Public sector renewal through ICT, a life-long learning approach

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Abstract. *The EEA Grants aim to strengthen relations between donor and recipient countries through the exchange of experience and by boosting the internationalization of the education sector. Inter-institutional cooperation projects are meant to support innovation and improvement of teaching in higher education, to contribute to the modernization of universities and ensure a closer relationship between educational offer and labor market. Inter-institutional projects can be proposed regarding any field of study. The ideas presented are related to our cooperation project which consists in strengthening the institutional cooperation in higher education between Romania and Norway and thus, establishing structured, intensive and long-term cooperation, especially regarding curriculum development, the development of additional course offerings for the Romanian students and research the partner from Norway.*

Keywords: EEA grants, ICT, E-government.

Introduction

The EEA Grants and Norway Grants represent the contribution of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway to reducing economic and social disparities and to strengthening bilateral relations with 16 EU countries in Central and Southern Europe. The Grants contribute to promoting social and economic cohesion in the European Economic Area (EEA). The funding is targeted at areas where there are demonstrable needs in the beneficiary states, and that are in line with wider European shared interests and goals.

Through the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway are partners in the internal market with the 28 EU member states. In that sense, the three states are interested in making a difference, sharing common values and responsibility with other European countries to promote equality of opportunity, tolerance, security, environmental sustainability and a decent standard of living for all (www.eeagrants.org).

To enhance cooperation and knowledge exchange, partnerships between organizations in the donor and beneficiary countries are widely encouraged for mutual benefit and strengthening of the program and project's quality. Funds are set aside in all beneficiary countries to support networking and foster project partnerships on initiatives of mutual interest.

Inter institutional cooperation project. Romanian view.

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Thus, inter-institutional cooperation can address the issue of developing a common curriculum, by creating integrated programs, covering a complete cycle of study (bachelor, master or doctoral level), concluded with a joint diploma or a diploma recognized mutually; study programs and modules for continuous training; or teaching modules in fields with a strong inter-disciplinary component.

Modernization projects imply actions to increase attractiveness of higher education institutions and to make them more responsive to the needs of labor market, citizens and society in general.

Modernization of higher education is necessary in curriculum (the Bologna process), financing and governance, thus helping higher education institutions face the challenges of globalization and contribute in a more effective way to professional training and reconversion of European active population.

Cooperation within these projects can include:
- Elaborating lifelong learning strategies and reinforcing the link between higher education on one side and vocational training (VET) on the other

side, thus helping HEIs become "continuous education centers" or "open education centers" in their region.

- Facilitating access of persons coming from socio-economically disadvantaged fields, who have received non-formal or informal education or who possess alternative qualifications, i.e. obtained by learning through accumulating practical experience.
- Ensuring transparence of mission and performance of HEIs, increasing quality, improving governance or diversifying funding.

Projects that focus on reinforcing the link between the educational offer and the demands of the labor market can bring together HEIs, enterprises, professional organizations, Chambers of Commerce, social partners or local/regional organizations.

Structured partnerships with the business community (including SMEs) can increase the relevance, quality and attractiveness of education and education and training programs: an accelerated transfer of knowledge between HEIs and enterprises and the other way around, placements of students, staff and researchers in enterprises and integration of enterprises staff in universities can bring benefits to all parties involved and increase the chances of graduates and researchers, by adding to their scientific expertise entrepreneurial knowledge.

Some remarks from the application, Case study: SNSPA – National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

At European level, it is underlined the central role of higher education institutions, their staff and students as partners in the Bologna Process. In that sense, the EEA Grants aim to strengthen relations between donor and recipient countries through the exchange of experience and by boosting the internationalization of the education sector. The project aims related to this cooperation project consists in strengthening the institutional cooperation in higher education between Romania and Norway and thus, establishing structured, intensive and long-term cooperation, especially regarding curriculum development, the development of additional course offerings for the Romanian students and research the partner from Norway.

In that sense, our proposal for a cooperation project aims to strengthen the competence of the partners involved within the field of electronic government, preparing joint material for e-government instruction, but also to create a platform for future scientific collaboration. In this regard, the Project's activities – including elaboration and delivery of online courses for students of Government studies (in bachelor and master level) support the Romanian's government interest in developing its Digital Agenda for 2020.

Additionally, having the projects' activities open without any discrimination to Roma students and also strengthen, during the online modules of learning, the need for an inclusive, open society, enhances the overall goals laid in the European Commission's Communication "An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020" and the European Council's conclusions of 19 May 2011 on the EU Framework for "National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020".

Another goal is to give students the key qualifications that are important in an international labor market defined by globalization and internationalization. This includes: intercultural skills, knowledge of European and international connections, an understanding for other cultures and ways of working, expertise in and knowledge of foreign languages and the expansion of each individual's horizons.

The learning outcomes can be defined as: personal fulfillment, international competence, academic fulfillment in terms of progression, employment, language competence, for students; for staff: career advancement, language competence, collaborative research, curriculum development; for the universities involved: international profile, quality enhancement.

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Following that idea, the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education organized a contact seminar on 3-4 February 2014 in Oslo. The aim of the seminar was to establish a meeting arena and facilitate contacts among institutions of higher education in beneficiary countries (BC) and donor countries (DC). That was the place where the three partners began to draw up the idea of a cooperation project having in mind strengthening the institutional cooperation in higher education between Romania and Norway and thus, establishing structured, intensive and long-term cooperation, especially regarding curriculum development, the development of additional course offerings for the Romanian students and research projects with partner universities from Norway.

EU leads the way to innovative application of ICT to sustainable development. EU's growth strategy for the coming decade, involves an innovative use of technology to challenges of economic growth, employment, education, social inclusion and climate/energy. Expanding the reach, EU countries are looking towards ICT as the key enabling technology to underpin future development in the region.

At European level, building on the existing strength of high levels of human capital and infrastructure, the transformative role of ICT has been recognized and adopted to further streamline e-government services. Notwithstanding, differences remain between regions and within them. In 2012 World Top 25 on E-government

development (www.unpan3.un.org) – Norway was placed on the 8th position with an index of 0, 8593, comparing to 2010 when it was placed on the 6th position, with a rank change -2 and Romania was placed on the 62nd position with an index of 0, 606 comparing to 2010 when it was placed on the 47th position with a rank change -15.

Also, according to EU data on E-government in Romania (2012), Romania's level of maturity for online services is significantly low: in education, only 34% of Romanian educational services are online, whereas in EU27+ the percentage is 72% (European Commission, Digital Agenda for Europe 2020). Looking at the distribution of skills between high, medium and low shows that while Romania has a rate of low computer skilled (14%) similar so that of the EU average (16%), rates of medium (13%) and, especially, high skilled (8%) are significantly lower (-12 p.p. and -18 p.p., respectively).

Students in Romania are average users of their own mobile phone but there is little use of their own laptop in school. At other grades high use of their own mobile phone for learning in class places Romania in the upper half of countries in this respect. Not surprisingly, students report using interactive whiteboards far less frequently than in other countries. Concerning students' ICT based activities during lessons, Romania is among the middle ranking countries as measured by frequency of use at grades 8 and 11 vocational, but ninth at grade 11 general. These findings support the overall objective of the project of preparing online modules for learning and thus develop e-learning practices in higher education.

Non-discriminatory education is also one of the key goals of the current Romanian strategies aimed at 2020. In this regard, the project is in line with the Romanian Strategy for the inclusion of the Romanian citizens belonging to Roma minority (2012-2020) and is based on the guidelines regarding Roma inclusion for the period 2011-2020 and the European legislation into force (the European Commission's Communication "An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020" and the European Council's conclusions of 19 May 2011 on the EU Framework for "National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020").

In the European Commission's report on E-government in Romania (2012), 59% of the Romanian citizens are said to prefer the face-to-face interaction, without offering any concrete reasons for their preference. That is one of the causes of low ICT assisted delivery process in Romania. As the Romanian partners are currently one of the main providers for education on government studies in Romania, the need for developing ICT friendly behavior is essential. In this regard, the project provides an innovative, inexpensive on long term solution.

These are some current issues that will be discussed and used as content of the online modules for learning:

- Benchmarking of E-Government, how to move from measuring provision to measuring adoption?
- What are efficient services from a citizen perspective?

- The importance of accessibility. Impairments come with age. Non-users due to accessibility problems are expensive, since they need to be handled manually.
- Electronic means to achieve government transparency and thereby prevent corruption.
- Citizen involvement to develop better policy decisions (e.g., within spatial planning).

As the project involves different partners a collaboration between institutions will be created, not only to meet the objectives of the present project, but also for the implementation of the future ones.

The activities proposed gather the project team members, academia and students, ensuring a reach of all levels of the higher education institutions involved.

Developing a joint curricula for the lectures on e-government helps/supports the exchange of good practices and knowledge between participants (as the research in e-government field is still limited and lacks presence in the curricula of public administration programs, it gives/ensures innovation in the field).

The ICT development brings new pressures to the Public Administration and Public Administration programs in higher education institutions. The lack of e-government courses gives an open and valid niche for which the project offers a solution. The innovation comes as the P.A. programs of the consortium partners will have the opportunity to learn from the Norwegian case.

Alternative teaching methods will be used and by this both countries will benefit, as informal teaching methods have made a distinguish difference in higher education programs all over the world.

The cooperation proposal addresses the need for increased knowledge and awareness in the field of E-government. This will be done by adapting and transferring innovative approaches already existing in Norway in this field. Providing online modules of training, thus making use of the existing but underused ICT technology the Romanian partners possess is possible to see as an innovative way of delivering education.

At the same time the cooperation project increases transnational cooperation and additionally educational and awareness-raising campaigns increase the general and professional public understanding of ICT.

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Concluding remarks

Strengthening bilateral relations was and still is a primary objective of the EEA and Norway Grants. Strengthening ties between European countries brings mutual benefits for institutions and organizations in both the donor and beneficiary countries.

In what concerns Romania, the EEA and Norway Grants have created a platform for cooperation and contact between Norwegian and Romanian actors. They have stimulated project cooperation in both the private and the public sector, the nature of this cooperation being different, from building new premises and launching new IT equipment, to the exchange of knowledge and experience, and awareness-raising.

In the same time, the Grants have given the Norwegian authorities a broader network of contacts in Romania and helped to strengthen Norway's reputation through the concrete results achieved. Through the NGO Funds, Norway has become the largest external source of funding to civil society in Romania, and this fact has also attracted attention outside the sector.

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