



# IDOLS

SUMMARY

# **Social innovation with cultural and creative professionals - executive summary**

A study into the value and collaboration within the IDOLS\* program

## Research objective and questions

Within the IDOLS\*-program, complex societal challenges were tackled in an innovative and creative way. This is often referred to as 'social innovation'. Ten consortia, consisting of on the one hand problem owners and on the other hand contractors from the cultural and creative industries, were supported for about one year to collectively tackle a societal challenge. This support consisted of financial support, coaching by an experienced social innovator, and events in which learning experiences were shared.

The study that is described in this report provides insights into how the IDOLS\* program contributed to the most important goal of the program: the expansion of work opportunities for the cultural and creative industries. In addition, the study was aimed at gaining insights into how the program and the projects that were executed within the program, contribute to continuous social innovation. Continuous social innovation is required to address complex societal challenges that cannot be solved within one project. Consequently, the impact of complex societal multi-stakeholder projects has to be seen in relation to the influence of the outcomes of the project on the formation and execution of possible follow-up projects in the future.

The research approach consisted of seventeen in-depth interviews with coaches and secretaries of all ten executed projects, the formulation of a value-framework to assess the positive impact of the ten projects, and a questionnaire which was completed by 50 respondents. The study aimed to investigate:

1. Which outcomes of the IDOLS\*program contribute to the expansion of work opportunities for the cultural and creative industries and to continuous social innovation
2. What we can learn from how consortia collaborated and how participants learned together within the IDOLS\*-projects
3. How the structure of the IDOLS\*-program contributed to the experienced produced value of the projects and to the way that projects unfolded.

## Findings

### *1a) which value did participants of the IDOLS\*-program experience?*

The subjectively experienced value that was most shared between participants was:

- The motivation and energy that was generated by participating in IDOLS\* amongst stakeholders to continue to tackle the challenge (engagement)
- That participants learned more about themselves and the role they can or want to take within social innovation (positioning)
- The expansion of the network of participants in light of future collaborations

### *1 b) what are the most important learning outcomes of participants of the IDOLS\*-program?*

The most mentioned important learning outcomes amongst participants considered learning to collaborate in a multi-stakeholder project, shaping the role of participants, the organization and management of projects of this size and type, and learning about (another) creative approach.

### *1c) To what extent have the learning goals that were set by the IDOLS\*-program been achieved by contractors and problem owners?*

The learning goals of IDOLS\* for contractors (cultural and creative professionals) consider the development of skills that can be applied in the context of social innovation and that can help to generate future income within social innovation. The learning goals of IDOLS\* for problem owners (public and private sectors) consider understanding the added value of creative professionals within social innovation and the application of strategies for being an effective client. Within both target groups a large majority (67-90%) self-assessed that they achieved these learning goals.

### *2a) In what way were roles and tasks divided and shaped within the IDOLS\*-projects?*

In many of the projects, participants established a traditional client (problem owner) – contractor relationships. This could lead to a lack of engagement of clients and a feeling of unequal collaboration with contractors, which in turn resulted in a suboptimal use of the diversity of knowledge and of an open exploration of the solution space.

Both shaping the role of coach as shaping the role of secretary were experienced as a search process. Overlap in roles and tasks sometimes led to tensions. Even though the role of coach was initially defined as being about supporting the problem owners, it ended up being shaped in a different way by all of the coaches. In particular supporting the collaboration

of the consortia, being a connector, and supporting the creative process were mentioned as being valuable elements of the role. In addition, coaches were faced with challenges around independence and acceptance of the role by some of the participants in some of the consortia.

### ***2b) What can we learn from the way that consortia collaborated in the IDOLS\*-projects? What were barriers and enablers for positive outcomes?***

Within the IDOLS\*-program it was recommended that participants would 'search openly'. This practice stresses the importance of exploring and learning together and was valued by the majority of the participants. At the same time, this occasionally caused tensions between participants when some preferred an explorative approach and others were more goal-oriented.

The large diversity of participants contributes to innovative solutions and is, according to participants, essential to grasp the complexity of the societal challenges. This diversity was not employed equally in all the projects. In addition, collaboration in a diverse multi-stakeholder project often leads to challenges with regard to different languages, different expectations about the focus of the project, and different ways of working.

### ***3) How did participants experience the influence of the structure and set up of the IDOLS\*-program on the collaboration and outcomes of the IDOLS\*-projects?***

Participants positively experienced the opportunity that the program offered to explore new collaborations with new partners. In the way that the consortia were formed this opportunity was not always used and some participants chose to work in existing, trusted partnerships that would allow a more efficient process towards concrete results.

In some of the projects, the budget and division of the budget over participants, and the planning that was made at the start of the project, led to tensions later on. For example, there turned out to be a large difference in hourly rates between different parties from the creative and cultural industries, and in the beginning of a creative process it is not always possible to exactly plan who will spend how much time in the project.

The coach role that was an essential part of the IDOLS\* program was positively experienced by the majority of the participants. Sometimes being coached was experienced as uncomfortable and in a few cases the coach inadvertently influenced the learning experiences in a negative way when they took responsibility of tasks that could have provided learning experiences for participants.

Finally, the learning events were mostly aimed at supporting participants from the cultural and creative industries and/or at supporting coaches. These learning events were experienced as positive by the majority of participants. There is potential to also include problem owners in these events and to not just learn within projects but also between projects.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Many of the findings of this study consider the optimization of learning experiences. Participants embarked on a learning journey about the shaping of roles, their own role within social innovation, collaboration in multi-stakeholder projects, and the creative process. Aspects of the IDOLS\*-program that contribute to learning are: to participate in a project with many different project members, the support of a coach, and participating in events that stimulated peer-learning. Potential for further deepening of learning experiences can be found in stimulating more diversity and collaboration within consortia, actively engaging problem owners in the projects and the learning community, and stimulating learning between projects, not just within projects. For this purpose, it is recommended to set up a learning infrastructure in addition to the coach role. A learning infrastructure consists of the methods and techniques, environment, services, technology and tools that promote to learn together, for example reflexive monitoring or a community of practice.

The researchers cannot quantitatively assess the impact of IDOLS\* or execute a cost-benefit analysis with regard to how IDOLS has contributed to work opportunities for the cultural and creative industries. An indicator for positive impact is that more than half of the responding problem owners indicate that they consider hiring the cultural and creative industries more often. Moreover, the fact that the majority of problem owners and participants from cultural and creative industries achieved the IDOLS\*-learning goals is expected to have a positive effect on work opportunities. For example, what participants have learned about themselves and their role within social innovation is expected to contribute to their positioning within future projects. Long term research will have to show what the actual effect is of the IDOLS\* program.

Even though the majority of participants indicated to have achieved the IDOLS\* learning goals, there is also a smaller proportion of participants who indicated to not have learned new skills or knowledge. From this can be concluded that the expertise levels and accompanying 'learning needs' vary between participants. To achieve an optimal learning experience for all participants, it is recommended to investigate the learning needs of participants at the start

of the project, or even while recruiting participants, so the educational element of IDOLS\* can be adjusted to these needs.

The societal impact of the projects could not be assessed. However, the learning goals in relation to collaboration and finding a role within social innovation, as well the strengthened relationships and networks within IDOLS\*, will contribute positively to future social innovation project and programs, and as a result to continuous social innovation. In addition, it was not only found that learning outcomes and new relationships are of importance, but also – and in this case particularly – the energy and motivation that was generated within the projects. This is a very valuable outcome from the perspective of continuous social innovation.

The researchers would like to express their admiration for the courage that was shown to design, fund and execute the IDOLS\* program and the social innovation projects that have been executed within the program. Although the design of IDOLS\* is unique, there is also an opportunity to learn from comparable projects and initiatives. For example, in future programs one could build on knowledge from research about transdisciplinarity, multi-stakeholder networks, system innovation and transition management. In addition to building on the academic body of knowledge, the program also offers opportunities to contribute to the development of academic knowledge about social innovation. This would enable sharing of insights with a broader audience. For this purpose, the researchers recommend to set up a research agenda alongside possible future programs that are comparable to IDOLS\*.

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\*Increasing Demand by Offering LearningS