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**STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING QUALITY IN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
IN LANGUAGE AND E-LEARNING EDUCATIONA: USING THE EUROPEAN
LANGUAGE LABEL MODEL**

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Abstract: *The focus of this paper is to present a model for developing strategies for improving quality in language learning research, innovation and policies in education. Between 2012 and 2014, the European Union, under the Lifelong Learning Programme, is funding the network NELLIP (Network of European Language Labelled Initiatives - Lifelong Learning Programme, Key Activity 2) The main aim of the network is to mainstream the initiatives considered of high quality in the European member states. The European Language Label is granted yearly to several projects as an acknowledgement of their contribution to the promotion of language learning, virtual learning environments, awareness raising towards multilingualism and improving quality in language teaching. From the hundreds of initiatives awarded the European Language Label during the last ten years approximately, the NELLIP project will select a few hundreds (with examples from each educational sector). These initiatives will be explored for identifying examples of best practice in all areas that characterize quality in learning: quality of the materials and methodologies developed dissemination and sustainability strategies, possibility to transfer and replicate results. This article presents the methodology developed by NELLIP for identifying and encouraging the transfer of quality language projects and offers guidelines on how to plan, implement, manage, exploit and create network between language learning quality initiatives based on maximizing best practice developed within the framework of European language labeled projects and initiatives. Also NELLIP focuses on the strategies for the exploitation and networking of language learning initiatives that have received the European Language Label and on the analysis of the benefits and impact of the European Language Label for language learning providers.*

Keywords: *language, research, innovation, policies, education, VLE*

I. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the research carried out in the NELLIP project and presented in this article is to identify quality criteria whose acknowledgement and implementation would improve the efficiency, transferability and value of language learning projects in all educational sectors, including higher education. In this article we present the mechanisms and instruments developed in the NELLIP project for selecting quality language learning initiatives from the European Union.

Moreover, while collecting examples of good practice throughout Europe, the NELLIP project partners have identified educational sectors where the award of the European Language Label is rare. The sector the least represented in the number of awards received is the higher education sector. The EuroEd Foundation, the Romanian partner in the NELLIP network, has identified a series of reasons that contribute to the modest representation of this educational sector among the awarded quality

initiatives. Another objective of this research is thus to improve the participation of language learning initiatives coming from the higher education sector in the European Language Label award process. The increase in participation would ensure a greater visibility of language projects coming from the higher education sector.

II. STATE OF THE ART IN AWARDING THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE LABEL TO LANGUAGE PROJECTS THROUGHOUT EUROPE

The European Language Label is a distinction introduced by the European Commission throughout the European Union Member states. The main goals of this award are: to encourage project coordinators to develop high-quality projects and materials, to increase the visibility of the initiatives that proved to have a positive impact, to raise the standards of language teaching across Europe and to make possible the transferability of the project processes and results to other educational contexts. The European Language Label is granted in each European Union member state by a national body appointed by the European Commission. Every year specific priorities are defined for awarding the distinction, priorities in line with the current policies and agenda of the European Commission. The priorities and award criteria are published and calls for projects are opened in every country although the mechanisms differ from one state to another, as well as award criteria. There is a set of general criteria agreed at a European level but as mentioned above, individual countries can also choose their own criteria.

The European criteria are the following: initiatives should be comprehensive, meaning that the project components – from students to teachers, methods to materials – should ensure that the needs of the students are identified and met; the projects should bring added value in their national context, which means that it ensures a concrete improvement in the teaching or learning of languages, either in terms of quantity or quality. In this context "quantity" might refer to the "project stimulating the learning of several languages, particularly those that are less widely used, whereas "quality" might refer to the introduction of an improved methodology" (the European Commission Language Label website). The projects awarded the European Language Label should also be motivating for all the stakeholders to improve their language skills, their cultural awareness or their openness towards multilingualism. The projects should also be original and creative, either in the approach used or the products developed. The European dimension of the awarded initiatives is also important and considered an award criterion, projects having to consider Europe's linguistic diversity and make use of this advantage - for example, by liaising with contacts across national borders. The initiatives should also actively "improve understanding between cultures by promoting language skills" (the European Commission Language Label website). A priority widely identified as central – both at European and national level – is the transferable character of the projects because they could be a source of inspiration for other language initiatives in different countries or educational contexts.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In operating the selection of high-quality initiatives throughout Europe, the NELLIP project has developed a selection process, chronologically relying on the implementation of several instruments in every country, in accordance with the project objectives. The main objectives of the NELLIP project are: to promote the networking and creation of synergies among language learning initiatives having received the European Language Label with the aim to enhance their impact, transferability potential and sustainability, to promote the adoption of a joint methodology that will allow the effective planning and implementation of high quality language learning initiatives according to the quality criteria used for the assessment of initiatives that apply to be awarded the European Language Label and to promote the information about the European Language Label initiative among language learning providers.

For accomplishing these objectives, the NELLIP partnership started from collecting a series of 50 projects that were awarded the European Language Label in each of the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, The Czech Republic and The United Kingdom. Every project partner was responsible for collecting data on 50 projects from their own country and 50 projects from another (neighbouring) country. In this context, the EuroEd Foundation was responsible for collecting data on projects from Romania and Belgium.

This initial database is made of projects chosen for their consistency of projects and initiatives with the current European political priorities in the field of language learning. The selection was carried out in close cooperation with the National Agencies in charge of the European Language Label in the respective countries. The project team aimed at collecting the same number of projects from each of the four main educational sectors: school, vocational education and training, adult education and higher education.

Once the database was completed, from the 50 projects identified in every country, 12 case studies need to be compiled with the help of the respective project coordinator (best in the form of an interview). The main objective of the case study compilation is to create a basis for disseminating best practice examples and for identifying the factors that make a language learning project successful in terms of quality, impact and innovation. The case study collects thus project data such as: background of the project, approach, objectives, results, reasons for the award of the European Language Label, activities following the award of the European Language Label, assessment of the impact of the award, recommendations for potential future applicants and consistency with the European priorities in the field of language learning. At this stage too, the EuroEd Foundation project team has noticed that it is very difficult to pinpoint projects from the higher education sector. Based on the database and the collected case studies, national reports on the history and developments of the European Language Label initiative in the countries represented in the partnership will be produced in every country considered in the project. The national reports will also describe the best practices developed by the promoters of initiatives, projects/products that were awarded the European Language Label.

At the partnership level a transnational report will be drafted. This report will analyze the information presented in the national reports according to a transnational comparative approach that will highlight points in common and main differences among the European Language Labeled projects/products created and assessed in Europe.

3.1 Research results

The research carried out within the NELLIP project is at present still in development. What has been done so far is the collection of the projects to be included in the database, the case studies and the best practice examples. The national reports and the transnational report for pinpointing the state-of-the-art in the European Member states have still to be written. The first results that we have access to are those obtained by the Romanian partner, the EuroEd Foundation for the projects studied in Romania and Belgium. The preliminary results mainly show an overwhelming representation of initiatives from the school educational sector, about 80% of the awarded initiatives coming from this area in Romania and 70% in Belgium. At the level of the entire partnership, from the 456 projects collected for the database, 83 are from the higher educational sector (18%) and 254 from the school education sector (55%).

3.2 Guidelines developed from research results

After collecting and synthesizing the results of the research, the NELLIP partnership will develop a series of guidelines whose main goal is to show “how to plan, implement, manage, exploit and network quality initiatives for language learning based on the capitalization of the best practices developed in the framework of European language labeled projects and initiatives” (the NELLIP project website).

After the guidelines are developed, workshops will be held in every participating country for testing the materials produced sharing information about the most effective language learning initiatives having received the European Language Label in Europe.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND ADDED VALUE

The preliminary research results show that European Language Label winners tend to come from the school sector. The feedback received from project coordinators in this educational area indicates that there are two main reasons for this disproportionate result in Romania. The first is a successful promotion strategy for disseminating the existence of this award in the school sector. Several mechanisms have been identified that lead to a successful participation rate. Firstly, the teachers and school directors are encouraged to apply by the county boards of education from each region of the country. The county board of education sends several announcements to schools to disseminate the yearly call for projects to be awarded the European Language Label. The second reason is the great number of European projects developed in the school sector under the Lifelong Learning Programme. Given the specificity of the Lifelong Learning Programme, most projects that are awarded funding for implementation already ensured the compliance with the European-level criteria for receiving the European Language Label (mentioned in the second section of this article). In Belgium, some of the project coordinators interviewed stated that they have decided to apply for the European Language Label because for the area in which their projects are developed there are very few distinctions that acknowledge the quality and value of their initiatives and they were aware that the quality of their projects would benefit other stakeholders as well. They wanted thus to make the results of their projects known to an audience as wide as possible.

In this context, the results relevant for the higher educational sector are the need of a more efficient dissemination strategy in the universities towards making the European Language Label known and towards motivating project coordinators and decision makers to apply for the European Language Label in order to disseminate the results of their work.

References

- [1] The European Commission Language Label website: http://ec.europa.eu/languages/european-language-label/index_en.htm
- [2] The NELLIP project website <http://nellip.pixel-online.org/info/project.php>