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# UNIVERSALITY AND CULTURALISM IN THE MANAGEMENT OF EUROPEAN PROJECTS IN PRE- UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This study refers to a project that a high school institution has run for two years as a partner of a French town hall. Within the management of this project, there were two approach paths: universalist and cultural. The universalist approach was governed by similar interests in all countries: the best project products with the lowest costs, while the cultural approach refers to the fact that even if they are partners and must meet the administrative-financial management requirements of the institution which has won the project, the Romanian schools will use procedures specific to the management of the Romanian state institutions.

Therefore, at the level of ERASMUS+ projects, there are two types of management: project management at international level and project management at national team level, including accounting activities in each partner institution. The uniformity of these project management practices, imposed at European level, does not always take into account the national cultures. It violates unwritten cultural rules and distinct sociocultural identities are being questioned. That is why the management of these intercultural projects, ERASMUS+ projects in pre-university education, requires an uninterrupted process of cultural translation, through effective communication, results-based management, with the aim of avoiding conflicts and achieving goals.

**Keywords:** project management, ERASMUS+, universalist approach, cultural approach.

## 1. Challenges encountered in ERASMUS+ projects

In the current Romanian education system, a large part of the activities that add value to the educational act are achieved through projects funded by the European Union. During the first decade of the 2000s, there were the Comenius projects, and more recently, there are the ERASMUS + ones. International cooperation projects between schools in Europe are receiving, depending on the type of project, considerable funding. Several hundred projects are won every year by pre-university schools in Romania. The management of transnational projects raises a lot of logistical and legal problems, difficulties related to each country's administrative management, financial issues due to the risk of exchange rates, etc. These are technical issues that can be solved through clear procedures established by the project management team's experts. Looking in perspective, intercultural challenges appear to be minor in the evolution of these projects, as the influence of national traditions on management ways and individual behaviors is rather limited. We do acknowledge the existence of major cultural differences among partners, but there is the possibility of merging

practices through an integrative project culture, which establishes specific operating rules within the project. We can also talk about an appeal to the participants' emotions to create an environment of tolerance for the various national cultural practices that may arise. Cultural differences are therefore overcome by a common routine, spiritual openness and pragmatic adjustment of each participant to the project. The language barrier issue is solved by the widespread use of English.

Beyond these lectures and applications, there is a **universal approach** to the management of these projects, governed by similar interests, in all countries: the best project outcomes with the lowest costs. On many occasions, due to there not being a very clear practice at the educational units' level, the Romanian schools prefer to be a partner in the projects with European financing, instead of submitting a project managed by themselves. Hence, the tacit acceptance of the working method of the country that submitted and won the project, thus recognizing the country's management model as the most effective. However, even if they are partners and must meet the administrative-financial management requirements of the school that won the project, the Romanian schools will use procedures specific to the management of the Romanian state institutions. With regards to this practice, we can talk about a **cultural approach** (Chévrier, 1996).

This type of approach to projects with European funding implies not only the existence of technical but also symbolic problems. This refers to the fact that beyond the strictly economic management, observed in terms of efficiency, there are problems created by the profound cultural tradition of each partnering country within the project. There can be a unique practice only if the collaborators have agreed upon it. This approach is less centered on the interactions between project members from different cultures, but more on comparing cultural systems and deciphering the links that can exist between the culture and practices. However, by focusing on management modes at national level, this cultural approach shows the frequent inconsistencies between national management systems and the difficulty of working together for the members of these different cultures. Therefore, at the level of ERASMUS + projects, there are two types of management: project management at the international level and project management at the national team level, including accounting tasks for each partner school. The consolidation of these project management practices, imposed at the European level, does not always take into account the national cultures. This violates unwritten cultural rules, with distinct sociocultural identities being questioned. That is why the management of these ERASMUS + projects requires an uninterrupted process of cultural translation through effective communication, with the aim of avoiding conflicts. This so-called translation consists of referring to the context of a culture and the definition of other practices, but with the same meaning in the other cultures of the project. These are: the concepts of responsibility engagement, the signing of a contract, the duration of the relationship between the partners according to their culture.

This study refers to a project (ERASMUS+ KA2, *Des écrits aux écrans*, 2014-2016) in which a high school institution named *Petru Rareș* National College has partnered with a French town hall, during a two year period. Within this project, we noticed various cohesion factors of both teams, notably since not all partners were educational institutions. Based on this, perhaps, the existence of diverse opinions regarding communication at the level of project management. The project brought together representatives from France (one city hall, three NGO associations, law 901, two high schools), Austria (an organization), Belgium (an organization), Poland (a high school) and Romania (a high school). The performance of the teams was facilitated by transnational meetings, reciprocal visits, emails, and the *basecamp* platform.

There are several factors that can be viewed as obstacles to international cooperation: cultural practices, working language, the culture of the project partners. However, it is settled beforehand that project participants will make efforts regarding adaptation and tolerance. Intercultural adjustments are not separate from behavioral and interpersonal adjustments. However, finding a common language may be a communication problem sometimes. Thus, although within our project the working language was French, the Polish partners communicated only through English, which made the organization of conferences, artistic residences and transnational meetings more difficult. From this point of view, the language barrier has been an obstacle for the communication of information at meetings, without undermining the quality of human relations. Partner bilingualism has often been at the bottom of effective communication. The project management did not require the use of a complex French vocabulary, so most of the partners communicated clearly. What proved more difficult were the technical aspects in the project language, specifically the specialized vocabulary required in certain phases of argumentation at cross meetings.

When essential terms for expressing thought are lacking, the overall level of speech is affected, and project members give up on giving explanations or discussing details. An important role was played by the project manager's bilingualism (French-English) and the influence of the mother tongues in the project (which helped when two members of the same country were present at the meetings). The language barrier may therefore constitute a double obstacle, on the one hand, because it prevents a perfect exchange of information and, on the other hand, because it prevents the development of lasting interpersonal relationships.

## **2. ERASMUS+ and the anticipation of overcoming potential difficulties in project management - Management with a universalistic and cultural approach**

### **2.1. ERASMUS+ KA2 project argument, *Des écrits aux écrans*, "Petru Rareș" National College, Piatra-Neamț, 2014-2016**

Along with the digital revolution, our society is going through a period of unprecedented mutations. It is a world-wide cultural revolution that concerns us all and which has an important impact in all sectors of society. It raises sociological and ethical issues, interrogations underlying this ERASMUS+ project, "Reading, Writing in Europe in the context of digital Mutation". Institutions in charge of reading and writing in each partner country are particularly confronted with the same problem: the lack of public engagement to the traditional reading offer. Faced with illiteracy, the loss of meaning or marks, each institution carries unique innovation possibilities that should be able to be transferred easier after this project. If reading and writing practices are expanding, they are taking new paths that challenge the institutions represented in this project. These have to be crossings of the information flow on any support, and exchanges between partners have to build extra bridges.

In addition, digital transmission of knowledge opens new fields: working ways in learning and acquiring knowledge. If young people have to take part in the evolution of digital as Web actors, this will first be reflected through fundamental issues.

- a. What is the long-term impact of generalizing digital writing over text reporting?
- b. What impact will this have on new reading practices?
- c. What types of learning writing should we elaborate to integrate recent developments?
- d. What needs to be done to strengthen the fight against school drop-outs and illiteracy, reduce disparities and foster professional insertion?
- e. How can we anticipate these changes in cultural and educational places?

This cross-sectoral project does not require to answer all these fundamental questions, but to generate new perspectives on the issue, to bring forward different experiences and to discover new procurement tools, through formal and non-formal approaches. The project aims to work with students who are school dropouts, to create digital based products. To the extent that interactions and exchanges around common issues open up new investigative fields, this partnership proves to be meaningful.

## **2.2. How have cooperation and communication been organized between project partners and other institutions? What were the aims and frequency of the transnational meetings related to the project and who attended them?**

Cooperation and communication have been achieved by looking for meaning and coherence in a collaborative approach, as well as by looking for efficiency in terms of cooperation and communication between partners.

For the sake of rigor, the project focused on a simple and clear organizational methodology in communication and working modes, based on the program unfolding and key moments, as well as the management of the specificities arising from the actions and the progress of the objectives to be achieved.

At the same time, communication and cooperation were favored by structuring the project around 4 key moments, organized in turn around round tables (4), transnational meetings (4), preceded by the launch of the project and followed by the closure of the project (2), experimental workshops and artistic residences that have helped the participants meet the goals set. At the beginning of each project, an introductory seminar was held to define the roadmap for each project participant. In order to strengthen cooperation between partners, communication is an essential basis for the good conduct of the project, as well as for the fulfillment of commitments.

Each partner has distributed each event, continuing the activity after the event, ensuring communication with its audience, so that the information can circulate permanently. This has been done with the help of internet, radio, television and media communication tools.

The completion of the project was crowned by a written statement, an online report, a photographic boarding card for the supply of communication along the line, and a web-documentary. By developing joint programs between France, Romania and Poland, exchanges of experiences, digital art creation, successful educational projects were carried out within the partner institutions. Transnational meetings are a time for information sharing, collaborative work planning for each stage and, last but not least, a succession of events, mobility and experiences.

The languages used to communicate in this project were: French and English.

## **2.3. How is budget control and project management time guaranteed?**

### **A – The project team**

The initiators of the project formed a strong team made of, on the one hand, by selected domestic resources to meet the coordination needs and, on the other hand, by a group of people to manage the project.

Internally, the project team has been built around several axes:

- a. in the project management plan: the cultural business direction of the city, accompanied by the project manager and the norm ISO 20121;
- b. in the field of administrative management: the direction of the administrative and legal field of cultural affairs;

c. in the budget execution plan: the direction of the city's financial and accounting service;

d. in the context of the actual realization of cultural actions: the city mediator along with the heads of each department (youth, adults, digital, city).

Externally, the project team relied on three NGO associations that assured the implementation of the project.

### **B - Methodological approach**

The ISO 20121 certification process has led to the appointment of certain persons to ensure the proper conduct of the project, in compliance with these quality standards, on a methodological, organizational and financial level.

In order to be able to control the essential budgets of the project (the total amount, 320,000 euros for all partners), the initiator relied on its own financial-accounting system (Civil Net Finance). It complies with the rules of public administration and has the advantage of being multi-budget as well as multi-exercise, and proposes an adaptable accounting structure (with a regulatory part and a personalized part).

Consequently, this project can be personalized and specifically treated within this financial accounting program with an analytical management that can be done by each partner country for each action. Due to the structure of this program, it is possible to ensure the analytical budgetary follow-up of the project (tracking suppliers, contracting, etc.), by supporting modules well suited to the management of large operations. The Civil Net Finance program is *full Web* and includes both a treasury management module and financial aid instruments. Thanks to the integrated tools, the financial service provides an integrated view through ad-hoc analysis and reports. The program allows third parties (European partners) to securely consult the information regarding them in perfect confidentiality.

On the other hand, each partner in the project was required, according to the rules in force, to keep his / her own financial and accounting records and to submit the financial reports before the deadlines set by the initiator. This educates the partners in the spirit of a financial discipline that will help with the smooth running of the project.

### **2.4. What measures are anticipated to take into account project-related risks?**

As any activity involving different resources from several states, for the achievement of positive results, it is necessary to take into account the risks that may arise in the course of the project, so it is recommended to:

anticipate management difficulties, given that the people involved come from different cultures, different civilizations, different levels of development;

analyze the upstream risks of the project and determine the weak points and risk factors.

This is a proposed approach starting from the big chapters, divided into subchapters, to better discover the sensitive points we need to be careful about. This way, we can track the risk management in three major directions: human resources, quality control and adaptability to norms.

Human resource management must take note of the distribution of tasks so that they are balanced, attributed by skill levels and complexity, and last but not least, they must be of a high degree of clarity. Compliance with objectives to be achieved. Each sector is under the guidance of a person nominated from the beginning (organizational chart). He must assume the obligations arising from his function and aim at reaching the quality standard, be able to progressively achieve the objectives (short, medium and long term) and apply the phased evaluation grid.

To prevent risks, the project builds on: choosing structures and teams; solid institutions that provide sustainability for project deployment; ensuring that this deployment

is consistent with the stability of staff; guaranteeing reliability in financial management; balance sheets and ongoing evaluations; specific program; retro planning, etc.

Solving conflicts happens through words and mediation. Communication plays a key role in defusing conflicts and solving any problems that may arise. Good communication helps achieve project goals, saving resources like time and money.

### **3. Conclusions**

In recent years, an increased interest has been shown in Romania to involve pre-university education institutions in European projects, thanks to the benefits to the community and institutions involved. This exchange of information, exhilarations, and perceptions among the owners of different cultures creates links between different civilizations. The European Union allocates considerable funds to the development of such projects to strengthen cooperation and unity between member states. Even though transnational project management raises a multitude of logistical and legal issues due to major cultural differences between partners, it is possible to standardize practices with a unifying project culture defining precise operating rules within the project. We can also talk about an appeal to the participants' emotions to create a climate of tolerance for the various national cultural practices that may arise.

These projects play an important role in the interaction between the member states of the European Union, creating leverage between different cultures.

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