

D3.2 EQUALS-EU PROFESSIONAL NETWORK
IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the outcomes of Task 3.3 conducted from November 2022 to November 2023, during which a professional network implementation plan was developed for a spin-off members' network focusing on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Europe and beyond.

This report describes aims and purpose of the network, the methodology for the development of the network, and details on how the network will be structured and implemented in the short and long term. The network is virtual and will be hosted on LinkedIn as a professional membership group that is open to all participants of the EQUALS-EU project. The adoption of LinkedIn as the network platform is explained, and operational considerations discussed, including administration and membership management. Network organisation and governance will be self-administered within the membership following a six-month period of mentoring from work package 3 leaders, Inclusive Creation. A kick-off program is included in the report to demonstrate the types of activities and meetings undertaken by the network in its early stages. Finally, main risks to the sustainability of the network are identified and mitigation strategies discussed.



INTRODUCTION

Deliverable 3.2 Professional Network Implementation Plan (PNIP), presents the outcomes of Task 3.3: Create and spin-off professional network for women and girls in social innovation and entrepreneurship.

The fundamental aim of this network is to provide the graduates of the EQUALS-EU incubator program and summer school with a community of peers to support each other on their continuing entrepreneurship journey beyond the conclusion of the EQUALS-EU project (end 2023). Furthermore, the network functions to perpetuate the capacity building initiatives of the EQUALS-EU project by engaging new stakeholders with the enduring outcomes of the project.

Specifically, the Description of Action (DoA) states that:

«T3.3 will establish a professional network for women and girls focused on gender equity in social innovation and entrepreneurship in Europe... The network will ensure the on-going sustainability, growth, and visibility of the project outcomes.»

Originally described in the project's (DOA) as a *business* plan, this plan has been re-defined as an *implementation* plan in light of the amendment made to the grant agreement where the scope and nature of the professional network was changed such that a business structure was no longer relevant. Unlike a business, a network functions as an entity where members play dual roles; they are both the customers and contributors. Consequently, the approach to generating value deviates from a profit-centred focus and instead, shifts toward enhancing value for network members through knowledge sharing activities that elevate their potential as successful entrepreneurs. This involves fostering members' expertise in critical domains such as business development, marketing, networking, sales, and other pertinent aspects necessary for the effective operation of a sustainable business. In essence, the network implementation plan prioritizes the empowerment of its members, aiming to equip them with necessary skills and competencies, thereby ensuring their success as entrepreneurs while contributing to the overall vitality of the network. That said, in developing this plan of implementation, the fundamental business plan template has been the point of reference to ensure key elements of a robust and enduring professional network are considered.



METHODOLOGY

The PNIP was developed over the course of twelve months between November 2022-2023. A co-innovation methodology was used, involving two key stakeholder groups: consortium partners (subject matter experts) and summer school¹ participants (target end-users). Dedicated workshops were held with each group to plan the scope, structure, and sustainability of the proposed network. While not originally specified in the DoA for consultation in the development phase of the network, the summer school participants were included on the recommendation of consortium partners, to ensure the network meets the intended users' needs.

CO-CREATION WORKSHOPS

Outlined below is the schedule of workshops and key outcomes that contributed to the PNIP.

WORKSHOP 1: CONSORTIUM WORKSHOP

An initial workshop was facilitated by work package three leaders during the first in-person general assembly of the EQUALS-EU consortium in Valencia, November 2022. The focus of this workshop was primarily on how the network should be organized and the need to re-evaluate the purpose of the network as defined in the DoA. The original terms of agreement required the network to be co-located at 3 physical hubs across Europe. This was determined by the consortium to be unsustainable long-term, given the costs involved. In a post-pandemic world of increased digital connectivity, it was decided that a virtual network was more likely to endure as it is more flexible and adaptable to the participants' changing circumstances and needs. Furthermore, it reduces the need for travel, increasing accessibility and environmental sustainability. For example, during the project period, several summer school participants relocated internationally which would have seen them excluded from a network fixed to a physical location. It was also determined that where possible, the proposed network should connect to and leverage existing professional networks rather than duplicate them. These conversations ultimately lead to an amendment to the DoA for Task 3.3, redefining the network from a physical entity to a virtual one.

WORKSHOP 2: TARGET-USER WORKSHOP

During the first week of the summer school (mid-June 2023), a workshop was held with the summer school participants as future members of the network. In addition to seeking input from the network's target users, the workshop sought to strengthen relationships between the group of future users, to foster ownership and commitment to the community-driven network beyond the conclusion of the

¹ For details of the EQUALS-EU summer school, please visit:
<https://equals-eu.org/outcomes/knowledge-exchange/>



summer school, and thus to assist in the transition of roles from a group of classmates to a network of professional peers.

The workshop covered the aims and objectives of the network and went into detail about the types of activities the network may organize for members. Participants suggested online knowledge sharing sessions in the form of workshops and seminars, in addition to progress ‘check-ins’ where members can update each other on their career progression and share lessons learned. It was also discussed if the network should be open to new members, and if any admission criteria would apply to new members. It was during this workshop that the decision was made to host the network as a group on the professional social network LinkedIn. This is discussed in more detail below. Lastly, the participants shared ideas on expectations of network members’ participation, in the context of how they could see themselves supporting the network as founding members. This feedback has been used to develop the working groups presented below.

The next section of this document sets out the implementation plan for the network. The core structure of the implementation plan is taken from a typical business plan template, adapted to the needs of a virtual professional network. This ensures adequate attention is given to the network’s initial set up, ongoing organisation, administration and activities, recruitment, future growth, sustainability, longevity, and the mitigation of potential risks.



NETWORK IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

NETWORK PURPOSE AND AIMS

The professional network is both a community and a knowledge sharing platform. It seeks to maintain the newly established social and professional connections formed between participants during the EQUALS-EU incubator program and summer school by providing a virtual space to meet and exchange knowledge. The intention is that this community of early-career entrepreneurs can build on their shared experience of the EQUALS-EU project to support each other as they continue their entrepreneurial journey. This group of women share an interest in the topics of innovation, leadership, and business development.

GOVERNANCE

The governance structure will be co-created upon establishment of the network. Specifically, once the LinkedIn group has been created and members invited, an initial meeting of the network will be held, at which the members will be invited to collaborate to formulate a mission statement and code of conduct for the network. A mission statement is recommended to provide a clear mandate for the group, while a code of conduct encourages the membership to consider what guidelines for participation may be needed to support the harmonious operation of the group. As inspiration, the EQUALS-EU Code of Conduct and the code of conduct developed for the incubator program will be shared and discussed,² in addition to examples of mission statements and group manifestos.³ Subsequently, at each annual general meeting of the professional network, the mission statement and code of conduct will be reviewed and amended by the members, if necessary, to ensure their continued relevancy.

NETWORK ACTIVITIES

The added value of the virtual professional network is its capacity to be a knowledge sharing platform, enabling members to collaborate and share resources of mutual benefit. For example, the EQUALS-EU partners and the participants of both the summer school and incubator program bring expertise across a number of topics that are of interest to the group. This expertise can be shared through formal and informal communications within the network, for example, through social media posts or live webinars. In addition, network members can look outside the network to other professionals in the

² <https://www.inclusivecreation.com/equals-eu-code-of-conduct>

³ See for example: Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion <https://concernedresearchers.org/manifesto>



field who can connect to the network by leading workshops, seminars or other activities. During the co-innovation development workshops for the network, a range of themes were identified: social media marketing, grant writing workshops, fundraising strategies, learning how to write patents, and perfecting the art of pitching ideas to potential investors. Some of topics are addressed in the EQUALS-EU summer school curriculum which becomes an online repository of learning materials by the end of the project (December 2023). This repository can form the basis of initial network seminars and workshops, where key learnings can be revised, further developed and shared to a wider audience.⁴

A further suggestion for network activities was the concept of an annual ‘check-in’ amongst members to share progress made. Working groups are likely needed to facilitate network activities on this scale, and this is addressed below. Under the section «Digital Hosting Strategy» the different types of activities are explained in greater detail.

NETWORK MEMBERSHIP

At start-up, the network membership comprises participants from the EQUALS-EU incubator program and summer school in addition to EQUALS-EU consortium partners. Key consortium partners will support and mentor the network’s members to ensure good practices of self-governance are established at the outset.

Initial interest in the network from participants in the EQUALS-EU incubator program and summer school has been strong, indicating a perceived need for the initiative. Graduates of both these programs have expressed a desire to extend similar opportunities to others outside the EQUALS-EU project, to share their own experience and knowledge gleaned from participation in the EQUALS-EU project.

CONSORTIUM MEMBERS – KEY PARTNERS

The EQUALS-EU consortium partners are invited to join the group and contribute content and co-host workshops or knowledge sharing sessions throughout the lifespan of the network. These workshops are open to both network members and the wider public. In the early stages of the network, the WP3 leader will manage the sessions that the consortium contributes to the network, but it is the network members that eventually will manage these sessions. Since the consortium partners work within specific areas and have different sets of expertise, the program will offer a diverse range of topics that meet the varied needs and interests of the network members. See the attached program to get further details.

⁴ The summer school online repository will be available on the Equals-EU website: <https://equals-eu.org>



NETWORK EXPANSION

As the members' personal and professional networks grow, new members with an interest in women's entrepreneurship and gender equality will be invited to join the network. It is anticipated that the network will appeal to people in the initial stages of their own entrepreneurial journey or who have already embarked on a path to becoming successful business owners, leaders, or organizational managers, with similar interests in innovation, leadership, and business development. Since the network is hosted on LinkedIn, it allows all members of the network to share the group with their connections, increasing the visibility of the network and inviting new network members to the group.

DIGITAL HOSTING STRATEGY

Short term and long-term strategies for hosting the digital network are proposed in support of the evolving needs and planned growth in membership of the network, as described below.

SHORT-TERM

At the second network co-creation workshop in June 2023 the summer school participants suggested that the EQUALS-EU project's spin-off professional network should begin as a LinkedIn group. Workshop participants described LinkedIn as a familiar online social networking platform, that many already used for professional networking and career development. Those who did not use it, had knowledge of its purpose and functions. It was discussed that a LinkedIn group is an effective way to maintain contact with each other and grow the new network by using existing digital technology commonly used internationally for such purposes.

WP3 lead, Inclusive Creation, will set up the LinkedIn group and provide leadership mentoring to the network for the first six months. Invitations to join will be sent to all EQUALS-EU project participants, including consortium members, advisory boards, incubator program participants and summer school attendees. New members will be encouraged to share the group within their respective networks, potentially expanding its membership base from the outset. Within the first month of the network's operation, an inaugural network meeting will convene, during which the mission statement and code of conduct will be collaboratively drafted by its members.

Concurrent to the network's recruitment phase, new members will be invited to contribute ideas regarding activities or resources of benefit and interest to the membership. Throughout the initial six months of network operation, Inclusive Creation will arrange monthly virtual activities for network members to participate in. See Appendix 1 for the proposed six-month kick-off program.

In the early stages of the network, network members will be recruited to the administrator and leadership group, facilitating a gradual transition of administrative responsibilities from Inclusive Creation to the network members themselves. For additional details regarding the administration and leadership of the network, please refer to the section "Network Leadership and Administration" below.



LONG-TERM

Beyond the first six months during which Inclusive Creation has supported the operations of the network, the network will become self-administering. The organisational structure for the network moving forward will be confirmed and a more long-term plan democratically determined and implemented that specifies the ongoing priorities and activities of the group. Mentoring during the first six months (October 2023 – March 2024) seeks to develop the self-governance capabilities of the network membership to effectively plan for the future.

LAUNCHING THE NETWORK ON LINKEDIN

The network will be established as a LinkedIn group in October 2023. LinkedIn is a social networking platform designed for professionals to connect, network, and advance their careers. Since it was first introduced in 2003, the networking platform has become the primary online platform to use to build a professional career. LinkedIn is free to join, it offers members a public profile page which functions as a resume, blog, and social media feed. LinkedIn has become a key resource for employment, enabling recruiters to reach job seekers through professional and personal networks.

As of August 2023, LinkedIn has members from over 200 nations, exceeding 850 million users⁵. Alongside personal profiles, LinkedIn offers a “group” feature. Groups are available to any LinkedIn user, enabling them to set up a smaller network within LinkedIn, focused on specific subjects, interests, geographical locations, industries, or activities. Groups serve as platforms that facilitate the exchange of news and information among individuals who share common interests, offering users a way to keep up with relevant information amidst the vast network that is LinkedIn. Notably, groups can be categorised as either “listed” or “unlisted,” that is, publicly visible or not. In the interests of supporting the network to expand the group’s membership, the network will be established as a listed group, therefore visible and searchable to any LinkedIn users. However, this status will be discussed at the first network meeting, and can be changed at any time, should the membership decide to.

SETTING UP THE GROUP ON LINKEDIN

LinkedIn groups can be set up by any individual member but require an administrator to manage recruitment and membership. The LinkedIn group will be set up by the WP3 leader, Inclusive Creation, who will be the temporary administrator of the group for up to the first six months, during which time the network will appoint a successor to the role from the new network members. The first six months will run from October 2023 until the end of March 2024. The organisational structure of the group is discussed further below.

⁵ <https://about.linkedin.com/>



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Ensuring the network's long-term success after the EQUALS-EU project concludes in late 2023, depends on it becoming quickly self-managing. To accomplish this, the network needs a basic structured leadership system consisting of a committed volunteer team of administrators and smaller work groups to ensure the network remains active and engaging. A preliminary draft of management guidelines will be developed by Inclusive Creation and revised during the first meeting of the professional network in October.

NETWORK LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION

A vital part of this self-management process involves the election of network leaders by its members when the network is established. This democratic approach allows members choose representatives to guide the network's activities and goals. The administrators are responsible for tasks that are essential for the network's effective operation: membership, LinkedIn administration and group leadership. These duties may be undertaken by individuals or shared by a few. It is anticipated that one administrator will be responsible for managing new member sign-ups, ensuring a smooth and inclusive joining experience. Another administrator will oversee the LinkedIn group platform, making sure that posts and interactions follow the network's code of conduct. Additionally, a leadership group will take a central role in shaping the network's code of conduct and mission statement. They will organize an annual meeting where these mechanisms are developed through a democratic process. This method ensures that every member can contribute to the network's core principles. This self-managing structure, with elected leaders and dedicated administrators, encourages member involvement, engagement, and ownership. See the section «Network Work Groups» for additional details regarding the Leadership and Administration work groups responsibilities.

NETWORK WORK GROUPS

Establishing work groups was proposed during a network co-creation workshop. These work groups are envisioned to facilitate the network's ongoing community building. Each work group has a distinct focus area, allowing members to contribute to areas that align with their personal and professional aspirations. During the workshop, three work groups were recommended: Marketing and PR, Financial Management and Grant Writing, and Events. To ensure that the network is self-managing a fourth work group has been identified, called Leadership and Administration.

The Marketing and PR work group's primary mandate is to ensure the widespread dissemination of the network and its events to stakeholders who may have an interest in the activities. They will take charge of enhancing the network's visual identity and supporting its future expansion, for example, to establish a dedicated website.

The Financial Management and Grant Writing group will dedicate its efforts to develop the network's financial situation. Some workshop participants expressed their intent to contribute to the network by applying for grants and seeking financial support from external stakeholders. If any grant applications are successful, this group will be responsible for ensuring that the proper reporting and financial



records adhere to the grant guidelines on behalf of the network. They will also be available to provide support to fellow members in the grant application process.

The Events group will take responsibility for organizing the network's hosted events, particularly when external contributors are involved. They will monitor event sign-ups and coordinate the timing of events. Collaboration with the Marketing and PR group is crucial to effectively promote the network's activities. Additionally, this group, in partnership with network members, will prepare the event program. Quarterly, they will present the program for the upcoming three months to maintain an engaging level of network activity.

To ensure the effectiveness of these work groups, some internal organisation is required. It is anticipated that each work group will conduct regular meetings to stay updated and address their respective responsibilities. Quarterly meetings are recommended for all workgroups to ensure alignment of activities across the network. An annual network meeting will maintain the network's strategic direction, update the mission statement, and review ongoing activities. If necessary, adjustments to the network's goals and objectives can be made. Importantly, all meetings can be made open to other network members, providing insight into each group's activities to potential newcomers.

As discussed above, a Leadership and Administration group will be established to manage administrative tasks. In addition to the duties outlined above, this group will coordinate and address matters related to workgroup activities, ensuring democratic processes during voting and decision-making. The planning and hosting of these work groups are dependent on the volunteer-members' preferences and capacities to support the project further.

COMPETITORS AND COLLABORATORS

LinkedIn has been selected as the ideal hosting platform for the network in part because it is already successfully used by other similar interest groups. Figure 1 shows a selection of LinkedIn groups tailored to women in entrepreneurship. While many of these have started similarly to the EQUALS-EU network (as outcomes of projects or competitions), they are generally geographically fixed. Similarly, there are several established networks for women in entrepreneurship that exist outside of LinkedIn, for example: WomenTech Network, ODA (a similar network located in Norway), and Women in Innovation (WIN) are specific to a geographical region, and some have a focus on a specific subject area (technology). The spin-off network from the EQUALS-EU project described here differs in being entirely virtual, providing members equal participation, regardless of their physical location. Further, as a self-administered, member driven group, the scope of subject matter will evolve with the interests of the membership. Existing networks are not viewed as competition for the spin off network described here. Rather, they provide nodes in the larger LinkedIn network and World Wide Web, with which to connect and collaborate.

MEMBERSHIP TO GLOBAL INVEST HER

In addition to the peer support offered through the LinkedIn group, the graduates from the EQUALS-EU summer school received a 12-month membership subscription to Global Invest Her. The



subscription commenced after the summer school program ended in July 2023. Global Invest Her is an online platform dedicated to advancing gender diversity and inclusivity in the world of entrepreneurship and investment. It provides a wealth of resources and support to empower women entrepreneurs and investors globally. Through a range of initiatives, including networking events, educational content, and mentorship programs, Global Invest Her fosters a supportive ecosystem for women to thrive in the often male-dominated fields of business and investment. Its mission is to bridge the gender gap and promote equal opportunities for women in entrepreneurship and investment. Membership to this platform ensures that the summer school graduates have access to formal resources and an expanded network to further the business concepts developed during the summer school. Participation in Global Invest Her is expected to also feed into the LinkedIn group activities.



The screenshot displays a list of seven LinkedIn groups. Each group entry includes a profile picture icon, the group name, the number of members, and a brief description. A 'Join' button is located to the right of each group's name.

- Bank of America Institute for Women's Entrepreneurship at Cornell Alumni Group**: 3K members. Description: Welcome to the Bank of America Institute for Women's **Entrepreneurship** at Cornell Alumni Group. This group is designed for individuals who have completed at least one course in the Bank of America Institute...
- VWISE Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship**: 2K members. Description: V-WISE (Veteran **Women** Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship) is a premier training program in **entrepreneurship** and small business management. The program is open to all women veterans...
- What Women Make - creative entrepreneurship around the world**: 2K members. Description: Creative Entrepreneurs and creatives ready and willing to go to market with their creative work, Writers, Illustrators, Designers, Visually creative and social good minded business owners, Innovation and...
- Center for Women's Entrepreneurship at Chatham University**: 868 members. Description: The Center for Women's **Entrepreneurship** at Chatham University creates economic opportunities for **women** through entrepreneurial education and training, mentoring, and networking. Building on Chatha...
- Women Entrepreneurship in Digital Technologies**: 265 members. Description: The **Women Entrepreneurship** in Digital Technologies is a group for managers, specialists and anyone interested in the capabilities of digital technology oriented in discussions, news, events. Our group's...
- Women in Engineering, Energy & Entrepreneurship**: 212 members. Description: This group is for females (plus male #HeForShe's) running STEM and TECH Businesses or those aspiring to achieve this goal. The Engineering sector plays a very important role optimising mineral and natural...
- Women Entrepreneurship Week**: 187 members. Description: Group is for administrators and staff at more than 200 universities and colleges around the world that are holding **Women Entrepreneurship** Week events on their campuses. The group provides an opportunity for...
- Laurier Women Entrepreneurship Centre**: 167 members. Description: A professional group for program participants, presenters and mentors from the Laurier **Women Entrepreneurship** Centre.

Figure 1: A screenshot of a selection of LinkedIn groups that focus on women and entrepreneurship.



RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Three main risks have been identified to the success of the network: participation, retention, and growth.

PARTICIPATION

The prospect of low participation and activity within a digital network is the main risk identified. As a volunteer network that is the outcome of a participation in a completed project activity, there is the risk that as the participants move on with their careers, new interests will take priority and the network will be perceived as less relevant. To mitigate this risk, every care is being taken to ensure the network is low maintenance and flexible, easy to engage with and can evolve as users' needs change. The preparation of a kick-off program seeks to make the network easy for new members to get involved in and gradually take over. Mentoring by Inclusive Creation and the EQUALS-EU consortium will further support member engagement.

RETENTION

The second identified risk is retention: that initial uptake will be strong and then fall away. To mitigate this risk, the network has been planned to be self-administered and to continually offer value to new and existing members through relevant resources and varied activities that seek to foster an engaged community and inspire and motivate members to maintain active participation. In addition, active recruitment of new members will replace departing members to maintain healthy membership numbers overall.

GROWTH

The final identified risk is the potential for stagnant growth. That is, that there will be limited interest from people outside the EQUALS-EU project to join the network. To mitigate this risk (as with the risks in participation and retention), the network format, and kick-off activities have been designed to have wide appeal. In addition, the network's goal is to maintain a low-entry threshold, creating an inclusive and welcoming environment to new members. Unlike many other entrepreneurial networks, there are no membership fees to join the LinkedIn group and participation options are flexible (to be part of a working group or not, to attend several activities or not). The initial membership includes both participants in the EQUALS-EU project activities and the consortium partners, providing the widest scope possible for the network at start up, and to leverage their personal networks to expand the group further.

CONCLUSION

The spin-off network is an important mechanism to perpetuate the EQUALS-EU project activities beyond the conclusion of the project: to disseminate the outcomes of the project and to continue to support the young women entrepreneurs who have participated in the many EQUALS-EU capability



development events and programs. This network implementation plan anticipates a flexible, member-driven network that offers a dynamic and thriving ecosystem to promote entrepreneurship, innovation, and collaboration among the network members, ultimately driving long-term positive change in the tech sector.



APPENDIX 1



Kick-off program EQUALS-EU Network

OCTOBER 2023 TO MARCH 2024

Month	Description of event
October	General assembly – first official meeting of the network. Establishing network governance. Third Wednesday in October – lunch check-in (online: Zoom)
November	Workshop – Presenting the Gender Equity Tools for digital inclusion. Third Wednesday in November – lunch check-in (online: Zoom)
December	Workshop – How to run a start-up on low funds. Third Wednesday in December – lunch check-in (online: Zoom)
January	Session four – Launch of the online summer school learning materials Third Wednesday in January – lunch check-in (online: Zoom)
February	Session four – Topic to be crowdsourced. Third Wednesday in February – lunch check-in (online: Zoom)
March	Session four – Topic to be crowdsourced. Third Wednesday in March – lunch check-in (online: Zoom)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The topics of the final two sessions will be developed by the network during the first three months.

