Quality, Innovation and Networking in Language Learning

Guidelines

based on experience derived from projects that were awarded the European Language Label (concise version)

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1. What is the European Language Label?

The European Language Label (ELL) is an annual award system that encourages new initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning. It is open to all types of language education and training projects, and its main focus is to promote innovation and raise standards in language teaching across Europe. It is coordinated by the European Commission, but managed by the individual Member States through their National Agencies.

Projects are selected for award according to criteria agreed at European level. To win the ELL, initiatives should:

- **be comprehensive** in their approach
- provide **added value** in their national context by improving the teaching or learning of languages
- **motivate** students and teachers to improve their language skills
- be **original** and **creative**
- have a **European emphasis,** taking account of Europe's linguistic diversity
- potentially be a **source of inspiration** for language initiatives in different countries.

Every year the European Commission proposes specific priorities for the ELL award. For example, in 2012-2013 the priorities were language learning based on the new technologies, and multilingual classrooms. National agencies may also identify their own specific national priorities.

National agencies in the member states put out a public call for applications for the award and have a procedure for applying. Deadlines for submitting applications vary. Applications for the ELL are evaluated by a jury which selects those national projects that best meet the criteria and priorities. The Label is granted in the form of an official ELL certificate. The winners are also entitled to use the ELL logo in their communications or publications, and in some countries, prizes are also awarded by national sponsors.

Further information about the European Language Label is available at http://ec.europa.eu/languages/european-language-label/index_en.htm and on the websites of the the national agencies in charge of the ELL, listed at http://nellip.pixel-online.org/EUL_national_agencies.php.

Impact of the European Language Label

The ELL provides **official and European recognition of a project's quality**. It also ensures greater visibility for the winning projects and the coordinating institutions, and **increases the motivation** of staff involved in the project as European recognition may help teachers to be more aware of their own role.

The ELL can also contribute to greater project sustainability giving rise to better opportunities for follow-up in subsequent activities or projects, and may help the coordinating institution to identify further funding to continue the activity. It **also contributes to the sharing of good practice,** especially at events such as the Language Label award ceremony.

2. The quality of language learning initiatives

A simple definition of 'quality' offered by Oakland[1] is 'meeting the requirements of the customer': customers are the ones who decide which services and goods are high quality and low quality, not the providers of a service or the makers of a product. The main customers in education are the learners, in this case language learners. Behind this group of 'customers' there is often another group or individual, for example parents or employers. Of course, especially in a service as complex as education, it may not be that easy for customers to define or know exactly what they want. They are more likely to recognize what they don't want.

The second and third ELL criteria mentioned on page 2 directly relate to the primary customer, the language learner.

2.1 What factors in a project affect its quality?

Quality is not related to a single aspect of a project but to <u>all</u> aspects and factors. Each is interdependent with others, so if there is a weak link in the 'quality chain' the overall quality will be affected. Some of the main aspects to be considered are.

a) **the learners who are expected to benefit from the project**

b) **the goal of the project - what language learning need is it responding to?**

Heyworth[2] points out that '*Projects are different from ordinary work. They are intended to change things*', or, we could add, at least test things out to see if they need changing. Language projects need to be carried out for a good educational reason

c) **the target outcomes of the project -** these need to be achievable by and useful to the learners. They also need to be measurable so that they can be properly evaluated.

d) **financial resources –** this is usually a crunch point: some projects require very little extra money, for example if they involve students working in a different way during class time, while others that go beyond day-to-day institutional learning may need extra funding.

e) **the project design** - this includes various key aspects related to the goal, such as the length of time, who the participants are, the methods used, the educational resources needed, the staff involved, and of course the management of the project.

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[1] Oakland, John. 1991. *Total Quality Management*. Butterworth-Heinemann
[2] Heyworth, Frank. 2002. *A Guide to Project Management*. Graz: European Centre for Modern Languages. See http://www.ecml.at/tabid/277/PublicationID/39/Default.aspx

f) **evaluation of the progress and success of the project -** if the outcomes of the project cannot be evaluated methodically, the project should not go ahead.

g) **communications about the project** - if a project is to be successful, communication among those involved, both staff and students, and with anyone interested outside the institution, has to be efficient and effective.

Quality assurance and quality management

Quality **control** is checking a service or product when it is completed. Any faults or problems identified will lead to a change in the processes. This is often done by collecting feedback from customers. Quality **assurance** procedures are used by organisations to ensure that a concern for maintaining and improving quality is built in before service or product delivery. Some organizations employ outside specialists to help with this. In these cases, the certificates given by outside bodies can be used as a 'quality label', as is the case with the ELL.

2.2 Criteria, standard and indicators

Several significant criteria can be used to identify a high-quality language project:

- The **skills and experience** of the project manage and members of the project team
- The **scope and timeline** of the project
- The **support** provided by the organization and its **commitment** to the project
- **Tasks and outcomes** that are useful and correspond to those in the project application and plan, and correspond to the budget
- Means of **piloting and obtaining feedback**, and the way the results of piloting and the feedback received are taken into account
- The **impact of the project** in relation to the financial resources available and the input: in some cases, the impact may be broader and more effective than foreseen: for example, new target groups may be able to exploit the results
- **Response to the needs of beneficiaries**: these needs should be taken into account in the planning phase and carefully considered during the project
- **Standards,** i.e**.** the rules and requirements governing the way a project is run: these should be set by the project manager from the very beginning. Examples may include:
  - Meeting procedures: fixing times and objectives of meetings in advance helps communication and collaborative work.
  - Documentation and communication: all the material related to the project should be available to everyone who needs it.
  - Clear schedules with set milestones will aid management of the flow of work.
  - Means of sharing knowledge and expertise within the team
  - Problem solving**:** the project manager and the project team should be able to deal with problems that arise during the project with flexibility and openness.

Indicators show how successfully the project is being carried out. Four main types of indicators can be used to assess the project, assuming relevant data and appropriate procedures are used[3]:

- **Input indicators** are used to measure the financial and other resources invested
- **Output indicators** measure the concrete consequences of the steps taken, for example the number of training units created, the number of teachers trained
- **Outcome indicators** help measure the results in terms of target group benefits, for example the percentage of students studying a less widely-spoken language.
- **Impact indicators** will help measure the long-term consequences of the project, for example, the increase in language proficiency in terms of the number of languages or the level of language skills.

Organizations are increasingly being called on by the general public and by those providing funds to account for their achievements in terms of concrete results. To be able to do this, development interventions, projects and programmes need to be "SMART":

S pecific
Should be clear to people with a basic knowledge of the issue, program or initiative and clearly articulated, well defined and focused.

M easurable
Should be able to determine the degree to which there is completion or attainment. Using the same (ideally quantifiable) methodology and information, findings should be able to be replicated.

A chievable
Should be realistic, practical, and attainable within operational constraints dependent upon availability of resources, knowledge, and timeframe.

R elevant
Should be tied to government priorities and mandate and help or contribute to the bringing about of the desired outcome in the Canadian society, economy or environment.

T ime-bound
Should have clear deadlines expressed.

In summary, indicators typically answer the following questions:
1. What are the outcomes and results of the project? How were these results achieved?
2. How large and impressive is the change that the project aims for?
3. Who is the target group? Have these groups been reached properly?
4. Where geographically was the project focused? Was it international, national, regional or related only to one specific institution?

2.3 Methods and procedures

In differing language teaching contexts, different methodologies are useful for different purposes. Examples include:

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[3] See *Aid Delivery Methods, vol. 1: Project Cycle Management Guidelines* (European Commission, 2004). Available at
http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/multimedia/publications/documents/tools/europeaid_adm_pcm_guidelines_2004_en.pdf

- **The communicative approach**, a method where students work only in the target language in class and small mistakes are not corrected. In this method grammar work is not emphasized: instead, the focus is on explaining and interacting in the target language and getting students to use it
- **The total physical response (TPR)** method, where actual physical movement follows instructions in the target language ('stand up', 'catch this', 'move to this spot' etc).
- The **total immersion technique,** which aims to make the learners aware of customs and cultures associated with the language by ensuring that they use it in a context where only the target language is used.

Methodological features that have proved successful in language learning and language teaching projects include:

Mobility in learning: the use of technical devices such as computers, phones, and games in language education provides an opportunity to work on language learning from anywhere. Physical movement away from the classroom or lecture room is another form of mobility.

Authenticity, interest and topics: here learners try out their language skills in real contexts and, if possible, with native speakers of the language being learnt.

Comprehensiveness and student involvement: active participation and face to face communication between students in different locations can enhance both learning and motivation.

Some additional issues (to be used selectively) when thinking of starting a project involve considering whether the project:
- meets the needs of the students and takes into account their interests and personal aims
- reflects important issues in language learning, and is rewarding and motivating to work on
- contributes to increased language learning and communicative skills
- enhances interaction among peers
- helps to develop intercultural understanding and multilingualism
- provides opportunities for authentic language learning and communication
- is transferable i.e. its design can be used with different languages and in different countries
- offers students a new approach to language learning
- widens the use of ICT in language learning
- provides an opportunity to use the language outside the classroom
- is designed to create and try out new teaching materials.

2.4 Tools for management and quality management

Successful project managers develop and use a number of tools to design, monitor, assess, and assure the quality of the project, as well as to determine how well it meets the original goals and complies with the work plan:

- A project plan is absolutely necessary because it describes the project scope and the approach and method chosen in order to meet the project objectives.
- Self-assessment questionnaires can be used, for instance, in project planning to make an initial evaluation of aspects such as levels of expertise in requisite areas, motivation, availability of resources etc.
- Checklists can help to verify to what extent the project complies with various pre-established quality criteria
- Time cards help keep track of how team members are managing their work
- Meetings with staff/project members to review work done, issues encountered, new ideas etc are essential
- Feedback forms and discussions with focus groups of project participants or representatives of the target groups can also be useful to gather their opinions and impressions on quality and potential changes.
- Progress and final reports on project activities and financial aspects are usually required by sponsors (e.g. the European Commission) and are a useful means of reviewing achievements.

A checklist for quality in a language education project

The checklist below can be used to check the quality of an ongoing language project.

1 Project beneficiaries

☐ The target groups are clear and well defined
☐ The learning needs of the target groups have been clearly identified and assessed
☐ Appropriate methods for motivating and involving the target groups have been decided on.

2 Project objectives and outcomes

☐ The project objectives are well defined and clearly explained
☐ The project contributes to increased language learning and communicative skills
☐ The project outcomes and impact envisaged are achievable, useful and measurable.

3 Project planning

☐ The planned activities are well structured and the necessary resources are available
☐ The institution has the human and financial resources needed to run the project
☐ The plan for monitoring and evaluating progress is effective
☐ A plan for evaluating the quality of the outcomes has been developed
☐ There is a clear plan for disseminating and exploiting the project results
☐ Key stakeholders have been identified and have been or can be contacted
☐ The institution has direct contact with the target group(s) and expertise in working with them

☐ Criteria, standards and indicators exist for project management, project development and project outcomes.

4 Project management and implementation

☐ A management plan was developed at the beginning of the project; it includes:
  – A work plan with realistic timescales for all the project activities
  – A well developed budget each of the project activities
  – The assignment of clear responsibilities to each partner and/or team member
  – Mechanisms for efficient collaboration within the partnership and effective communication among partners
  – An appropriate reporting system, and an internal document sharing system, available to all partners
  – Time management and problem solving mechanisms

☐ There are procedures for assuring the quality of project activities and outcomes including:
  – carrying out an assessment of the needs of the target groups
  – choosing a methodology that meets learners' concrete needs
  – ensuring coherence between the project objectives and planned activities and outcomes
  – establishing quality criteria for the project products/outcomes
  – involving the target groups at all stages, and obtaining feedback from them
  – testing any project products and improving them accordingly

☐ Time management mechanisms are in place for:
  – monitoring whether short term and longer term objectives have been met
  – identifying deviations from the work plan and project goals, and adjusting these as required

☐ The project partners use the same reporting methods and templates to report on the activities carried out in the separate contexts, including:
  – the costs incurred
  – dissemination activities
  – feedback from participants and stakeholders.

☐ recommendations are put forward by internal and external evaluators and, if necessary, changes are made

☐ there is feedback on partner reports

☐ There is a clear plan for dissemination during the project and after it ends; the dissemination plan:
  – creates maximum awareness of the project and its goals
  – Is adapted to the project objectives and target groups
  – Is reasonable in terms of the financial resources needed.

2.5 Follow up

Follow up (n): "…the act or an instance of following up, as to further an end or review new developments: The follow-up is often as important as the initial contact in gaining new clients"

" …one that follows so as to further an end or increase effectiveness: The software was a successful follow-up to the original product"

"…. an action or thing that serves to increase the effectiveness of a previous one, as a second or subsequent letter, phone call, or visit"

"… an article or a report giving further information on a previously reported item of news"

Follow up (v): "..to increase the effectiveness or enhance the success of by further action: followed up her interview with an e-mail" [4]

The aim of project follow-up activities is to keep the results of a given project alive and make them sustainable. This could involve:

- updating the results after the project has been completed
- obtaining recognition or certification of the outcomes
- persuading policy-makers to make use of the results
- transfer of the results to, and exploitation of them by, other sectors or target-groups, or in other environments
- commercialisation of certain project results.

Whatever the situation, further activities undertaken either by the project team or by other stakeholders will generally stem from the original idea of the project, so ideas for possible follow-up should be identified at the start of a project.

Follow-up activities may enlarge the target group and/or end-user groups in a very natural way: the project output may be welcomed by and applied to other sectors or other user communities[5]. In other cases, the follow-up activities may eventually lead to another project.

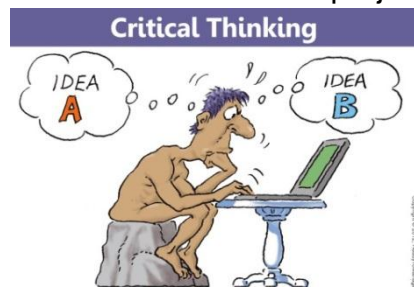### Follow-up related to the European Language Label (ELL)

In terms of a project cycle, the application for the ELL, and if it is successful, the award of the Label, is a follow–up activity in itself: in most cases it happens after the project has reached its administrative completion and it is based on the project results or outcomes.

Follow-up activities are carried out after the end of the project but need to be considered before and during the project period. They can be divided into roughly three groups:

- ongoing support for the project products

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[4] From the *Free Dictionary* - http://www.thefreedictionary.com/follow+up
[5] see more about beneficiaries and stakeholders at
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/valorisation/glossary_en.htm

- developing and/or adjusting the product to other groups or purposes
- maintaining interest and motivation in using the project products.

This gives rise to several questions:

1) how long should the follow up last? This is very important when a project product or service requires financial or human resources
2) who will own the project outcome and be in charge of managing it? This also includes the sharing of profits if the project outcome is commercialized
3) who is responsible for the follow up actions – the project coordinator, individual partners, or someone else? Who else will be involved?
4) will the follow up require training? For example, some preparatory training might be needed if the project outcome is taken up by another group of users.

Long live the project!

If the project is awarded the ELL, what steps can be taken to keep your project alive, attractive and useful?

a. **Use the ELL logo and certificate** as widely as possible
b. **Make your achievements known to a wider public:** do not hesitate to promote your achievements at public and professional events such as fairs, seminars, workshops or conferences
c. **Maintain and widen the network by** presenting the project to a wider audience; this may lead to closer networking and new partnerships and useful cooperation
d. **Offer the project product(s) to other teachers and other kinds of users, and u**se the vast potential of ICT to adapt and extend the way in which the project outcomes are used
e. **Look for ways to commercialize the project products:** follow-up often requires financial and human resources. Commercial exploitation will help you raise money for other activities and projects.

2.6 Motivating language students and teachers

There are many different forms of motivation, for example, motivation to learn languages, motivation related to the class, to the topics dealt with, and/or resulting from the tools and strategies used during the lessons We can also differentiate between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' motivation: students may be engaged in the subject matter 'extrinsically' as a result of the teacher's approach or attitude, or students can be motivated as a result of their personal interests, needs and preferences. This intrinsic motivation obviously varies from individual to individual.

MOTIVATION IS ATTITUDE IN ACTION !

Fostering motivation may help students to be more confident, more autonomous, and to broaden their

knowledge of the world itself, as well as increase their satisfaction and enjoyment.

Motivation - a keystone within the teaching/learning process at the European Language Label

ELL applications are assessed according to certain criteria, which include innovation, transferability, a marked European orientation, and the capacity to motivate learners. But teachers' motivation is also crucial, and good projects can increase their motivation too. Generally, project coordinators begin projects on the strength of their personal desire to improve teaching and their students' language learning experiences. However, receiving the ELL is also motivating since it is recognition of the organizers' efforts, and of the educational value of their ideas. In addition, it contributes to dissemination of the initiative and therefore to its sustainability.

Based on the analysis of examples of best practice in projects that have been awarded the ELL by the Nellip Network, some factors that help increase or sustain motivation are:

1. **Practical and amusing content and activities**, such as games, simulations, shows or contests, to engage the students' attention and increase their enjoyment of language learning

2. **Dynamic teaching methods & innovative approaches in language learning,** involving an action-oriented approach

3. **Opportunities for social interaction in the target language**

4. **Varied and up-to-date learning resources** and a**uthentic teaching and learning materials** that enrich and increase the chances of effective learning

5. Learning languages for **specific, professional or study purposes**

6. **Use of ICT** and p**romotion of autonomous learning** to encourage students to be more independent and to take their own initiatives

7. **Fostering mobility and providing access to multicultural contexts**, so helping students to develop their cultural awareness and intercultural competences

8. **Involvement of learners in the world of work** to highlight the value of the target language(s) in their future careers

9. **Encouragement of multilingualism** to improve students' chances of finding good job opportunities

10. **Recognition of the quality of the project**, which motivates both coordinators and students.

Learners are motivated by different factors, and it is important to understand that motivation in higher education differs from motivation in school education, in adult education, and in vocational education and training. The contexts share some

features, but they also differ in terms of the methods and procedures commonly used by teachers, which play such an important role in students' learning and motivation.

3. Exploitation and Networking in European Language Labelled Initiatives

3.1 Dissemination, exploitation, sustainability

Why should project resources (budget and staff) be invested in these activities? Some of the most obvious answers are:

To tell end users about your project - the users might be a diverse group, including, for instance, learners of different ages, teachers, educational institutions and other local training agencies. The project needs to reach the maximum number of individuals in the target group(s) for a minimum of expenditure; promoting the project in the most appropriate, most targeted way is crucial to success.

To contribute to the implementation of European and national/ regional/local policies - for instance, a national drive for vocational training or to meet local employment needs. If the project contributes to these policies in some way, it may gain support from agencies which can help with its promotion.

To inform sponsors and funding bodies - those agencies that have supported your project want to know how you're doing. If it is a European Commission funded project, the evaluation process is a requirement. But other agencies, including policy-makers, could also be interested: your project may help them achieve their own policy goals. And they may be able to contribute to the progress of the project.

To support and enhance the image of your own organization - the project may help to raise the organization's profile or open up new networks and partnerships

To increase the impact of your project by networking - networking is an essential way to extend the activities of projects through other organisations (see below).

To inform commercial organisations that you have a product to sell.

3.1.1 Dissemination

The main goals of dissemination activities are:

- to design a plan for announcing what is to come in the life of the project
- to communicate with stakeholders
- to raise public awareness
- to promote new project outputs.

The planning of a dissemination strategy involves:

- defining the dissemination channels and the roles of the dissemination coordinator and other project partners
- specifying the duration of each dissemination activity and the development time needed

- allocating a budget and a number of staff days for each dissemination product or activity.

Dissemination should take place both within the partner institutions and outside them. Within the partner institutions this could include:

- putting information about the project on the websites of each partner institution

- exchanging project related information during meetings

- displaying and updating notices and distributing project leaflets/flyers to inform staff, beneficiaries and networks about project events

- participating in local/national and international workshops, seminars, conferences or fairs

- ensuring there is media and social media coverage, e.g. press releases, interviews, announcements, brochures, newsletters.

3.1.2 Exploitation

Exploitation includes 'mainstreaming', the process of transferring the successful results of projects to appropriate decision-makers, and 'multiplication', i.e. convincing individual end-users to adopt and/or apply the results. The main goals of exploitation activities are:

- to seek to change policies and current practices
- to ensure project results are adopted by target groups
- to 'multiply' the project's results and best practice, and transfer them to other contexts in other educational settings.

So a successful exploitation strategy involves:

- defining channels and approaches to maximise impact
- creating an exploitation strategy both at the level of the partnership and at national, regional and local levels
- allocating a budget and number of staff days to exploitation

3.1.3 Sustainability

Sustainability is the capacity of a project to continue to function beyond the end of the project period, or that the project results are used and exploited continuously. The main goals are to ensure that the project produces lasting benefits for participants and the community at large, and to ensure that the project survives in some way after the funding ends.

In planning for sustainability, the most important actions are:

- creating a sustainability plan, a commercialization plan or a business plan for selling the tangible outcomes of your project
- defining the roles of the sustainability coordinator and of the other partners in this
- drawing up an intellectual property rights agreement (or IPR).

The best ways to ensure the project continues after the funding ends is either to find a sponsor who is willing to continue to fund it, or to sell the project products. In this case, the best way is to create a flexible business plan detailing:

    a. the product and its distinctive value
    b. Potential markets and competition
    c. The financial plan
    d. The organization and management team
    e. A marketing and sales strategy
    f. Any potential strategic alliances
    g. The principal risks, and an exit strategy

The business plan should involve both current partners and new people or institutions interested in continuing the project. This should mean that the project is more likely to become self-sustainable.

Intellectual property rights (IPR)

An IPR agreement defines the rights of all partners involved in the project in the event of publication, commercial use or other exploitation of the project materials. Early on, partners should clearly state their financial and other expectations with regard to their contribution when it comes to capitalising on the project results.

3.2 Networking in initiatives awarded the European Language Label

Networking is generally regarded as the essential path to extend and enhance the activities of projects by embedding them in wider and more diverse social and economic milieus.

All human relationships can be regarded in some sense as networks. Here, however, networking refers to the intentional use of contacts, links and structured experiences in order to support specified professional activities. Most networking initiatives have some element of advertising or public relations: they develop or extend marketing efforts. Networking is a low-cost activity that involves more personal commitment than money – but it also requires planning, design and evaluation to ensure that it is effective and delivers an impact.

Communications are at the heart of networking. The critical point of growth is when the project actors (both internal and external) begin the process of communicating to formulate issues, themes and questions for other stakeholders to consider, as well as engaging in a two-way process of critical reflection and shared learning. Clear and planned communications and shared meaning are two prerequisites for effective networking.

Networking significantly increases the pool of potential stakeholders who know and share the project outcomes and products. These then have a stronger chance of being used after the funding ends making the project sustainable in the long term.

Another key reason for networking is to increase shared learning that extends and deepens the impact of the project and can serve as a springboard for subsequent work. Where EU-funded projects and programmes are concerned, another reason for networking is to increase the impact of the European dimension of the project: good networks will aspire to influence EU policies in order to make them correspond more closely to European priorities.

Constructing sustainable and viable networks involves a number of critical stages:

- establishing a common vision - all stakeholders should be in agreement about the importance of the topic or activity around which the network is being constructed.

- Agreeing on shared values, most importantly, trust, a willingness to take risks, and collaborative intent.

- Pooling shared experience of common areas (like language learning) or specific sectors (school type or level).

- Building networks using existing contacts from previous work, earlier networks, like-minded stakeholders, or professional bodies and agencies and engaging new potential stakeholders in innovative and stimulating ways.

- Establishing mechanisms to respond to requests for further information from potential or existing members, bearing in mind that E-networking using social media and Web 2.0 can result in an exponential increase in network membership.

Defining outcomes

Successful networks are based on their relevance to stakeholder needs. Dynamic networks continually develop new products, engage new actors, implement interesting innovations and add to the professional learning community which they are part of. The benefits of professional learning communities to educators and students include a reduction in the isolation of teachers, better-informed and more committed teachers, and academic gains for students.

Constructing networks

There is no one "look" for professional networks: they can be large or small; and they can work within formal settings and structures or can operate more loosely. Professional networks, such as language learning communities, can be school-based, region-based, national or international, but must include participants who:
- Care deeply about learning and the issues focused on in the project
- Feel free to take risks
- Challenge each other, and raise everyone's expectations
- Respect perspectives other than their own, and seek the inputs of others
- Strive to work and perform better, and continually develop.

To work successfully, a network must be informed by research data, agree on and follow quality standards, and focus on results. The work of networks should expand the knowledge and skill of participants while encouraging innovation and excellence.

Networks need the motivation of their members to operate, survive, thrive, and expand.