Needs

The importance of health & social services is increasing as European society grows older and unemployment and relocation across Europe increases. This growing demand for services in many Member States is creating unprecedented pressures on health & social care systems. Despite differences in political approaches and institutional frameworks, health and social services in all Member States face similar challenges in adjusting to demographic ageing, societal change, rising expectations and consumerism, changing employment and family patterns, evolving technological opportunities and funding issues. In addition to being an important source of job creation (in excess of 20 million employees), the health and social services sector has an important economic weight, as it generates around 5% of the total economic output in the EU-27.

A key part of the Social Care sector deals with vulnerable people. A recent report by the Social Protection Committee on the social dimension in the EU2020 strategy stated that greater emphasis must be spent on generating an effective and innovative way of developing the human capital of those responsible for improving the quality of life for vulnerable people throughout Europe. Education and training plays a pivotal role in developing those who work with vulnerable people and, more generally, the social services sector. In many parts of Europe, the sector has a strong emphasis on learning and assessing skills for job roles in real practice environments ("practice learning"). In some qualifications, practice learning can be almost 40% of the total learning time.

There are also on-going demands for practice learning with new qualified professionals and professionals as part of "in-service"/CPD training. There are clear logistical challenges in arranging practice opportunities where trainees are able to learn the core skills of the job and receive high quality support, supervision and assessment of their practice from suitably qualified mentors/practice assessors. Furthermore, finding sufficient numbers of such placements has been a challenge for the last 30 years. However, there are also other challenges; e.g. risks associated with work-based learning and the safety and well-being of service users in giving trainees access to their lives.

Thus, there are vocational skills mismatches and shortages around practice learning in this sector.

Meeting the needs

To address these challenges, the Digital Bridges project will develop an immersive 3D virtual environment, built on gaming architecture and driven by emotional AI, to provide a safe and readily accessible environment where Higher Education and VET students and professional social workers who deal with vulnerable people can learn by interacting with NPCs (Non-Player Characters) in a simulation of a real world service. Trainees will engage with simulations and be required to navigate their way through choices to arrive at the best resolution. Each simulation can be replayed and evaluated by the trainer/mentor and the trainee can use the same simulation as many times as required. We see this as offering a measurable, controlled environment where learners can gain a command of the basics of the job role they are training for with minimal resource requirements and zero risk to the public, thus providing a sound basis from which to progress to real work practice placement.

Priorities: Skills issues and policies are major features in the EU2020 policy vision. The 'Agenda for new skills and jobs' as well as 'Innovation Union' and 'A Digital Agenda for Europe' underline clearly the importance of skills and knowledge architecture that will be developed through this project demonstrated within simulated practice environments as situated learning. This project covers the 3 complementary fields of HE/VET education, the labour market and HE/VET policy making with technology partners to provide the simulation. The outcomes and deliverables of the project will propose innovative policy objectives and will address challenges related to professional skills, promoting competences such as digital

literacy and multi professional skills. The outputs and products generated as part of this project will also contribute and connect with European and Global qualifications policies. Needs Analysis; the SSSC, the regulatory body for social services in Scotland, commissioned a needs analysis recently on the basis of this project and found that such an environment would be extremely beneficial in education & training but no such solution existed.

The Digital Bridges project is expected to result in the development of innovative practices in the training of social and healthcare students and professionals at organisational (public/private), regional, national and European levels. It will result in positive impacts for such people through (for example): improved competences linked to professional profiles (both for social and healthcare students and teachers of such), improved levels of skills for employability, a more active participation in society, increased opportunities for professional development through the existence of the simulated practice environment and, as a by-product, improved levels of digital competence.