

QUALITY PLAN

for

the project Erasmus Mundus Action 2 SIGMA Agile

Critical Skills Learning for Innovation, Sustainable Growth, Mobility and
Employability in the Multicultural Environment of the Western Balkans

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1. Overview

1.1 The Organization: Partnership Erasmus Mundus A2 SIGMA Agile

Erasmus Mundus Action 2 SIGMA Agile (EMA2 SIGMA Agile) is a project funded by the European Commission within the programme Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013, accepted in 2014. Its life-cycle lasts from July 15th 2014 until July 14th 2018. The objectives of the programme Erasmus Mundus include: mutual enrichment of societies by developing qualifications and skills, particularly as regards to the labour market; promotion of mobility for students, researchers, academic and administrative staff, including vulnerable groups, based on excellence; contribution towards the development of human resources and the international cooperation capacity of higher education institutions in the participating countries with the principles of equal opportunities. Erasmus Mundus Action 2 provides support for the establishment of partnerships between the higher education institutions in the EU countries and targeted non-EU countries in order to organize and implement individual mobility arrangements. Within the programme, scholarships are granted at all levels (for students, researchers, faculty members, professionals) and the mobility can last from 1 month (in the case of staff) to 36 months (in the case of full degree doctoral students).

Partnership EMA2 SIGMA Agile consists of 9 partner universities from 9 EU countries (Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, The Netherlands, UK) and 11 partners from 5 Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, Serbia). Its full title reflects the ambitious tasks that the partnership is

planning to accomplish: Critical Skills Learning for Innovation, Sustainable Growth, Mobility and EmployAbility in the Multicultural Environment of the Western Balkans. EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* specific objectives are fully in line with the objectives of the programme Erasmus Mundus, as well as with the EU horizontal policies, and include:

- **Development of critical skills** necessary for functioning in the knowledge-based society and increasing chances for employment, e.g: entrepreneurial skills, managing one's career, managing organizational processes, applying for grants, linguistic skills, and others; bridging the gap between education and work; mutual enrichment and cross-fertilization. This will be done through academic mobility and other initiatives, such as conferences, seminars, webinars.
- **Mobility of students, researchers, academic and administrative staff;** enabling excellent candidates from the WB to obtain qualifications in the EU, and EU candidates to gain experience in the WB. Equal opportunities will be given to excellent candidates from vulnerable groups, anti brain-drain measures will be taken.
- **Quality measures.** Like *Six Sigma* method in business, project SIGMA *Agile* is going to implement quality planning, assurance and control measures and transfer of expertise within the partnership, thus promoting the EU as the centre of excellence in learning. Bologna process and ECTS documents will be applied. Smooth transfer of grades, credits, programmes, diplomas, skills and qualifications between the EU and WB HEIs will contribute towards a greater compatibility between the WB and EU HE systems and will help to increase the quality of education in the WB. Both internal and external peer-evaluation will be applied. To maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the project, Agile manifesto principles¹ will be followed, to the extent that is possible within an educational project. This includes: agile response to the needs of the stakeholders

¹ <https://www.projectmanager.com/blog/agile-principles>

and to change, fact-based management, effective and efficient flow of information with the use of available technology.

- **Transfer of know-how; building academic, managerial and administrative capacity** in the WB partner institutions. Well-trained academic and administrative staff and alumni of the project will contribute towards further human development and capacity building in their home institutions.
- **Ensuring long-term structured cooperation among the EU and WB HEIs** with emphasis on sustainability and future joint initiatives, such as sustaining the network, joint projects, research and innovative programmes, curricula development, publications, workshops, conferences.
- **Development of greater cross-cultural understanding**, peaceful cooperation, inclusion of all groups, supporting talents, and the development of skills for employment; awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity; in a wider perspective, contribution towards the improvement of the HE system in the WB, sustainable development of the region, peace and stability, decreasing the feeling of isolation from the EU, enhancing the European knowledge-based economy and greater social cohesion; promoting equality of all groups and non-discrimination of any kind.

Close cooperation of the teams at the partner universities, good communication and empowered performance is a must, if the project is to succeed. On a daily basis the partnership operates as a virtual team and uses such channels of communication as e-mails, telephone, website, questionnaires, simple brainwriting activities. Rarely do the members have the opportunity to meet in person, which happens on the occasion of the kick-off meeting, selection meeting, workshops, closing event. There may be some skype meetings or teleconferences, too.

This real life contact is invaluable in terms of mutual understanding among the partners and highly motivated performance.

As it has been demonstrated, partnership EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* has included the question of quality into its objectives. It is planned to address all the aspects connected with the implementation of an educational project, which entails: quality of education, quality services at the partner universities, quality project management, quality reporting, according to the EACEA requirements (The Educational, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency). All the partners are acquainted with the project proposal and with the quality planning, assurance and control measures that had been included in it. In addition, they received “Instructions for SIGMA *Agile* Partners”² – a document that shortly describes how to proceed at all the stages of the project throughout its lifecycle and beyond. A good systematic, optimized quality plan should allow the partnership to achieve its goals with an increased efficiency and to measure the outcomes of the project.

1.2 Erasmus Mundus A2 SIGMA *Agile* Structure

EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* consists of 9 partner universities from 9 EU countries and 11 partner universities from all the 5 eligible Western Balkan countries, with the leading role of the University of Warsaw in Poland. The project Joint-Coordinator is the University of Montenegro. EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* project teams at the partner universities are more often than

² Available at EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* website:
<http://portal.uw.edu.pl/web/sigma/for-partners;jsessionid=468D65D77009C51C945CEDB8846E712F>

not based at the International Relations Offices and report to their relevant functional managers. The coordinating team at the University of Warsaw is also based at its International Relations Office, which reports to the Vice-Rector for Research and International Relations. Within the structure of the International Relations Office, EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* coordinating team is part of the Section for the EU Educational Programmes, which practically plays the role of Project Management Office (PMO). EMA2 Partnership reports to the EACEA and has to fulfill the requirements of the call for proposal, as included in the Grant Agreement. Other stakeholders are: associates, student organizations, Erasmus Mundus alumni, other higher education institutions in the WB region, national structures, EU-Delegations, embassies, ministries, NGO's, platforms for vulnerable groups, local authorities and businesses, etc.

EM A2 SIGMA internal structure is as below:



This structure should enable empowered performance and active participation of all the partners in the quality processes. Joint-Coordinator is to support the coordinating team in such activities as promotion of the project, project management, selection of the scholarship holders, data collection and analysis. Western Balkan Forum consists of representatives of all the Western Balkan countries participating in the project (1 representative per country), selected during the kick-off meeting, and has an advisory role in the case of complicated matters concerning the region, such as reaching TG 3 candidates, recognition and transfer of credits, diplomas, skills and qualifications. Selection Committee consists of 1 representative per each partner university (EU and WB). In addition, 4 working groups have been established:

- **Quality Assurance Working Group** – to streamline SIGMA *Agile* quality measures with regards to the application and selection procedures, inclusion of vulnerable groups, promotion, academic quality, reporting, evaluation, etc.
- **Skill-Learning and Employability Working Group** – to further develop SIGMA *Agile* skill-learning component, taking into consideration the situation on the WB labour markets; to establish links with the alumni, career centres, employers and other organizations; to ensure social inclusion.
- **Recognition Working Group** – to identify problems connected with the transfer of scores, credits, skills and qualifications, and the recognition of credits, programmes, diplomas, qualifications; to propose workable solutions for SIGMA *Agile* partners.
- **Sustainability Working Team** – to ensure visibility and sustainability of SIGMA *Agile*, to gather information on existing cooperation among the partners and to encourage further cooperative activities, to ensure collaboration with other actors, such

as alumni, student organizations, other Erasmus Mundus partnerships, NGO's, local authorities, EU delegations, etc.

All the partners have received SIGMA *Agile* Roles and Responsibilities Chart, which contains more detailed information on how to ensure effective and well-balanced participation of all the actors. Robert Cole, W. Edwards Deming, Joseph Juran, Philip Crosby, all stress the need for employee participation as a key element in managing organizations in the changing and increasingly complex world. Close collaboration and knowledge-based work in teams is the natural result (Lindsay, Petrick:1997). Similar rules apply to work environment within such projects as Erasmus Mundus A2. They also contribute to the improvement of quality.

1.3 Holistic Approach to Quality Assurance within EMA2 SIGMA *Agile*

According to Armand Feigenbaum (1983), “The system approach to quality begins with the basic principle of total quality control that customer satisfaction cannot be achieved by concentrating upon any one area (...)”. Even though the author was talking about business organizations, this sentence perfectly reflects the multi-dimensional approach that is needed in the case of such projects as Erasmus Mundus A2 ones. The following aspects must be considered:

- Formal requirements of the programme Erasmus Mundus A2
- Internal quality procedures at the partner universities

- Different levels of quality: academic quality, quality services at the partner universities, quality project management and administration, quality financial management, etc.
- Application of the Bologna Process – its rules and standard documents
- Quality planning, assurance and control throughout all the phases of the project: Project Initiation, Preparation, Promotion, Recruitment, Selection, Pre-Mobility, Mobility, After-Mobility, Close-out and sustainability measures
- Many different stakeholders involved in the project

As S. Thomas Foster (2007) observes, we should also be conscious of possible different cultural perspectives on quality and on the fact that we may need flexibility while pursuing quality. In the view of to the contingency theory, no theory or method can be applied in all instances.

2. Quality plan for EMA2 SIGMA Agile

According to Timothy J. Kloppenborg and Joseph A. Petrick (2002), quality is the totality of characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. However, as described in 1.3, quality is a multi-dimensional and complicated concept and in the case of an Erasmus Mundus A2 project, different aspects should be addressed. Therefore, in order to design a general, optimized quality plan, we have to refer to the different levels the question of quality should be approached, to the 3 spheres of quality (quality planning, assurance and control), to the Total Quality Management assumptions and theories proposed

e.g. by Deming, Ishikawa or Crosby. Also, we can have in mind the four project quality pillars developed by Kloppenborg and Petrick: (1) customer satisfaction, (2) process improvement, (3) fact-based management, (4) empowered performance. We have to identify and apply appropriate tools in order to be as precise and efficient as possible. Finally, we have to remember about the specificity of the project and the programme Erasmus Mundus A2, about its objectives, about the interests of the scholarship holders and other stakeholders.

EM A2 SIGMA *Agile* quality plan includes 3 points: (1) Quality planning, assurance and control throughout all the phases of the project and beyond, (2) Different levels, such as academic quality, quality project management and administration, quality financial management, quality services, (3) 4 pillars of quality: response to the targeted groups, process improvement, fact-based management, empowered performance.

2.1 Quality planning, assurance and control throughout all the phases of the project and beyond (Based on *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge – Fourth Edition*)

2.1.1 Plan Quality

Inputs: EMA2 programme requirements and guidelines; scope, schedule and budget baseline; partnership building and assigning the project teams; register of risks; lessons learned and good practices from other similar projects; information from the partners, including their policies, strategies and preferences; strategies and recommendations for the region and for each participating country.

Tools and Techniques: benchmarking; risk analysis; analysis of lessons learned and good practices; analysis of reports on the participating universities, participating countries and the whole region; experts consultation; additional quality planning tools.

Outputs: Project proposal with clear quality assurance measures; list of project activities, deliverables and expected outcomes; project documents, such as Communication Plan, Roles and Responsibilities Chart; draft Memorandum of Understanding, draft Learning Agreement, Work Plan and Activity Report for EMA2 SIGMA *Agile*.

2.1.2 Perform Quality Assurance

Inputs: Grant Agreement with the EACEA, Financial and Administrative Handbook; draft Quality Plan; Instructions for the Partners and for the Scholarship Holders.

Tools and Techniques: quality control tools and techniques; academic quality tools and techniques; questionnaires and evaluation forms; reports; interviews; audits; process analysis.

Outputs: Quality Plan updates; project document updates; project procedures.

2.1.3 Perform Quality Control

Inputs: Grant Agreement with the EACEA, Financial and Administrative Handbook; updated EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* Quality Plan; quality checklists and metrics; project deliverables and milestones.

Tools and Techniques: Cause and effect diagrams (e.g. Ishikawa's fishbone diagram), flowcharting, run charts; Six-Sigma techniques, e.g. DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze,

Improve, Control) or RUMBA (Realistic, Understandable, Measurable, Believable, Actionable); inspections.

Outputs: quality control measurements; validated deliverables; project document updates; updated project procedures; reports on the project.

2.2 Different levels of quality: academic quality, quality services, quality project management and administration, quality financial management.

2.2.1 Academic Quality

- Use of standard ECTS documents and Bologna process provisions, adjusted to EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* purposes (Learning Agreement, Work Plan, Transcript of Records, Diploma Supplement, etc.).
- Use of other documents that help to assure academic quality, such as Scholarship Contract, Instructions for the Partners, Instructions for the Scholarship Holders.
- Clear instructions for the applicants regarding academic requirements at the partner universities, application procedures, registration, required documents, etc.
- Assigning academic contact person/ tutor/ supervisor.
- Reports on the academic activities of the scholarship holders, outputs and expected outcomes: every semester, or, in the case of staff and post doctorates – at the end of the mobility period.

- Regular contact with the scholarship holders and their academic supervisors during the mobility period – feedback on the academic aspect of the mobility and any problems they might have faced.
- Documenting each mobility in terms of its academic outputs and outcomes: LA/ Work Plan, grades and credits (Transcript of records/ Certificate), reports, research projects, publications, dissertations, etc.
- Gathering information on additional activities and achievements connected with the mobility, such as awards, publications, joint initiatives.
- Providing information on the credit system, grading system, curricula, syllabi, etc.
- Follow up on the recognition of grades, credits and qualifications gained abroad. If needed, consultations with the quality experts at the partner universities, Bologna experts, ministries, policy makers, etc.
- Lessons learned and good practices regarding recognition.
- Involvement of the academic coordinators, regular consultation with the academic staff and quality experts at the partner universities.
- Questionnaires on the mobility, also with regards to its academic aspects: at the end of the mobility period and after a certain period of time to measure long-term outcomes.
- Promoting sustainability of the partnership, also in terms of academic cooperation among the partner institutions.
- Workshops and webinars.

2.2.2 Quality Services

- Gathering information on services provided by each partner university to the scholarship holders, such as: assistance with the registration, visa, contact with the academic coordinator, contact with student associations, buddy/mentor programme, assistance with accommodation, pick-up service, orientation, language courses, social activities, inter-cultural activities, workshops, student id, opening bank account, etc.
- Instructions for the partners.
- Feedback from the alumni.
- Working on how to provide high-quality student services.

2.2.3 Quality Project Management

- Compliance with the EACEA Financial and Administrative Handbook.
- Development of project-specific documents, such as MoU, Timetable, Milestones document, Communication Plan, Roles and Responsibilities Chart, Instructions for the Partners, Instructions for the Scholarship Holders, Scholarship Contract, etc.
- Use of business approach for quality project management, such as Six Sigma or Agile principles.
- Development of Workbreak Structure.
- Use of effective IT tools, e.g. for the application and selection process.
- Communication among the partners and joint work on quality measures throughout all the phases of the project; use of expertise within the partnership.
- Gathering good practices and lessons learned.
- Workshops for the administrators.
- Seminars/ webinars

- Quality control methods regarding the administration of the project: questionnaires, surveys, checklists, reports. Internal and external peer-evaluation is planned.
- Feedback from the scholarship holders in the form of e.g. questionnaires, structured interviews, reports - during and after the mobility period; comments on the study programme, services, administration, accommodation, hospitality, inter-cultural experience, skills they have learned, results and expected outcomes.
- All the data will be gathered, processed, and presented to the partners and to other similar partnerships.
- Cooperation with other EMA2 partnerships (joint initiatives, peer-learning, etc.).
- Accuracy with project documentation and reporting – according to EACEA guidelines and internal regulations.
- EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* Quality Plan.

2.2.4 Quality Financial Management

- Compliance with the EACEA Financial and Administrative Handbook and with the Grant Agreement.
- Instructions for the partners, MoU.
- Close cooperation with the Financial Office and use of the financial management tools.
- Development of an IT tool for EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* selection proces and budget calculation.
- Check and control procedures regarding finance management.

2.3 4 Pillars of Quality

- **Response to the targeted groups**, achieved by customer-focused work supported by committed leadership (in this case: scholarship holders and administrators at the partner universities); meeting the expectations of both internal and external stakeholders.
- **Process improvement**: continuous improvement of work processes to efficiently and effectively achieve the objectives of the project.
- **Fact-based management**, which means that the partnership will be collecting, measuring and analysing data and trends.
- **Empowered performance**, which entails the empowered daily work performance of continuous improvement in personal tasks aligned with the objectives of the project and the team member's scope of responsibility (Kloppenborg 10-17).

While working on the multi-dimensional project quality, EMA2 SIGMA *Agile* partners will make efforts to build effective communication and mutual trust within the partnership, to stimulate the feeling of working towards the common goal, to ensure meaningful tasks and individual empowerment, to enable peer-learning, to provide training and skill-learning through consultations, workshops and webinars.

** in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence*

References

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