

HOW CAN AN ASSOCIATION FACE CRITICAL CHANGE? THE EUCEN EXPERIENCE ACROSS THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a test for our society - it is stretching our endurance and testing our strength. Big enterprises are losing millions. Small enterprises will resent this situation - a lot of them will have to close or engage in loans that will take years to repay. Many individuals will face unemployment - will everything get back to “normal” eventually? Perhaps not. Higher education institutions have moved into total virtual teaching and learning in a matter of days, without previous preparation. But, what happens with NGOs and associations that depend on their activities and rely on their members to continue their work?

eucen is an association with 170 members from 36 different countries, mainly from Europe. The budget of our association is based on EU-funded projects, membership fees, events and consulting. Resources are normally tight and the annual objectives and the long term ambitions are large. But, what happens when one or more of the four pillars (projects, annual fees, events, consulting) collapse? How can an association fight to survive in times of crisis? What is needed? Who is involved?

This paper explores how **eucen** has faced the current situation, the measures that are being taken and imagines briefly how things might be in the near future.

EUCEN'S ANNUAL ACTIVITIES

eucen¹ is a non-for-profit association that is financed mainly through membership subscription fees, EU-funded projects, consulting and the organisation of events, primarily conferences and seminars. The main objectives of the association do not include making a profit to share with shareholders, the annual budget of the association is tight and the **eucen** activities are offered to members and other users with affordable prices.

The planification of **eucen**'s annual activities are based on a general calendar that includes a number of fixed face-to-face events throughout the year: in the spring there is an annual Policy meeting in Brussels, in early summer the annual conference and General Assembly and in autumn the university lifelong learning (ULLL) staff development seminars in Barcelona. For 2020 **eucen** had planned face-to-face events in April, May, June and November. Dates had been fixed (some of them over one year in advance), reservations for spaces were made, catering booked and **eucen** members as well as stakeholders had been informed and called to participate.

The overall financial impact of 2020 face-to-face events was estimated to be around 10% of the total annual net income expected for the year². What happens when 10% of your budget is cut off from your financial arrangements unexpectedly?

¹ www.eucen.eu link to **eucen**'s website

² This estimate includes also events programmed for EU-funded projects in which **eucen** had a budget dedicated to organise activities that had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation

CHRONOLOGICAL ACTIONS TAKEN DURING THE FIRST WEEK AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ANNOUNCEMENT

But before entering into the consequences of unexpected cuts in tight budgets, let's see how the announcement of the pandemic was dealt with in **eucen** during the first seven days after the OMS' formal declaration.

Wednesday 11 March: - OMS announces officially the COVID-19 World Pandemic
- **eucen** schedules an emergency meeting for Friday 13 March

Thursday 12 March: a quick analysis of the situation including the possible financial impact of this situation is done and a number of possible scenarios for the 2020 calendar is prepared

Friday 13 March: - the Steering Committee of **eucen** meets virtually at 09:00CET and agrees which are the measures to be taken
- the Executive Director prepares a draft formal announcement and shares it with the Steering Committee

Monday 16 March: the auditor is informed that the date of the annual auditing will be maintained but the work will be done in virtual format

Tuesday 17 March: the draft formal announcement is confirmed by the Steering Committee

Wednesday 18 March: a final formal announcement is sent to **eucen** members and stakeholders and shared in the social media

Thus, in one week, all the planification for 2020 disappeared and, instead, a new set of actions were immediately implemented.

CHANGES ANNOUNCED OFFICIALLY AND CONSEQUENCES

All the 2020 face-to-face activities were, therefore, cancelled and transformed into virtual activities in a matter of days. The events that suffered changes are:

1. The **annual Policy Talks** in Brussels planned for 06 May 2020 was postponed to 09 September 2020. *This change required (a) informing participants, and (b) changing booking reservations of the spaces. Although there was still hope that this activity would be done face-to-face in September, participants were informed that, if it was not possible to travel, the activity would be still done 09 September but virtually.*
2. The **annual conference** planned for 27-29 May 2020 is postponed to 18-20 November 2020. *This change required (a) informing the hosts in Budapest (HU), the Central European University, and agreeing with them new terms and conditions (b) deciding how to deal with the registrations and the fees already received, (c) informing the keynote speakers of the situation, and (d) informing authors of abstracts attached to the Call for Contributions of this event. At that point it was expected that in November it would be possible to do this activity face-to-face.*
3. The **annual General Assembly** was maintained for 27-29 May 2020 but in online format. *This change required (a) finding a stable online environment to use, (b) designing a secure way to carry out a voting process, and (c) helping involved individuals to access and use the online environment (including members that would have to attend the meeting).*

4. The **annual Autumn Seminar** planned for 18-20 November 2020 had to be cancelled. Instead, the Steering Committee agreed to offer a free online seminar to **eucen** members on Thursday 28 May 2020. *This change required (a) designing a new activity, including finding topics and keynote speakers, (b) developing a website for the activity, and (c) choosing a stable online environment and learning to use it.*

The above planification was conceived in March 2020. However, in early June 2020 it became evident that it would not be possible to do the face-to-face conference in Budapest in November and, therefore, the Steering Committee together with the Executive Director of **eucen** designed a brand new activity to be offered throughout that month: the **eucen** ULLL Open Fora³ that has replaced point 2 above.

NECESSARY FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS IMPLEMENTED

Economically speaking, **eucen** found itself in a budgetary year with an expected cut of around 10% connected to all the activities face-to-face programmed. Also, in order to show solidarity with professionals and organisations suffering the COVID-19 situation, **eucen** decided to offer its online activities in 2020 in an open and free format, which translated in no new income expected. These decisions needed adopting a number of financial measures, the most important ones are listed below:

- Review of expected costs for 2020 and budget – the annual budget was reviewed and adjusted according to the new reality. Some anticipated costs had disappeared whereas certain expected income was also gone. The reviewed 2020 budget shown a new set of needs and a new shape of **eucen**
- Cut of unnecessary costs – included in the annual budget revision a number of costs were cut, for example stationary. Some of the travel and subsistence costs allocated to Steering Committee meetings had been reduced too, unexpectedly
- Reduction of human resources – even so, the reduction in budget was not sufficient to face a “bad year” financially speaking and the human resources had to be reduced and adapted to the new reality
- EU-funded project days – affected also by the COVID-19 situation were all the projects that were active and funded by the EU. The fact that face-to-face activities could not take place (including meetings and multiplier events) had affected the structure of these projects. Some coordinators for example decided to extend the deadline of the project and, therefore, work that was expected to be done in 2020 have been moved to 2021. How this affects **eucen**'s budget? Our budget includes working days in projects, if we move working days for projects from 2020 to 2021 we have a gap of days in our 2020 budget. Thus, whereas possible, **eucen** has maintained its working days for 2020 in 2020.
- Extra days reported in EU-funded projects – working online and offering activities online is quite demanding and new for most of us. Whenever possible **eucen** has requested extra days in projects to cover this stretched effort that was not expected. In some cases we hope the EU will allow certain flexibility.

OPPORTUNITIES EMERGING FROM THE COVID-19 SITUATION

As so many other organisations, **eucen** quickly emerged from a moment of panic and put in place palliative measures for the situation, managing to find a number of unexpected opportunities that helped re-invented existing activities at different levels.

³ <http://ulll-open-fora.eucen.eu> eucen ULLL Open Fora 2020 website

a. Stakeholders and members level

Reinforced collaborations – COVID-19 has brought to **eucen** the possibility to create empowered alliances with associations like RECLA⁴, UPCEA⁵ and AAACE⁶. **eucen** was invited to present its case during the RECLA seminars online in April 2020 and, later on, actively involved UPCEA and AAACE in the **eucen** novel experience: the **eucen** Seminar Across the Atlantic⁷ which was an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences between Europe and America.

New type of activities more inclusive and opened – Apart from the **eucen** Seminar Across the Atlantic, **eucen** has designed another novel activity: the **eucen** ULLL Open Fora, which intends to offer short events every day throughout November focusing in four different topics (one each week of the month). We hope that these two activities, that have emerged by chance, become a feature of **eucen** regular activities in future years as part of our vision to offer open actions that help our community, specially our members.

b. EU-funded projects level

Extensions for current EU Calls for Proposals – the sudden announcement of the pandemic also made the EU reconsider some fixed protocols. For example the deadlines for some of the ongoing Calls were extended and that gave an opportunity for **eucen** to join several more proposals. Whereas in the 2019 Calls **eucen** was engaged to participate in 12 proposals, by end of April 2020 **eucen** had joined 20 new proposals. There is no certainty of how successful these proposals will be, but the opportunity offered allowed organisations to prepare more proposals than usual.

Flexibility to timeline of current projects – the challenging situation also obliged the EU to reconsider fixed terms of on-going projects. Whereas the deliverables that were promised in the proposals continue being a committed engagement, certain flexibility on the deadlines and the way the deliverables are produced have been granted. The situation has also given the opportunity to be more creative and to find alternative ways of working.

c. Internal arrangements level

Digitalisation of the association – although **eucen** has become more and more digitalised in the last three years, the COVID-19 situation has pushed our association towards a greener and more virtual organisation than ever. For example, the standard three yearly Steering Committee meetings have become seven virtual meetings so far. Meetings are now shorter but occur more often. Also, having been forced to organise the annual General Assembly and the annual Audit in an online way has been a test for the association. This situation obliged us to prepare all our documentation in electronic format and to develop digital skills to accommodate the necessities of the moment faster and better than we would have expected.

Training online – the tele-working situation and the availability of multitude of free webinars have triggered the chance for **eucen** staff to participate in online activities that maybe would not have been considered in the past.

⁴ <https://recla.org> Red de Educación Continua de Latinoamérica y Europa

⁵ <https://upcea.edu> University Professional and Continuing Education Association

⁶ <https://www.aaace.org> American Association for Adult and Continuing Education

⁷ <http://seminar2020across-atlantic.eucen.eu> eucen Seminar Across the Atlantic 2020

Communication – internal virtual communication has become more agile and fluid since everyone works from home. The use of chats such as Slack or WhatsApp, the launch of instant virtual meetings using e.g. GoToMeeting, Zoom or Teams has become ‘normal’ and has given us the flexibility to work and discuss things quickly and when needed.

CONCLUSIONS

eucen will survive 2020 and continue its trajectory, even though the situation has forced us to change many of the usual routines that were well established. We might have learnt the lesson to be more alert to what is happening in the World, because sometimes unexpected events can affect us. And, specifically, we might need to build our annual programme with an open mind for flexibility, if needed. We have learnt that if you are forced to cancel, it is not the end of the World – things do happen beyond your control.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has been a challenge for everyone. But it has also brought significant opportunities for change and renovation. It has forced organisations to think outside the box, to share and communicate and to adapt to new situations from within and from outside of their communities.

The price that might have to be paid is some financial loss. However, this loss can also be taken as an investment that is allowing our organisations to quickly train staff and quickly re-design and renovate activities. To be taken out of the comfort zone and to confront new realities can also be an energising therapy.

A recommendation towards change: Always be positive!