DIGITAL ACTION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

HEIDI

Digital Actions for the Upskilling of Grassroot Communities

Synthesis Report

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

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Introduction

This document summarises the report entitled *"Digital Actions for the Upskilling of Grassroot Communities"* produced in the context of HEIDI's Intellectual Output 3. The main objective of IO3 was to join HEIs and communities consisting of individuals with fewer opportunities and facing significant barriers to participation in their efforts to achieve their goals and interests. To do so, various events and activities that extended knowledge of Digital Actions and provided digital upskilling opportunities were formulated.

The HEIDI consortium organised and facilitated twenty-one (21) events and activities in the United Kingdom, France, Greece and Cyprus. These were inclusive of six (6) Roundtable events, nine (9) Webinars and six (6) Grassroot DA events. In total, 512 people participated in IO3's events and activities.

This synthesis report will provide an overview of the process of HEIs involvement to support communities in their efforts to co-design solutions to their needs by synopsising those events that took place in the context of IO3. All twenty-one (21) events and activities followed a specific structure and rationale that would allow HEIs and grassroots communities to join DA efforts to achieve community-identified interests and broader goals at community and individual levels.

Methodological approach

For IO3, three (3) event formats were formulated: **Roundtables, Webinars and Grassroot** DAs, each serving a different purpose within the project's overarching aim. Whilst Roundtables enabled HEIs and partner organisations to collect data regarding the community-identified needs and concerns, webinars raised awareness of DAs and provided informal educational opportunities. Finally, Grassroots DAs, responding to the

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needs identified in Roundtable sessions and upskilling opportunities offered in Webinars, offered a productive space for communities and HEIs to come together. A more detailed outline of the methodological approach and steps taken to implement these activities can be found in the IO3 comprehensive report.

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6 Roundtables

- Online Roundtable with communities in the UK (UCL)
- Online Roundtable with participants not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and early school leavers (ESLs) (CIP)
- Roundtable with refugees and asylum seekers (CIP)
- Roundtable with unemployed women (CIP)
- Roundtable with participants not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and at risk of early school leaving (ESLs) (CIP)
- Roundtable with participants not in education, employement or training (NEETs) (UP)

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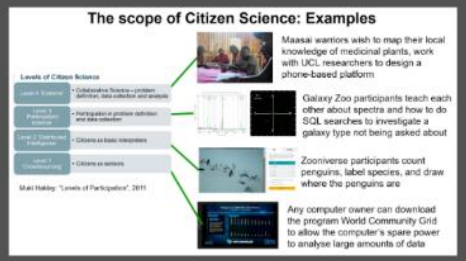

9 Webinars & Seminars

- Digital activism: scope, methodology, tools and practices (W2L)
- Maker movement: methodology, scope and practices (CIP)
- Datathons, hackathons and digital hacktivism: Critical data, Arts & Science, Introduction to creative coding workshop (UP)
- Community engagement in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UP)
- Introduction to Citizen Science: scope, methodology, tools and practices
- Create your own Zooniverse project
- Create your own nQuire project
- Introduction to City Nature Challenge
- City Nature Challenge: Event Planning

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6 Grassroot DAs

Cyprus: Municipalities as maker spaces for disadvantaged groups (CIP)

Cyprus: VET Schools as makerspaces for disadvantaged groups. NEETs & ESLs (CIP)

UK: Co-creation Citizen Science event with communities in East London. The River Lea Conservations for Action (UCL)

Cyprus: Engaging migrants and asylum seekers in DAs. Microcontrollers (CIP)

Cyprus: HEIs as makerspaces for disadvantaged and unemployed groups. Engaging unemployed migrants including women in 3D printing (CIP)

France: COVID- 19 DA. NEETs and Digital Action during the COVID-19 Pandemic (UP)

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Roundtables and identified grassroots community needs.

The HEIDI project ran a total of six (6) Roundtables with grassroots communities, including marginalised individuals and participants with fewer opportunities, four (4) of which took place in Cyprus by CIP, one (1) in the UK by UCL and one (1) in France by the UP. Invited participants were encouraged to "voice" their environmental, social, or other concerns and thus guide HEIs in adjusting their approach to community engagement and participatory models.

To systematically create a record of the participants' needs and profile, a set of predefined questions were used throughout the roundtable events, which were structured along three (3) key areas to collect information in terms of:

1. Their background involvement in or awareness of Digital Actions (if any) and skills.

2. Insights of their perceptions of DA and how they could help (or not) their communities.

3. The types of skills, training and support required by HEIs and organisations to enable their participation.

This information was instrumental in forming the basis of the subsequent Webinars and Grassroot DAs.

All Roundtables, irrespective of the target group or organisation involved, offered unique insights into various perspectives and needs. The key takeaway points from Roundtables were as follows:

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- Participants did not wish to address all the questions presented to them but rather those that were more relative to their experiences. Whilst those with previous DA experience wished to elaborate on the initiatives they are actively engaged in, those with no expertise wished to see how new knowledge of digital skills can help them participate in DAs and provide solutions to both their individual and collective problems.
- Attendees' stories of bottom-up initiatives centred on concerns with the lack of satisfactory responses to a problem significant to them. Equally, participants without involvement in Digital Actions presented ideas of how Digital Actions can help solve their concerns. However, the lack of digital skills training and resources hinders the development of their bottom-up initiatives.
- Additional concerns regarding data privacy are one of the aspects that need to be addressed by HEIs to raise broader- awareness for informed consent and, where possible, provide alternative solutions to digital data gathering.
- Support from HEIs and organisations needs to come in different formats. Whilst communities already invested in bottom-up activities might require additional support in systematic data collection and reporting, communities with fewer opportunities require more time investment in their efforts.

Webinars and in-person Seminars for upskilling communities

IO3 ran nine (9) customised upskilling opportunities to both communities and those HE Staff or organisations that support them but lack the DA methodology or digital skills to do so. Four (4) out of nine (9) events targeted communities with fewer opportunities and no previous DA experience. In-person accessibility provisions were made available to

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enable the inclusive participation of individuals from communities facing significant barriers to participation, such as Deaf-and-Hard-of-Hearing individuals, asylum seekers, migrants or other communities facing further socio-economic obstacles. Thus, the provision of Sign Language interpreters, the recruitment of lead integration mentors, the provision of digital equipment, hands-on-interactive activities and transportation support not only allowed the inclusive participation of underrepresented groups but equally allowed HEIs (and NGOs) to adjust their methods of delivery and public engagement.

In addition, a series of webinars introduced Citizen Science to grassroots communities, researchers, HEI staff and students with some experience or background in DAs and Citizen Science who wished to further their understanding and application of Citizen Science practices. These webinars guided attendees in thinking about the ways to set up a project, familiarise them with ready-to-use platforms, the ways that volunteers can be recruited and engaged in activities, the format and manner of communication between volunteers and the research team, as well as, how to run events in public spaces with safety measures in mind. They provided communities with step-by-step instructions, expert guidelines and tips and ready-to-use resources that do not require advanced digital skills in design or management so that communities can create, run and manage their own DA solutions to address their needs. Equally, collaborations with organisations and research institutes that, for example, run their own Citizen Science events will significantly increase the level of ongoing interactions and support between communities and researchers.

Grassroot DA Events

In the final phase of activities and events organised as part of HEIDI's IO3, HEIs and partner NGO collected the needs and challenges expressed by the various communities and individuals involved in the Roundtable discussions and facilitated six (6) Grassroot DAs. In total, four (4) co-creation activities took place in Cyprus with a focus on the maker movement, one (1) in France addressing the COVID-19 DA, and one (1) with a focus on Citizen Science took place in the UK.

In Cyprus, the co-creation events involved digital skills training on programming and coding software, including 3-D printing software, as well as microcontrollers, allowing the participants from grassroots communities with fewer opportunities (mostly migrants) to explore the potential usefulness of these tools and actions in co-creating innovative solutions to environmental issues. In France, NEETs (people not in employment, education or training) took part in activities exploring how digital tools were used in the COVID-19 pandemic and realising the importance of learning about DA not only in terms of developing the skills necessary for professional development but also for contributing to their communities in challenging situations. Finally, in the UK, guided by the roundtable with communities raising concerns on environmental issues, inspired the UCL team to offer their active support to the local communities of the River Lea in a joint effort to address the environmental issue of the pollution of the river. These highlighted and implemented HEIDI's vision of bringing together grassroots communities and HEIs in digital actions. Finally, the IO2 impact evaluation methodology was used to assess the impact of Grassroot DA events under IO3, displaying an 82.2% (post-event) satisfaction rate and an 86% likelihood of participating in a future DA project. This is, to a degree,

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indicative of both the success of these events in stimulating interest in DA and facilitating the cooperation of communities and HEIs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, during the implementation of HEIDI's IO3, a series of events and activities took place to identify and address grassroots communities' needs, interests in, and ideas for DA, to provide them with digital upskilling opportunities and awareness-raising for future engagement in digital actions. Following the nine (9) Webinars and six (6) Grassroots DAs in the United Kingdom, France, Greece and Cyprus, individuals with and without prior DA experience were purposefully engaged in DAs and developed their skills further.

HEIDI's IO3 created room for dialogue and transformation between communities and HEIs. HEIs adjusted their methods of engagement to respond to the needs of communities. This increased engagement allowed for an adaptation of how DAs are planned, designed or facilitated by HEIs, to correspond to community-identified issues (e.g. River Lea pollution). During this process, individuals with fewer opportunities were not only provided with a space to communicate their needs but were equally provided with avenues towards active participation. The extent to which these events and activities impacted HEI's digital transformation will be further explored HEIDI's IO5.

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