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MODULE 4

SMART VET
Erasmus+ K210-VET Small scale

Decision-Making & Problem-Solving

Empower learners to make informed, timely, responsible decisions and solve problems systematically in mobility and professional settings.

Erasmus+ KA210-VET | SMART-VET Project

Funded by the European Union

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Enriching lives, opening minds.

Learning Outcomes

OVERALL OBJECTIVE

Decision-making is the process of selecting a course of action from among alternatives — a multifaceted skill involving logic, emotion, risk assessment, time pressure and interpersonal factors. In unfamiliar mobility settings, it also demands cultural awareness.

BY THE END, LEARNERS WILL BE ABLE TO

1. Explain why decision-making and problem-solving matter for success in mobility and professional life.
2. Distinguish rational, intuitive and collaborative decision-making, and know when to use each.
3. Apply a structured decision-making cycle under pressure or incomplete information.
4. Recognise common decision-making traps and biases, especially in high-pressure environments.
5. Use structured problem-solving tools (SWOT, 5 Whys, decision trees) to navigate real mobility challenges.

Why This Skill Matters Abroad

Decision-making becomes more complex during mobility: cultural differences, language barriers and unfamiliar institutional structures all raise the stakes.

40–50%

of VET learners report difficulties with decision-making and problem-solving (SMART-VET survey)

#1

barrier reported is fear of failure — leading to avoidance or inaction rather than a wrong choice

Top

trait host companies prioritise in trainees: initiative, autonomy and responsibility

Three Key Decision-Making Theories

1 Bounded Rationality

Herbert Simon (1957): humans aim for a satisfactory choice rather than a perfect one, given cognitive and information limits — especially relevant amid rapid mobility change.

2 Dual-Process Theory

Kahneman & Tversky: System 1 is fast, automatic and emotional; System 2 is slow, deliberate and logical. Good decisions shift between the two as context demands.

3 Prospect Theory

Kahneman & Tversky (1979): people weigh potential losses more heavily than equivalent gains — shaping risk appetite under uncertainty.

Three Types of Decision-Making

Each type has its place — an effective decision-maker knows when and how to use each.

1 Rational

A step-by-step, evidence-based process. Best for high-stakes situations like budgeting, scheduling or legal compliance.

2 Intuitive

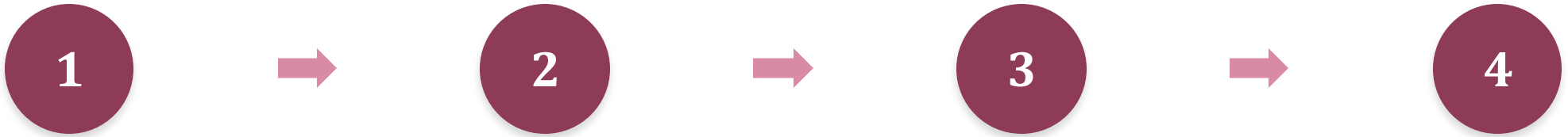
Draws on personal experience or instinct. Fast and useful in emergencies or when data is limited.

3 Collaborative

Engages team members in joint reflection and consensus. Builds ownership, innovation and diverse perspectives.

The 4-Step Decision-Making Cycle

A simple, repeatable structure for deciding under pressure, incomplete information, and unfamiliar cultural norms.



Pause

Clarify the situation, recognise emotional responses, and avoid reacting on impulse.

Decide

Weigh options and consequences, considering cultural expectations and ethical implications.

Act

Implement the choice through clear communication and appropriate professional behaviour.

Reflect

Review the outcome to identify learning points for similar situations ahead.

This cycle repeats as new situations arise

Common Decision-Making Traps

Even skilled decision-makers fall into mental shortcuts — especially under pressure or in unfamiliar situations.

1 Analysis Paralysis

Overanalysing to the point of inaction.

2 Confirmation Bias

Looking only for evidence that supports your initial belief.

3 Escalation of Commitment

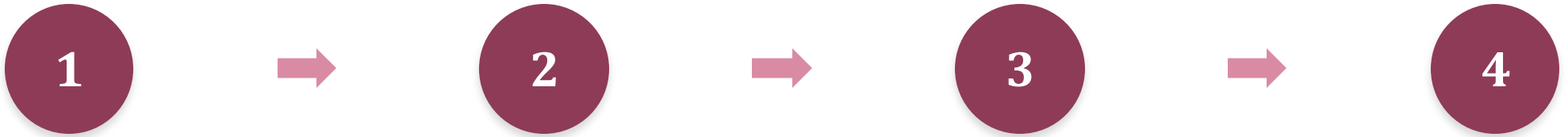
Continuing down a failed path because of prior investment.

4 Overconfidence Bias

Underestimating risks or overestimating your own competence.

The Problem-Solving Cycle

Problem-solving is not just fixing problems — it's transforming obstacles into opportunities for growth.



Identify

Clearly define the issue; avoid vague or emotionally charged language.

Analyse Root Cause

Use techniques like the 5 Whys to find causes, not just symptoms.

Generate & Evaluate

Brainstorm options freely, then weigh feasibility, risk and cultural fit.

Implement & Reflect

Act, stay flexible to adjust, and capture what the experience taught you.

5 Structured Tools for Clearer Thinking

Especially useful when emotions run high or cross-cultural dynamics obscure clear communication.

1 SWOT Analysis

Evaluate internal Strengths and Weaknesses against external Opportunities and Threats.

2 5 Whys

Dig into the root cause by repeatedly asking “why” until the foundational issue emerges.

3 Decision Trees

Map choices and their potential outcomes to visually compare different paths.

4 Pros & Cons List

Compare the trade-offs of different options in a clear, logical format.

5 Mind Mapping

Visualise complex or creative challenges by connecting related ideas, causes and effects.

Real-Life Case: Maria's Feedback Dilemma

CASE STUDY

Maria, a learner from Spain, went on a mobility placement in Germany. Her supervisor gave little feedback, and Maria felt unsure — in her culture, supervisors usually give clear praise or critique, so she began to worry she was doing something wrong.

Instead of withdrawing, Maria used a personal journal to reflect, then calmly asked for a feedback meeting. Her supervisor reassured her: she was doing well, but independence and self-evaluation were valued more than constant approval in the German work culture.

Takeaway: Cultural differences in feedback style can easily be mistaken for a problem. Self-reflection and open, respectful communication clarify expectations and reduce stress — a structured, proactive decision beats silent worry.

Practice: Scenarios & Simulations

Use these for discussion, journaling, or role-play in peer workshops.

1 Scenario: Conflicting Instructions

Two supervisors give conflicting guidance — one wants speed, the other team discussion. Whose guidance do you follow?

2 Scenario: Clashing Styles

Peers from three cultures clash on feedback and hierarchy while deadlines slip. How do you manage it?

3 Scenario: Unresponsive Mentor

You're homesick and your mentor hasn't replied. Do you escalate to your coordinator, or keep waiting?

4 Simulation: Ethical Dilemma

What would you do if a supervisor asked you to overlook a safety protocol?

5 Simulation: Time-Pressured Challenge

Respond to an urgent request without complete information.

6 Simulation: Cross-Cultural Conflict

Navigate indirect criticism from a host supervisor who avoids confrontation.

Key Takeaways

- Decision-making in mobility contexts requires balancing logic, emotion and cultural awareness — not just data.
- Rational, intuitive and collaborative decision-making all have their place; know which the situation calls for.
- The PAUSE → DECIDE → ACT → REFLECT cycle gives you a repeatable structure, even under pressure or incomplete information.
- Watch for analysis paralysis, confirmation bias, escalation of commitment and overconfidence — all more likely under stress.
- Structured tools like SWOT, the 5 Whys and decision trees turn chaos into clarity when emotions or cultural dynamics blur the picture.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Pause. Decide. Act. Reflect.

Next: Module 5 — Professional Ethics & Work Attitude, grounding every decision in honesty, integrity and respect.