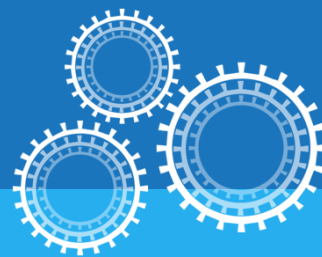


# Road to Excellence



## BLUES lessons learnt

### ROAD TO EXCELLENCE ON BLUES ACTIVITIES

The BLUES consortium, consisting of four cluster organisations, embarked on a journey towards excellence, with the aim of raising the value and competitiveness of each cluster organisation. The consortium put a huge emphasis on quality, sustainability, and comprehensiveness of cluster strategies, leading to the updating and changing of the visions and missions of each cluster organisation according to the current situation and changes.

To achieve this goal, the BLUES consortium produced analyses as a basis for future strategy building, resulting in the implementation of improved individual strategies. These strategies have been instrumental in raising the value and competitiveness of each cluster organisation.

Training materials for cluster managers played a crucial role in the success of the BLUES consortium's journey towards excellence. Partners gained new knowledge in the field of business strategy and became familiar with the Canvas model, financial planning and the skill of writing excellent project proposals. The training materials were tailor-made presentations by each trainer, practical exercises, teamwork, and open discussions during lectures. The consortium partner and member SME also learned how to deliver winning pitches through practical exercises and advice from an experienced coach.

The last training sessions (internal training) brought new insights into a CRM (Customer-Relationship-Management) system with the consortium partner gaining a better understanding of the CRM benefits. Some consortium partner even started thinking about implementing a CRM system into their day-to-day activities and processes.

Also included in the last training session was the Cluster Management Excellence training, which was very important because nearly all BLUES partners have a Cluster Excellence Label, and most of them were planning to renew the label or heading for a higher label.

Despite facing several challenges during the project period, the BLUES ESCP-4x managed to fulfil most of the KPIs and successfully overcome difficult times. The pandemic situation with Covid-19 arrived in Europe during the project, forcing the consortium to adapt to the situation and foster more virtual SME exchanges instead of physical exchanges. This situation was especially difficult for SMEs and scaling-up organisations whose business had to be closed or limited with their liabilities. Nevertheless, the BLUES ESCP-4x found a way to work with each other in an “online world” and involve SMEs in project activities like the trainings.

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Different types of members were affected differently, and the BLUES ESCP-4x discovered different strategies to fight difficult challenges. The impact of meta-cluster organisation is becoming bigger and bigger these days, and the BLUES partnership believes that the consortium can secure the sustainability of their mission, goals, and vision through CEDEG. The CEDEG grouping was considered a key tool for the sustainability of the BLUES consortium after the end of the project. New techniques and processes were executed and trained during each training, providing consortium partner with an opportunity to learn many interesting things and to continue the BLUES work in the CEDEG grouping.

Furthermore, the Blues project organized two study visits to Warsaw (Poland) and Montpellier (France) to better understand the value chains offered by the consortium clusters. During the study visits, participants met with various actors to understand their organizations, missions, and offers. These included cluster management teams, SMEs, academics, policy makers, and support institutes. The experience gained from the presentations, discussions, and exchange of experience was invaluable. Each cluster drew attention to issues that could improve its functioning, enlarge its service portfolio, and expand its network. The visits were organized very well with the highest level of preparedness. BLUES had a chance to present the ecosystems of the members for the different entities from Poland and France. The participants from the host regions presented their ecosystems and networks. One of the phenomena observed was the absolute need for physical encounters and a willingness to engage with each other. Many of the contacts made during the meetings are being maintained and will certainly result in joint activities in the future.

One main part of the BLUES partnership was to organise with a great success different Peer Learning Webinars (PLW). They were a powerful and efficient tool for ESCP 4x partnerships to take a step back, connect with each other, and learn from each other. From all the discussions and sharing, some key messages and lessons learned were extracted like the one following. For future ESCP 4x partnerships, they should not underestimate the power of meeting and interacting with other partnerships. When facing difficulties or uncertainties, it is more efficient to team up and join forces. They should look for synergies with other ESCP 4x projects while implementing project activities as it can save a lot of time and effort. They should also be flexible and able to adjust plans. PLW are very useful and should not be restricted to ESCP 4x but to all ESCP projects. Other lessons learnt from the PLW were that as a cluster organization, digitalization of cluster services is very strategic but has to be smartly planned as it can't replace all "traditional" actions of clusters. Clusters are playing a key role in SMEs development and especially in difficult times such as the COVID crisis. They must be flexible enough to adapt their actions to answer their members' needs. Communication has to be maintained at all costs and especially in difficult times. Clusters should adapt their communication actions or risk breaking the link/trust with their members. European funding programs are highly strategic for cluster organizations in order to diversify their revenues. It can be useful for funding part of the clusters' "usual" activities/services but also to develop new ones. Members are more and more interested in EU funding programs but supporting members for applying to that type of funds is time-consuming. Most clusters cannot include that kind of service as part of the membership fees and need to propose a dedicated service. Several options are available from 100% outsourced to an extra paid service. The study visits and PLWs have contributed to improving the daily activities of clusters and ESCP 4x partnerships. The knowledge gained from these visits and webinars will be useful for building future

projects and common actions together. Clusters and partnerships should continue to connect with each other and learn from each other. The future of excellence lies in cooperation and sharing.

The main part of the BLUES project have been the virtual and physical exchanges. In total 53 exchanges have been realised during the 3 year project period. The realise these exchanges a recruitment report was developed. The recruitment report began with the identification of the main challenges and barriers that the consortium will face in the recruitment of prospective hosts and visitors. This analysis led to the development of a bespoke recruitment strategy for ClusterXchanges, including the organization of local events, informative webinars, and individual meetings to enhance the recruitment results. Furthermore, BLUES consortium developed two different webinars to explain the ClusterXchange program and promote the enrolment of prospective participants. The joint webinar provided a general view of the program to identify possible candidates within the target groups, and the IT tool registration process. The BLUES consortium organized in total 226 bilateral and peer learning meetings during physical and virtual exchanges, providing a platform to learn about the latest trends and cooperation between businesses and science in the blue and eco industry. These meetings discussed innovation opportunities, main challenges, relevant strategies, innovation challenges, and funding opportunities. The meetings also provided an opportunity to share experiences and investigate potential opportunities for joint cross-border activities, enhancing foreign market access. Each partner of the BLUES consortium organized a workshop to discuss relevant topics connected with the current and future challenges and technological transition in blue and eco-industries. The workshops provided a platform for exchanging experiences, sharing knowledge, and exchanging best practices. The presence of policy makers was also essential to discuss how to find new synergies and cooperation with the relevant interregional partnership of public authorities. Clusters were used as a link to reach the maximum key stakeholders and ensure a greater impact. Due to the pandemic, the format of the meetings had to be adapted to online workshops. After the workshops, a summary virtual meeting was arranged to discuss the experience, knowledge, and comments from the workshops.

As already described, the Blues project faced unexpected challenges in its early stages due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected their actions but also the external communication. However, the consortium partner learned important lessons from this experience, the first being the need to be adaptive. To overcome the challenges, the partners planned a "crescendo communication" strategy with several phases. The first phase involved small communication during quarantine and summer 2020 to identify possible candidates for the exchanges. The second phase was launched in the second semester with local events in autumn 2020 and the beginning of 2021. However, the impact of these activities was limited due to difficulties in traveling and low interest in virtual exchanges. The third phase began during the third period in 2022, with more effort focused on sharing the success stories of the first exchanges. The lesson learned was that communicating in uncertain times is challenging. Many rules regarding ClusterXchange changed, so the message was not always clear. Direct contact with members and various forms of communication were necessary to keep interest around the topic. Furthermore, communication should be reinforced during challenging times, especially on social media. The Blues team improved their communication actions by multiplying their publications and posts. The communication became more important as Blues organized more concrete actions, such as strategy building, PLW, Local Event, WINning Days, and others. The most important lessons learnt was

that organizing exchanges in parallel with fairs had a greater impact. SMEs were more interested in group exchanges, and having an exchange in the framework of a fair was very attractive to them. They could meet potential new partners with personalized and concrete agendas while being in a dynamic area. The exchange duration was found to be more attractive when it was for three days rather than five days. Overall, the Blues project faced challenges but was able to learn from them, adapt to the situation, and improve their communication strategy to achieve excellence.

The BLUES consortium successfully embarked on a journey towards excellence, resulting in improved individual strategies, training for cluster managers, and a joint strategy for state-of-art ESCP-4x. The BLUES consortium has strengthened its position and is stronger than ever, with the potential for future collaboration activities within or without projects.