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KTT WESERBERGLANDPLUS

Instigating innovation in traditional SMEs by promotion of “Knowledge and Technology Transfer”

Background

Weserbergland*plus* is a long-standing, coming back to 1999, collaboration of four rural districts of Lower Saxony in Germany: Hameln-Pyrmont, Holzminden, Nienburg/Weser and Schaumburg with some 500.000 inhabitants and 3.600 km².

The districts are dominated by small and medium enterprises in particular from traditional sectors and the innovation level is low. In the early 2000s already, the districts jointly developed a consulting service instrument for SMEs. The aim was and is to support the improvement or development of new products, implementation of innovations, application of new technologies, to launch cooperation with scientific institutions or to join innovation networks. Therefore, the 4 districts jointly hired qualified consultants to provide SMEs with up to 10 days of focused consultancy, that may cover an analysis of innovation performance, the development of project ideas or the initiation of cooperation with research institutions or even some assistance in applications for innovation funding after an initial assessment of one day. It is completely financed by ERDF and districts money.

The companies value the support because of very low barriers to use this service and very short paths between companies and consultants.

Challenges

As the regional innovation eco system is weak, the ESSPO peer review by Gabrovo (BG) has given a broader view of the needed changes, especially to better reaching out to the SMEs, enlarging the KTT to involve not only an academic but also business to business transfer of technologies. Anyway, there was no common database of the existing companies in the districts and no overview of best practices and possible joint projects.

Those SMEs, who receive the advice, are willing to start a new activity but need additional support to go this next step. This is another challenge: To bridge the gap between consultancy results and the investment in innovation. Funding the implementation, may be by a voucher, would allow the instrument to be more efficient in the end.

Third challenge has been the visibility of the results, as the indicators used for the instrument reporting has not shown the success of the scheme clearly. Therefore, the Weserbergland*plus*-team considered to evaluate the effects in an adequate and SME-oriented way to collect arguments for the continuation after 2020 to the responsible state government.

Achievements

A very basic achievement is a database of companies that are suitable for the transfer of knowledge and technology. This database has been populated with information on some 3,900 companies and about 7,000 contact persons from the region. The data are validated and supplemented via company surveys. It has been integrated with a "Business Intelligence Tool", with which all data can be combined, addressed and analyzed in a variety of ways. First of all it is a tool for the four districts' personnel implementing SME support activities.

To make results visible and to convince politicians to finance the instrument, a very pragmatic evaluation concept has been developed from the recommendations of the ESSPO Task Force, which also convinced other regions in Lower Saxony. They decided to use a short, simple questionnaire to examine the SMEs expectations and feedback. The first application of the survey gave valuable insights. The scope and quality of the obtained data is clearly increasing and will not only facilitate the forthcoming preparation of action plans but also provide strong arguments to the state government for the further development and continuation of this instrument.

The fact that the work on KTT is branded by Interreg project helped the promotion of the survey on the companies' needs and the monitoring of the program results and communication among other district groupings in the whole Lower Saxony. Andreas Manz, the Weserbergland*plus* project leader, is part of the coordination group of the NEWIN, the network overall, in whose meetings the state government also takes part. The network has prepared position papers for "Instruments of a regionally intelligent, specialized innovation policy in Lower Saxony" and the future "Lower Saxony Innovation System (NIS)" and submitted them to the state government. The results from ESSPO have been included there. The NEWIN papers have been incorporated in the funding strategy as well as in RIS3 2021-2027 of the State of Lower Saxony. Both the strategy of the State of Lower Saxony for the funding period 2021-2027 presented in December 2019 and the RIS3 presented in March 2020 are seen as clear confirmation of the intention to continue and further develop the instrument after 2020.

Policy Change

The crucial factor that brought changes was the strong commitment of the already well functioning steering and managing structures in the region, which ESSPO project could use and which made the work on changes natural and efficient. The inspiration by ESSPO activities mainly came from peer review and the participation in the Task Forces on monitoring and evaluation.

To bridge the gap between consultancy and implementation the districts decided to enlarge the KTT-scope and focus on innovation even within the already existing own program of *proInvest* – Promotion of productive investment in the SMEs in Weserbergland*plus*.

Therefore, several modifications were introduced to *proInvest* in order to make the instrument more accessible and adapt it to the identified needs. The changes include the option to initiate cooperation with not only universities, but also other companies that can help to introduce innovation in the given company. As substantial funding was made available for the implementation of the collaboration project, resulting from technology transfer consulting. In terms of the management of the program significantly higher priority has been given to scoring innovation and the importance of the creation of jobs has been reduced.

The instrument offers SMEs grants of up to 50,000 Euros or 15% of the eligible costs for productive investments (establishment and expansion of companies with which full-time / permanent jobs are created) and non-investment measures (external consulting services). It is endowed with around 1,000,000 Euros in public funds annually.

ESSPO
Interreg Europe



Landkreis
Hameln-Pyrmont



Weserbergland
Region *plus*