

MANAGEMENT OF PROJECT LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The latest Support to Participation in EU Programs project sparkles growing interest in investigating management mechanism of creating efficient project leadership in higher education. The Project reveals significantly different variables in hard core sciences research topics prevailing over the social sciences topics encompassing all priorities, e.g. in HORIZON 2020 funded by €77, 03 billion: 1. Industry driven: Strategic investments in key technologies, Support to innovative companies, 2. Researchers driven: Excellent science as the foundation of modern technologies, 3. Society driven: Concerns of citizens and society/EU policy objectives, Multidisciplinary collaborations. Being exposed to hands-on experience of multiple successful project applicants and project reviewers one could observe the significance of creating skilful project leadership to cover relevant project life phases: 1. Project proposal, 2. Project team comprising, 3. Project management, 4. Project results dissemination and 5. Visibility. Project management in Serbian higher education is prime skill also helping the internalization of the universities.*

Keywords: *Project leadership skills, Educational setting, Hardcore sciences, Social sciences, Project life cycle.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since we belong to the academic community of the University of Niš we will describe its educational, research and internationalization settings. The University of Niš was founded in 1965 as a state HE institution. It is a medium-sized, mature and well developed academic community, comprising 14 faculties: Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Electronic Engineering, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Occupational Safety, Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Physical Culture, Faculty of Science and Mathematics, Faculty of Technology and Faculty of Education. The fourteenth - Faculty of Agriculture has recently been founded and it enrolled the first generation of students in the academic year 2018/2019. Most of those faculties have composite structure, i.e. various departments, divisions or majors, offering wide and diversified study and research opportunities at both undergraduate and graduate levels, including opportunities to obtain a PhD degree.

The University of Niš (UNI) presently has 24669 students at all levels of studies, 1723 teaching staff and 686 administrative and support staff.

UNI has significant experience in international programs such as Tempus, Erasmus, FP6 and FP7. Within the EM ECW program, the University of Niš entered the exchange of students and teaching staff in 2008 as a partner in the Project BASILEUS. In 2011, UNI became a consortium member of the Project EM2STEM. The University of Niš also became partner of other Erasmus Mundus programmes, such as SIGMA, ERAWEB, EUROWEB, GREEN-TECH. Currently, the University is involved in the following programs: ERASMUS+, CEEPUS and HORIZON 2020.

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One of the leading principles of the University of Niš is to become part of the European higher education area and to adjust its plans and programs against this aim, in the context of the reform of higher education system within the EU academic programs and other programs.

Uniform question in all project applications forms posed is if the partner organization has participated in a European Union granted project in the 3 years preceding any given application. This is a vital part meant to enhance the prospects of successful project application and therefore all granted projects of the higher institution are listed. It is relevant of course, whether you acted as a partner or as a coordinator of the project in previous projects. In our example one can see that the University of Nis is a respectful partner having experience in project granting and implementation both as a coordinator and a partner:

1. **Development of mechatronics skills and innovative learning methods for Industry 4.0** – Technical University of Cluj Napoca, **2019-1-RO01-KA203-063153** (strategic partnerships);
2. **DEEP: Development of the educational platform to facilitate adaptation to the new academic context of student migration** - Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine;
3. **FINLEAD: Leadership in Public Finance: Building Capacity for Reforms through Education** - Wroclaw Univ. of Science and Technology, Poland;
4. **Improving the employability prospects to the students of economy by introducing more practical work to their study program** - Univerzitet Goce Delčev-Ekonomski fakultet, Štip, Severna Makedonija;
5. **ISOLINE: Information System of Quality Assurance Support for Ukrainian Higher Education Institution** - Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine;
6. **EBETCMW: Entrepreneurship and Business Education and Training Center for Migrant Women** - Western Caspian University, WCU, Baku, Azerbaijan;
7. **VICORE: Cross-disciplinary Virtual Collaborative Research Environment to enhance research skills of Master Students and Young Researchers** - Hamburg University of Technology, Germany;
8. **SUSDev: Support to University Staff Development** - University of Sarajevo, BiH;
9. **INCEDU: Adopting European experience in electronic inclusive education for persons with disabilities in Ukrainian universities** - Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine;
10. **AISEE: Academic Internationalization for Strengthening Economic Extroversion** - Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece;
11. **HE REALITY: Higher Education Resources and Environment for Active Learning with Innovative TechnologY** – SALSIT State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria;
12. **emPOWER: EMPOWERING PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT MANAGEMENT IN MOLDOVA** - State University of Physical Education and Sport, Chisinau, Moldova;

Source: <https://www.ni.ac.rs/>

These are just first stepping stones and if you apply for a specific project program there are numerous sets of parameters and facts that are divided into roughly several categories covering relevant project life phases: 1. Project proposal, 2. Project team comprising, 3. Project management, 4. Project results dissemination and 5. Visibility.

2. PROJECT LIFE PHASES

For every \$1 billion invested in projects by companies in the United States, \$122 million was wasted due to lacking project performance, further on 57% of unsuccessful projects fail due to communication breakdown, according to Project Management Institute Research.³ These data perfectly corroborate our idea that being a teaching staff at the university does not imply your expertise in the project management. Therefore, having centers for international relations at each faculty is felt nowadays a must. The University center prepares the necessary decisions and the accompanying documentation needed for the University participation in international projects and other forms of international collaboration. It also establishes contacts with universities and other institutions on the international level. With the increasing internationalization of universities each and every faculty comprising it is expected to search for, identify, devise, prepare and implement as many projects as possible since this is one of the crucial criteria of a starting or a reaccreditation process. To make it more feasible teaching staff, among other educational duties, is usually encouraged to participate in various forms of educational workshops, seminars, webinars and upgrade their project handling skills. Needless to say, that the difference between the STEM sciences-based projects and those related to humanities is huge. Sometimes the teaching staff from humanities lacks the firm foundation of hard-core sciences and is therefore advised to cooperate tightly on project designs. The latest Support to Participation in EU Programs project sparkles growing interest in investigating management mechanism of creating efficient project leadership in higher education emphasising following trainings: Training on horizontal aspects, Training for MEI and NCPs, Training on New programs and Training for Applicants.

Since faculty teaching staff creates applications for projects trainers usually follow this agenda: 1. Project idea development, EC project life cycle, identification of call for proposals and application guide, 2. Project documents preparation and submission of proposals, 3. Planning the implementation phase of the proposal (work plan preparation, management structure, consortium, 4. Budget preparation, 5. Evaluation of proposal & contracting, 6. Developing effective partnership, Lobbying, EU structure, EU budget for 2020 and beyond.

However, we need to be foremost prepared to understand the whole process of project life cycle and particularly of each segment of each phase. A project is a temporary organisational structure set up to create a unique product or service (output) within certain constraints such as time, cost and quality. Every project starts with an idea which is provoked by a need or a problem that has been insufficiently solved or not solved at all. From idea to application is a long way to go. We must be familiar with already developed project ideas /concepts, we must find the suitable call that is within the area of our project idea, we must attend to the consortium building (assign different roles: Coordinator or Project partner), be wise about resource planning, organize project preparatory meeting “Brain-storming” with all partners, prepare the detailed project outline including draft budget calculation, read the latest EU documents related to our topic, and finally thoroughly read the latest scientific papers if we want to corroborate the need to further explore our project topic. For example, the trainers usually advise us to start with a catching idea and to further delve into it so that the evaluators will consider project idea worthy of evaluating at all, since 50% of all applications fail to reach the attention of the evaluators.

³ <https://www.lucidchart.com/blog/the-4-phases-of-the-project-management-life-cycle>

Steps for the project initiation phase may include the following:

- Creating a feasibility study to estimate if the project can offer a solution to the set problem,
- Being aware of the scope and volume of the project: How far the project will delve,
- What will the project deliver as the outcomes: Define the product or service to provide,
- Identifying project stakeholders: Make and define targets or target groups and determine their needs,
- Developing a business case: Compare the potential costs and benefits for the project,
- Project objectives (one general and 3-5 specific) should be clear, realistic, measurable and achievable,
- Activities should be credible,
- Institutions should have sufficient capacity (human resources, financial resources, infrastructure, etc.),
- Activity and budget alignment are necessary.

During project development phase partners consolidate the idea into a concrete Project proposal, by defining the strategic and operational details as well as the responsibilities among partners. At the end of this stage the application form is submitted to the programme. This phase implies (Hartman, 2008):

- Organizing the responsibilities and accountabilities in the partnership and agreeing on the role of lead partner,
- Developing the project intervention logic; i.e., Project objectives, results and outputs,
- Working in detail on the project proposal, its justification and expected contribution to the programme strategy,
- Preparing the project budget,
- Keeping regular contact with the programme to get support for the development of the project and the application,
- Submitting the application form to the programme.

Contracting and start of the project implementation implies that at this stage the programme has taken a decision on the funding of the project, thus the contractual agreements are signed and the project can officially start off and what follows is:

- Signing subsidy contract with programme authorities,
- Finalizing the project partnership agreement and having it signed by all partners,
- Setting up the project coordination and decision-making structures, milestones and project meetings,
- Planning tasks and partner responsibilities in detail for the first part of the implementation period.

During Project implementation phase the project partners carry out the work planned to produce the desired outputs. Regular administration, management, monitoring and reporting activities take place, along with communication and promotion tasks. Changes to the plan are managed by exception in agreement with the partners and the programme. This phase implies following activities (Mengel, 2008):

- Carrying out project activities and achieving objectives,
- Carrying out quality control to produce the best possible outputs,
- Setting up smooth monitoring and reporting procedures and reporting to the programme as required,

- Managing risks and project modifications in agreement with the partners and the programme,
- Managing the partnership,
- Communicating and promoting project work and achievements,
- Building up a network of relevant contacts and initiating the uptake and using of project knowledge and outputs after closure.

At Project closure stage the project content activities should be completed and all outputs delivered. The partnership takes care of the final administrative provisions before the funding is over. The project and the programme reflect together on the results and lessons learned. At this phase following is implied:

- Finalizing the rules for the use of results after the end of the project with all involved parties,
- Ensuring all partners are aware of what is expected by the end date of the project, also in terms of audit and responsibilities after the end of the project,
- Drafting the final report and submitting it to the programme,
- Developing follow-up activities, if relevant.⁴

3. CONCLUSION

As companies (higher education institutions are increasingly been considered as companies) strive to deliver complex projects in hyper-competitive environments, the demand for skilled project managers is higher than ever before. Our management bodies at universities prove out the Project Management Institute estimates that by 2027, the number of project management roles will increase by 33 percent. We as teaching staff at universities face this challenge of accepting the role of project creators nowadays. Research also shows that demand is highest for practitioners with the necessary mix of competencies—a combination of technical and leadership skills plus business acumen. Thus, it seems that we have to perfect not only our expertise knowledge but also project life cycle knowledge in order to survive in the arena of highly competent project writers. From the perspective of the IPA CBC Bulgaria - Serbia program and Erasmus+ program researchers we could state that universities demands are huge, but our knowledge must accommodate different project lines and programs requiring constant upgrading and brushing up of our project management skills such as effective communication, negotiations, scheduling and time management, leadership, technical expertise, risk management, and last but not the least in importance, critical thinking and problem solving.

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⁴ Some ideas and materials of projects life cycle presented at the workshop within Support to Participation in EU Programs project held at the University of Nis, on 28th of January, 2020

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