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INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS IN ERASMUS+ CBHE PROJECTS OUTSIDE THE EU

Key words: funding, Erasmus+, cooperation, partnership, quality, application, writing

Finland belongs to the forerunners in higher education, and the Finnish higher education system is often seen as a model by countries where higher education is less developed. In TAMK, we are eager to develop and apply new methods and environments for teaching and learning. This forms an excellent basis for transferring our knowledge and expertise in Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education (CBHE) projects to countries with less advanced education. During the Erasmus+ programme period 2014–2020, TAMK had eight CBHE projects in total, targeting countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. When the new programme period 2021–2027 started, TAMK submitted seven CBHE project applications to the first call of the programme in February 2022. This paper summarizes the lessons learnt from those projects and project applications.

Identify and tackle actual needs of the target institutions

The relevance and success of the project depends heavily on how well the needs of the target region and partner institutions have been identified. Such project applications tend to get funded which include a needs analysis of high quality with detail and evidence. The project should represent a timely response to clearly outlined challenges. One should avoid research related activities leading to production of documents with no clear implementation during the project. Tackling actual needs in a concrete manner makes everybody motivated and it is easier to carry out joint efforts by the partners smoothly and successfully.

The identified needs form the backbone of the project. In addition, it is important to consider how the project can contribute to the overarching priorities of the Erasmus+ programme. All projects should make a clear contribution to green jobs and skills, with well described links to labor market needs. The outcomes of the project should be relevant for modernization and internationalization. Furthermore, addressing diverse and underrepresented populations in higher education should be considered. One should also remember that translation of the results to local languages might be necessary.

Make your work plan clear, balanced, logical, realistic and detailed

The starting point of a good work plan is a clear definition of the problem to be solved. In other words, the project should produce outcomes which fulfil the identified real needs of the target region and partner institutions. This should be done by following a realistic and well-structured workplan with a logical sequence of core activities. Naturally, project applications with a clear and consistent work plan have better chances to get funded. Furthermore, running the funded project smoothly and successfully will become easier.

Clear consistency between objectives, method, and activities is important. Enough detail should be provided to make the scope and content of activities clear. Work packages should be clearly defined, including detailed descriptions of activities, aims, milestones and deliverables.

There are some common pitfalls to be avoided. Don't forget to demonstrate in sufficient detail that the gaps identified in the needs analysis will be filled. It should also be made evident that work already done in previous projects will not be repeated. If the project is strongly based on a certain methodology, remember to provide evidence on the suitability of the methodology to the proposed work.

Try to avoid budget overestimation. There should be no doubt about the cost-efficiency of the project. The coordinating partner should not

have a strikingly high share of the budget. Furthermore, resources should be allocated in a balanced way between the target region and Europe. Finally, subcontracting and equipment should be properly justified. When the project is running, it is important to make sure that equipment purchases are done appropriately and in a timely manner.

Get to know your partners and engage them

To avoid problems in the later stages, it is very important already in the proposal stage to get to know the partner institutions in the target countries well. If possible, it is advisable to visit them all before the proposal is submitted. This may be possible to arrange if project preparation is started early enough. The management of the institutions should be involved to assure institutional commitment, but also the staff members who will be involved in the actual work if the project is funded.

It is important to engage the partner institutions in the application writing exercise. The expertise of all partners should be demonstrated well in the application, and contributions of the partner institutions to that part of the application are absolutely necessary. The partnership should be balanced and complementary with all partners having proven expertise in the explored fields. When possible, the project should bring together diverse partners, also non-academic ones, including relevant associate partners with complementary expertise. Interaction with local organizations of the target region is advisable.

Key staff listed in the proposal should represent full range of expertise and skills needed. Small-size teams heavily depending on the availability of a certain staff member should be avoided. Partners should be assigned to tasks appropriately in the work plan, promoting good collaboration. Active participation and commitment of partners should be adequately reflected in project activities.

The coordinating partner should have a good track record on project coordination. In the worst case, poor management of the project by

the coordinator can lead to suspension of the project. Realistic, clear and effective management arrangements should be introduced. Virtual meetings are fine, but experience shows that motivation and commitment of everybody is considerably higher when working together face-to-face. What comes to decision-making, it is important to plan and clearly describe the decision-making process and conflict resolution mechanisms. If problems arise during project execution, they can rescue the project from failing badly.

Make real impact your first priority

Positive changes are expected to take place as the result of the granted project funding. Therefore, it is very important to make sure that the project is going to have real positive impacts in the target regions and partner institutions. The short- and long-term impacts should be significant but realistic and they should be clearly indicated in sufficient detail. Suitable indicators should be defined to make the impacts verifiable.

It is wise to describe in considerable detail how the results will be taken into use in the partner institutions. They should be embedded to their regular activities and practices for example by integrating them into curriculum. Impact can also take the form of enhanced capacity of the institution to carry out further development on its own in the future.

Plans for dissemination of results should also be provided in sufficient detail, possibly in a country specific manner. Target audiences should be clearly defined with appropriate channels for reaching them. Proper dissemination activities should be described and adequate resources allocated for them.

Replication potential of the results can be enhanced by including appropriate tools in the outcomes of the project. For example, one outcome could be a handbook for replication. That would make the results more easily transferable to HEIs not involved in the project and other potential users. Naturally, it is necessary to arrange open

access to the results to make replication possible. The use of Creative Commons licensing is recommended.

Realistic plans for sustained use and maintenance of the results among partner HEIs should also be made. Often the proper integration of the results to the institution's activities makes sustained use quite evident. Nevertheless, commitment to sustainability might be demonstrated in some way, for instance by the involvement of university management. Sustainability strategies can also involve outsiders, for example in the form of a transnational community of practice to be established during the project. In any case, plans should be presented also for sustainability of the results outside the partnership.

Hints from the Erasmus+ CBHE Secretariat

In addition to the lessons learnt from TAMK's projects and project applications, it is wise to take into account the advice provided by the Erasmus+ CBHE secretariat in Brussels. In their latest info day in December 2022 they told what kind of projects they are expecting (Online info session, 2022).

Most advice given by them was in line with the above presented lessons learnt. However, they emphasize a few additional things which might give a competitive advantage to a project application if tackled appropriately.

It has been observed that innovation is often not visible in the projects. Instead of recycling already explored topics, applicants are encouraged to tackle areas and topics not yet explored by Erasmus+ CBHE projects. The range of themes should be enlarged to include humanities (languages, law), governance, peace, security, human development, migration, mobility etc. It would be desirable that the projects focus on least developed countries. Emphasis should not be on well-established universities in well-established countries.

In addition, many detailed hints were given. For example, applicants were advised to notice that the milestones of the project should

always occur before deliverables, marking some important point on the path towards a deliverable. Unfortunately, it is not possible to repeat all the detailed hints here. Instead, it is advisable to have a look at the materials in the Erasmus+ CBHE website, in particular the recording of the December 9th, 2022 info session (Online info session, 2022).

Conclusion

Erasmus+ CBHE projects offer a possibility for interesting and rewarding work with skilled and open-minded people from development-oriented institutions in less developed countries outside the EU. They are complex and often quite challenging projects. Therefore, to find the ingredients for success, it is wise to study the lessons learnt from earlier projects and their preparation.

This paper includes a collection of lessons learnt for TAMK's earlier Erasmus+ CBHE projects and project applications. The author hopes that it finds its place as a support tool for running projects and project preparation work.

The key messages of this paper can be summarized as follows, repeating its subheadings:

Identify and tackle actual needs of the target institutions.

Make your work plan clear, balanced, logical, realistic and detailed.

Get to know your partners and engage them.

Make real impact your first priority.

References

Online info session: Erasmus+ programme – Capacity Building in Higher Education, December 9th, 2022. Recording. <https://webcast.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-infoday-for-capacity-building-in-higher-education-cbhe-2022-12-09>