

Intellectual Output Code: O13

# Project Summary

Prepared by Meath Partnership



SYNERGY

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# 1. Introduction

■ At the heart of the SYNERGY project is the belief that when SMEs succeed, Europe succeeds. The SYNERGY project team understands that 'SME' is a little acronym but it covers a huge diversity of companies, sectors and circumstances. Hidden within this large universe of companies across Europe are the champions of tomorrow. New companies, especially SMEs, represent the most important source of new employment creating more than 4 million new jobs every year in Europe. However, support measures for SMEs throughout Europe remain unbalanced with a substantial number of EU Member States still neglecting to take into account the needs or unique characteristics of small businesses, in particular micro-enterprises. These are the gaps in service provision that the SYNERGY project team has elected to address. Since August 2014, the SYNERGY project team has been developing, delivering and disseminating the project and its innovative outputs; aiming to bridge the gap between the current offering of VET support for micro-enterprises, and the increasing need for specialised training amongst Europe's SMEs.

SYNERGY is a B2B initiative aimed at connecting business owners with other business owners and in so doing creating high-value and quality long-term relationships. Through the use of social networks, SYNERGY has brought together business owners, trainers, mentors and enterprise support agencies to foster a culture of learning within the micro-enterprise sector promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In consultation with small business owners across Europe, the project team has;

- developed a series of mini-learning training courses;
- provided free to use information resources and toolkits;
- facilitated online networking and mentoring;
- addressed the real training needs of the micro-enterprise and SME sector.

Overall, SYNERGY aimed to minimise business failure, strengthen operational capacity and tap into the wealth of knowledge and expertise amongst business owners across Europe. SYNERGY is promoted by a project consortium of

seven organisations from across Europe, namely Ireland, Italy, Romania, Cyprus, Greece, Germany and Finland. Through the partnership fostered with local stakeholders and target group members over the past 24 months, the project team feels that the project aims have been achieved and that real progress has been made towards improving the quality of VET for nascent and existing entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises across Europe.

## 2. Key target groups

■ The main target groups of the SYNERGY project are:

1. Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisations and professionals working to support the development of the micro-enterprise sector;
2. Owner managers of micro-enterprises.

SYNERGY project partners have worked with these target groups over the past two years to produce relevant training materials and to create an online platform where these groups can interact and network together to improve the quality of learning and training provision for micro-enterprises in Europe.

## 3. Main aims and objectives

■ The SYNERGY project is a great example of how funding under the Erasmus+ programme can provide local business owners with an opportunity to network with businesses in other European countries; to make the connections needed to target new customer sectors or geographical locations; to form partnerships that would otherwise not be possible, or simply to be inspired by the approaches and methods used by other micro-enterprise owners to maximise their return.

The SYNERGY team has worked to reduce the 'real-world distance' between the training opportunities which VET offers micro-enterprise owners and the requirements of business owners in terms of training, development and up-skilling. To achieve the project's ambitious but pertinent aims, specific objectives were agreed upon by consortium partners when the project was first being

conceptualised. These defined project objectives included, to:

1. Support a culture of learning within SMEs;
2. Support the continuous professional development of VET trainers building their knowledge and understanding of the business world;
3. Create a sense of community between micro-enterprise owners and VET providers;
4. Design and implement a series of cost-effective, flexible, peer-to-peer learning micro-social networks to increase the range of educational services and supports;
5. Provide a suite of media-rich learning resources that address specific skill needs within the SME sector.

## 4. Overview of Development History of the Project - Review of Intellectual Outputs

■ The primary aim of the SYNERGY project was to develop tools and resources to meet the needs of VET providers and micro-enterprises across Europe. As this was an innovative approach to ensuring that businesses can avail of practical and relevant support from the VET sector, it was necessary that a comprehensive research process was undertaken by the project partners. As part of this process, SYNERGY project partners undertook to design, coordinate and implement a Research and Audit Framework; the outcomes of which would act as the evidence base for the future development work of the project, particularly with regard to the Induction to Pedagogy training, the Mini-learning Format Resources and the peer-to-peer learning to be facilitated through the micro-social networks.

To ensure that the research conducted by each partner addressed a common set of issues with a defined level of analysis, a common research framework was developed by CARDET. The implementation of this common research framework ensured that the learning tools and resources developed were of relevance to the needs of the VET and SME communities, and that this work was based on current and relevant research.

At the same time, SYNERGY project partners also undertook an audit of local businesses to ascertain the current skill and knowledge assets and deficits within the local SME business community. This skill asset audit was necessary to ensure that the content of resources developed was relevant to address skill deficits and was not superfluous to the existing knowledge of the micro-enterprise owners and managers. Working with the SYNERGY Research Framework, AOA Arges formulated a common audit tool comprising 24 questions; this formed the Audit Framework, and focussed on the following four areas:

1. Identifying specific skill assets and knowledge within existing micro-enterprises that could be harnessed to support the development of the sector as a whole;
2. The learning preferences of micro-enterprise owners and the most appropriate learning platforms and environments for the proposed peer-to-peer learning;
3. What are the learning areas where gaps in provision exist that need to be addressed with the proposed mini-learning-format resources?
4. What are the skill assets within the micro-enterprise community that could be used to inform the Train the Trainer courseware to ensure that the skills developed within the VET sector reflect the needs of business?

The summary research and audit reports comprised the evidence base for development actions of the consortium and for the development of all intellectual outputs and training resources produced. The results clearly demonstrate that at that time the training offering available to micro-enterprise owners did not reflect the real world needs of these entrepreneurs. Traditional forms of training courses delivered over several days at distant locations were deemed not fit for purpose; it was agreed that these courses failed to recognise the demands and pressures on business owners today. Short, bite-sized training offerings that can be accessed on the go or at a time that is convenient for the business owner was in high demand. Coupled with opportunities for networking, peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange was also greatly sought after. With these findings collated, the project team got to work developing the resources and building the platform required to respond to the needs of the SME business community.

The SYNERGY project team started developing the bespoke Train-the-Trainer Curriculum, producing the induction to pedagogy and the mini-learning format resources and disseminating the SYNERGY Exchange platform directly with the project target groups.

## 4.1 Train the Trainer Curriculum

The SYNERGY Train the Trainer Curriculum has been designed to support VET professionals who work in the traditional VET setting to become competent e-tutors who can accurately and competently respond to the needs of micro-enterprises through the design, development and delivery of a suite of mini-learning resources.

Participants using the curriculum develop the technical skills and expertise they need to facilitate their development as e-tutors; to enhance their knowledge and understanding of e-didactics and to enable them to use software and equipment available to them, to produce a series of short online learning resources for the business community.

This Curriculum offers participants the opportunity to attain accreditation at QQI (Quality & Qualifications Ireland) Level 6 by successfully completing the assessments for module 6N3326: 'Training Delivery and Evaluation'.

## 4.2 Training Our Trainers

A key element of the SYNERGY project was to engage with VET tutors and trainers and support them through a CPD programme to deepen, strengthen and broaden their entrepreneurial teaching to meet the real needs of small to medium-sized business owners. To provide this CPD training to VET professionals in all implementing countries, it was decided that project partners would each elect to send four experienced adult educators to attend a 5-day bespoke Train-the-Trainer programme in Ireland, in February 2016. Following on from this, a cascading model of training was then employed by each partner, whereby the programme delivered in Ireland, would be transferred to ten VET participants

in each partner country. As part of the training in Ireland, Meath Partnership hosted 21 VET trainers from Italy, Germany, Greece, Cyprus and Romania for an intensive 5-day accredited Train the Trainer programme. The training programme was designed to up-skill VET trainers in the design of mini-learning resources for online environments and on topics which were of relevance to their local business communities. Trainers from the fields of adult education, e-learning and media production were on hand to help the trainers to research, write and produce their own Mini-learning Resources with the results available on the SYNERGY Exchange platform.

This training marked a key milestone in the project, and was the beginning of VET professionals producing Mini-learning Resources for the specific needs of SMEs in Europe. Today, the online community of VET professionals and micro-enterprise owners who are networking online through the SYNERGY Exchange platform are creating “mini” online courses covering topics such as sales, management, strategy, finance, marketing and many more...all relevant to the modern business environment.

### 4.3 Induction to Pedagogy Programme

The Induction to Pedagogy programme was created by project partners, with the aim of helping micro-enterprise owners using the SYNERGY Exchange platform, to engage in peer-to-peer learning opportunities. This training programme comprises six modules and is delivered over five hours through a series of video lectures and PowerPoints which have been written, developed and recorded by project partners.

These modules provide micro-enterprise owners with a sound understanding of the basics in relation to e-didactics, quality criteria of peer-learning, evaluation of online learning resources and online learning environments, producing quality learning resources for peers and other knowledge that has helped them to become competent and confident online peer-educators. These modules were outlined in the Pedagogic Strategy, developed by the University of Paderborn, and were agreed upon by the partners.

All partner organisations collaborated to develop these modules *ab-initio*, relying on research findings, results of literature reviews and the identification of best practices. All modules are now available to access online in five partner languages through the SYNERGY Exchange platform.

## 4.4 Mini-learning Resources

Micro-learning training resources are designed for professionals and business owners who wished to add knowledge and skills in brief time-bound sessions. The online courses (mini-learning resources) developed as part of the SYNERGY project are effective examples of micro-learning supporting business owners and VET professionals to gain new knowledge on important, timely topics in small portions. Micro-learning is learning in small segments. It is made possible with the aid of discreet, well planned, bite-sized chunks of activities that are short-term, digestible and easily manageable. The learners are in control of what and when they are learning. The characteristics of micro-learning tend to be 5 to 15 minutes long; highly targeted covering single objectives, self-contained offering small segments of information; responsive across a range of devices, easy to find and multimedia in nature.

Micro-learning training resources are very practical and relevant in nature to be responsive to the current challenges and issues facing learners, business owners and training professionals. They respond to the growing need to match in-demand relevant learning with an availability of time on behalf of the learner. Micro-learning training resources are not intended to replace more formal vocational training; instead they often feature mastery topics intended to address special areas of knowledge.

As mentioned above, research conducted with 132 micro-enterprise owners across six EU countries clearly outlined that the current and available training offers often did not address those issues and problems experienced by business owners; and also that business or vocational training available to business owners was often location specific, classroom based and scheduled for 1 to 5 days during core business trading hours. Therefore, there was a need for short and concise resources that can be used whilst working, integrated into the daily work routine.

SYNERGY has been successful in creating learning opportunities and exchanges that are supported at a time and in a format that is suitable and appropriate to time constrained business owners. In consultation with small business owners across Europe, the SYNERGY team has developed a series of mini-learning training courses, free to use information resources and toolkits and online masterclasses that address the real training requirements of the micro-enterprise and SME sector.

## 4.5 SYNERGY Exchange

While the impact of SYNERGY can be measured in purely quantitative terms - number of vocational staff trained, number of business owners trained, quantity of learning materials produced, etc. - it is in the qualitative elements that the real impact on target groups can be found. Building sustainable partnerships between the worlds of education and business based on mutual respect and cooperation has had an impact of considerable importance and relevance on the target group members. These partnerships are as a direct result of the micro-social networks which the SYNERGY project team has created.

There are various networks available which allow business networking. Similarly, there are a multitude of MOOCs, online learning platforms and social networking platforms, which all provide a particular function to modern businesses. What makes the SYNERGY Exchange platform different is that it incorporates all of these elements into one easy-to-use and accessible platform.

The SYNERGY Exchange platform is not simply a forum for business owners to sell their services or products to other members or their contacts. It also provides a platform to allow business owners to enrich their own business by creating long-term and meaningful business partnerships and contacts within the world of VET. The SYNERGY Exchange allows business owners to share their expertise and knowledge with others, to learn from their peers, to network with other businesses across Europe, to influence the provision of VET locally in their region and to access bespoke bite-sized training on topics which are of interest and relevance to their own business. The SYNERGY Exchange provides an opportunity for business owners and VET professionals to network with people who understand their aspirations and challenges; making connections possible.

## 5. Methodology employed to reach Project Target Groups

■ Developing a learning culture among micro-enterprises remains a real challenge that requires concerted interventions at practice and policy levels. In a rapidly developing and changing global market the need for appropriate, on-going interaction between businesses and VET providers is critical. Empirical evidence confirms that management training improves company performance, productivity and profitability and reduces corporate failure rates (OECD, 2008) but research also highlights the low uptake of training by owner-managers of small firms.

Micro-enterprise owners and managers are the key to learning in the micro-enterprise sector and if engaged with management development there is a better chance they will promote learning among other staff. Poor management skills and awareness of training needs are recognised as a problem worldwide in the sector.

As always the project team have worked to connect business owners and create high-value and quality long-term relationships through learning and networking. Networking with people who understand your aspirations and challenges, and are willing to share and support your business journey is at the heart of SYNERGY.

The SYNERGY project addresses two primary target groups:

- (a) micro-enterprise businesses owners
- (b) vocational education organisations and their staff.

As these target groups were the main stakeholders it was essential that appropriate interaction with them was achieved at the start of the project and nurtured throughout the project life-cycle. To achieve this, two local sub-groups were established by implementing partners in Ireland, Germany, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Romania. Partners decided that there was a need to establish these local focus groups because the consortium was committed to achieving buy-in from micro-enterprise owners and education providers in each of the six implementing partner countries.

The function of these groups varied by type but in general, partners agreed that these groups would be involved in the following activities:

1. support research activities;
2. test and validate curriculum and in-service resources;
3. test and validate the functionality of the social media environments;
4. identify areas where mini-learning-format resources could be developed;
5. participate in evaluation surveys;
6. champion the project.

These local sub-groups met regularly throughout the project at key developmental milestones. The scheduling of these meetings was left to the discretion of the project partners.

As well as these external sub-groups, project partners organised events to promote the project and its outputs directly with these target group members. These events included the round-table discussion forum in Germany, the SYNERGY Symposium in Romania and the thematic seminar in Greece. These events were scheduled to coincide with face-to-face partner meetings, so that they could be attended by representatives of all partner organisations. The events were used to showcase the outputs which were being developed at different stages of the project and to create a sense of ownership among the widest cross-section of stakeholders during the project life-cycle.

Partners also promoted widespread use of the new micro-social networks at these events and to their local focus groups, to support the development of a robust and versatile peer learning network.

## 6. Case Studies from Partner Countries

■ We have selected a series of case studies based on the experiences and motivations of micro-enterprise owners and VET professionals involved in the SYNERGY project; as a means of illustrating the impact and development potential of this innovative new approach to VET provision for business in participating partner countries. These case studies are presented below:

*Project summary*

## 6.1 Cyprus

At the start of the SYNERGY project in Cyprus, CARDET endeavoured to recruit participants from a variety of sectors in order to form local sub-groups in which sufficient voices were represented from both the micro-enterprise and the VET sectors. Through frequent communication with them (via phone or face-to-face meetings or emails), we kept our local sub-group members in the loop of all project developments. In general, we developed an efficient working relationship with the members of our local sub-groups in a friendly and pleasant atmosphere in order to assure their continuous co-operation and engagement. Overall, we were receptive to their ideas and feedback, we took into account their valuable input during the project development phase and we used their constructive feedback to the benefit of the project outputs. As a result of our efforts, we believe that we achieved significant impact at local level. We managed to build sustainable partnerships between the worlds of education and business based on mutual respect and cooperation, and we created a more positive disposition towards education and training among the Micro-enterprise Owners (MEOs) as a result of the high-quality material and the functional platform developed.

### Quote from an MEO, Cyprus:

***“Leveraging new disruptive technologies such as social media, allowed and encouraged business owners, mentors, trainers, and enterprise support agencies to interact and foster an innovative learning environment that is agile and adaptable. SYNERGY is an important project that will both bring people with similar needs together as well as encourage productive interaction in learning.”***

## 6.2 Germany

In Germany, we started working together with a group consisting of five micro-enterprise owners, and five experienced coaches and business trainers. Our approach was to always keep our local members up to date, which is why we informed them, after each international partner meeting, of the status of the project and gave them an overview of any up-coming tasks. The local meetings were of particular importance, as the group members had the opportunity to

get to know each other and to exchange knowledge and best practice; and the meetings also gave us the opportunity to receive valuable feedback about the projects activities from both of the project's target groups. From our point of view, the SYNERGY project led to qualitative and sustainable collaborations with trainers but also micro enterprise-owners. With the SYNERGY Exchange platform and the Mini-Learning Format Resources produced, we successfully developed and piloted a new approach to VET provision for businesses; which is easy to implement in a business environment, and which will act as a valuable resource for trainers seeking to get in contact with new clients from the SME community.

**Quote from a VET tutor, Germany:**

***“The participation in the SYNERGY project was very interesting for me, and I made a lot of experiences. In the first half of the project, the participation was more passive and we received manifold information. In contrast, we were involved actively in the second half, and a close collaboration took place. Here, the idea and the aims of the projects finally became clear to me. I would like to participate in such a project again, but with a more frequent, practical exchange and involvement right from the projects beginning.”***

### **6.3 Greece**

All members of the local sub-groups were initially approached through our own peer channels in Thessaloniki, Greece. Micro-enterprise owners (MEOs) were part of the local startup scene and were mostly targeted through their involvement with the group “SGK Startups”, which has over 500 members. The VET sub-group was recruited by communicating a project description to Thessaloniki's Metropolitan College staff, as well as other VET centres. The MEO sub-group members were interested in learning about business growth and development, mostly because they were predominantly at start-up stage, and they were intent on exchanging knowledge and best practice with established businesses through the SYNERGY Exchange. The VET sub-group participants were mostly concerned with promoting their existing training offerings through the SYNERGY Exchange, to reach a larger audience. Throughout our meetings and interactions with these groups, the need for practical knowledge-sharing was evident, especially due

to the needs of startup members to stay up to date with the latest practices and trends in marketing, sales and the use of online tools. MEOs and VET professionals were willing to try out this new approach to practical knowledge sharing and micro-learning and it led to a successful project implementation in Thessaloniki.

**Quote from VET tutor, Greece:**

***“Researching evidence on why mini learning resources make sense, as well as completing the VET training in Ireland, has helped amend my approach to training material production as well as the length of my seminars”.***

## **6.4 Ireland**

To reach the intended target group, Meath Partnership contacted members of local business networks at the beginning of the project. Targeting the Elevation Business Network specifically, we were able to recruit micro-enterprise owners to form our local sub-group. For the VET sub-group, we worked with tutors from the local Education and Training Board, but who would not have explicitly worked with the SME community in the past. The SYNERGY project was of huge benefit to these two groups. County Meath borders other university counties, but has no university or college of its own. As such, micro-enterprise owners looking to up-skill in the county, rely solely on VET provision. While the VET providers in the county strove to meet the needs of business, they were not able to meet the specific requirements of Meath’s industrious and time-strapped entrepreneurs. At the beginning of the project, it was obvious that a lot of work was needed to bring these two groups together and to get them working effectively. As such, Meath Partnership decided to merge the two local sub-groups and form one group; where knowledge, experience and opinions were shared; where draft outputs were tested and feedback provided, and where the networking between SMEs and VET professionals could be fostered in a trusted, face-to-face environment before it was launched online through the SYNERGY Exchange platform. Overall, we felt this approach worked very well in bringing these two groups together and in delivering a valuable project to the local SME and VET communities. As a result of this development work, the delivery of training locally and our targeted

dissemination efforts, SYNERGY has reached over 3,000 individuals in County Meath and will continue to reach out to these communities and benefit these individuals long after the project has ended.

**Quote from VET Tutor, Ireland:**

***“Involvement in the SYNERGY project really opened my eyes to alternative approaches and techniques that I could use in designing and delivering training programmes for businesses. Having never trained in e-learning, I found the units on micro-learning and e-didactics to be not only interesting, but also incredibly useful to my day-to-day work as a VET tutor. Completing the SYNERGY Train the Trainer programme has helped me to revolutionise the way I deliver training to all groups, but especially to businesses.”***

## 6.5 Italy

At the beginning of the project, we made contact with owners of micro enterprises and VET companies who we had previously worked with and who we thought would benefit from their involvement in the SYNERGY project. At local level, about 20 enterprises (micro-enterprises and VET companies) were involved in the project. Taking into account that each of these companies has on average 7 employees, we reached 140 people within the SME and VET sectors in Molise. In addition to this, we also reached out to local stakeholders, who numbered at least 40 by the end of the project; and comprised public bodies, associations, policy-makers and professional bodies. SYNERGY had a positive impact on local members of these target groups in that there was a lot of interest from among this group in the project and a willingness to participate in the focus group sessions. In terms of measurable impacts, ARES has witnessed a change in local SMEs in that there is an increasing awareness of training opportunities available to them; a culture of learning in these SMEs has been fostered throughout the project to the extent that some micro-enterprise owners even provided their employees with the opportunity to complete specialised training, using the SYNERGY Exchange platform. Overall, this has been a very positive result for the SYNERGY project in Molise.

**Quote from an MEO, Italy:**

***“I was very interested in participating in the SYNERGY Focus Group because I, as the owner of a micro enterprise, understand the importance of training for myself and for my employees, but often, for a lot of reasons, I procrastinate [in providing] training. Being involved in a project whose aim is to better understand the value of training is for me very useful.”***

## **6.6 Romania**

In Pitesti, local sub-group members were contacted initially by email and telephone. After members were recruited for both groups, we found it necessary, and most effective, to spend time with each focus group member in the beginning of the project in order to better explain the scope, objectives and activities of the project. We also used these meetings to demonstrate to them how the final outputs would work, and to present any outputs that had been developed. We received positive feedback regarding the materials presented, but also guidance and advice on how they could be improved. Explaining with clarity what we wanted to develop and why we wanted to do it, was important in our approach to working with our local sub-groups. Through our efforts, we have reached approximately 16,000 individuals. We also promoted the project and its outputs to SME's, public institutions, non-governmental organisations, universities, VET organisations and chambers of commerce. The project was disseminated at every possible opportunity; and as a result of our dissemination campaigns we were contacted by many individuals wishing to test and use the project's outputs. The impact we achieved was only possible through the approach we took, to be patient and to explain to members of the target group the innovation which drove the project, the value or the learning resources being developed, and their relevance to the needs of the entrepreneur and the VET tutor alike.

**Quote from an MEO, Romania:**

***“No matter how good the team or how efficient the methodology, if we're not solving the right problem, the project fails. So we have to work hard on using the results as best as we can.”***



# Erasmus+

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## SYNERGY

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