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EFFECTS OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND MOBILITY ON EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (SCHOOLS) AND PARTICIPANTS

Education is a field within the competence of each EU member state. Despite the differences in the national education systems, most countries face similar challenges. Therefore, the countries cooperate, and exchange good practices and solutions which they tailor to their own conditions (Improving Competences for the 21st Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools, 2008). The European Union plays an important part in the process since its guidelines, recommendations, and foremost its financial instruments facilitate exchange and cooperation among countries. One of the most important documents in the field for the common European area is the Europe 2020 strategy, which puts education in its centre. Prevention of early leaving of education among you and higher education attainment are listed among the main goals of this strategic document.

The strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education of training adopted in May 2009 emphasises that, besides the development of individuals, cooperation in this field should also ensure wellbeing, underpinned by employability, democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue (ET 2020, 2009).

Education should provide all individuals, regardless of their background, with opportunities to acquire, strengthen or preserve skills and knowledge relevant for their learning, work or active role in the society (Europe 2020, a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, 2010). An indispensable element of this important mission is the cooperation of various players in the local, regional and broader environment. In this case the “think globally – act locally” principle is especially relevant. Opening towards the domestic environment and the nurturing of its needs and specifics on one hand, as well as opening towards the world when implementing joint projects on the other, is a path, which could potentially lead to the desired change. Sectorial or inter-sectorial partnerships within a single or several levels of education constitute opportunities for joint responsibility for the development and provision of skills needed by individuals. At the same time this supports innovation in a sustainable manner (Rethinking Education: Investment in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, 2011).

For many years, the Lifelong Learning Programme (including its predecessors) has been one of the essential instruments for ensuring partnerships, exchange and international cooperation. Through its mechanisms the programme made a significant contribution to the strengthening of innovation, social partnership and cooperation within the European education area.

The programme promotes the introduction of the European dimension in education as well as development of competences and skills for active participation in a knowledge-based society. One of the main programme objectives is to support youth’s acquisition of basic knowledge and skills as well as competences for life, i.e. those which are required for their personal development, future employment and active European citizenship (Decision No. 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and Council, 2006). It is implemented through mobility projects and cooperation of various stakeholders in the education area.

As a member of the European area, Slovenia is committed to implementing common European guidelines, while it uses its own instrument to support their implementation in practice. The field of education and training is an important element of each national development strategy. The main priorities of the draft version of the most recent strategy up to 2020 also include knowledge and an inclusive society. Improving cooperation and knowledge flow among different stakeholders and the provision of conditions for local partnerships are one of the priority activities for the development of our country (Strategija razvoja Slovenije (osnutek), 2013).

Provision of an environment for lifelong learning, cooperation between education institutions and their environment, and the nurturing of the abilities for a successful life in the society were the objectives of Slovenian education (Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji 2011, 2011)

The skills which individuals will require in a knowledge-based society require inter-curricular links, efforts for the development of key competences, esp. creativity and entrepreneurship, intercultural understanding and operation. These are mostly skills, which the individuals will be able to use in practice, and different life and work situations.

As the main carriers of these changes, teachers will not be able to fulfil this task on their own. It is essential that the entire school team commits to the attainment of the set objectives, and that each institution further connects with other institutions in their narrower and broader (including international) environment (CMEPIUS, 2013).

International cooperation, international mobility and inter-institutional partnerships remain the main tools for the attainment of local, regional, national and European objectives, since they significantly contribute to the development of individuals, institutions and the broader society. This is supported by many studies conducted during the recent years.

The evaluation study of the impact of the LLP on the primary and secondary education from the aspect of national priorities, conducted by Sentočnik on behalf of CMEPIUS, found positive impact of cooperation on institutions, teachers and students in all examined fields of LLP activities (ibid., 2013).

Positive impact of participation in Comenius School Partnership project was also confirmed by the studies, published by the European Commission in 2007 and 2012. The study of the impact of Comenius School Partnerships on the participating schools from 2012 is already looking for changes, which are the result of cooperation in bilateral and multilateral projects at the level of the education system and various stakeholders. The study of impact of Comenius School Partnerships on the participating schools, conducted in 2007, observed the impact of cooperation on schools (GES, 2007; CIEP 2012).

Comenius School Partnerships have a significant impact on the school community as a whole. In 75% of the observed cases the observed impact was considered as rather high, high or extremely high. Partnerships had the highest impact on students, followed by teachers, schools and their environment (CIEP, 2012). Slovenian teachers also believe that the projects had the highest impact on students, while the head teachers believe that project participation has the highest impact on the operation of the school and teachers' work (CMEPIUS, 2013).

The Slovenian study has shown that head teachers (74%) think that the highest long-term impact on school is the impact on the head teacher's support of teachers. 68% of all teachers supported this claim. The analysis has shown that the project role of head teachers varies significantly, ranging from the mere head teacher's support for participation in projects, to the active head teacher's engagement in project work, integration of the project into the life and work at school. The project impact on the school is also higher in cases when the school's head teacher actively supports the project and its implementation (CMEPIUS, 2013).

The highest percentage of teachers (74%) believes that their contacts with foreign teachers had the highest long term impact on the work of the school. Author of the study claims that it is up to the head teachers, whether they encourage all teachers to participate in the project, or only coordinators, who are basically more open for cooperation by default. This claim was supported by 67% of all head teachers (ibid., 2013).

Project impact on schools also depends on the continuity of cooperation, which constitutes a problem given the current application process, since the interest of Slovenian schools exceeds the available funding by far. The 2007 study revealed that the project impact on the institution decreases through time after project completion (GES, 2007).

Other significant long term impact of projects on the work at school, identified by the head teachers include: cooperation between teachers and the head teacher (71%), teachers' contacts with foreign teachers (67%) and the reputation of the school in its environment (66%). The significant long term impact was confirmed by teacher with respect to cooperation between the head teacher's support of teachers (68%), contacts of students with foreign students (64%) and reputation of the school in its environment (60%).

The lowest long term project impact on the work at school was observed by both head teachers (18%) and teachers (11%) with respect to school's cooperation with other Slovenian schools. This can be explained by the national restriction of project application in the case of the Comenius programme, and the consequently high competition among schools due to a high level of interest for participation and inadequate funding. The author of the Slovenian study added that the programme in itself does not require the establishment of links between Slovenian schools. Some applicants saw this as an opportunity, while others did not (CMPEIUS, 2013).

"Head teacher's responses revealed that the project impact on the work at school was evaluated slightly higher by the head teachers of schools in urban areas. However, teachers' responses reveal an opposite trend, since teachers at schools in rural areas evaluated the project impact on the work at school slightly higher than the teachers at urban schools" (Ibid., 2013).

Teachers of basic schools evaluated the following aspects slightly higher than the upper-secondary school teachers: head teacher's familiarity with teacher's work, cooperation between teachers and the head teachers, and the collegiality between staff. On the other hand, the following aspects were evaluated higher by the secondary school teachers: project impact on student exchanges with partner schools and students' field trips abroad (CMEPIUS, 2013). The latter can be explained by the fact that there are more mobilities of students at the level of upper-secondary education, since all Leonardo da Vinci mobility projects are carried out at the level of upper-secondary education.

The projects promote change in the internal organisation of the school, and the school's education offer. The projects also define the new background for a discussion on the new path for exploitation of the school environment and time. Due to the promotion of inter-curricular connections and the adjusted learning pace projects require modifications of the timetable, special time for discussions between students, and the adjustments of the school premises. International mobility of teachers and head teachers enables participants to compare the organisation of the school environment and work. (CIEP, 2012).

Study of the impact of Comenius School Partnerships on the participating schools revealed that the projects improve the image of participating schools in the parent's eyes. Parents consider the participation of students in mobility as a privilege and a priceless intercultural experience. School partnerships also affect nearby schools and can bring institutional change. The impact on the local environment largely depends on the dissemination activities – activities related to the dissemination of project information and project results, as well as further use of the developed innovative methods (CIEP, 2012). According to the Slovenian study 80% of teachers and head teachers believe that the projects have a high or low long term impact on collaboration with parents, while only 40-50% believe that project had an impact on cooperation with other Slovenian schools (CMEPIUS, 2013).

Through the creation of closer links with the local authorities, cultural institutions and companies projects can help open the school towards their local communities. Projects constitute an opportunity to strengthen ties between local authorities, esp. when visiting partner schools. Subject to the selected topic of cooperation schools actively seek to establish partnerships with associations, specialised institutions and companies (CIEP, 2012).

“Impact of projects on the work of coordinating teachers show, that the projects implemented within the scope of LLP had a positive impact in all examined areas, with the exception of their workload, where the responses show that the project did not in any way impact their work” (CMEPIUS, 2013). The highest percentage (75%) was observed in the evaluation of the project impact on their respect of different cultures. This was followed by teachers’ organisational skills (63%) and the knowledge and understanding of education systems in partner countries (61%). Head teachers agree with the teacher’s opinion that the project work had the highest impact on their respect of different cultures (68%).

“Compared to upper-secondary teachers basic school teachers assess the impact of project on teachers as more positive. The major difference was observed in the evaluation of the impact on the ability of teachers to teach students with special needs – this was graded a lot higher by basic school teachers than by upper-secondary school teachers. Another notable difference in the evaluation, when the project impact was more positively assessed by the upper-secondary school teachers was observed in the evaluation of the impact on teachers’ relationship with students” (CMEPIUS, 2013).

“The main difference between the head teachers’ responses regarding the project impact on teachers was observed in the evaluation of the project impact on the development of ICT skills, where the grades awarded by basic school head teachers are significantly higher than those, awarded by upper-secondary school teachers. The aspects, which were evaluated slightly higher by the upper-secondary school head teachers include the project impact on the teachers’ awareness of the new forms and methods and teaching, teachers’ application of diverse teaching methods, teachers’ relationship with students and the motivation of teachers to introduce change and novelties in education (ibid., 2013).

The impact of participation in LLP projects on students was assessed by teachers – coordinators, who evaluated the impact as positive in all examined fields. The highest percentage was observed with respect to the impact on the students’ awareness and knowledge of different cultures, as well as self-confidence when using and/or speaking a foreign language (79%). This was followed by the desire to collaborate with peers in their home country and abroad (77%), and the respect of diversity and interest in other European countries and their culture (75%). According to teachers’ opinion the lowest average grades were observed with respect to communication skills in their mother tongue (25%) and the awareness and application of learning strategies (26%) (CMEPIUS, 2013).

The study of the impact of Comenius School Partnerships on participating schools confirms the findings of the Slovenian study, i.e. about 82% of all European schools believe that the students’ participation in projects increases their interest in other EU countries and their cultures. School partnerships also have a positive impact on the improvement of language skills and inter-sectorial key skills – social and civil competences, creative and computer competences, as well as learning to learn (80% - rather strong and extremely strong impact) (CIEP, 2012).

“Coordinating teachers from basic schools assessed the following aspects slightly more positively: project impact on students with respect to their awareness and knowledge of different cultures, their interest in other European countries and their culture, development of ICT skills, and the knowledge and application of learning strategies. Teachers from upper-secondary schools, assessed slightly more positively the project impact on the self-confidence of their students when using and speaking a foreign language, and their thinking capacity” (CMEPIUS, 2013)

A few differences were also observed between the coordinating teachers from urban schools and the coordinating teachers from rural schools, although these differences were negligible. Teachers at rural schools awarded slightly more positive grades for the impact of projects on their students (ibid., 2013).

All three studies have shown that the impact of international cooperation on the participating institutions and participant exists, and that it significantly contributes to the introduction of change in both the work of institution as well as the work of teachers and students. However, the intensity and duration of impact also depend on the role of the head teacher, coordinator, and entrepreneurship, people involved in the project activities at the school, head teacher's and staff's awareness of the added value of project cooperation, ensuring of cooperation continuity as well as proactivity (CMEPIUS, 2013).

Creation of the conditions for a changed environment, which will ensure the growth of both individuals and the society is subject to various factors. However, it is of vital importance that the European education area provides clear guidelines and relevant support mechanisms for their implementation. In this respect the successor of the Lifelong Learning Programme will pay an extremely important role, while the mobility of youth and inter-institutional cooperation projects shall remain in its core.

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