

European Accreditation – Fitness LdV TOI Project

Final Report Summary

30th November 2010

Project Outcomes

The European Health and Fitness Association (EHFA) Standards for Fitness Instructing and Personal Training occupations have been revised and updated as a result of the project. The Standards, which relate to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Fitness Instructing and Group Fitness Instructing at Level 3 and Personal Training at Level 4, were subject to consultation and review to ensure that they are up to date and fit for purpose. In addition to this, new standards have also been created at Level 2 for a supervised Assistant Fitness Instructing role. With regards to impact, the set standards have ensured that learners who have trained with EHFA accredited training organisations have all had to meet the same requirements in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, thereby facilitating the mobility of instructors who have all met the same criteria in whatever country they trained in.

A major outcome of the project is the successful accreditation of 15 training providers in the following 10 countries: France, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Hungary and the Netherlands. Each training provider has aligned their own qualifications to the EHFA Standards to ensure that their learners demonstrate achievement of the knowledge, skills and competence that form the basis of the Standards. In terms of impact, there has been a multiplication effect as a result of the successful accreditations that have taken place. For example, once one training organisation in Portugal went through the accreditation process, another two training organisations requested accreditation and have also been successfully accredited. The same applies to Norway - where one training organisation was accredited, another two followed and were also successfully accredited.

An additional outcome has been the training of multinational evaluators of the accreditation process, in order to have multilingual evaluators facilitating the accreditation of even more training organisations after the close of the project. 11 evaluators were trained and the languages now covered are English, French, Swedish, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and Dutch.

The European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPs) now has members in 28 European countries and work towards the development of national registers has resulted in the set up of a national register in the Netherlands. The number of national associations that have been formed and that are cooperating with EHFA and EREPS has expanded during the project period from ten to eighteen. The EREPs website has been established and has been translated into 8 languages (CZ, DE, EN, FR, HU, IT, LT, SE). Key EREPs documents have been translated into 5 languages (DE, EN, FR, IT, SE).

Dissemination activities have included presentations, seminars, meetings, articles, interviews and a project website. For example, CYQ presented at a Central European Fitness Forum in Prague to raise awareness of the project. The event included delegates from across Europe, including Michel Aribaud, DG Education & Culture, various fitness training organisations, club operators and trade associations.

Changes to Original Plan

The aim of work package 6 was to establish a European Register for Exercise Professionals (EREPs) in 7 new countries. This has been achieved and EREPs is now an independent process for the licensing of all instructors, trainers and teachers working across Europe in the exercise and fitness industry. It is a pan-European system, which is based on a central European database. Registration means that an exercise professional has met prescribed minimum standards of good practice, as accredited by the EHFA Accreditation Unit, including the adoption of a Code of Ethical Practice and a commitment to raising standards through a process of continuing professional development (CPD).

The project application identified that work package 6 would result in the establishment of EREPs and national registers in 7 new countries. In line with the aims for this work package, EREPs is now established in 28 countries which means that fitness professionals can register directly with the European register. In addition to this a national register has been developed in the Netherlands and this links directly to EREPs. However, it was not possible during the course of the project to establish other independent national registers for a number of reasons. Firstly, the development of EREPs in Portugal had to stop following the decree passed by Portuguese Parliament which established a licence system for exercise professionals and not a registration scheme such as EREPs. Secondly, it was agreed by the EHFA/EREPs board that independence is required for the development of a national register and because the project partners were all training providers it was not possible to use their organisations for the development of national registers as there may have been a conflict of interest. Because of this it has taken longer than anticipated to source national organisations in the Active Leisure Sector that are able to demonstrate the independence required to become a national register.

Work is now underway in Hungary, Sweden, Ireland, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark, however it will take more time than allocated to the project for the further development of independent national registers in the partner countries. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that as fitness professionals from the partner countries can now access EREPs directly, there may be less incentive for the development of national registers to be developed alongside EREPs. This change was communicated to ECOTEC on the 24th March 2010.

With regards to work package 5 and the accreditation of training providers against the EHFA standards, the initial timetabling of accreditation visits was changed due to the need to schedule visits around assessment days within the training organisations. This impacted on the number of accreditation visits achieved in the first year, but all visits carried over to year 2 of the project were carried out and completed in good time by the end of July 2010.

Project Achievements

The project has achieved the general objectives identified in the application form as follows:

1. Fifteen vocational education training organisations have been accredited during the course of the project which is an over-achievement. The accreditation process undertaken included an audit of each organisation's quality assurance procedures and operational practice. It also involved the alignment of an organisation's qualifications to the EHFA Standards to ensure that the qualifications met the required minimum standards in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.
2. Prior to the project there were 8 accredited training organisations. As well as the 15 project related accreditations, an additional 3 training organisations have also been accredited during the project lifetime, resulting in a total of 26 EHFA accredited training organisations. This growing number of successful accreditations means that all learners, who successfully achieve their qualifications via these 26 training organisations, have met the same criteria for fitness instructing and personal training occupations. This standardisation and comparability between training organisations means that the potential for mobility for employers and individuals is much enhanced. For example, an employer such as Club Med Gym in France (who has been through the EHFA accreditation process as part of the project) can be confident that an instructor who has trained at FIAF/SIAF in Italy (another project accreditation) will be able to demonstrate the same knowledge, skills and competence as a result of the accreditation of the training organisations.

In terms of operational objectives, the project has achieved the following:

1. The project partners represented a good geographic spread and each partner has provided ideas and support to other partners as they were all actively involved in going through the accreditation process. As part of the project, some of the partners underwent training to act as European Verifiers for CYQ and this has provided additional learning opportunities for them. 11 European Verifiers (evaluators) were trained during the course of the project.
2. The project has facilitated the development of new practice in 10 countries throughout Europe which is an overachievement as only 7 countries were identified in the original application. CYQ, an exercise and fitness specific awarding and certification body has transferred the learning gained from developing and delivering this model of external verification for 12 years in the UK.
3. The EHFA Standards, which were updated as part of the project, have been aligned to the EQF and this has provided transparency in terms of knowledge, skills and competence expected at each level. The Standards are outcome based and allow for the acquisition of skills and competence via formal, non-formal and informal learning.
4. Accreditation has included the review of digital evidence, such as eLearning and videos of practical assessment.

Contribution to Trans-National Work

The project partner training organisations included higher education organisations as well as private training providers. The variety in delivery and assessment methods between the different providers enabled them to share ideas and make recommendations to each other with regards to delivery and assessment methodology. For example, Holmes Place Academy (Czech Republic) developed a new training programme and assessment process to align to the EHFA Standards, and SIAF/FIAF (Italy), a well established provider of fitness training qualifications was able to provide useful guidance to HPA with regards to programme content and assessment structure.

The project partners also provided useful information with regards to the Accreditation Process Document in terms of what was and what was not relevant in each country. This enabled us to refine and streamline this document to ensure that it was appropriate for all of the partner countries. One of the project products was the translation of the Accreditation Process Document and the Assessment Strategy. Once these documents were translated, we were able to use the partners to check each translation for technical accuracy with regards to specific exercise and fitness language.

We were also able to use the partners' expertise in delivery and assessment and train them to join our European Verifier team which now consists of 11 evaluators. This training included observation of accreditation visits and the range of languages spoken proved extremely useful for translation during the accreditation visits. A few partners had been involved in earlier projects, such as Eurofit-QST and ECVET Exercise and Fitness, which meant that they had an excellent understanding of the EHFA Standards which had been developed as part of the Eurofit QST project. This meant that they were able to share their interpretation of the Standards with the other project partners who were less familiar with them – this was an unanticipated benefit.

Review of the revised EHFA Standards by each partner was extremely useful as each of the partner training providers was able to feedback on the appropriateness of the learning outcomes for their own individual country and the partners were all involved in carrying out the desk research for the research report.

The project meetings were invaluable for not only ensuring that the project objectives were understood and progressed by the partners, but the meetings also provided an excellent forum for exchanging ideas for streamlining the accreditation process, in order to make it easier and less labour intensive. Following evaluation and feedback from the partners the documentation requirements of the accreditation process have been revised and they are now more user-friendly.

Discussion at partner meetings with regards to EREPs development ensured that EREPs had a clear understanding on the situation regarding the potential for national registers in each of the partner countries.

Transfer Strategy

This project built on the achievements of 2 earlier projects – the EUROFIT-QST project (2003) and the ECVET Exercise and Fitness project (2006). These 2 projects led to the development of the EHFA Standards for Exercise and Fitness occupations – a set of learning outcomes that defined the knowledge, skills and competence required for Fitness Instructing, Group Fitness Instructing, Aqua Fitness Instructing and Personal Training. The ECVET project also resulted in the formation of the EHFA Accreditation Unit (CYQ) to carry out the accreditation of training providers across Europe by mapping their qualifications against the EHFA Standards to ensure standardisation and comparability.

This EA-Fitness project has transferred the results from these 2 earlier projects in order to create a critical mass of European accredited training organisations, to encourage the adoption of the EHFA Standards across Europe. Transfer of innovation has taken place at both sectoral and geographic level within the Exercise and Fitness sector by using the UK model of accreditation and transferring this to all of the countries involved in the project. A minimum of 7 countries were identified in the original application and we have exceeded this by carrying out accreditations in 10 countries.

With regards to the wider European perspective, we have transferred innovative skills relating to sector qualification accreditation by verifying 15 training organisations across Europe against a common assessment strategy, by using the skills and tools developed in the UK by our specialist Awarding Body. This transfer of accreditation skills and tools has proved to be fit for purpose and successful. 15 successful accreditations have taken place and feedback from the partners relating to the accreditation process has been positive.

A number of the accredited training organisations have identified that accreditation has provided them with a unique selling point in their country – for example, in the Netherlands there was previously no Level 4 qualification for fitness professionals and now this exists. Holmes Place, in the Czech Republic, are the first training organisation to be accredited in their country therefore the accreditation has provided them with an advantage.

Feedback from the training organisations that have been through the accreditation process has indicated that organisations have developed a broader scope with regards to how their qualifications are delivered, and they have identified that they have improved the quality of their provision. The training organisations have welcomed the external feedback that was provided by evaluators and they have improved and developed their programmes as a result. Feedback from training provider partners has included “it has been most valuable to be involved in this important project – to learn more of the situation in other European countries and to meet interesting people to share knowledge with; also the accreditation process has ‘forced’ us to look through our educations and to improve them”; “it will impact my work in a good way - the content of the educations are even better than before”; “as a training provider, we will benefit from being accredited by EHFA in many ways, but the main thing is it will give us point of commercial difference; we have also been able to introduce the project as well as the EREPs registration possibility to our team

members which gives our teams a benefit as well”; “it should make our training programmes more attractive to the candidate fitness instructors because our accreditation enables them to become part of the European Register, if they are interested in doing so” and “Experiencing transnational cooperation and in depth exchange with different training providers in the fitness sector (universities, for-profit etc) has been most valuable.”

This has been an innovative process as a number of the countries involved did not have an accreditation system in place to ensure standardisation and comparability of training across the health and fitness sector. This work has been carried out by CYQ, a UK Ofqual regulated exercise and fitness specific awarding and certification body. We have transferred the learning gained from developing and delivering this model for 12 years in the UK. The mapping and accreditation process that was carried out by CYQ has supported the training organisations involved in the project to meet the required standards.

In addition to accreditation, EHFA has transferred the UK model of a register for exercise and fitness professionals to develop a European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPs) which has built on the skills and tools developed for the UK model. EREPs is now a pan-European register with members in 28 European countries. This area of work has proved more complex than anticipated, as the ideal model for a European register is the creation of national registers which link to the pan-European register. During the lifetime of the project it has been established that it takes approximately 2 years to work with independent competent bodies to establish a national register. Therefore it will take more time to develop registers in a wider range of European countries. Despite this, EREPs has developed and has an increasing membership base.

Impact on Target Groups and/or Sectors

This project has had an impact on the Sport and Active Leisure Sector, employers, employees, students and teachers, and of course the end-users, the general public who participate in fitness sessions.

The main impact on target groups and geographical areas is that it has acted as a catalyst to the growth of EHFA accreditation activities across Europe. When the project started there were 8 training organisations accredited. During the lifetime of the project, 15 project related accreditations have taken place and 3 other non-project accreditations have been carried out. As predicted in the project application there is now a greater number of accredited vocational education and training providers. There are also a number of training providers who have initiated the accreditation process that we expect to be accredited beyond the end of the funding period.

Our goal was also to train technical experts to carry out the role of European Verifiers and we have trained 11. This means that we now have a team of verifiers that cover the following language base – French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, German and English. The impact of this is that the accreditation process has and will become easier for training providers from these countries to go

through the accreditation process. The creation of these satellite verifiers in partner countries (and non-partner countries) has been a positive by-product of the project.

During the period of the project, EREPs has become an established, recognised and understood principle for the professionalising and development of the European fitness industry. The impact of the project in relation to EREPs is the increased number of EREPs members. The accreditation of the 15 project and 3 non-project training providers has generated interest in EREPs with students registering following the accreditation of training providers. Since the start of the project 1,600 members have registered with EREPs and there is a good re-registration rate. As a result of the project, one national register, in the Netherlands, has now aligned to EREPs. A pan-European EREPs is now successfully operating in 28 different countries and 7 countries have made a commitment to working towards a full national register arrangement in the future.

Updated EHFA Standards have been developed during the course of the project and this has ensured that the knowledge, skills and competences defined in the Standards are up to date and fit for purpose, which is vital for the Sport and Active Leisure Sector.

The EHFA website and the EA-Fitness project website have increased the exposure of the project, the accreditation process, EREPs and the EHFA Standards.

In addition to the training providers who enquired about the accreditation process and who are now accredited, we have had 27 requests for information from training providers across a range of European countries

The indicators that we used to measure impact were:

- Minimum of 14 accredited training providers
- Number of accredited training providers across Europe
- Number of trained European Verifiers and number of countries verifiers are based in
- Number of EREPs members
- Updated EHFA Standards signed off by EHFA Executive Committee
- Standards tested on a minimum of 2 stakeholders
- Number of accredited training providers using the new Standards
- Number of national registers aligned to EREPs
- Number of hits on website
- Requests for information

Impact on Geographical Target Areas (local, regional, national and/or European):

Geographically, the accreditations that have taken place during the project are based in the partner countries with the addition of Norway and Ireland. The non-project accreditations that have been completed are based in Norway and Cyprus. We now have a pool of European Verifiers who cover a wide range of languages which has resulted in and will continue to make the accreditation process easier for training providers in countries where the range of languages are spoken.

In Lithuania, a new fitness training programme was created and accredited – this was something that did not exist before the project.

In the Netherlands, the sector is now aware of the importance of this European development. Fit!vak, the branch organisation in the Netherlands has achieved EHFA accreditation and has also adopted the EREPs system for the registration of fitness professionals.

In the Czech Republic, trainers who have been through the newly accredited programme, have an advantage as the first trainers in the Czech Republic to have this accreditation.

In Sweden, the number of accredited training providers is now multiplying, with 3 accredited training providers and another 2 training providers who are now showing an interest in gaining EHFA accreditation and there are now EREPs members in 28 different European countries.

The indicators that we used to measure impact were: geographic spread of training providers, numbers of countries verifiers are based in and number of EREPs members in each country.

Impact on National VET Systems

As the EHFA Standards have now been aligned to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) at Level 3 and Level 4, it is now easier to compare the Standards to the equivalent qualifications in the UK. Following the revision of the EHFA Standards, it is evident that there is parity between the EHFA EQF Level 3 Fitness Instructor Standards and the UK QCF Level 2 Certificate in Fitness Instructing. Likewise, there is parity between the EHFA EQF Level 4 Personal Training Standards and the UK QCF Level 3 Certificate in Personal Training. Because of this parity there is a mutual recognition of these qualifications between EREPs, the European Register of Exercise Professionals and UK REPs, the UK register. The project has also had an impact on the Sport and Active Leisure sector in Lithuania. There has been communication with the State Department of Physical Education and Sport under the Lithuanian Government and also communication with the Latvian Fitness Association. The project was also introduced to the responsible person for VET at the Ministry of Science, Education and Qualifications with Lithuania. Previously in Lithuania, there were no national vocational qualifications for fitness instructing occupations and now this exists as a result of the project.

Fit!vak is the new national register in the Netherlands and it is accepted that this register is now going to be the quality standard for fitness professionals throughout the country. Many training providers from across the Netherlands send their students to Fit!vak for external assessment and they have become the first national association, as opposed to a training organisation, to become accredited.

Also in the Netherlands, there was previously no nationally recognised Level 4 qualification – this has now been achieved via the accreditation of EFAA Health Management.

A multiplication effect has been evident in Sweden with the accreditation of SATs, followed by Axelsons, and also in Portugal, with the accreditation of ESDRM, followed by CEF and Manz. It is evidence that once one training organisation goes through the accreditation process in a country, there is more incentive for others to follow.

The same multiplication effect has occurred in Portugal with the accreditation of the 3 most important training providers in the country, firstly ESDRM, our project partner, closely followed by CEF and then Manz Producoes.

Much progress has yet to be made in Italy regarding the understanding that qualifications for fitness instructors are neither to be found through the universities or through the Olympic Committees, and that fitness professionals should be formed through vocational education and training. SIAF's role has been to disseminate this fact to their social partners, to inspire new legislation to regulate this sector and to create their own norms that reflect the work of the project and there is still work to be done in that regards.