

Mutual benefit

Bringing regional SMEs and universities together through the innovative SHARPEN* teaching methodology

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ABSTRACT. Presently, many European countries (as well as the Federal State of Saxony/Germany) are facing similar demographic developments that will provoke fundamental changes in the respective labour markets in years to come. This situation will especially affect Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) that are based in rural regions with rapidly increasing numbers of retirees and an equally rapidly shrinking population of young people. The available theoretical approaches of Human Resource Management (HRM) and models are suitable for the conditions in large companies. However, SMEs are not “small” large enterprises, but they have specific characteristics that affect all HRM processes. HR Management varies from one SME to another and depends very much on the regional context. An SME in a metropolitan region needs a different approach to HRM than one in a rural region. The innovative Learning Module that marks the core of the Erasmus project SHARPEN addresses these issues. Students select SMEs in five European rural regions and describe the context of the selected regional SMEs, their internal constraints and, above all, the specific needs of HR Management in these SMEs. On this basis, students apply their theoretical HRM knowledge by modifying HR approaches and models for this selected SME. The innovative teaching methodology of the HR module combines state-of-the-art HR concepts and practical HR work in companies within one learning module. Besides that, the teaching methodology enables regional and cross-cultural cooperation between students, lecturers, SMEs. This is supplemented by learning with up-to-date interactive learning methods, e.g. guided discussions, presentations, teamwork and case study method for students. This paper focuses on the question to what extent this innovative teaching approach can help to solve this HR problem in European SMEs.

KEYWORDS: *Human Resource Management, rural regions, SHARPEN, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise (SME), teaching methodology*

Current situation of SMEs on the example of Saxony/Germany

In recent years, it has become more difficult to combine a company's supply of jobs and the search of young specialists for attractive jobs. In Saxony, too, the seemingly paradoxical situation arose that companies are looking for specialists but at the same time specialists are looking for attractive employment opportunities. In the past few years, the state of Saxony has not only been characterized by demographic changes, but also by migration tendencies. The consequences are declining population figures with a simultaneous increase in the proportion of older people, which has also led to a change in age structure in the large number of SMEs in Saxony: the share of younger employees has fallen sharply and the average age has risen (Freistaat Sachsen, 2018). The resulting vacancies can therefore only be filled with considerable personnel effort (Fachkräfte Monitoring, 2018). At the same time, student numbers have remained relatively stable in regional universities and other educational institutions in recent years and many graduates intend to work in the region after graduation. For example, an empirical survey among students at the Westsächsische Hochschule Zwickau/Germany (WHZ) shows that graduates are willing to choose their future employer predominantly in the region, if attractive employment opportunities are offered to them (Walter, Förster, 2015). Changed preference structures of young professionals regarding their entry into professional life provide an important starting point for a contemporary and sustainable design of Human Resource Management processes, in particular the acquisition (recruiting), integration and commitment (retention) of graduates in companies. This subject is controversial because the urgent need to preserve the innovation capacity of SMEs in Saxony is currently dominated, and will continue to be so in the future by the adequate and rapid filling of vacant or newly created jobs with qualified young professionals. Already today, it is partly difficult to fill jobs in Saxony with suitable young applicants (Fachkräfte Monitoring, 2018). In comparison to large companies, the SME sector is particularly affected by this problem, as it is very difficult for SMEs to submit attractive offers to applicants in times of fluctuating order situations and tight liquidity constraints, e.g. with regard to remuneration and duration of employment (Psychogios, Prouska, 2019). Especially for SMEs in Saxony, an advantage may arise from the fact that in the future the employer's attractiveness will not be evaluated solely by the level of wages, but increasingly by what a company offers as a whole in terms of its jobs and working conditions resp. by the extent it differs from other companies as an employer; initiates and implements market-oriented Human Resource Management through holistic HR concepts such as Talent Management and Employer Branding (Walter, 2018).

We have scope to explore how mediators such as leadership style, SME climate and development climate influence the relationships between formal and informal HRM practices and between organizational and individual outcomes (Nolan, Garavan, 2016).

Description of the project SHARPEN

The following five universities are working together as strategic partners in the SHARPEN project: University of Applied Sciences in Zwickau/Germany, Technical University of Liberec/Czech Rep., University of Applied Sciences in Kajaani/Finland, University of Applied Sciences in Klaipeda/Lithuania and University of Huddersfield/GB. In addition, various SMEs and regional institutions such as chambers of industry and commerce are integrated into the project in all five countries.

As part of the project, the participants and institutions have established a joint research and business network that will promote human resources work for SMEs and the regions as a whole. The key objectives of this project include:

- Matching competencies to be developed in academic curricula to the real needs of SMEs in the regions through engaging and helping specific groups within the labour market;
- Addressing the real needs of SMEs in these rural regions, especially in building the HR competencies;
- Addressing critical gaps related to SMEs' limited time and financial resources to work on long-term, sustainable HR initiatives as a business priority;
- Co-creating a set of tools with and for the target groups to enable them to use HR competencies and capabilities effectively and efficiently specifically in SMEs;
- Helping SMEs in their HR policies and practices to attract suitable, qualified employees and to integrate young talents to the employers and
- Improving integration with regional institutions, changing the social and business environment, aligning HR policies and practices to the evolving needs of the region, sharing best fit international knowledge and experience.

The project comprises three outputs:

1. The learning module;
2. The e-Handbook for SMEs;
3. The empirical survey of HR managers (Figure 1).

Output 1 is the HR learning module and is described in the point 3 of this paper.

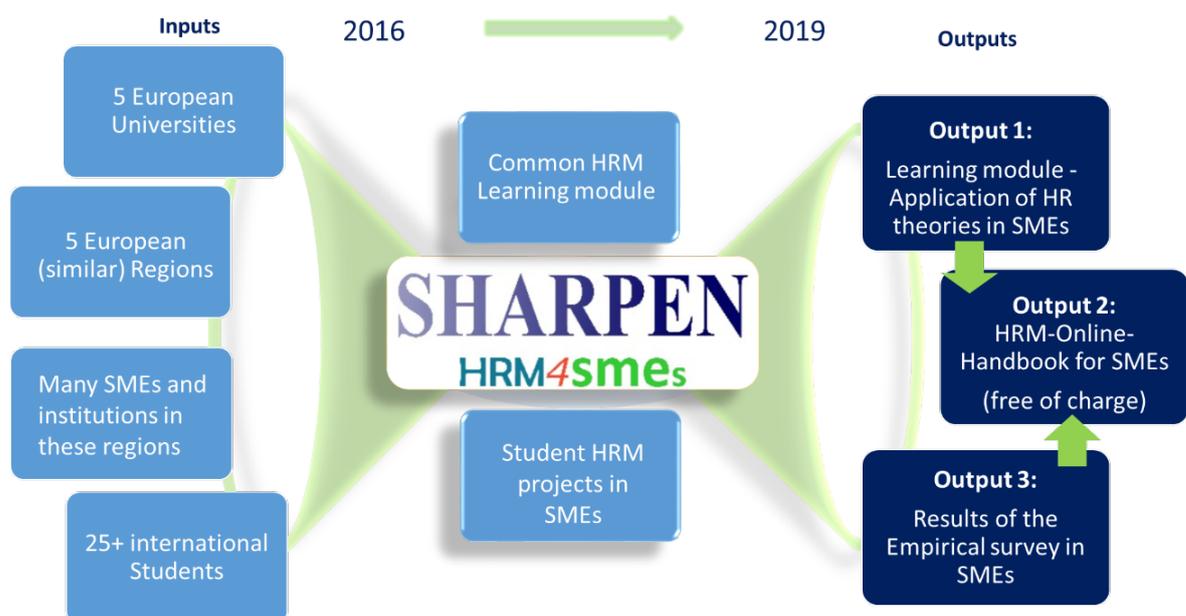


Figure 1. The outputs of the project SHARPEN (own development)

Output 2 includes the e-Handbook for SMEs. This online Handbook contains chapters focusing on HRM in SMEs and their specific needs as well as on current HR issues. It is based on the results of the literature research and the analysis of the practical conditions in the contacted SMEs during each learning module (Output 1) as well as the results of the empirical survey of SMEs on the specific HR needs of SMEs in all five project regions (Output 3). The results are published in Komulainen et al. (Komulainen et al., 2019) and Richter et al. (Richter et al., 2019a).

Output 3 contains the results of the empirical survey of HR activities in regional SMEs, carried out among SMEs within all regions by all project partners. The survey focuses on topics connected with the main challenges: highly industrialized regions with a large percentage of SMEs that are hit hard by declining birth rates and high levels of emigration. The research study output integrates already existing approaches (e.g. current HRM theory) viewed by perspective of practical aspects (e.g. questioning the relevance of HRM theory to SMEs). The results of the study show what regional companies need and currently lack to become more attractive as employers (Richter et al., 2019). All project members (students, SMEs, lecturers) will be able to adapt their teaching and learning needs based on these results. The results are published in Maršíková et al. (Maršíková et al., 2019) and Richter et al. (Richter et al., 2019b). This means the project SHARPEN combines the strengths and competencies of the strategic partners such as expertise in Human Resource Management, Business Knowledge, Language Competencies and Entrepreneurship Knowledge. Through this strategic collaboration, the SHARPEN partners involved have created the knowledge triangle and a common platform for the integration of best practices and the exchange of intellectual resources. These project results will benefit all major stakeholders such as students, lecturers, SMEs and other organisations in the five European partner regions.

SHARPEN teaching methodology – what is innovative?

The new HRM learning module in English (Output 1) will use an innovative methodological approach. The rationale of project are the joint development and implementation of an English-language learning module in the subject area of Human Resource Management (HRM). This module is a specialization for students enrolled in study programs of the participating universities and aims at developing, sharpening and practically applying students' HR competencies in terms of Recruiting and Selection, Integration and Retention of young employees (Retention Management), as well as on bolstering the attractiveness of employers (Employer Branding). Projects in which students cooperate with regional Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) form the core of the module that contains 10 ECTS. The main question is how can current HRM approaches be modified for the specific application in SMEs in different European regions? The most important general aims of the learning module are:

1. Students and SMEs learn from each other and learn to understand the job expectations of both sites (SMEs and future young graduates);
2. Enhancement of HR performance in SMEs;
3. Increase in employability of students;
4. Slowing down further brain drain and to support our five EU regions.

That's why we developed the innovative learning approach of the HR module as a combination

of current HR concepts and practical work in companies in one module, based on current HR textbooks and scientific HR articles. In that way we can reach a regional and international cooperation between Students, Lecturers and SMEs and it is possible to combine virtual and classroom learning with up-to-date interactive learning methods, e.g. guided discussions, presentations, teamwork, case study method for students, design thinking etc. Besides we practised national and cross-cultural teamwork virtual and face-to-face during Intensive Study Program weeks (ISP). During those weeks students from five EU project countries worked together in one partner university. The innovative didactic concept of the learning module consists of three phases (see figure 2). Phase 1, i.e. the weeks before the Intensive Study Program (ISP), has a flexible beginning that corresponds to the start of the summer semester in the five countries. This phase contains up-to-date HR approaches and concepts that are taught in an innovative learning environment in each country. Phase 2 is the ISP, i.e. the mobility phase. Phase 2 focusses on cross-cultural teamwork between the students from all of the five partner countries and their cooperation with SMEs and other regional partners in the host region of the ISP. Phase 3 starts after the ISP and runs until the end of the semester. That means it has a flexible duration and end, depending on the end of the summer semester in each of the five countries.

Pre module phase	Phase 1 before the ISP	Phase 2 mobility phase	Phase 3 after the ISP	Post module phase
Winter semester until the start of the summer semester	Flexible start, depending on the start of the summer semester in the 5 countries	Intensive study program week (ISP)	Flexible end, depending on the end of the summer semester	After the end of the summer semester
Preparation and improvement of the learning module	Up-to-date HR approaches and concepts in an innovative learning environment in each country	Cross cultural teamwork and cooperation with SMEs in one country (5 students per Country)	Completion of HR-projects, development of the practical HRM tools for SMEs in five different regions	Developing output documents and case studies for the E-handbook
Students work on HR-projects in SMEs in our 5 EU regions, Coached by the responsible lecturers in all partner countries				

Figure 2. Structure of the whole innovative HR Learning Module (own development)

The theoretical HR content of **Phase 1** consists of the following seven Chapters:
Chapter 1: Introduction to HRM and specific aspects of SMEs

- HRM: approaches, processes, current issues etc. (framework/ overview);
- Trends in globalization, digitalization and demographic developments;

- Specific aspects of SMEs compared to large companies (qualitative aspects);
- The special contexts of HRM in our five regions and the special situation of regional SMEs (special regional literature);
- Corporate Social Responsibility and Human Resource strategy;
- HRM and Performance in SMEs.

Chapter 2: Strategic resourcing and workforce planning for SMEs

- The objective of strategic resourcing and strategic HRM approach;
- The components of strategic employee resourcing;
- Workforce planning;
- Competency-based HRM;
- Competency framework for SMEs.

Chapter 3: Recruitment and Selection for SMEs

- The recruitment and selection process;
- Employer Brand/Employer Branding;
- Talent Management;
- The importance of social networks for recruitment and selection;
- Recruitment and Selection in SMEs.

Chapter 4: Employee Turnover and Retention Management for SMEs

- Risks of employee turnover;
- Retention Management;
- Motivation and employee engagement;
- Commitment and engagement in SMEs;
- Enhancing Retention Management in SMEs.

Chapter 5: Pay and Reward Systems for SMEs

- Influences on payment systems;
- Job evaluation systems;
- Different types of payment system;
- Components of reward in the contemporary era;
- Suitable types and components of payment systems for SMEs.

Chapter 6: Performance Management

- Performance Management in theory and practice;
- Approaches of Performance Appraisal;
- Collaborative Performance Management;
- Limitations of Performance Measurement;

- Performance Management in SMEs.

Chapter 7: Employee Ownership for SMEs

- Ownership and Responsibility;
- Structure of employee ownership;
- Opportunities to modify employee ownership schemes;
- Specifics of employee ownership in SMEs.

The learning platform Moodle was used jointly by all five partner countries and has served for exchanging information and learning material. The first Intensive Study Program week (**phase 2**) took place in April 2017 at our University of Applied Sciences in Zwickau/Germany. During this week, a total of 29 students (five from CZ, UK, FI, Lit and nine from Germany) completed an intensive learning program (for schedule of the first ISP see Figure 3 on the next pages). After the group of international students and lecturers had been welcomed by the vice rector and the faculty's dean, a number of joint workshops took place, in which students presented and discussed their preliminary project results. During the ISP, students also worked on case studies, had the opportunity to talk to HR officers in three of our partner SMEs, and participated in a workshop with the regional Chamber of Industry and Commerce. In summary, the HRM module and the ISP offered the participating students multiple learning opportunities, and allowed them to gather experience in cross-cultural cooperation as well as to gain insights into HRM practice in SMEs in their home countries and in Saxony/Germany. The preparation and implementation of the ISP was at the same time a major challenge for the respective partner university and the lecturers. The following activities had to be organized and to managed with a lot of effort:

- Coordinating the Intensive Study Program during the presence week including the coordination with SMEs and internal as well as several external partners like the Chamber of Commerce;
- Preparing the excursions to regional companies (schedule, rooms, transportation);
- Organizing the cultural program (e.g. international food bazar, spring barbecue, excursion to regional sights);
- Preparing travel, accommodation and guides for 20 international students and several lecturers (with limited funds).

In the summer term of 2018, the ISP has taken place KAMK in Kajaani/Finland from 22 to 27 April and in the summer term of 2019 at SMK in Klaipeda/Lithuania.

The project partners from Kajaani and Klaipeda have already made all preparations and designed a demanding program.

And after all the ISPs, all the students were very enthusiastic and not only learned a lot, but also found international friends. During **phase 3**, the students worked out their project report as an assignment for an examination. The student teams developed a need-specific concept for the Human Resource Management of an SME in their region.

SHARPEN
 HRM+SME

Intensive Study Program 2nd - 8th April 2017



Sunday 2 nd April	start	Monday 3 rd April	start	Tuesday 4 th April
Arrival of the participants – Check-in 6.00 p.m. Transnational meeting for lecturers (restaurant)	08.30 a.m. - 09.30 a.m.	Opening session Welcoming international students and lecturers at WHZ auditorium 2	08.30 a.m. - 12.15 p.m.	Cross cultural Teamwork: Students work on a HRM sample case study 5 cross cultural student teams (one student from each partner university) supported by all lecturers house 5
	09.30 a.m. - 10.30 a.m.	Ice breaker session All students and lecturers moderation: KAMK house 6 113		
	10.45 a.m. - 12.15 p.m.	Student presentations: 15 min each learnings / findings from phase 1 2 parts: a) regional context of the SMEs (point 1 of project assignment) b) description of chosen regional SME (points 2-4 project assignment) 4 national student teams TUL/KAMK/SMK/UH All lecturers moderation: TUL house 6 113		
	12.15 p.m. - 01.30 p.m.	Lunch break (Mensa WHZ) and WHZ campus tour Scheffelstrasse		
	01.30 p.m. - 03.00 p.m.	Workshop: Introduction to working with case studies a) analyzing case studies b) designing case studies all students moderation: UH house 6 113		
	03.15 p.m. - 04.00 p.m.	Forming cross cultural student teams all students moderation: UH house 6 113		
	04.00 p.m. - 05.30 p.m.	City tour of Zwickau (guided by students WHZ)		
	Evening activities			
	06.30 p.m. - 08.30 p.m.	Spring barbecue (Campus Scheffelstraße 39)	06.00 p.m. - 07.00 p.m.	Dinner in the students dorm
				Free evening / Students club

SHARPEN HRM+SITE		Intensive Study Program 2nd - 8th April 2017		Westächsische Hochschule Zwickau University of Applied Sciences			
start	Wednesday 5 th April	start	Thursday 6 th April	start	Friday 7 th April	Sunday 8 th April	
08.30 a.m. 11.30 a.m.	Workshop with: Chamber o. C., Institute for E.R. and Career Service WHZ 1. Presentations: the context of SMEs in Saxony (by hosts) 2. Students Presentations: Regional context of SMEs (= revised version of part a of Monday's presentations) 4 national student teams TUL/KAMK/SMK/UH All lecturers 3. Discussion Location: IHK Zwickau Sachsen-Saal Äußere Schneeberger Straße 34	08.15 a.m. 08.30 a.m.	Meeting point Scheffelstraße 39, WHZ, solar flower Bus departure	08.30 a.m. 09.30 a.m.	Feedback workshop: What have we learned during the workshops with regional institutes and companies? What conclusion can we draw for our project assignment? all students and lecturers moderation: KAMK	8.00 a.m. – 4.00 p.m. Transnational meeting for lecturers (room house 5 and restaurant)	
11.30 p.m. 12.15 p.m.	Lunch break (IHK Zwickau)	11.00 a.m. 11.45 p.m.	Lunch break in the company	09.45 a.m. 11.30 a.m.	Teamwork: Preparing presentations (15 min) about the next steps in your project assignment based on what you have learned during the ISP 5 national student teams house 5		
12.15 p.m. 01.00 p.m.	Bus trip to Chemnitz	12.30 p.m. 03.00 p.m.	Cultural exposure Talsperre Pöhl	11.30 a.m. 12.15 p.m.	Lunch break (Mensa WHZ)		
01.00 p.m. 04.00 p.m.	Company visit 1 3D Micromac AG Chemnitz 1. company Visit 2. presentation: progress of project assignment Student team 1 /WHZ 3. Q & A All students, lecturers and company	03.00 p.m. 05.30 p.m.	Company visit 3 (Sternquell Brauerei Plauen) Visit. Q & A All students and lecturers	12.15 p.m. 04.00 p.m.	Feedback on ISP all students and lecturers house 5		
04.45 p.m. 05.30 p.m.	Return to WHZ			04.00 p.m.	Get together and farewell on the Campus		
Evening activities							
06.30 p.m.	International Food Bazar: International Office WHZ Students club "Tivoli"	06.00 p.m. 08.00 p.m.	Event in the company	06.00 p.m. 07.00 p.m.	Dinner in the students dorm		

Figure 3. Program of the ISP at WHZ in Zwickau/Germany in 2017

The content based on the following structure in all of the five Universities:

1. Description of the context for SMEs in the respective region (Size and location of the region in Europe, age structure of the population, number and structure of the SMEs, industrial structure, development of these facts in the next 5 years);
2. Selection and description of one regional SMEs (size, industry, technology, employee structure, specific needs);
3. Analysis of HRM needs and priorities for this company;
4. Developing practical HR-tools for this SME to cater their HR needs;
5. Critical evaluation of the results obtained in 2 to 4;

6. Conclusions for HR in this specific SME;
7. Conclusions for the design of HRM for SMEs in Europe.

But there is no need for uniformity, as we have very different conditions and prerequisites at the 5 partner universities. E.g. the detailed structure of student reports or the number of SMEs can vary. Only the following points are crucial to improve the employability of our students. Therefore, the need to be implemented in all partner countries:

- Integrating students with the nearly the same study course level (Bachelor, Master);
- Developing HRM competencies and intercultural skills in English language;
- Applying acquired knowledge to SMEs working in regional project groups;
- Exchanging learning experience and directly experiencing intercultural collaboration of all students during the ISP;
- Drafting and writing/presenting HR solutions for specific companies.

Results of the learning module - Bringing together regional SMEs and universities?

During each summer terms from 2017 to 2019, the learning module was successfully implemented and completed in all five partner universities as planned in the project. Students from all five countries participated in the whole module. Results in the form of written student reports, HR case studies as well as videos of the final presentations demonstrate the successful first run of our learning module. The experience the project team gained during the learning modules formed the basis for further improvements. The different conditions in the partner countries, e.g. the different semester schedules, various qualification levels of the participants (Bachelor and Master students) as well as cultural and regional specifics in competence development, resulted in big challenges that needed to be mastered within a short time by lecturers and students. With the learning module, we achieved very important results: Students' knowledge in HRM was deepened and they gained intercultural experience.

The intensive group work during the whole semester in the home countries and cross-culturally during the international study weeks helped to sharpen their personal development as well as their intercultural communication skills. Students' English language skills were improved and Students learned how to practically apply HRM theory during the close collaboration with regional SMEs in all countries. Students got to know the regions of Zwickau/Germany, Kajaani/Finland and Klaipeda/Lithuania during three ISPs. Students practiced to write an academic report in English (e.g. English citation methods etc.).

In particular, the challenges of the development and the implantation of the HR learning module were:

- Promoting the new English-language HRM learning module at the participating universities and selecting students;
- Drafting HRM learning material in English and conducting weekly seminars and workshops;
- Selecting and providing English-language textbooks and academic articles for the students;
- Preparing collaboration with regional SMEs and other regional partners;
- Preparing student projects in cooperation with regional SMEs (interview guidelines, interviews, evaluation);

- Jointly preparing, conducting and evaluation online tests for students after the first phase of the learning module;
- Counseling students during the preparation of their final reports and their final presentations;
- Managing posts about project events on various platforms (SHARPEN, Moodle, Facebook, regional media);
- Evaluating students' written reports (12 000 words) and presentations;
- Constant cross-cultural coordination between all partner countries (mostly online).

Finally, to the learning module we were able to determine that the learning module has fully achieved its goal: students and regional SMEs have not only been brought together, but have successfully worked together on HR tasks and developed solutions to current problems.

Summary and sustainability

At the WHZ, the newly developed HRM specialization module will be included with 10 ECTS credit points in the study and examination regulations of the undergraduate degree programs of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Public Utilities Management, Diploma of Industrial Engineering and Business Management).

This module will be integrated into the specialization HRM, so that it is primarily focused on the students of the specialization HRM. In addition, it will be integrated into the catalogue of optional modules 'Special cases and econometric methods'. If they are interested and meet the subject-specific requirements, and sufficient capacity is available, other students of the mentioned degree programs may attend this module and get it acknowledged in the form of ECTS credits. Students of several Masters programs in Business Administration/Financial Auditing and Logistics may attend individual module components and get them acknowledged. Interested bachelor and diploma students of other WHZ faculties may attend, if they meet the subject-specific requirements, and obtain a certificate after successful completion of the module. The full or partial transfer of ECTS credits is possible within the framework of recognition modules of the respective degree programs if applicable. Participation in the module requires the successful completion of a basic HRM module for all students.

Finally, I would like to sum up by taking a critical perspective and asking what can we make better? What we need is a more intense preparation, particularly of Bachelor students, for working in intercultural teams before the ISP.

The participating students need more training and experience in academic writing style in English language, in preparing and solving case studies, setting up interview guidelines, conducting and evaluating interviews for the collaboration with SMEs.

Sustainable effects of the project SHARPEN were achieved from the first day of the implementation of the project because students will improve their chances when applying for internships and jobs, and their employability. For their professional development, they will acquire in-depth HRM skills, experience in practice and project work, in transnational cooperation as well as language skills and skills in dealing with learning modules.

The analyses of HR problems and the teamwork in SMEs will help companies in different regions in their strategic and international orientation of HR work. Regional SMEs will become

more attractive for academic talents in the long term. At the same time, the exodus of young people will be counteracted, and the regional economy will permanently be strengthened in the long term.

There is the chance for involved students and academics to enhance their experience in the long run, in particular in the following areas: theory of HRM and practical implementation in companies, transnational project work and online teaching.

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