

**REPORT
ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
IN KA2-CBHE
ERASMUS+ PROJECTS**



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INCOMA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic has been a very difficult and challenging endeavour worldwide. This situation particularly affected projects funded within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, as many of them were (and to some extent continue to be) affected by restrictive measures to protect public health. The European Commission and entities working on Education and Training cooperation and mobility projects had to adapt to this new and difficult situation.

Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) projects are at high risk of being negatively impacted by the pandemic, as they are cross-regional initiatives and containment strategies and measures to tackle the impact of COVID-19 widely vary.

For this reason, INCOMA, as an institution responsible for coordinating Evaluation and Quality actions as part of several Capacity Building in HE projects, and as a member of several transnational Consortia that bring together institutions from around the world, created a global survey in order to understand how COVID-19 affected Capacity Building in HE projects and if this impact might entrain long-term changes.

To create this report, several Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world were interviewed based on a semi-open questionnaire and a total of 47 answers were collected in seven regions (as defined by the Erasmus+ programme): Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership countries, South-Mediterranean countries, Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, Gulf countries and EU countries. Answers were collected from both project coordinators (Lead Applicants) and Consortium members (Co-Applicants).

In addition to results and comments collected, we make several recommendations that, even though especially target the Consortia in which INCOMA is involved, can also be relevant and taken into consideration by other institutions involved in this type of projects.

As observed in Figure 1, partners from European, Asian and Latin American countries represent the majority of survey respondents, followed by those from South-Mediterranean countries.

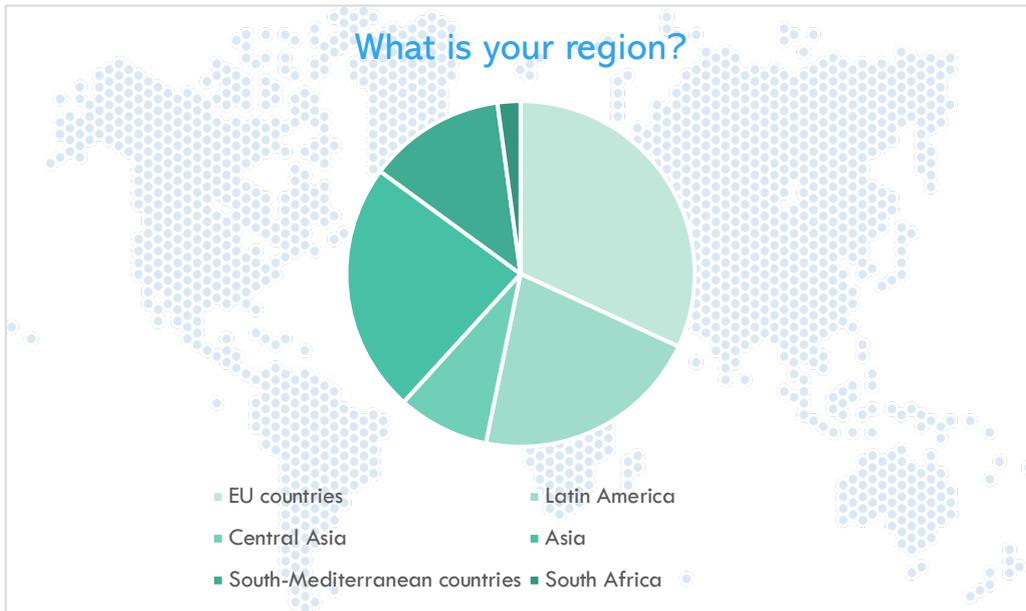


FIGURE 1

2. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

2.1. COVID-19 impact on Capacity Building Projects

The majority of respondents (91%) mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the projects in which they are involved, which can be considered a rather significant percentage. On the other hand, all respondents reported that their projects suffered a suspension of activities or an extension of project duration during the COVID-19 crisis.

Upcoming sections focus on further analysing the implications of the COVID-19 crisis among institutions whose projects were affected.

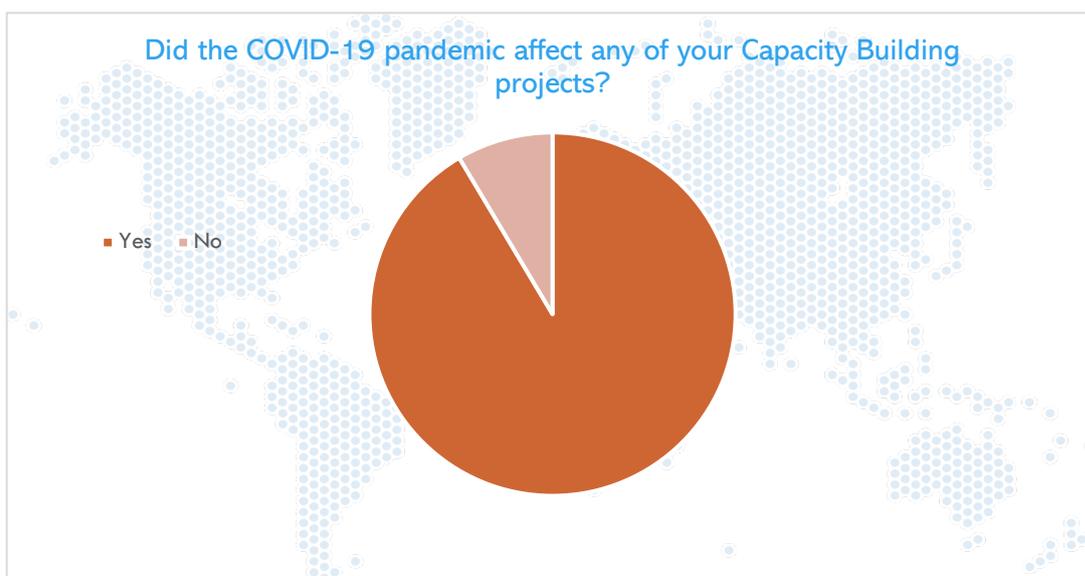


FIGURE 2

2.2. Support received

In general, EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, responsible for managing Capacity Building in HE projects) and project coordinators provided an adequate support to projects that were affected.

Support from EACEA

Regarding EACEA's support, over 65% of respondents consider they received either "high" or "moderate" support from EACEA. It is relevant to stress that those who answered they received "low" support, or "none" are not project coordinators (and, therefore, they are not regularly in contact with EACEA officers) and that answers obtained reveal that online meetings were organised as an alternative to onsite ones.

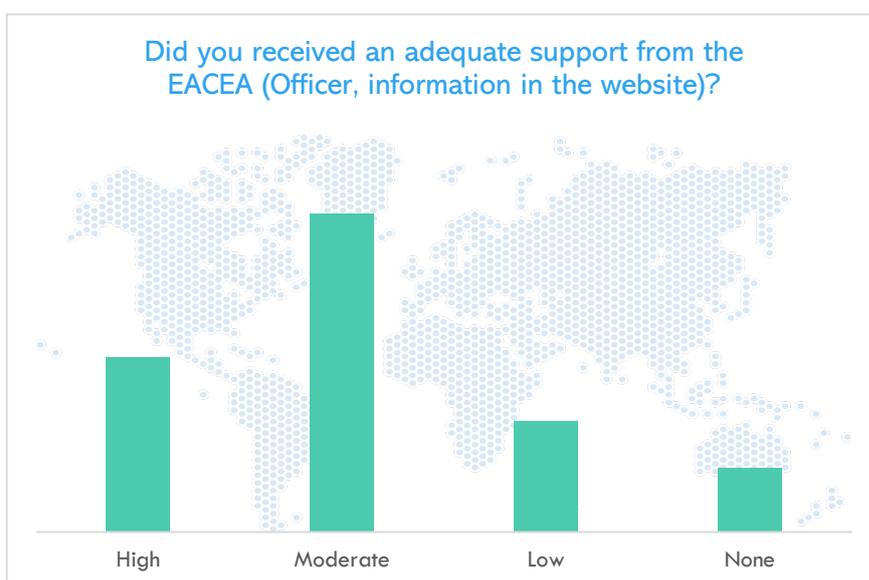


FIGURE 3

Support from the project coordinator

Most respondents believe they received adequate support from the project coordinator (95.3%).

When asked why, they especially referred:

- Flexibility;
- Availability to help;
- Information provided;
- Updating capacity;
- Transparency;
- Leadership;
- Adequate support.

2.3. Coordination challenges

Regarding mitigation strategies employed by Capacity Building in HE projects coordinators to address challenges that arose, most respondents highlighted the adaptation measures implemented to interact more by using online resources.

Indeed, comments collected as part of this survey suggest that while some respondents consider the current context a crucial opportunity to improve remote working, others tend to prefer face-to-face meeting as they experiences problems with language differences, communication issues, delays in receiving answers, difficulties to deliver training activities, and even a negative impact in dissemination processes due to the fact that participants were less motivated when compared to face-to-face events.

Hence, evidence suggest that should the organisation of onsite meetings not be possible, and the adoption of online conferences is set-up as an alternative measure, it would be beneficial organise online conferences more often. In other words, it would be necessary to increase the number and frequency of meetings and activities (including training activities) organised online.

Similarly, survey respondents also stressed that it was necessary to adapt timelines to the constraints arising from COVID-19 and that cooperation was facilitated by providing timely information.

Therefore, more instruments are necessary to adapt projects to the current context and challenges, with special focus on budget flexibility and adaptation to online modalities.

2.4. How did projects change?

Regarding the extent to which projects were negatively impacted, close to 75% of respondents affirmed that some activities were either “extremely” or “very” affected by changes such as cancelations or delays.

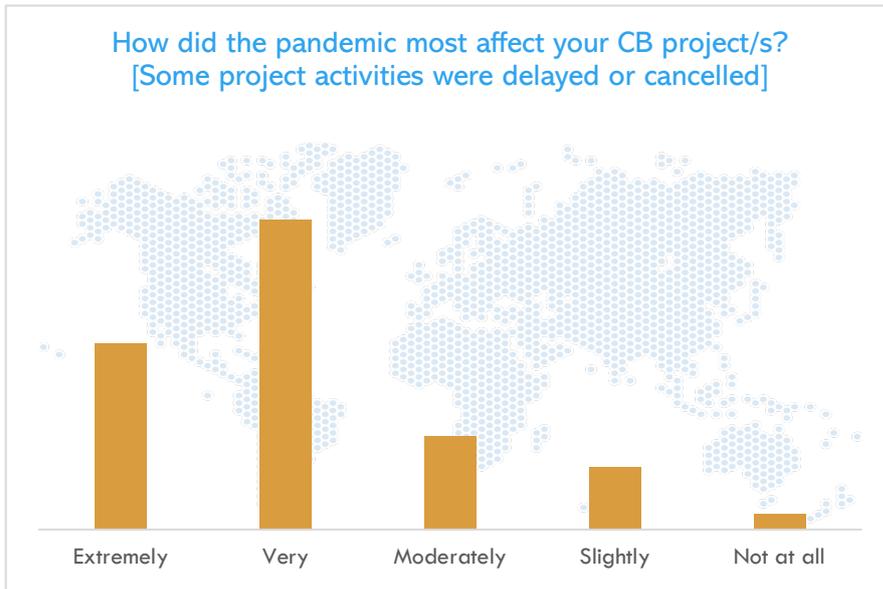


FIGURE 4

Moreover, the majority answered that onsite activities (including meetings) were cancelled and reconfigured to take place online.

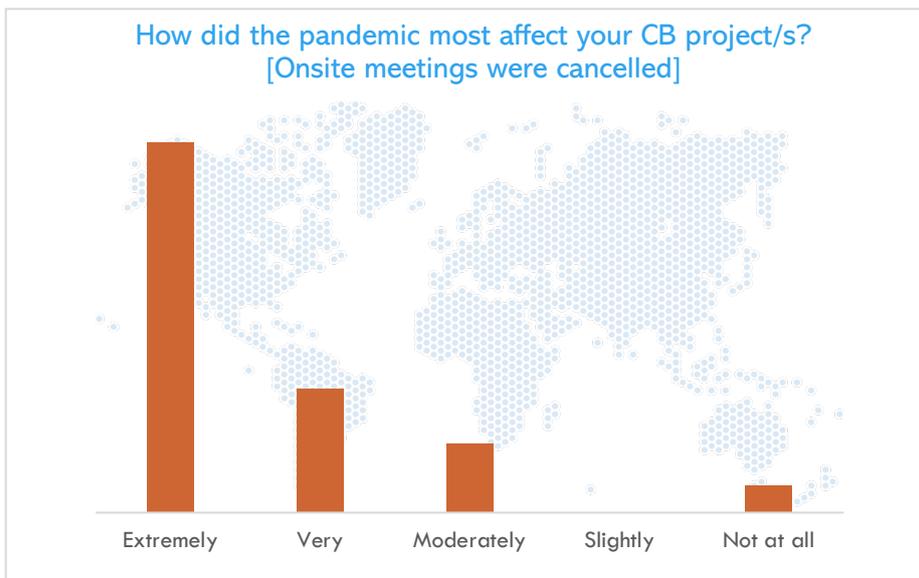


FIGURE 5

Given these results, the question arises as to whether these circumstances decreased the impact of Capacity Building in HE projects.

Indeed, the impact of the projects decreased, although to different extents. Even though a third of respondents said it “moderately” contributed to a decrease in impact, almost 33% believed their project’s impact was either “very” or “extremely” affected.

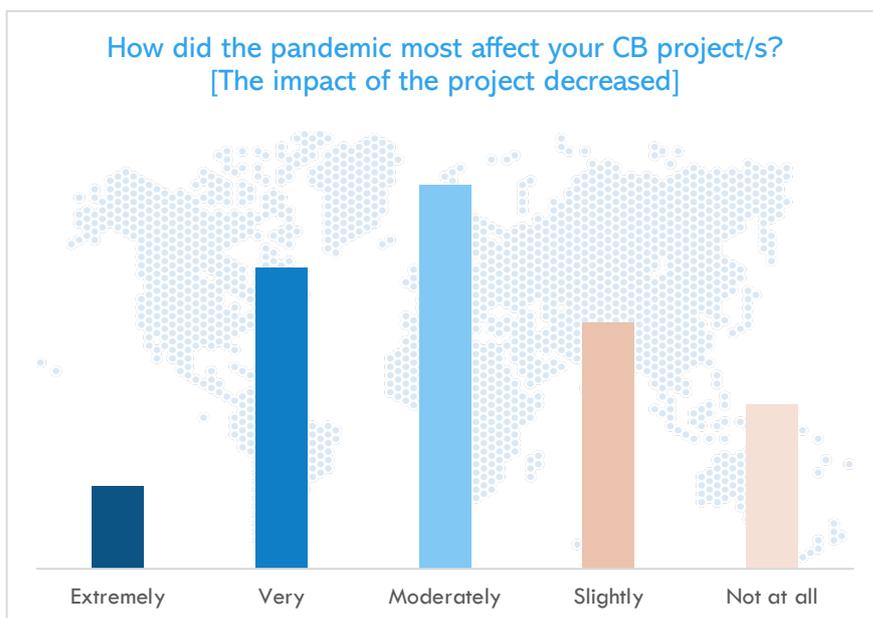


FIGURE 6

As mentioned above, respondents emphasised that one of the biggest obstacles they encountered in this new situation was moving from a blended approach (where face-to-face activities complemented online actions) to carrying out all actions almost exclusively online.

Some of them mentioned that one of the difficulties occurred when organising dissemination events. Here, two different trends emerge, which can be justified by different levels of preparedness to move towards digital scenarios: while 46.5% reported organising online events was “extremely” or “very” difficult, 48.8% assessed it as “slightly” or “moderately” difficult.

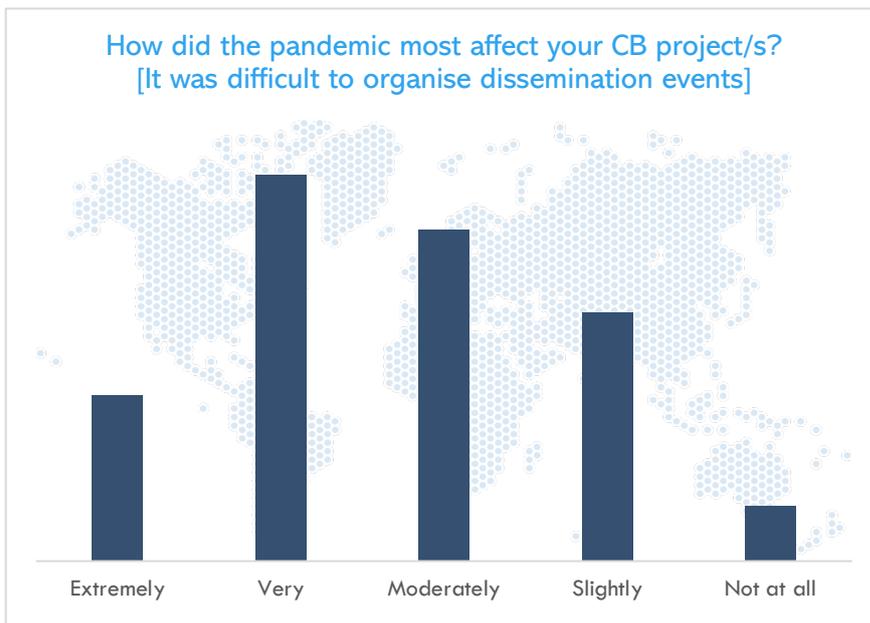
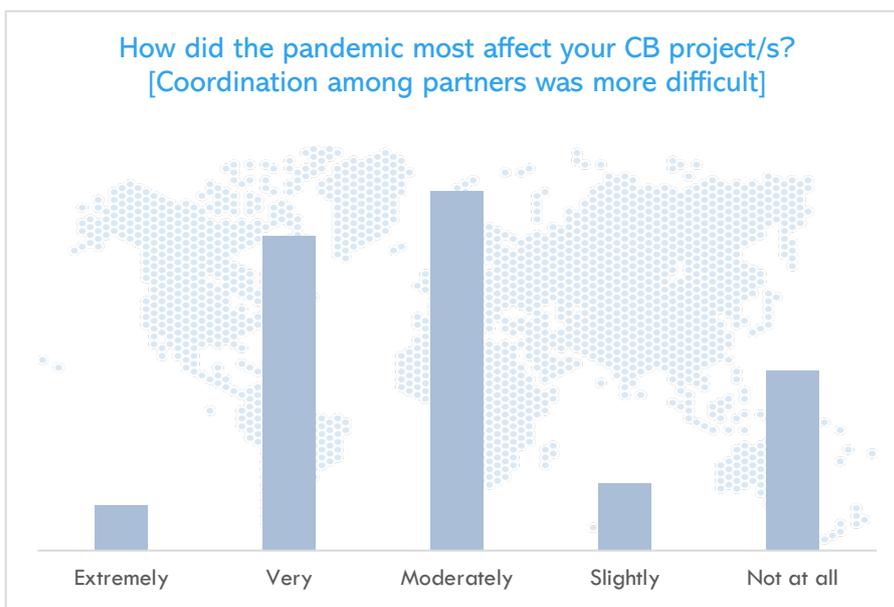
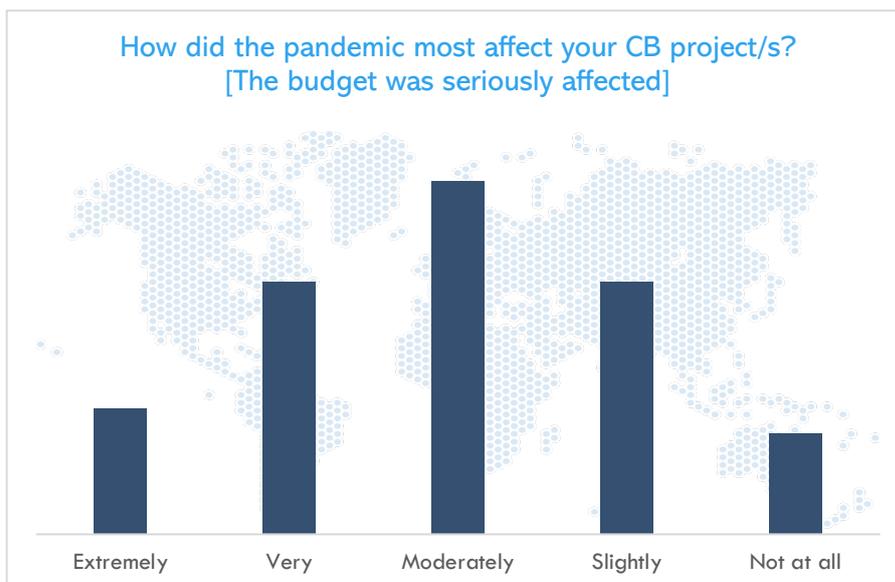


FIGURE 7

Another noteworthy aspect is the fact that about one in four respondents did not consider that coordination among partners was more difficult, while 37.2% considered it was “very” or “extremely” difficult, and another 37.2% found it “moderately” difficult.



When it comes to the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, about a third of respondents considered their project budget was “moderately” affected, while 23.2% were “slightly” affected. Therefore, we can conclude that, for the majority of respondents, the budget was only relatively affected.



Last but not least, respondents offered some comments, impressions and ideas on how they coped with this situation. We can conclude that:

- It is highly suggested to allow some reworking on the budget in order to be more effective and cause a higher impact;
- This new experience allowed respondents to develop new ways to manage their projects;
- It has been a learning experience for coordinators and teams;
- Restrictions in mobility and the lack of possibilities to meet in person were the most common aspect that affected Capacity Building in HE projects.

In other words, even though institutions and their staff members are adapting to the situation, they require further assistance and support.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In short, COVID-19 had a noticeable effect in Capacity Building in HE projects.

Most of the difficulties reported relate to the change from face-to-face to online communication, events and coordination. Most respondents found it difficult to interact with other partners almost exclusively online as there were communication barriers. In addition to this, the need to adapt events from face-to-face to an online modality made beneficiaries or attendees less motivated in what concerns dissemination activities.

On the other hand, changes in projects occurred due to the fact that some of the activities and events were cancelled or delayed. This means that administrative instruments became necessary to enable the extension or suspension of project implementation.

An important point is that partners received support from both their coordinators and from EACEA, thus reinforcing the fact that coordination is essential when it comes to achieving successful projects.

Nevertheless, even though project impact among target groups was negatively affected, we can consider that it only moderately decreased.

Despite these drawbacks, there were a number of improvements that should not be overlooked. For example, many Universities became familiar with online communication and it is clear that international cooperation can also be achieved digitally.

The situation, therefore, was not as negative as we might have expected: there was a greater involvement by Consortium members and communication improved, as it became easier to meet online.

In short, there were difficulties and almost all aspects of the projects were affected, but adaptation was favoured by the adoption of an online modality in some activities.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

As mentioned above, in addition to results and comments collected, we make several recommendations that especially target the Consortia in which INCOMA is involved, but it can also be relevant and taken into consideration by other institutions involved in this type of projects.

Transition to the online modality

The fact that respondents agreed that the most difficult aspect was the need to organise online activities and events as an alternative to face-to-face actions suggests that it might be necessary to finance the development of tools and equipment to virtualise project management, to provide training to use these tools and, in short, to offer extra help for this transition to the online modality.

It is safe to say that the digitalisation of our contemporary society was boosted by the COVID-19 crisis and, as such, new tools, skills and opportunities to further deepen this process are called for.

Improve online training

Furthermore, even if in the future events may again be organised face-to-face to increase project impact and favour engagement, it would be important to work on promoting online measures as an additional tool to contribute to project development.

Focus on the objectives

It is highly advisable to focus on goals such as improving the quality of digital education.

Therefore, it is our recommendation that blended exchanges continue to be set-up since, as the pandemic revealed, they are feasible and, moreover, make a contribution to the objectives of reducing the carbon footprint without undermining synergies in cooperation.

Budget flexibility

Given that the last months have been marked by instability, it is highly recommended to increase flexibility in what concerns the use of budget, project deadlines and other issues that may be negatively impacted, in order to enable coordinators to quickly adapt to new circumstances.

5. ABOUT US

INCOMA is a training and research centre based in Seville (Spain) with extensive know-how and experience in the development and coordination of international cooperation projects mainly funded within the framework of EU programmes, especially in the field of education, training and research.

INCOMA's Research and Innovation Department is actively involved in the development and implementation of social innovation and education projects funded internationally covering topics such as socio-economic inclusion and the promotion of equal opportunities, the acquisition of key competences for an active citizenship, the provision of lifelong development opportunities for public and private social practitioners or the internationalisation of education and training systems.

Indeed, we hold close to 20 years of experience as a coordinator and partner, having assumed several roles and responsibilities and acquired extensive knowledge in the implementation of research and training activities, development of training and learning materials, coordination of transversal actions (Dissemination, Evaluation and Quality Assurance, Sustainability and Exploitation), as well as overall Project Management and Coordination.

Within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), INCOMA's Research and Innovation Department has been involved in over 40 projects, of which 8 are funded under the KA2 Capacity Building in Higher Education initiative. Furthermore, we are responsible for the coordination and implementation of Evaluation & Quality Assurance activities in 6 of the aforementioned Capacity Building in Higher Education projects and, in that sense, an analysis of how COVID-19 impacted such transnational cooperation projects was crucial.

INCOMA is an active member of international networks such as the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, EfVET (European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training) and WINGS for female entrepreneurship. Furthermore, INCOMA is a founding member of the INTERMOVE Network and a signatory of the W.I.S.E.4All - Women for Innovative Society in Europe initiative.