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Management of international projects of informal education

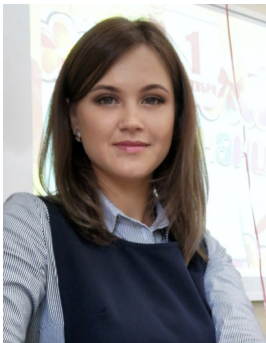
Abstract. The authors propose to consider the peculiarities of management of international informal projects in the format of benchmarking European educational practices. Special attention is paid to the review of objective difficulties and psychological risks that may affect the project goals and results.

Keywords: informal education, benchmarking, international project management, the desynchrony of professional development.



Irina Nurgatina

Our world has changed a lot and continues to change. Formal or ‘vertical’ education, which one receives through the stages of the public education system in any country of the world, no longer meets the modern demands of life in a changed world order. Lifelong learning is therefore seen as a necessary and increasingly important element of modern education systems. And the key aspect to improving the quality of education, especially in postgraduate education and professional development, is informal education.



Ekaterina Pavlukhina

According to the International Standard Classification of Education, adopted at the 36th session of UNESCO’s General Conference in November 2011, informal education is a non-institutionalised, unstructured education, which may include learning activities that occur in the family, workplace, local community and daily life, and its focus is determined by the individual, the family or the community [2]. That is to say, informal education is an out-of-form education, an individual’s cognitive activity that accompanies his or her daily life and is not of a

purposive nature, the variety of which is reflected in all aspects of interpersonal communication and in processes of active individual or group social interaction [1].

The key characteristic of informal education is that it is aimed “inwards”, inside the person, his or her own meaning of life, professional training and personal development, a person who has not lost interest in learning about his or her inner world, who is also capable of critical thinking, deep reflection and a constant search for the meaning of his or her own life events [5].

In European postgraduate education practice and professional development, informal education is increasingly recognised and applied. The Institute for Intelligent Integration /III Institut für intellektuelle Integration [www.rbs-ife.at./](http://www.rbs-ife.at/) actively uses and promotes informal education as the main format for implementing professional development programmes as appropriate and as fully meeting the objectives of “lifelong and life-long learning” in post-graduate adult education, and relevant to the sustainable development principles of the world’s best regions [4].

A special place in the activities of the Institute for Intellectual Integration in the context of solving life and professional tasks of an individual is occupied by international information projects in the format of benchmarking of European educational practices, organised for teachers of general and higher education in Russia and the CIS countries. By benchmarking we mean the process of identifying, learning and adapting the best practices and experiences of other organisations to improve the performance of one’s own organisation [6].

The management of an international informal education project in a benchmarking-practice format involves organising a large number of meetings with European education specialists in a relatively short period of 1-2 weeks of project participants coming to Europe. In this way, project participants find themselves in a situation of formal/informal communication with foreign colleagues, immersing themselves in the real conditions of their work “in the workplace”, which enables an in-depth assessment of the professional experience and situation as a whole, their critical analysis, identification of their own and others’ capabilities, and also sets a reflection on their own activities and high motivation in setting new professional goals on the way to further self-development.

An analysis of the Institute for Intellectual Integrations experience in organising and managing international informal benchmarking pro-

jects between 2016 and 2020 revealed their high efficiency and promise. However, the authors also highlighted various challenges/risks that executives and managers/administrators of this type of projects may face.

The objective difficulties of managing an international informal education project include the following:

- Identification of relevant project topics in line with the European Educational Development Strategies 2030 and the target group of possible project participants interested in these topics. This is particularly difficult at the forward-looking annual planning stage of the institute's activities.

- Choosing of the project team, involving the selection of a project supervisor and project administrators/managers, selection of experts with unique experience in the field. The process of interacting with experts and educational organisations before concluding concrete agreements is particularly costly in terms of time and administrative resources.

- The time frame for project preparation and implementation. Thus, project preparation to implementation can take from 4 months to half a year, which is not usual for Russian and CIS participants and is difficult for them, especially from an organisational and financial point of view.;

- Consideration of the differences in socio-economic, legal, socio-political, socio-cultural, demographic, ethno-religious norms in the countries of the participants and the countries of the project organisers. For example, analysing the situation of teacher-student interaction may be complicated by differences in the legal norms governing this kind of relationship in different countries. Etc.

The authors want to pay special attention to the psychological aspects of international informal project management, which represent risks that can positively or negatively affect project objectives and results and to which project organisers need to pay special attention.

First of all, as such aspect can be highlighted the level of preparedness of project participants for foreign internships, as well as possible different psychological manifestations of cultural shock when getting into another cultural, linguistic, national, architectural, aesthetic environment, related to the presence/absence of foreign travel experience of participants and their level of psychological health.

Secondly, project participants face certain difficulties in intercultural communication and cooperation with European counterparts. It is particularly difficult for participants to overcome the language barrier, even if they are proficient in a foreign language. In addition, building

partnerships with foreign colleagues also requires knowledge of certain ethical norms and rules of work in international professional teams.

Thirdly, during the course of the project, there may be difficulties in the group interaction of the project participants due to both group dynamics processes and the individual characteristics of the participants, as well as difficulties in adapting to the new living conditions (e.g. domestic living conditions, organising shared accommodation, the need to adapt to using other foods, etc.).

A particular risk may be the psychological acceptance/disapproval by participants of the basic principles of informal education and benchmarking technology, namely: readiness to “merging with complication” [5] and self-development; readiness to learn in any situation, not only specially organised, but also in any situation of informal communication and interaction with experts and colleagues; objective evaluation of received experience without preconceptions and negative criticism to determine possibilities for its use in their own activities; readiness for reflection and self-reflection, the ability of teachers to step out of their usual formats and stereotypes of perceptions of education systems, etc.

The latter risk may be related to the dyssynchrony of the professional development of project participants, which manifests itself as a mismatch and imbalance of personal and activity qualities of a professional and may manifest itself at the motivational, socio-behavioural and other levels [3].

The presented analysis of the Institute for Intellectual Integrations experience in organising and managing international informal benchmarking projects shows that all the above aspects should be taken into account in the process of organising and conducting an international project. However, it is the psychological factors that have a decisive influence on the result of an information project, each of which needs to be studied more thoroughly.

Finally, the authors have to mention another risk that the whole world faces in 2020 is the occurrence of force majeure. For example, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many academic mobility projects around the world were cancelled, including those of the Institute for Intellectual Integrations. The projects were forced to move to another format - digital - and many, both organisers and participants, were unprepared for this form of professional development. In this context, even an unusual trend emerged – the geographical importance of the internship location.

The epidemiological situation around the world is still complex. It is impossible to predict how and when this situation will be resolved. However, the authors hope that the ability of educators around the world to break out of familiar formats and stereotypes of perception of education systems will allow them to find alternative forms and technologies of inherently informal education that are relevant to the modern demands of life in a changed world order.

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