**EFEE Project**

**Innovation4Education: Strengthening the capacity of European education employers through the promotion of innovation in education institutions in a post-Covid19 era.**

*4th Peer Learning Activity, “Leadership Skills in Education”*

*14 – 15 September | Ljubljana (Slovenia)*

**EVENT REPORT**

The last Peer Learning Activity (PLA) of the “Innovation4Education” project took place in Ljubljana (Slovenia) on 14-15 September. The two-day event was packed with, among other topics, high-level discussions about leadership skills, school management in times of crisis, and what kind of change in culture is needed for education systems to become more resilient and flexible. Thanks to our host, [Solski Center Ljubljana](https://www.sclj.si/), participants were able to visit the school and see the classes ‘behind the scenes’.

During the first day, Barbara Novinec ([Vrtec Galjevica](https://www.vrtec-galjevica.si/)) gave a keynote speech outlining the key features of the Slovenian education system, as well as the opportunities associated with it and the challenges it faces. While being smaller than most EU countries, Slovenia is proud to have a strong network of public schools that are accessible and free for all. However, one of the challenges faced by governance at national and local level in the country is a teacher shortage that has been particularly noticeable over the past four years. Ms. Novinec noted that the pandemic played a significant role in creating the current situation, as it resulted in salaries decreasing and the teaching profession becoming increasingly unpopular.

The first panel discussion, moderated by Silvia Pesini ([EFEE](https://educationemployers.eu/)), focussed on leadership skills and ‘How to improve education leadership in the society and what tools can schools use to empower and support new leaders of the future’, our panel featuring Dr. Jaco Deacon ([FEDSAS](https://www.fedsas.org.za/)), Fergal McCarthy ([ACCS](https://www.accs.ie/)) and Rodrigo Melo ([CNEF](https://cnef.pt/)). The conversation covered the topics of community leadership, with participants emphasising that ‘every member of the school community is a leader’; what counts as ‘leading’ and what counts as ‘following’ within the school community and the world of education at large; and the need for every school to do more to create their own leaders. The concepts of situational leadership, educational experience, and leadership driven by meaningful actions were discussed by the panel and all participants, who also emphasised the importance of helping the right person develop good practices. Finally, it was argued that each school should define the type of leader that it needs, given that each faces a specific context and a different set of opportunities and challenges.

The conversation between the panel and the rest of the group then turned to the topics of ‘challenging leaders by exposing them to out-of-school environments’ – a way to help them establish new connections, and to the Irish model of distributive leadership, in which people are assigned specific areas of responsibility. The model, it was observed, prevents principals from micromanaging teacher who were already assigned the task and grants teachers the opportunity to ‘bring their best self to work’.

During the following session, Dr Peter Kelly (Researcher for the Innovation4Education Project and Associate Professor at the [University of Plymouth](https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/)) shared a presentation on the preliminary outcomes of the project research.

Dr Kelly pointed out that education systems, in regular circumstances, usually appear robust and fit-for-purpose. However, when a crisis such as Covid-19 comes along they actually turn out to be vulnerable. Therefore, it is important to make those directly involved in the education sector (teachers, school staff, students, etc.) more resilient to such crises.

There are indeed areas where resilience/capacity can be improved to respond to those needs. Firstly, teacher retention systems are important. When teachers feel valued and listened to, they tend to be better and stay longer in the profession. During every stage of their career, teachers should therefore have the opportunity to take on leadership roles. Dr Kelly noted that teachers tend to feel very defensive and not particularly motivated when they are not given any professional choice – for example by not being involved in policy discussions.

At the same time, challenges such as the considerable amount of paperwork, the time required for test preparation, and frequent policy changes are only some of the problems that teachers are facing across Europe. As a result, and in the aftermath of the pandemic in particular, a rising level of dissatisfaction has been recorded. Dr Kelly then argued that the focus should be on how to move from a situation where external factors are the main driver of teachers’ motivation to one where teachers’ inclusion, involvement, and motivation is prioritised within the school system itself. The final project report hopes to show that, with regard to this subject, there are resonances across European countries – while at the same time each of them also faces a different set of challenges.

The Project Researcher then argued that schools should be seen as social arenas where people learn to live, to feel good and bad about themselves, to make mistakes or to take part in social activities and ‘live’ – and not exclusively as places where knowledge is acquired. Dr Kelly then stressed the need to make sure that students’ issues are prioritised.

The last activity of the morning programme consisted in separate discussions within small break-out groups, in which participants brought and discussed concrete examples from their own leadership practices. The conclusions drew attention to the importance of being open to new ideas and providing exposure to new opportunities, including access to professional learning. At the same time, it was argued that reaching a collective consensus about the way to move forward and learning to ‘embrace the uncomfortable’ are also both necessary. It became clear as a result of the discussions that there are many overlapping issues societies are facing across different levels of education – especially with regard to keeping people engaged or making sure that they have the skills they need.

The second panel discussion focused on the topic of “School management in times of crisis”, featuring Gean Gilger ([ETBI](https://www.etbi.ie/)), Dr Maria Zeniou ([UClan Cyprus](https://www.uclancyprus.ac.cy/)), Barbara Novinec ([Vrtec Galjevica](https://www.vrtec-galjevica.si/)) and Nives Počkar ([Solski Center Ljubljana](https://www.sclj.si/)). The need to look out for each specific group within the school community was highlighted, as well as the importance of coming up with strategies to try to ensure everyone’s well-being. Clear communication between every member of the community was identified as a key element when striving to implementing changes to this end. Panellists also argued that, in this sense, one of the solutions could be introducing well-being programmes (e.g., yoga or Pilates in the morning), and that, more in general, teachers must be encouraged to support each other. In addition, it is important to have space for people to make their own contribution and to create new opportunities for learning and be a part of the community. Ms. Gilger stressed that, in order to address the problems created by Covid-19 (pointing out, as examples, the cost-of-living crisis and housing crisis as just some of the challenges facing Ireland more specifically), relying on and being involved in communities is key to start addressing such problems, as the process of innovating must be a collective community effort.

The final activity of the day was a roundtable about “How to best prepare Education Leadership Personnel”, in which the lead was taken by Paul Fields ([ETBI](https://www.etbi.ie/)), Isabelle Janssens ([GO! onderwijs van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap](https://g-o.be/)) and Dr Jaco Deacon.

Panellists argued that “culture eats strategy for breakfast” and noted the importance of always having a risk plan prepared. Participants learned that if a change in culture takes place, it also results in a profound change within the organisation overall - which is a considerably difficult process and takes a significant amount of time to implement. Moving to the issue of flexibility within school systems, it was maintained that, when trying to encourage a change in such a direction, school leaders must consider a wide range of elements simultaneously and to establish a basic set of rules first.

Overall, three main conclusions emerged from this latest discussion:

1. It is important to understand the expectations, exchange, and develop dialogue with other groups.

2. There is a necessity to be aware of different possible approaches to addressing crises.

3. The importance of culture should not be underestimated.

**--- End of Day 1 ---**

During the second day of the PLA, all our participants visited the Solski Center Ljubljana and were guided around the school and its facilities by Nives Počkar, School Director – as well as two of the students.

After the guided tour, the ‘Digital Sustainable Teacher’ project - funded by the European Commission and national authorities and focussing on improving competences across three different areas (digital, sustainable, and financial literacy) – was presented. The initiative is ‘vertical’ in nature - i.e., it involved teachers from kindergarten all the way to public adult education, with each teacher going through different forms of training over the course of 13 days. Two training approaches are featured, the first being ‘on a national level’ and the second being based on the concept of a permanent learning community. The goal of the first approach is to empower teachers with a range of formal competences and to provide an exchange of experiences with other educational institutions. Aims of the second approach, on the other hand, include the development and functioning of the educational institution learning community, the practical testing and introduction of newly acquired competences, and developing new practices by using and upgrading proven models. The project seeks to add value for education leaders as well by helping them strengthening the organisational climate and to allow them to get a better understanding of their employees.

After a short coffee break, participants had the opportunity to directly exchange with local teachers about the concept of innovative leadership. The discussion revolved around the subject of innovative leadership in the classroom more specifically – including the need for curricula to be updated, the increasing use of technology, and what role teachers should play in the current world. It was asserted that the role of teachers has shifted, as it is no longer about being ‘the supreme authority’ or ‘the sole provider of knowledge’, but instead is increasingly about being able to create an environment where the subject being taught matters to the students. The discussion then turned to new didactic approaches being implemented, such as peer-to-peer learning, more personalisation and differentiation, debating and critical thinking, and game-based learning to nourish the inner child. Participants also noted the importance of delivering soft skills in classes, including empathy and solidarity, which can be achieved, among other ways, by writing essays, assignments or articles on topics such as intolerance, bullying, migration, culture shock or active citizenship – thus raising awareness on these issues. The teachers also pointed out that it is crucial to motivate students and get them interested in whatever the school programme needs them to be interested in.

**--- End of Day 2 ---**

The last PLA of EFEE’s “Innovation4Education” project brought many new insights and perfectly complemented the discussions from previous activities in Ghent, Lisbon and Oslo. As the project is slowly to an end, EFEE is delighted to invite you to its final conference, set to take place in Leuven (Belgium) on 1 March 2024 (you can see the draft agenda [here](https://educationemployers.eu/it/meeting/the-end-of-a-journey-final-conference-of-the-innovation4education-project/)). Make sure to secure your spot and [register](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd1uqbvO8eQwLJULwJTVXLmQMVxxWaGUYWDabZ3SoZwNHWUVg/viewform) now!