KNOWLEDGE SHARING SEMINAR FOR STUDY VISITS ORGANISERS

KEY MESSAGES FOR

STUDY VISITS ORGANISERS

3-4 November 2008, Thessaloniki

CONTENT

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FOREWORD

The aim of this document is to provide a brief summary of the information and recommendations circulated during the two-day knowledge sharing seminar for study visit organisers hosted by Cedefop on 3-4 November 2008 in Thessaloniki.
The document highlights the suggestions made by the European Commission, Cedefop, representatives of National Agencies and, most importantly, experienced organisers of study visits on how to prepare, organise, deliver and follow-up on the study visits for education and training specialists. This document is primarily aimed at prospective study visit organisers focusing mainly on practical tips discussed during the seminar. It is recommended that organisers read this report in conjunction with the Handbook for Study Visits Organisers, which can be found in English, French and German at:
http://studyvisits.cedefop.europa.eu/index.asp?cid=2&artid=6141&scid=74&artlang=EN

Alternatively, you can access the Handbook by double-clicking one of the icons below.

Handbook EN.pdf   Handbook DE.pdf   Handbook FR.pdf

SUMMARY OF THE SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

The seminar aimed to provide the organisers of study visits with information and guidance on how best to organise study visits that support policy cooperation and development in education and training at EU level as well as at national level in participating countries. The participants of this seminar included experienced organisers of past study visits, prospective organisers, former participants, and representatives of National Agencies, the European Commission and Cedefop. In order to stimulate thinking on the theme, the seminar involved formal presentations, open discussions, practical presentations of successful study visits, knowledge sharing workshops, feedback and recommendation sessions. A succinct and chronological summary of the seminar can be found below.

On the first day, representatives from the European Commission and Cedefop set out the context for the seminar by presenting an overview of the following key issues: 1) the contribution of Cedefop to EU policy on education and training; 2) the policy context of the study visits programme as part of the integrated Lifelong Learning Programme; 3) the impact of study visits on policy development and cooperation within lifelong learning, notably regarding the Lisbon agenda and the Education and Training 2010 work programme, as well as the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and their successors; and finally 4) the responsibilities of the key actors involved in the study visits programme – the European Commission; Cedefop; National Agencies; organisers of study visits; and participants.

It was also during this phase of the seminar that it was highlighted that the structure of the new consolidated programme of study visits is now aligned with the priorities set down by the Education and Training 2010 work programme, as well as with those of the Lifelong Learning Programme (ILLP)[1]. The organisers were subsequently given tips on

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[1] Adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 5 November 2006 (Decision 1720/2006/EC, OJ L 327, 24.11.2006.).

how they can link - in practical terms - the theme and the actual content of study visits to the Education and Training 2010 priorities.

The second phase of the seminar outlined the two main Cedefop tools that organisers can use to prepare study visits: the Handbook for Organisers and the management information system OLIVE. This session took stock of the benefits and practicalities of using these two tools with an emphasis on enhancing the quality of study visits. The quality of the study visits programme is defined in relation to four key aspects: the content, participation, organisation and impact. Once again, organisers were offered useful tips on how to improve each of these four elements, which are integral to the success of study visits.

The seminar continued with three workshops. The first two workshops were targeted at study visit organisers and provided them with an opportunity to 1) learn from each other about best-practices and study visits experience in other countries, 2) share expertise related to the practical preparation of study visits, 3) share knowledge on how to stimulate participants' involvement in study visits, 4) find solutions to practical problems during study visits such as late cancellations, and 5) to discuss the benefits of using the Handbook during the organisation of visits, as well as areas where the Handbook can be improved to better cater for organisers' needs and interests. The two workshops were run by experienced study visit organisers and included presentations from organisers of successful visits. It concluded with practical recommendations. The third workshop focused on the preparation of the 2009-2010 catalogue and forthcoming activities. The workshop's group of participants was limited to representatives from National Agencies, Cedefop and the European Commission.

The final day of the seminar began with a review of the lessons drawn from the workshops for organisers. The workshop moderators reported on key discussion points and conclusions of their workshop group. The key messages are presented in this report.

The workshop reports were followed by a presentation from a former study visit participant. The presentation conveyed key messages for organisers with reference to issues to be taken into consideration before, during and after study visits, highlighting that it is important to communicate with all participants in advance in order to provide them with information about lectures and field trips. Furthermore, participants should be given enough free time for them to be able to network and share experiences with other participants on an informal basis. A further presentation was given by an experienced organiser who drew on his experience both as an organiser and as a former participant. The presentation provided the example of a web-based platform to support active participation, reporting, networking and dissemination before, during and after study visits.

The final seminar presentations provided valuable information on Cedefop's on-line sources and publications such as the VET bibliographical database (VET-Bib), the VET Digital Library (VET-eLib), the ETV Newsletter, as well as other European Commission funded data sources including the Eurydice Information Network and the European Commission Libraries Catalogue (Eclas)[2]. The seminar ended with concluding remarks from representatives from Cedefop.

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[2] Information on how to access these datasources is provided later in the report.

KEY MESSAGES FOR STUDY VISIT ORGANISERS

The seminar provided a wealth of practical suggestions for the organisers of study visits. These key messages are presented below in three different sections;

A) Before the visit – practical tips on how to prepare for your study visit;

B) During the visit – suggestions on how to address problems that may arise during the visit; and

C) After the visit - practical tips on what to do after the visit in order to maximise the impact for the host organisations, individuals (organisers and participants) and the wider audience.

A. BEFORE THE VISIT

1. How to ensure a good communication flow with participants before the visit?

- Organisers are advised to contact participants for the first time at least three months before the visit or as soon as they receive the final list of participants, and to remain in contact with them throughout. Early communication can help to identify potential problems / misunderstandings early on in the process and enhance the quality of discussions during the visit. An on-going communication helps to reduce the potential of late cancellations as it reinforces the commitment of participants to attend.

- It is recommended that the emails sent to participants follow the same format each time to minimise the risk of emails getting lost (i.e. so that they do not automatically end up in the Junk Mail folder). For example, organisers could use the same e-mail subject and number all the messages (e.g. *"Study Visit in Rome - 1st message"*) so that participants can easily identify official study visit emails and can also see if they are missing any. It is also helpful to inform participants about when they should expect the next email and what it will include.

- The participants may also be asked to confirm that they will be taking part in the visit so that organisers can be certain that the right people are receiving the right emails.

- If there are difficulties in contacting or getting a reply from some participants, it is suggested that organisers contact the relevant participant through different channels (e.g. another e-mail address, possibly through the e-platform set for the study visit, by post, or telephone). If no response is received, organisers may want to get in contact with their National Agency, which can follow up the issue.

- Organisers can create virtual platforms / online learning communities to facilitate their communication with participants before, during and after the study visit.

  o There are already several good practice examples available to illustrate how to create and use web-based platforms to support study visits. A good example is the Co-operative Platform for Study Visits, Conferences and International Projects from Austria: http://www.edumoodle.at/studyvisits/

  o If a virtual platform is set up, organisers should instruct participants how to use it, actively maintain the content and moderate discussions in order to ensure maximum use and impact.

For further information,
see 'Contacting participants' section of the Handbook (p. 13-14)

2. **What kind of help does the information management system OLIVE offer for organisers?**

Cedefop provides an interactive management information system that is commonly referred to as "Olive" and it can be accessed through the main Study Visit website at http://studyvisits.cedefop.europa.eu/

- OLIVE provides organisers with access to restricted sections:

  o In the participant management section, the organisers can check the details of their group's participants. Organisers have the opportunity to export the participant list to Word/Excel and print out individual applications to read when convenient. They include detailed information on the background, language skills and motivation of each participant.

  o The group management section allows you to view data about your own study visit group and it also contains information on other groups.

- Cedefop can upload additional documents onto group sections of the system on behalf of organisers, such as the programme of the study visit, information on accommodation, transportation, background papers, etc. Cedefop is taking steps to further enhance the system by enabling organisers to upload their own documents onto the system in 2009.

- It is important that organisers update their contact details in OLIVE should they change.

- If organisers are informed of a change in the participant's contact details they should inform Cedefop.

- It is recommended that organisers install Java (http://www.java.com/en/download/manual.jsp) to ensure that the platform works correctly.

- Organisers should make sure that they keep their username and password in a safe and convenient place.

- Cedefop is able to provide organisers with a reminder of their password should they misplace it.

For further information, see 'Contacting participants' section of the Handbook (p. 14)

3. **What information sources are available to support preparation of background information?**

The organiser should prepare background information on the topic of the visit and send it to the participants before their study visit.

- Cedefop's online resources provide a large amount of information on national systems for education and training (E&T), glossaries and background information, which can be used to support both hosts and

participants. These are available on the main study visit website (see documentation on themes on education and vocational training)

- The ReferNet network produces up-to-date publications on vocational education and training (VET) systems in Europe. Information is often updated on an annual basis and international comparisons are also available on specific aspects of VET. The ReferNet network involves a national consortium in each Member State made up of organisations representing VET institutions. A link to the publications of the network is available on the study visit website (please see the link above or you can also access it through http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Information_resources/NationalVet/).

  Organisers may also consider contacting the network if they are looking for specific expertise or speakers, or if they want to disseminate findings of the visit to a consortium of national VET experts. Contact details for the network leaders in each country can be found at http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/index.asp?section=8&sub=3

- The VET bibliographical database (VET-Bib) is a multilingual bibliographical database on vocational education and training, which contains around 50,000 VET related references. VET-Bib and other digital libraries of Cedefop can be accessed at http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/F

- The ETV Newsletter is the European training village (ETV) newsletter, distributed on a monthly basis by Cedefop offering information on vocational training issues at European level. Those interested in reading the newsletter can access it free of charge: http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/News/newsletter.asp

- Organisers and participants can also access the Cedefop bookshop free of charge. The publications are available from the bookshop www.trainingvillage.gr

- Eurydice Information Network is an institutional network for gathering, monitoring, processing and circulating reliable and readily comparable information on education systems and policies throughout Europe. It publishes up-to-date country descriptions on education systems and comparative studies. It can be accessed at www.eurydice.org

- Eclas (European Commission Libraries Catalogue) covers the EU's official publications and documents http://ec.europa.eu/libraries/doc/catalogues/index_en.htm.

For further information, see 'Preparing background information on the theme of the visit' section of the Handbook (p. 14-15)

4. How can organisers support participants with their presentations/contributions?

- It is important that organisers review participants' interests when setting up the study visit programme. Participants' presentations on their national systems should always be related to the topic of the visit.

- Organisers should advise participants to keep the section of their presentation relating to their national systems for education and training brief. If information is required on national education and training (E&T) systems, participants could obtain this information from their National Agency or any other sources identified in section 3 above. These could then be presented in smaller groups to allow more effective discussions. They could also be gathered and 'exhibited' in a poster type exhibition so that participants are able to read about E&T systems in different countries and ask questions from other participants throughout the visit. This means that the presentation itself can concentrate on the actual theme.

  Alternatively, the group could be split into two or more sub-groups in which the contributions of each participant are presented.

  For further information, see question 3 above or 'Contacting participants'
  section of the Handbook (p. 13-14)

5. How to decide on accommodation and group facilities for participants?

- It is recommended that organisers make arrangements with a local hotel in order to ensure all participants are accommodated in the same place; participants can benefit from this by being able to spend more time together in an informal setting.

- In some cases participants may wish to stay over at friends/family or in another hotel away from other participants due to budgetary reasons. They should be advised not to do so because the organiser, in most cases, has pre-booked rooms for all participants at interesting locations and at competitive rates. Organisers should outline the benefits of staying together during the visit. If however a participant insists on staying elsewhere, he/she should be made aware about the importance of arriving on time to the activities of the visit.

- Organisers may wish to get in contact with participants to find out details about the value of their grants before a hotel is chosen, so that they pick a hotel which is in a suitable price range for the participants. National Agencies can inform organisers about the average amount of the available grants.

- Organisers should check that the hotel offers the right facilities for the group to meet, discuss and draft the group report.

For further information, see 'Finding and arranging hotel and transportation'
(p. 9) and 'Contacting participants' section of the Handbook (p. 14)

6. How to obtain funding to help with running costs of your visit?

Availability of funding for organisers to help them with the cost of setting up and running study visits varies from country to country. In some, support is provided by the national, regional or local authorities and in others it is not.

- Organisers can look for alternative sources of funding from relevant public authorities at national, regional and local levels, such as ministries and other authorities dealing with education and training matters.

- Prospective organisers are also encouraged to search for sponsorship in the form of free lunches, transport or free use of facilities. Such efforts should target policy makers, mayors, city councils, private sponsors and study visit partners, as well as other relevant actors.

  For example, if a study visit includes visits to companies, it is worth exploring whether the company would be willing to provide a free lunch or an afternoon snack. Collaboration with hotel and catering schools may also enable organisers to access the possibility of free or low-cost meals and facilities.

- In order to persuade key actors to provide funding or to convince an organisation to co-host a study visit, organisers should promote the benefits of the visits to individuals, host organisations and the wider audience.

- It is vital to promote the programme at the right level of political authority – the level which has the power to make such funding decisions.

- If organisers package all or some local costs together (i.e. travel, accommodation and meals) and participants pay a lump sum towards these costs, they must explain very clearly in advance what the package includes and that participants' money is not being used towards general running costs of the visit.

7. Why and how to link your study visit to EU policy objectives?

Organisers should keep in mind that individual study visits have the potential to make a practical contribution towards policy development and cooperation in education and training at European level. Organisers can raise awareness of EU education and training priorities by linking them to the topic of their study visit.

Organisers can also use the EU benchmarks and core indicators of the Education and Training 2010 work programme as reference points. For example, to set the scene for a study visit concerning early school leaving, they can provide information on how the host and participating countries are performing against the EU benchmark on this issue.

Information on the European education and training policy agenda can be found from following sites:

- o Education and Training 2010 work programme
  http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html

- A brief summary of EU benchmarks and the progress made by different Member States towards these objectives can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/educ2010/indicatorsleaflet_en.pdf
- The Study Visits website also provide hosts with background information on key policies: http://studyvisits.cedefop.europa.eu/

8. Where to find further information on how to prepare for the study visit?

- Organisers may consider creating links with former study visit hosts who have tackled the same topic. This will allow them to see what practices worked best in organising a similar event and what did not work so well.

- Various group reports can be accessed from the main study visit website.

- Those who are interested in learning about possible impact and benefits of study visits, may consult, for example, the Mode Project, which has analysed the effect of mobility and study visit schemes in Latvia, Slovenia, Romania, Spain, Denmark and Germany. Information can be found at: http://www.modeproject.net/

- An equally interesting project is the European Mobility Alumni Network (EMAN) http://eman.programkontoret.se/index.htm which aims at supporting the valuable European networks that are formed during mobility actions such as Study Visits or Comenius and Grundtvig In-service training courses. These small or big networks could serve as a platform for continuing discussions between individuals and institutions throughout Europe.

- Experienced organisers are generally very positive about the quality and practicality of the Handbook for Study Visits Organisers. They strongly recommend that first-time organisers review it before they start their preparatory work.

B. DURING THE VISIT

1. How to organise a good programme?

- Feedback from previous study visits has highlighted the need for a balanced agenda, with a combination of formal presentations and discussions and on site visits.

- Opportunities for participants to meet and speak with students, beneficiaries and teachers are usually high on the 'wish list' of study visit participants.

- Organisers can save time and enrich the experience for participants by providing them with information about field trips and partner organisations/companies in advance (e.g. websites of organisations, schools or companies that will be visited).

- It is important to actively manage participant contributions and enforce time limits for their presentations.

- Participants should be encouraged to discuss and disseminate their shared ideas in the group report in an analytical manner rather than in a descriptive one. It is also a good idea to encourage them to write some conclusions with regard to how the findings/outcomes of the study visit work in the context of their own country.

- Organisers may also consider having a brief feedback session at the end of each day so as to take into account participant views about the programme on an on-going basis.

- It is important to bear in mind that participants may require support from the organiser in tracking down lost suitcases and other practical problems during the first night. By solving these practical issues, participants will be better able to focus on the content of the programme.

- All the programme material should include information on the contact details of the hotel in which they are staying and of the people who will be supporting them during the field trips. A detailed timetable of the transportation to be provided during the study visits should also be handed out.

  For further information, see 'Drafting a programme' (p. 11), 'Informal meeting on the eve of the start' (p. 15), 'A typical day' (p. 16-17), 'Group report' (p. 17-18) sections of the Handbook

2. **How to support participants with poor language skills?**

- Organisers should always check the profiles of participants in the OLIVE system in order to find out their language skills. This can help to identify early on which participants may require additional language support during the visit.

- Participants with poorer language skills can be supplied with additional background material and be encouraged to read the material in advance in order to give them time to learn any new and relevant vocabulary.

- It is necessary to bear in mind that many people, who are not fluent or comfortable in speaking a foreign language, may instead be able to write fluently and fully understand discussions. In these cases, the hosts, together with the rest of the group (i.e. other participants), can play a vital role in creating a supportive and friendly atmosphere, in which people feel comfortable enough to express themselves, even though they may not do this fluently. It is also recommended that organisers allow those individuals to make their presentations a few days into the visit when they have become more familiar with the vocabulary and feel more comfortable within the group. If the group contains more than one person with the same nationality, their colleagues may be able to help them with translations.

- Some hosts have been able to find low-cost translation solutions, such as using language teachers or students as translators for at least some parts

of the visit. In countries where National Agencies or other stakeholders provide funding for organisers, some hosts have been able to use some of this money towards interpretation costs.

3. How to deal with late arrivals / early leavers?

- If organisers are informed in advance of participants' late arrival / early departure they should remind the participants of their obligation to participate in the whole study visit. It is also recommended that they inform the participant's National Agency who has the responsibility to act upon this issue according to the contractual agreement with the participant.

- It is important to note that participants may have personal reasons for not being able to attend a part of the visit and in such situations organisers should provide both cooperation and understanding.

- The final certificate awarded to participants should specify the total number of days attended irrespective of the reasons behind their late arrival / early departure.

4. What to do if a participant is accompanied by a partner or a friend?

- Organisers should not allow participants to bring accompanying persons on study visits as contacts with other participants might be impeded. Participants should stay with the group during the whole study visit.

- Organisers should inform the participants' National Agency in due course about such situations.

C. AFTER THE VISIT

1. What can organisers do to maximise benefits from the study visit?

- It is important to thank the institutions and organisations visited for their contribution to the study visit programme.

- Organisers are recommended to offer each participant an information CD or a memory stick containing relevant documents – these could include background papers, presentations, photos and contact details for all participants and hosts. Alternatively these could be emailed to participants.

- Organisers can encourage participants to collaborate with one another, not just during the study visit but also afterwards through regular contact. The study visits represent a unique opportunity for people to meet other practitioners from different European countries and to see how the topics are approached in different contexts. Contact between individuals could take place through various tools, such as e-mails, discussion forums, e-platforms and potential dissemination events like Cedefop's knowledge sharing seminars. Follow-up activities can also include co-operation under other EC funded programmes.

- By inviting local and national press to join part of the programme, organisers can make the event more visible to local stakeholders. Local media should be made aware in advance that the visit is taking place so as to encourage them to promote the event. Alternatively, an article could be written about the visit and its potential impact in collaboration with local newspapers. Where possible, it is a good idea to post the articles on the websites of key stakeholders to raise awareness about the visit.

- Organisers are encouraged to organise a dissemination event together with local partners, policy-makers and other stakeholders to:

    o Highlight the benefits of organising and hosting such events (e.g. visibility, networking, shared expertise, catalysis for change, etc.);

    o Evaluate how if and how the learning objectives of host organisations have been met;

    o Discuss the good practices identified, as well as ideas brought forward by participants; and

    o Examine the lessons on how similar problems are tackled in other countries.

For further information, see 'Promoting the visit' section of the Handbook (p. 15)