Synthesis of DIGA Evaluation Findings - Key Learnings and Policy and Practice Implications

Note:

This report is an intellectual output of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project Digital Innovations for Growth Academy (DIGA) [2014-1-UK01-KA202-001780]. It presents research and analysis to inform the development of the DIGA training programme to enhance the digital competencies of enterprise educators and trainers. Digital Innovations for Growth Academy operates as a Strategic Partnership from seven-member states. The partners are from the social, private and public sectors. Through the testing and piloting of the programme materials the project will include 120 enterprise trainers and educators from five partner countries.

Disclaimer:

1.0 Introduction

The Digital Innovations for Growth Academy Project is a Strategic Partnership from seven-member states (UK, Ireland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Norway and Spain) involved in the enhancement of digital competencies of entrepreneurs and owner-manager through the provision of appropriate small firm context digital training programmes. The DIGA programme (http://digaproject.eu/learning-programme/) is designed to support entrepreneurship trainers and educators (ETE) in the development of their digital competencies and skills to enable them to train, advise and mentor entrepreneurs to become more digitally-literate.

The DIGA programme promotes an integrated perspective of the role and benefits of digital technologies as they apply to the specific characteristics of the start-up and established small enterprise. The programme content was shaped by the five core digital competencies identified in policy and practice reports. The five required digital competency areas are as follows:

1. Enhancing Digital Awareness and Knowledge
2. The role and use of Digital Technologies and their benefits to Business
3. Making Digital Deliver for the start-up and small business
4. Enabling and Supporting the Development of an Entrepreneurial Digital Strategy
5. Designing Integrated (Digital Competence) Entrepreneur Support/Programmes

A blended delivery approach was deployed encompassing knowledge sharing complemented by linked practice based experiential learning via online assignments and supporting exercises and case studies. The learning environment was designed to encourage and enable peer and supported group learning in an informal interactive manner. This creation of a community of learners generated a network of professional contacts for ongoing collaboration between the participants once the programme was completed.

At the onset of the programme participants completed a Personal Development Plan (PDP) to capture their existing levels of digital knowledge, familiarity with digital language and the use of digital tools in their roles. This information ensured that programme content and the practical learning assessments addressed the varied entry needs of participants and enabled some customisation of content and assignments by partner institution. Engaging in the completion of the PDP was a useful personal self-reflection and self-learning exercise for participants as it identified in a more explicit manner their individual level of digital knowledge and further it provided a useful means of tracking digital learning as they completed DIGA.

The evaluation comprised programme and module evaluations.

1. DIGA programme evaluation determined if the overall objectives of the DIGA programme were accomplished, what worked well, not so well and the learnings from this that would inform the transferability of the programme into other contexts.

2. Module evaluation: Post module evaluation captured the level of satisfaction of the experience of the participant with each module in areas such as the organisational aspects of the programme; the variety and depth of the content and assessments of the modules and the learning obtained. This evaluation took place on the completion of each module.

The following sections provide a summary overview of the key findings and learnings from the DIGA evaluation and their implications for policy and practice.

2.0 Key Learnings from DIGA

The following is a summary of the key learnings emerging from DIGA evaluations:

Pre DIGA assessment:

- Practices of digital by ETEs were on a fragmented and piecemeal basis – where digital is viewed as a periphery business function.
- The language typically used with the explanation of digital was technically or tool focussed as opposed to their uses, application and benefits for an entrepreneurial context. Thus, language was often a barrier to engagement about digital with their entrepreneurial clients.
- A narrow perspective of digital – frequently mentioned that digital uses are marketing and promotional focussed. DIGA extends knowledge and application beyond marketing to cross and within functional applications.
- There was an absence of a clear set of objectives for digital and confusion as to the potential benefits (financial and non-financial) that digital can bring to a small enterprise.
- ETEs are not fully capitalising on the functionalities or the potential of digital in learning and delivery of entrepreneurship programmes. Linked to this is the evidence of a lack of a strategic perspective of integrating digital technology as part of the broader strategy or business plan for their enterprise.
- Deficiency of knowledge on digital measurement, or monitoring tools and their importance to understand the return on investment from detail. This is perhaps linked to the lack of detailed understanding of the array of digital tools available for the entrepreneurial context.
- ETEs communicated a lack of confidence and skills in the use and trialling of new digital technologies across functions and in using digital language with their clients and thus resulting in a reactive response to the digital needs of their entrepreneurial clients.
- There is an interest in and eagerness for ETEs to develop digital competencies but they were not always clear on what digital competencies they needed to develop and why so. The inclusion of the Personal Development Plan was instrumental in clarifying the digital needs competencies of the participants.

Post DIGA assessment:

- Participation in the programme distilled the myths and preconceived ideas of digital generating a more engaged audience of learners on the topic.
- The DIGA blended delivery approach of face to face personal interactions and online delivery with enterprise specific applications engaged the ETE in personal and professional learning about digital in an integrated manner.

- Participants now have a more embedded digital mind-set and behaviour from an integrated learning of the '*what*' and the *'how'* of digital as it applies in an entrepreneurial context.
- There is a heightened awareness of and ability to extend digital beyond a marketing and promotions application to take account of its potential benefits across all business functions.
- An increased level of confidence in supporting entrepreneurs/small business owners to develop an entrepreneurial digital strategy.
- More proactive engagement with and introducing digital to clients rather than waiting for clients to ask about it – making digital part of the business narratives and their deliberations between ETE and their clients.
- Participants developed skills and understanding of methods to monitor the return (financial and non-financial) and the benefits of digital tools to save time and money.
- Better understanding of the relationship or impact digital can have on enterprise performance, growth and the '*bottom line'.*
- Developed new contacts and sources of ongoing learning the teamwork and peer learning opportunities resulted in important personal learning development mechanism.
- The Personal Development Plan (PDP) provides an important self-reflection and self-learning tool. The PDP has use for ETE personal and for client application – useful to track their own ongoing learning and provides a tool for training needs analysis for more general entrepreneurial programmes.
- Participants acknowledge and appreciate that digital technology is an evolving and ever advancing domain and thus digital learning is ongoing and through DIGA have developed a set of skills and resources to do so.
- DIGA is very much needed and in demand by ETE as it generates positive personal and professional expertise, provides augmented level digital competencies to support entrepreneurs/small business owners to develop an entrepreneurial digital strategy.
- Successful digital adoption is not just about tools and technology but about developing a digital strategy and the latter was an important learning from the DIGA programme.
- DIGA provides a flexible digital learning model whose content and delivery could be adopted to accommodate country cultural, entrepreneurial learning preferences and national digital policies and practices.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative evaluation were positive and consistent across partner countries strongly endorsing DIGA as a framework to develop and build digital competencies and capabilities for integrated application in an entrepreneurial context.   The results provide some important messages which can be used in the progression of DIGA as a 'good practice model' of digital competency enhancement.

3.0 Primary Outcomes from DIGA

DIGA produced a number of tangible benefits for Entrepreneurial Trainers and Educators (ETEs) working across partner countries and by extension will enhance the digital competencies of the entrepreneur at all stages of entrepreneurial journey from start up to growth and internationalisation. The primary outcomes and impact from the DIGA project are presented under the following:

- **Digital Engagement and upskilling of Entrepreneur Trainers and Educators (ETE)**
- **Digital Knowledge and Competency Development (Professional Development)**
- **Learning and Delivery Approaches**
- **Entrepreneur Trainer Educator Personal Development**
- **DIGA Partnership outcomes**

3.1.1 Digital Engagement and upskilling of Entrepreneur Trainers and Educators (ETE)

✓ The empirical factfinding study consulted with over 482 enterprise trainers and educators (ETEs), learners and entrepreneurs to ascertain their perception of, use and application of digital and their interest in developing digital competencies.

✓ The design and piloting of a 5-module DIGA Learning Programme combing experiential and action learning approaches was underpinned by the provision of digital knowledge and policy perspectives.

✓ Over 93 Entrepreneur, Trainers and Educators (ETEs) completed the DIGA programme in UK, Slovenia, Spain, Lithuania and Bulgaria.

✓ Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative evaluation engaged with 57 enterprise trainers and educators to provide feedback on their DIGA personal and professional learning experiences.

✓ A DIGA website was developed and contains information on: the DIGA initiative; partner institutions; DIGA programme modules; EU and country specific policy documents; blogs and informational pieces; and programme materials in a number of languages.

✓ Design of a Personal Development Plan template which can be adapted for use as a training needs analysis for other entrepreneurial competency development programmes.

3.1.2 Digital Knowledge and Competency Development (Professional Development)

✓ A demystification of the language and jargon of digital in an applied entrepreneurial context and, as a result, participants are better equipped to incorporate digital as part of the business narrative – moving digital from the peripheral to a core business function.

✓ ETEs acquired new learning on the overarching digital EU policy which provided context and an insight into its impact on digital practices in the entrepreneurial context – ETEs now see the reason why digital is so important and that it will be a critical entrepreneurial function.

✓ DIGA produced a more informed viewpoint of what digital competencies are and their characteristics for an entrepreneurial context.

✓ An increased awareness of and knowledge about the opportunities to apply digital in an integrated cross functional manner to an entrepreneurial context.

✓ Comprehension of the components of a digital strategy, the provision of tools and techniques for the development of digital strategy and its implementation.

- ✓ The Business Model Canvas as a novel tool that can be used across a variety of enterprises irrespective of sector and also used in other business development programmes for small businesses beyond digital training.
- ✓ The ability to adapt digital content and practical examples to country and learner fit is important for greater immediate transferability of the learning accrued.
- ✓ The acquisition of digital enabling skills and an understanding of *how, when and where* to apply them in an appropriate manner to an entrepreneurial context.
- ✓ Better understanding of the relationship and impact that digital has on the 'bottom line' i.e. enterprise performance and growth targets.
- ✓ DIGA provides ETEs with the ability to provide an additional or new digital training initiative to their professional portfolio of services on offer by ETEs.

3.1.3 Personal Development of the Entrepreneur Trainer Educator (ETE)
- ✓ Greater confidence and ease in proactively discussing digital tools across business functions – making digital part of the discussions between ETE and their clients.
- ✓ Extended ETE to move beyond their 'digital comfort' zone to test newly acquired digital knowledge and tools.
- ✓ The Personal Development Plan is an added value instrument for their use as it can be applied to track and build their portfolio of training competencies and presents an important self-reflection tool on areas for personal and professional development.
- ✓ Teamwork and peer learning activities facilitated sharing and exchanging of experiences in an honest and constructive manner generating confidence and less cautious testing and trialling of new digital tools.
- ✓ Participation in DIGA resulted in an expanded range of contacts and business networks for new business or 'go to people' for ongoing digital learning.
- ✓ Obtained knowledge on and experience of new delivery mechanisms that the ETE will use in the delivery of entrepreneurial related training programmes.

Overall participants experienced combined personal and professional development from a linked theoretical and practical experiential learning perspective.

3.1.4 DIGA Delivery- blended approach
- ✓ The interactive and practical learning (e.g. video cases studies, Business Model Canvas) provided participants with a better understanding of how to design and deliver a digital competency training programme.
- ✓ The mix of knowledge transmission, peer learning and practical experiential learning activities achieved the simultaneous acquisition of digital knowledge and its application in applied entrepreneurial context.
- ✓ Attainment and execution of practical applied tips and tools to integrate digital within and across business functions are important enablers for inclusion in future digital learning interventions.
- ✓ Peer and team learning scenarios of experiences and good practices are fundamental components to allow participants to personalise learning to their client and user base.

✓ The material and content are adaptable and transferable and respondents reporting that they have integrated material and exercises into advice sessions, action plans and workbooks with clients.

✓ To enable new ETE participate in the delivery of DIGA tutor guidance booklet was devised by the partnership. This booklet provides an introduction and overview to the DIGA Project, comprehensive information on the modules and the approach to programme delivery and the use of practical exercise, references to broad range of digital learning supports for digital learning.

3.1.5 DIGA Partnership

✓ Successful cross-cultural partnership consisting of public and private sector organisations in UK, Ireland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Spain, Bulgaria and Norway - 7 partner organisations from 7 European countries working together.

✓ Partnership learning and expansion of networks across public and private institutions and learnings of best practice digital competency models from different countries.

✓ Brand and image of the various partner institutions was heightened locally and internationally

✓ Development of knowledge base – tacit knowledge which can be shared with colleagues and thus instilling shared digital learning within and across partner institutions.

Based on the above DIGA presents an effective digital competency model. The outcomes provide a number of transferable and useful learnings to guide the next stage of the DIGA programme and can also feed into the ongoing development of digital policies. The following are recommendations on both areas.

4.0 Practice and Policy Implications
4.1 Practice Implications – transferability and progression of DIGA

There is a definite need for and interest by ETEs to enhance their digital skills and competencies relevant to an entrepreneurial user context. Suggestions are offered on how the DIGA model can be leveraged as a digital competency upskilling initiative for ETEs in public and private organisations which include the following:

Planning, recruitment and selection process

- *Programme Planning and Administration* - there is a need to apportion time and administrative support for the organisational and logistical preparation of the programme. The pilot DIGA Learning Programme heightened the importance of personal recommendation, endorsements and interaction with potential candidates during programme promotional phase.

- *Administrative support* - important to have a dedicated contact person as the key contact for applicants and to undertake administrative duties linked with the administrative aspects of the running the programme, updating of material and for ongoing contact between module sessions for the participants.

- *Sourcing and Recruitment of applicants* - the recruitment process is time consuming as it requires incorporating a degree of customisation. Ability to leverage personal networks and contacts as primary source of participants and a means of promoting the programme.
- *Programme Promotion* - a combination of online and off-line promotions (of presentations or information workshops and more individual targeted follow up). The use of testimonials from the programme invaluable for future promotions of DIGA.

Programme Content:
- *Module and Topics* - Feedback suggests that the current suite of modules which address the broad spectrum of digital topics (policy to practice and implementation) are addressed in an integrated manner and thus are relevant for inclusion in a digital competency programme.
- *Advanced DIGA programme* - Opportunities were mentioned by respondents to build on the existing modules to raise their level of advancements in digital and introduce more challenging exercises for a follow up programme or 'DIGA level 2'. This programme could be shorter in duration and run through intensive workshop sessions. Other opportunities exist due to the variety of digital ETEs needs; ascertain the demand for offering DIGA as a la carte menu of modules where participants could choose to do one or a number of modules most applicable to them or complete the total programme.
- *Customisation* – We realise that not all material will be relevant to all participants or to different levels of digital experience of participants. Therefore, the programme provider must have the insight to segment and re alter the number and sequencing of modules and level of activities offered to each group. Balance standardisation and customisation.
- *Leveraging the use of the Business Model Canvas (BMC)* - This tool obtained very positive feedback as source and means of digital learning. The BMC has potential to enable online or use in virtual classroom to provide a basis of modified digital competency programmes.
- *New Users or broader application of DIGA* - The variety and nature of the content of the DIGA programme allows for the inclusion of some of the modules into business planning and marketing programmes
    - for government agencies who deal with entrepreneurs and
    - individual in workplace or working with entrepreneurs
    - broader community agencies and groups

Delivery
- Investigate alternative delivery options to manage the time constraints of participants and extend the reach of digital training to a broader geographic base. This will vary by partner country and consideration should be afforded to options such as block release format over a longer period of time; delivery on an evening or weekend basis; more advanced online format with options for participants to virtually engage, network and collaborate and realise peer learning.

- Keep updating the suite of practical activities, the use of videos, case studies, 'how to tips' are important experiential tools to incorporate into all modules.
- Incorporate peer learning and sharing of experiences - learning with and from each other peer learning ongoing learning.
- Evaluate the demand for an online digital competency development programme by modifying module content and practical assessments accordingly.
- The DIGA Learning Programme Guidance for tutors provides a roadmap and instructions to assist individuals and organisations who wish to deliver of DIGA programme for the first time. The guidelines are aligned with the key objectives of DIGA and provide suggestions on how to approach the delivery of the content and your role as a trainer/facilitator in the delivery of the programme

With an increased rollout of DIGA, greater number of individuals at the different stages of their entrepreneurial journey will become more digitally competent and efficient. Thus, better able to engage with and perform in an evolving intensified digital economy. Furthering the existence of this programme will heighten the importance of digital as a competency, that necessitates ongoing learning and therefore reduce its perception as an add on or periphery function.

The programme clearly addresses calls echoed in digital EU and national policies, as well as the learnings from DIGA and the following suggestions will guide policy developments and create alignment between digital policy and practice.

4.2 Policy implications – transferability and progression of DIGA

The following contributions can inform the development of digital policy initiatives to advance the practices of digital in entrepreneurial contexts:

- ✓ The language and narratives in digital policy must contain practical, shared and user-friendly terminology to engage ETE and entrepreneurs in the discussion on digital. Further digital discussions and descriptors should take cognisance of the varied audiences beyond other policy makers and in the perceptual context of the user of digital.
- ✓ Promote digital beyond marketing - digital strategy needs to be taken into account across all business functions and not just the marketing function, to enable business growth and sustainability – the Business Model Canvas can be applied to achieve this.
- ✓ Heighten the awareness and importance of digital by promoting it as a key entrepreneurial strategic competency and mirror its development and resource allocation as would be the case with other human capital resources.
- ✓ View DIGA as a proven entrepreneurial digital competency model which should be made available beyond the partnership. The DIGA programme is standalone transferable model due to the addition of the Personal Development Plan template, the DIGA Learning Programme Guidance notes and the accompanying range of experiential and action based exercise.
- ✓ Extend the reach and scope of digital – new uses and users through the following:
  - **New uses:** The nature of the content and DIGA programme structure allows for modification and the separation of modules to include as part of other entrepreneurial

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competency programmes. Such as into business planning or marketing strategy programmes. Additionally, options include - have a la carte menu where participants could choose to do one or number of modules most applicable to them.

- **New users:** DIGA is a blueprint or template that is flexible and can be used by government agencies who deal with entrepreneurs and the broader local community groups, professional agencies and commercial institutions who work with entrepreneurs and owner-managers.

✓ Engage and as with ongoing feedback mutual learning outcomes and the interconnected audiences / stakeholders in the development of digital competencies for the entrepreneur learner will benefit.

5.0 Some Final Reflections

Overall, a definite message permeating the literature is the imperative that digital is here to stay and entrepreneurs and ETE need to embrace it in a cross functional perspective.

The DIGA programme responds to this need and has the potential to deliver measurable digital knowledge, skills and competency development - moving digital from the peripheral to a core business function – perceptual and operationally. Digital needs to become a natural part of the business narrative for ETE when engaging with entrepreneurs.

The importance of digital can be heightened by associating it with a competence and due to the everchanging nature of DIGA; it requires investment in ongoing learning and enhancement. When entrepreneurs possess relevant digital knowledge and skills then subsequent decisions on the most appropriate use of digital tools and the required digital infrastructure will be more focussed to the needs of the firm and its market requirements.

Is important that the ETE and entrepreneurs understand that digital is not all about the technology and to understand digital strategy should drive and inform decisions on digital tactics and tools. It is appreciated that there is no 'one size fits all' digital competency programme, however the DIGA Learning Programme content, DIGA Learning Programme tutor notes and the stock of available module content material, supporting practical and action based learning exercises is useful and proven.

Further information on the DIGA Project is available here: http://digaproject.eu/

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