on the form of the existing material (as an example, in Finland there is lot of material including both module 3 and module 4 elements). Module 5 is horizontal, crossing all other modules and lifting for example the value of group processes higher. Self-evaluation, group evaluation and such online tools are also part of this module, as well as exchange of good practices which is integrated into the whole learning system.

The results mirror a good connection with Wp2 and with the former project Skill which assures continuity and exploitation of the results achieved in that project.

An important contribution to the elaboration of learning materials (deliverable 3.2) came from FTC given that it represents a big cooperative system in which a process of testing and implementation of training modules is already in action. As far as multimedia learning materials (deliverable 3.1) is concerned, the information and communication technology (ICT) expertise of Kemi Tornio University provided a valuable contribution in addressing technology to cooperatives' peculiarities and learning needs. The use of Moodle multimedia web platform have been the focus of the testing activities for the target-groups (deliverable 4.2).

Due to the heterogeneous training needs, the learning system focuses more on the exploitation and further development of traditional material compared to group process method.

Concerning WP4, Exchange of best practices which also included piloting of the learning system, the 4Wheel training framework corresponding to the four main areas (leadership, value, community, management) have been tested within the consortium during the project meeting in Trento (deliverable 4.1). That testing session enabled partners to better identify the cooperatives' training needs also taking into account the differences among the consortium cooperative systems as reported in the study visit documentation (deliverable 4.3).

The significant differences in target groups and therefore also on training needs, lead to a long confrontation on the curriculum plan developed after the gap analysis and

on the definition of target groups, which caused some delay in the implementation of the learning system.

Involvement of target groups (cooperative representatives) was made possible by organizing two dedicated training sessions and study visits (deliverable 4.2): Sweden – November 2012 and Poland – May 2013. Those sessions focused on practical skills training and group processes.

Testing a learning model to cooperative systems having substantial differences has been a challenge that nonetheless provide useful remarks to the consortium especially as far as the necessity to customize these tools in order to address real needs. This brings to attention the problem of replicability when target groups are heterogeneous. Moreover the balance between group process and individual training has to be carefully defined according to partners' feedbacks.

To ensure the smooth processes and understanding of responsibilities in implementation of the project, consortium agreement was made during the first months of the project. With the same target, coordinator has also organized monthly online meetings with the partners. This has been highly appreciated, as it allows regular discussion and presentation of the current status, and it was also considered as a contribution for better cooperation between partners.

To create greater understanding of the project, dissemination plan was prepared by each partner and summarized by Italian partner. Italian partners also enabled common information and communication templates and contributed to the setting up of the project blog and web pages together with Finnish coordinator on

www.conventuscoop.eu.

All partners have then implemented and updated the dissemination plan on national or even on international level.

A set of social media tools have been used to provide updated information.

e-newsletter on the partner websites, articles on local/partner magazines, meetings with regional and national stakeholders and meetings with the pilot groups enhanced the project dissemination.

Overall, partners carried out the dissemination activities according to their plan. The development of this Wp has been effected by the initial task of the project: the definition of the learning system which slackened the working plan of Wp5 and Wp6.

For identifying and making different stakeholders committed to the project activities and valorization of the results, partners also prepared the exploitation plan with the lead of Coop Finland. All partners have involved and will involve other regional and national stakeholders in discussions of the cooperative movement and supporting activities in different countries.

The final output of WP6, Exploitation is the result of a process of rationalization of the material produced during the project. The activity guided by Coop Finland required partners' support and has been carried out especially in cooperation with WP5 .

The output is a publication that will serve as a catalogue of all the material and reports of the project. It presents curriculum and materials of the learning system, and can be used also as teachers guide. The main concern about this product was the definition of the best way to make project results available given that some are stored on Moodle platform and available in electronic form, and other (such as the

learning system report) are too long for a disseminating purpose. This implied the cooperation of the partners in reframing the results in order to make them friendly usable to a wide public.

Sustainability of the results was in a core of all thinking. This has also been noted on regular evaluation (WP7) of the project, as well as evaluation reports (both internal and external) have given valuable feedback for the whole partnership.

Given that the internal evaluation was conceived as a form of self-monitoring and a way to make the consortium aware of the whole project development, it took a strategic role in the first period.

Periodical surveys enabled partners to share their point of view on critical aspect of the project and how to sort out some problems (especially in WP2, WP3 and WP4). In this respect evaluation was a good exercise for the consortium to be aware of the state of the art of the project and to introduce a debate on what comes next, how to finalize the efforts in order to achieve a valuable outcome.

In the second period evaluation changed its function and was more helpful in keeping the cohesion among the consortium. To this end the survey focused on the project developments by asking WP leaders to provide updated description of their respective activities gathering information from partners involved.

Overall the discussion among partners provided relevant ideas for future improvements of the learning platform. Particularly, the heterogeneity of the consortium became a relevant issue to consider while addressing the theme of replicability and scalability of the project which can be achieved only by taking into account also customization issues in order to be able to address the specific needs of different target groups.

The objective of the Conventus project was to create greater understanding and knowledge of the situation of the cooperatives in Europe among the co-operators themselves, so as to strengthen their self-esteem and cooperative identity and entrepreneurial skills, updating the cooperative competences and assure a better match with labor market needs, contributing to new job creation and addressing the changes in society.

We aimed at making difference in our countries or regions, and enhancing the development of cooperative systems also in other countries with the help of Conventus – Learning system for cooperatives, and continue working with this topic also in future. As one positive example of even unexpected results during the project, one new co-operative was set up in Iceland as a direct result of the pilot course. We hope these examples keep coming up.

Concerning the future, it has also been discussed among partners, and further co-operation possibilities are tracked. The external evaluation process also collected some possible future improvements in the project field, described under section 5.

4. Partnerships

The project is managed by Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences (KTUAS), a higher educational institution in Northern Finland. It was established 1992 and has staff around 280 persons, serving around 2800 students. Studies are divided into three units: Business and Culture, Social Studies and Health Care, and Technology. Adult education plays an important role in the activities. Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences is also an active eLearning developer in Finland since 1999. The core activities are education, research, development and innovation, and regional development. In Conventus project, Kemi-Tornio is responsible for leading the preparation and design of multimedia and interactive learning materials together with partners (work package 3) in addition to coordination of the project (work package 1).

Coompanion Cooperative Development agency of Skaraborg (CKUS), located in Falköping, Sweden, started 1990 as a co-operative association. The members are mix of municipalities of Skaraborg, the established cooperation and new cooperatives. Coompanion has a recognized experience in vocational guidance and counselling in the specific field of cooperation. CKUS promotes co-operative development and business development in the Social Economy as a whole. In the project, CKUS is responsible of exchange of best practises (work package 4) and together with partners develop tools and methods for this work package, sharing their knowledge and good practices and being responsible also for documentation of study visits organised in Italy (June 2013), Sweden (November 2012) and Poland (May 2013).

The Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione (FTC) is a non-governmental private organization founded in 1895, based in Trentino in the north of Italy. FTC groups together almost all cooperative enterprises in the Trentino Region (approx.. 500). More than 50% of inhabitants in the region are cooperative members. FTC provides assistance, consultancy, supervision and auditing services in all business sectors and acts as political representative giving support to the movement as a whole, among several other activities related to development of the cooperative sector. Their contribution in the project is significant in the forms of expertise in cooperative learning field, in design of ICT based contents and exchanging good practices. They also coordinated the earlier SKILLS project, which partially contributed to this, and we all will utilize the results of the earlier project in Conventus. FTC's specific responsibility in this project is related to dissemination (work package 5) and evaluation (work package 7), and they are supporting the lead partner in managing the project.

National Co-operative Council (NCC) is the apex organization of Polish co-operative movement, founded in 1995. NCC represents almost 9000 single cooperatives of 15 sectors. Their main aim is to represent the whole cooperative movement in Poland and abroad, to assist and to steer the development strategy of the movement and to draft legal framework for the cooperatives. NCC is also organizing training for cooperatives. Their goal in this project is to enhance cooperative training systems

and entrepreneurial skills of cooperatives, as well as to improve access to training via new advanced tools. They are also filling the national gap in analysing the cooperative education in Poland and providing suggestions and solutions to support further development.

Bifrost University (BU) is a direct descendant of the Cooperative School, which was founded in Reykjavik, Iceland in 1918. Today Bifrost University is an institution of considerable diversity, which offers its students quality training in business, law, and the social sciences, and prepares them for positions of responsibility and leadership both in Iceland and abroad. The number of students is around 1300. Bifrost University coordinated gap analysis phase (work package 2), and it resulted to comparison of cooperative movement and learning models targeted to cooperatives in participating countries or regions. They are collaborating closely with the cooperative organisations or organisations with similar functions as the coop movement.

Osuustoiminnan kehittäjät – Coop Finland (COOP) is a national association of experts on cooperative and mutual entrepreneurship, established in 1997. The association aims to improve and keep up to date its members expertise in cooperative development. Their main goals are supporting small cooperatives and improving the position of cooperative developers with several activities like consultation, networking and promotion. Coop Finland is responsible of exploitation of the project results (work package 6).

5. Plans for the Future

Partners aim to sustain, maintain and develop the learning system developed during the Conventus project. Each partner has made specific plans for ensuring further use of the learning system.

Concerning the future, it has also been discussed among partners, and further co-operation possibilities are tracked. The external evaluation process also collected some possible future improvements in the project field:

The growing importance of non-formal and informal learning might be reflected in a further development of the Conventus project tools, in order to keep it connected, if possible, with on-going developments of European mobility policies. A possible further future evolution of the project might take into account the European ECVET system. A second line of evolution of the project might be connected to validation of non-formal and informal learning, according to Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012. Starting from the fact that most of the co-operative human resources acquire their crosscutting competences and skills in a concrete workplace, it would be challenging to take in consideration the possibility of a further evolution of the current Conventus Learning system in this direction. Furthermore we would like to stress the importance of a possible future challenge: designing and implementing a learning system which could be integrated in differently shaped learning paths - structured as formal, non-formal and informal learning -, and so fittingly structured as to be provided to different target groups adopting a tailor-made approach, according to their specific needs.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The importance and the positive role of cooperatives as vehicles for the implementation of many European Community objectives in fields like education, employment policy and social integration, is demonstrated by the adoption of the Recommendation on the Promotion of Cooperatives by the International Labour Conference in 2002 which states, “The promotion of the cooperatives should be considered as one of the pillars of national and international economic and social development.”. Amongst the main actions for the promotion of cooperatives are education and training of the co-operators. The educational needs of cooperative members are often neglected and the particular nature of co-operative enterprises calls for tailored VET. The cooperative education promoted in schools or universities, contributes to develop a cooperative culture but cannot embrace the training needs within cooperative system. New learning methodology based on innovative contents and procedures have to be developed in order to improve members competences, to arise their cooperative identity. In the partners countries the cooperatives have developed distinct characteristics and features based on their own histories and cultures. Partners’ experience in the vocational education and training, and the deep knowledge within their cooperative movements will provide different perspective on the learning process. The international partnership will strengthen cross-border cooperation through the use of ICT tools e.g. interactive meetings and new learning materials. This is to promote intercultural dialogue and strengthen the co-operative identity.



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