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Deepening Cooperation in the Black Sea Region: IBSU Project Experience

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Abstract

The article shares the experience of two-year project within Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme. Five Universities from four Black Sea region countries were involved into the project. Based on conducted surveys, statistical analysis of the results are done. Huge potential of such a projects is underlined.

Keywords: project, experience, Black Sea region, university cooperation.

Introduction

In today's unstable world when conflicts spread from region to region, it is very important to have human contacts to break through distrust and to keep peace and prosperity inside the country and in the region. Higher education institutions are among the key players in providing these basic values. Education should help students to acquire cosmopolitan perspectives and values needed to attain equality and social justice for people around the world. Students also acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to function effectively within their cultural communities, nation states, regions, and the global community [1].

For emerging and developing countries, the EU expertise has been a beneficial source for building platform for people-to-people communication and dialog. The EU programs in higher education such as Tempus, Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme, etc., are important priority for cooperation activities with the neighbouring countries and the countries within its wider vicinity. The programs support modernisation of higher education, as well as they promote university cooperation, sustainable university partnerships, and enhance mutual understanding between the academic worlds of the European Union and the Partner Countries [2].

Georgia shows one of the highest results of higher institutions involvement in the EU programs. Particular, 49% of Georgian universities have been involved in Tempus projects [3].

Some of the European projects are focused on the Black Sea region cooperation. One of successful example is "University collaboration network at the Black Sea – UNIVER.SEA-NET" project, in the framework of Joint Operational Programme "BLACK SEA BASIN 2007-2013".

To evaluate the results of activity within the project, three structured questionnaire surveys were conducted. The surveys' results have been encoded in the SPSS program.

Project contents and objectives

Five Universities from four Black Sea region countries were involved into the project. Particularly, beneficiary of the project was Andrei Saguna University of Constanta (Constanta, Romania) and the following universities – International Black Sea University (Tbilisi, Georgia), Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Moldova (Kishinev,

Republic of Moldova), Istanbul Aydin University (Istanbul, Turkey) and Karabük University (Karabük, Turkey) – participated as partners.

The duration of the project was 24 months starting from March, 2013.

The overall objective of the project was to promote exchange of educational values and experiences between universities in partner countries through joint educational program and network. The project aimed on creation of virtual community within which the universities would exchange good practices, publications, and courses. These activities created natural framework for a dialog between students and academic staffs of different countries with different culture and religion.

Evaluation of the project main activities

These aims were successfully achieved through project activities. Specifically, in the course of the project two workshops were held. The first workshop was held in Romania (in Constanta) on September 12-14 of 2013 and the second was held in Turkey (Karabük) on October 24-26 of 2013. Students and lecturers met and discussed the ways to promote common educational values and to capitalize regional identities (<http://univer-sea.net/online-library.html>). The participants focused attention of academic community and public on profound and long-lasting historical and cultural connections, which were established in the Black Sea region throughout the centuries. They argued the urgent need of creation of foundation of common cultural environment in the region. The workshops contributed to the creation of the background for stronger social and cultural relations among communities, to the promotion of development of educational network among institutions in order to support social and economic development of region countries.

As workshops result, brochure “*White paper of good practices within the common educational programs*” was written and published. The book describes the existing educational system in the partner countries – Romania, Turkey, Moldova, and Georgia, and shares good practices in partner countries [4].

The next project activity was aimed on widening the project horizon by involving new partners. The International Conference in Istanbul on October 9-11 of 2014 demonstrated strong desire of academic community of partner countries to dialog in order to achieve mutual understanding and respect for cultural and religion diversity among neighbors. Georgian delegation included official representative of 13 Georgian universities located in Tbilisi and Georgian regions (particular, Batumi, Telavi, Gori, Zugdidi). Collaboration Protocols were signed by the universities.

One of the most important goal of the project was to develop common educational programs and courses for common cultural and educational values promotion. In November - December of 2014 online classes were delivered. Nine lectures from project partner universities delivered lectures for four modules:

Module 1: Multiculturalism & Identity (Karabük University, Turkey)

Module 2: Intercultural Communication (Moldova University)

Module 3: Conflict resolution (Andrei Saguna University, Romania & IBSU, Georgia)

Module 4: Social Entrepreneurship (Istanbul Aydin University).

Urgent topics (such as “Intercultural Communication”, “International Conflicts and Conflict Resolution”, “Social Entrepreneurship”, “Democracy and Democratization”, “Multiculturalism”, etc.) and interesting contents attracted students and make the courses very popular among the students (<http://univer-sea.net/online-library/courses.html>). 104 students from 8 Georgia universities were registered for online course modules, 22 of them wrote Final project papers and were awarded with Certificate of Completion. 18 students received Certificate of Appreciation in five different nominations. The top five project authors from International Black Sea University, I. Gogebashvili Telavi State University, Gori State Teaching University, Guram Tavartkiladze Teaching University, and Shota Meskhia State Teaching University of Zugdidi were selected to undertake one-month internship at Karabük University and Aydin University in Turkey.

At the end of the online course, the feedback form was sent through e-mail to 203 students involved in the project. Among them 150 students finished the course and 117 students filled-in the feedback form, which means that response rate was 78 percent that is quite sufficient. The results of the survey are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' satisfaction regarding the online activity on the UNIVER-SEA.NET platform

Criteria	Number of respondents	Maximum Points	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Mode	Number of students who evaluated with	
						Maximum points	Minimum points
Rate of the online courses	117	10	8.89	1.31	10	46	0
Rate of the way in which the courses were developed	117	5	4.31	0.71	4	51	0
Rate of the quality of the lecturers' performance	117	5	4.31	0.77	5	54	1

Thus, evaluation of results shows that great majority of participants were satisfied with online course module organized by the project on the UNIVER-SEA.NET platform, mostly with the quality of the online courses. The result showed that students' satisfaction rates are almost close to the expected values.

21 students, participants of the Internship were asked separately to rate different activities, on a scale from 1 to 4, where 4 represents the highest level of satisfaction and 1 the lowest, depending on their perception of the activity. The response rate was 100 %. The results of the survey are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' satisfaction regarding internship on the UNIVER-SEA.NET platform

Criteria	Number of respondents	Maximum Points	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Mode	Number of students who evaluated with	
						Maximum points	Minimum points
Rate of the information provided prior to the Internship programme	21	4	3.9	0.6	4	19	0
Rate of the documentation provided prior to the Internship programme	21	4	3.95	0.22	4	20	0
Rate of the transfer to the meeting places	21	4	3.95	0.22	4	20	0
Rate of the content of programme	21	4	3.86	0.36	4	18	0
Rate of the logistic preparation and organization of programme	21	4	3.95	0.22	4	20	0

Rate of the communication between the coordinator of the project and the students	21	4	3.8	0.4	4	17	0
Rate of the quality and usefulness of presentations and other materials provided during the lectures	21	4	3.95	0.22	4	20	0
Rate of the usefulness of the social events and trips.	21	4	4	0	4	21	0
Rate of the duration and respecting of the timetable in the programme	21	4	3.8	0.4	4	17	0
Rate of the quality of the catering services	21	4	3.7	0.46	4	15	0
Rate of the hotel or dormitory quality	21	4	3.86	0.49	4	19	0
Rate of the communication between the students and the project team	21	4	3.71	0.56	4	16	0
Rate of the enrollment of the participants in activities and discussion	21	4	3.95	0.22	4	20	0
Rate of the communication and interaction between students of different countries	21	4	3.8	0.6	4	19	0

Thus, evaluation of results shows that great majority of the internship participants are satisfied with overall quality of the program and, in particular, with organizational aspects, communication between organizers and participants, materials provided and the activities offered in the frame of the internship.

In March of 2015, the Final Conference of the project took place in Constanta, Romania, under the organization of the „Andrei Şaguna” University. Conference participants summarized the importance and benefits of the project. The feedback form was sent to the participants through e-mail and was filled-in by 60 of participants out of total 91, which means that response rate was 66 percent that is acceptable. The results of the survey are shown in Table 3.

Evaluation was conducted using the scheme:

- Very Good/Very Important - 5;
- Good/Important - 4;
- Medium/More or Less Important – 3;
- Bad/Less Important – 2;
- Very Bad/Not Important – 1.

Table 3: Participants' opinion regarding the Istanbul International Conference

Criteria	Number of respondents	Maximum Points	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Mode	Number of students who evaluated with	
						Maximum points	Minimum points
The quality of the conference	60	5	4.58	0.62	5	39	0
The level of importance of the discussed topics	60	5	4.4	0.64	5	29	0

Thus, evaluation of results shows that great majority of participants were highly impressed with the Istanbul International Conference organized within the project, mostly with the quality of the conference. The result showed that participants' satisfaction rates are very close to the expected values.

The project results

For Georgian universities Black Sea network can scarcely be overestimated. The positive role of the project can be summarized as follows. "University collaboration network at the Black Sea – UNIVER-SEA.NET" project

- supports the dissemination of common European values that are especially important for partner countries and for Georgia, in particular,
- encourages friendship among the cultures and establishment of cultural links among participating countries,
- promotes a dialogue between the education stakeholders through establishment of strong network and partnership among the participating institutions,
- intensifies accumulation process of information and knowledge in education field through sharing the best practice,
- encourages staff and student mobility,
- increases the opportunities of capacity building and development at student as well as staff level,
- helps to accumulate international project management know-how and to get involvement in EU projects,
- improves multicultural and communication skills of the project teams,
- provides the IBSU team and staff with a broader vision of the educational situation in EU countries and offers invaluable expertise in the ability to compare EU and Georgian present and future education programs,
- increases recognition and credibility of each partner and particular, IBSU at international level.

Conclusion

The project "University collaboration network at the Black Sea – UNIVER-SEA.NET" reveals an example of a successful story and a source of inspiration of further expanding of international network and future cooperation. During two years students and academicians of five universities from four countries intensively worked together. We realized that the existed differences in religion, culture, traditions are not barriers for mutual understanding and respect. The project built platform for future communication and cooperation not only among partner universities but all universities involved into the project. We do recognize huge potential of such activity.

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