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**BY SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ERASMUS+ IS OPENING UP OPPORTUNITIES FOR SLOVENIAN ADULT EDUCATORS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The article presents the background of the founding of the Erasmus+ Programme, which this year celebrates its 30th anniversary. The results of the interim study have shown that international cooperation within the Erasmus+ Programme has a positive impact on the professional development of staff and the development of local communities, while improving the quality of the adult education system in the Republic of Slovenia. The article also presents the EPAL platform – an online spot with up-to-date relevant information from the field of adult education, which also serves as a support tool for the dissemination of project results and good project practices of Erasmus+ projects in Europe.*

**Keywords:** *quality, professional development, Erasmus+, Interim National Report on the Implementation and Impact of the Erasmus+ Programme, EPAL*

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**Introduction**

Education and learning are life-long processes. The needs and modes of education for each age bracket differ slightly. The European Adult Education Association (EAEA) declared 2017 the Year of Adult Education in Europe. With this step the association wishes to highlight the significance and benefits of adult education, which have also been recognised in Slovenia: “Awareness, that the education which ends in youth is no longer adequate for the individual, nor for the society, is also the underlying reason for the growing importance of lifelong education. Besides vocational education, general education is also important, since it contributes to the development of personal potential, overall cultural sophistication (development of cultural and social capital), while empowering people to manage the conditions of their own life and to accept responsibility for the creation and changing of these conditions, i.e. for active social and political participation.” (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 35)

International cooperation expands horizons and opens up insights of new possibilities, connects people and helps enrich the relationships and impact on education systems. This was also one of the main guiding principles which triggered the integration and connections between European countries, and ultimately led to the creation of the European Union (EU) in its current form. Today, EU strives even more for the free flow of people and exchange, by using various mechanism. One of such mechanisms is also the Erasmus+ Programme promoting mobility, cooperation, development of innovations and reforms in the field of education, training, youth and sport.

The aim of this article is to present the background of the creation of the Erasmus+ European programme, as well as the key findings of the impact of cooperation in international projects on the adult education system and organisations in the Republic of Slovenia. With the aim to improve the quality of education, and underpinned by the desire for professional development and the desire for strengthening intercultural competences, an increasing number of Slovenian organisations decides for international project cooperation, including the Erasmus+ Programme. The article highlights the significance of the EPALE (*Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe*) platform with respect to the dissemination of good practices and sustainability of the international cooperation projects' results.

### ***A look back to the beginnings of the erasmus programme***

A look into the past, i.e. the second half of the 20th century reveals that this is the time of the conception of the idea of international cooperation, which led to international cooperation that was unimaginable even a decade ago. In 1950, only five years after the end of WWII the representatives of the countries, which were on the opposing sides only a few years ago, discussed and decided to put the wellbeing of people and the development of the European area first. They decided that the right way to attain this objective is cooperation and not politics, which has often led to wars and conflicts between neighbouring countries of the old continent, and – last but not least – also to both world wars. (The history of the European Union, 2017).

The next year Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany signed the *Treaty of Paris on the Establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)*, which is considered a predecessor of the today's European Union. At first, the Union was based on economic and political

cooperation. However, after expansion onto other fields and after accession of new Member States, experience revealed that such connections enrich life in several fields, including education. Such a spirit was also prevailing between 1982 and 1986, when the first pilot student exchanges were organised, which in turn led to the establishment of the European Union Programme for student exchange, named Erasmus (*European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students*) (Erasmus+: the EU's biggest success story, n. d.). This happened in 1987, while a total of 11 countries participated in the programme. All this time adult education has slowly, but persistently gained recognition and significance. When EC Member States signed the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, formally establishing the European Union, there were no legal grounds for cooperation in the field of education. At the time, adult education has not yet been considered an independent branch of education. However, vocational training and education has been given a special role and independent status since the programme's very beginnings due its recognition in connection with the employment policy. As a result, it was more focused on the adult population rather than youth. Even in the 70s, when the ministers of education started holding regular meeting and defined six areas of cooperation (including education of migrant workers and their children, collaboration in the field of higher education, teaching of foreign language, and promotion of equal opportunities), adult education still received no separate mention, but it remained associated with vocational training.

A major breakthrough was made in the EC *White Paper on growth, competitiveness and employment* from 1993, in which the European Commission stressed the significance of the education and training system for both the citizens and economic development, with a special emphasis on the significance of lifelong learning. In the context of education during the relevant period we also need to bring attention to another EC *White Paper on Teaching and learning – towards the learning society*, which was produced in 1995 as a result of cooperation between DG Education and DG Employment. Although the document does not directly emphasise the lifelong learning concept, the given recommendation for improving the general level of knowledge and equal treatment of capital investments and investments in education and training. With the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 the six former programmes in the field of education into two programmes, i.e.: Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci. Within the scope of the Socrates programme, the Erasmus and Lingua programmes were preserved, while Comenius was added as a sub-programme for the field of



school education. A general adult education action was also included, but it was not given the status of a special sub-programme. It finally received this status in 2000 with the Grundtvig sub-programme (Rasmussen, 2014).

The initial Erasmus Programme, which lasted from 1987 to 1993, was followed by the Socrates (1994-1999) and Socrates II (2000-2006) programmes and the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013), while the currently active Erasmus+ Programme was launched in 2014, and will last until 2020. The field of adult education was first included in the Socrates II Programme (Od Rima preko Maastrichta do Kopenhagna in naprej: Poklicno in strokovno izobraževanje in usposabljanje v Evropi, n. d.). This year the Erasmus+ Programme, which enables the co-funding of projects throughout the entire education vertical (kindergartens, basic and upper secondary schools, tertiary education and adult education) and in the field of youth and sport, celebrates its 30th anniversary.

The current Erasmus+ Programme, which is the most complex programme in the field of education up to now, uses co-funding to support projects for the mobility of individuals, cooperation projects for innovations and exchange of good practices, as well as projects for supporting policy reforms. This provides Slovenian adult educators with an opportunity to become involved in international activities, within which they can connect with representatives of different organisations abroad. In the recent years the Programme enabled the mobility of over 2,100 professionals from 210 different organisations in the field of adult education (Mednarodno sodelovanje v številkah 2007–2017, 2017).

### ***Erasmus+ and Adult Education***

In Slovenia, the actions of the Erasmus+ Programme, which covers the fields of education, training, youth and sport, are coordinated by two national agencies. The field of education, training and sport, and the programme's predecessor, i.e. Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) falls within the responsibility of CMEPIUS (Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Projects in the field of Education and Training), while the field of youth is covered by the national agency MOVIT (Institute for the development of youth mobility). The Slovenian EPAL National Support Service (NSS), which manages the multi-language European platform for adult educators, is also a part of CMEPIUS. The platform is a website with up-to-date information in the field of adult education and also serves as a support tool for dissemination of project results and good practices from Erasmus+ projects in Europe.

During the interim phase of implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, in cooperation with an external expert and CMEPIUS, compiled the *Interim national report on the implementation and impact of the Erasmus+ Programme* (Klemenčič, pre-publication),<sup>1</sup> in which the authors of the interim study examined the impact of the Erasmus+ Programme both at the organisational level and at the level of the Slovenian education system.

The study results confirmed the assumptions of CMEPIUS associates which were previously identified solely through the monitoring of projects, while now we can also resort to statistical evidence, confirming the finding that the participation in the programme has a positive impact on both the institutions and the education system. Positive impact was observed mostly with respect to the development of professional staff and improved organisational climate, as well as the quality and internationalisation of institutions.

The respondents in the part of the study referring to adult education included 13 community colleges, which is a bit over a third of all community colleges in Slovenia. Authors asked the respondents on the impact of the programme on various aspects of their work, such as:

- Impact of international cooperation on the various fields of work within their organisation;
- Assessment of the impact of participation in international projects on the work of adult educators in their organisations;
- Impact of the LLP or Erasmus+ projects on the adult education system, and not only the home organisation of survey respondents;
- Impact of the EPAL platform on the adult education system.

Below we present the findings of the study concerning the impact of international cooperation, international projects and the EPAL platform on community colleges and the Slovenian adult education system.

### **Impact of international cooperation on Slovenian education institutions**

All survey respondents confirmed that international cooperation had a positive impact on the recognisability of their organisation in the environment, openness of the organisation towards the local environment and broader, and employee's

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<sup>1</sup> The data from the interim study have been processed and are being prepared for publication. The results of statistical analyses will no longer change.

foreign language communication skills. Moreover, all respondents agreed about the positive impact on the readiness of staff to participate in new projects, which is also evident from the data, monitored by CMEPIUS; the most active organisations in the field of international cooperation most often do not participate in one project only, but in several projects at the same time.

Therefore, 92% of all organisations agreed that participation in the Erasmus+ Programme or its predecessors had a positive impact on the cooperation between the adult educators and organisation's management, collaboration with other adult education institutions in Slovenia, and the dialogue between employees. A large majority of the surveyed respondents (85%) also believes that international cooperation promotes the feeling of staff's commitment to common objectives and collegiality between staff, while supporting the use of ICT within the organisation and facilitating the implementation of additional activities for participants in adult education.

### **Impact of international cooperation on the work of adult educators within their own organisation**

Respondents also answered the question on the impact of their participation in international projects on the work of adult educators within their own organisation. All respondents detected a positive impact on the training of educators in foreign language skills, knowledge and understanding of adult education systems in partner countries, knowledge of foreign education environments, motivation of educators for introduction of change and novelties in teaching. All respondents further agreed that international activities contributed to the awareness of the use of new teaching aids, materials, as well as the forms and methods of teaching. This is also evident from the content of project applications within the Erasmus+ programme, where we observe that many project ideas are based on the reform of education processes and revamping of existing programmes.

Majority (92%) of respondents believe that international cooperation has a positive impact on the educators' awareness of European cultural and moral values. A large share of respondents (85%) also believes that participation in international projects also has a positive impact on the educators' ability to teach SEN participants and members of vulnerable groups. International cooperation also strengthens the respect of different cultures, while contributing to a better knowledge of European institutions and their activities.

### **Impact of international cooperation on the Slovenian adult education system**

The survey questionnaire also asked respondents to grade the impact of cooperation in international projects on the adult education system. All respondents agreed that cooperation in international projects had a positive impact on the dissemination of good adult education practices within Slovenia. 92% of respondents claim that international projects had a positive impact on the internationalisation of the adult education system, dissemination of good practices in Europe, overall increase of the quality of learning and teaching, professional development of adult educators, and the use of EU tools for the transparency of adult education systems and the recognition of adults' knowledge. 85% of respondents confirmed that the projects lead to the advancement of system quality improvements, collaboration of various stakeholders (educators, decision-makers, local communities and others), and help support national adult education policies.

As evident from the study results, participation in international projects has been recognised as positive. Therefore, with the aim to enable international connections and experience of an intercultural workplace to as many Slovenian organisations as possible, CMEPIUS also implements various support activities and workshops. The Interim national report on the implementation and impact of the Erasmus+ Programme also included a question on the impact of the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) on their organisation and the adult education system.

### **Impact of EPALE on education institutions and the adult education system in Slovenia**

With the aim to improve quality in the field of adult education, and to provide a support tool for Erasmus+ Programme projects, in 2014 the European Commission launched the EPALE electronic platform, which enables adult educators to monitor the developments in their respective field both at home and in Europe. Multi-language online community which is currently available in 24 official languages of the EU helps over 30,000 users from all over Europe to search and exchange news, blogs, event invitations, sources and good practices, and to monitor policy trends in the field of adult education.

All study participants agreed that EPALE has a positive impact on the dissemination and sustainability of results, monitoring of current trends and guidelines for adult education in Europe, peer learning of adult educators, and

the mutual exchange of good practices. A good example of exchange of good practices and dissemination of project results is provided by the Ljubljana City Library. From 2014 to 2016, the library implemented the “LinkINJob” project within the Erasmus+ programme. As stated by a member of library’s professional staff, EPALE is their window on the world of adult education, through which they can observe the developments in the field of adult education in Europe, while they also use this “window” to show the library’s activities. After publication of contributions they received positive feedback from foreign organisations, while EPALE provided them with additional possibilities and opportunities to promote the project and library’s activities, and helped them acquire new information as well as partners for future project cooperation (EPALE Slovenia, 2015).

The share of those who believe that EPALE also has a positive impact on the finding of foreign project partners, monitoring of current trends and guidelines in the field of adult education in Slovenia, as well as the monitoring of upcoming events in the field of adult education (seminars, conferences, etc) was also extremely high (92%). Last but not least, 85% of respondents also agreed about EPALE’s positive impact on the professional development of adult educators, and application of ICT in education, while constituting the first step toward more complex international projects.

### ***Conclusion***

The world we live in is becoming increasingly open, people are connecting, the distances are decreasing and it is easier to overcome them. International cooperation provided us with plenty opportunities to connect and meet our foreign colleagues, driven by our desire to seek and master new knowledge. All of these aims are supported by various European Programmes. One of such programmes is definitely the Erasmus+ Programme, which is not only a tool for the co-financing of mobility and activities related to implementation of specific projects, but it becoming increasingly focused on the strengthening of the impact of international cooperation. The impact must be observed in individuals, as well as in organisations, local communities and the entire system. Through our work at CMEPIUS we are realising that the most successful organisations in this field do not limit their perception of international cooperation to project work, but view international cooperation as a way of work; newly acquired knowledge and experience are combined with the current knowledge and experience, and then transferred to relevant stakeholders. This is the only way to ensure the sustainability of the results of such cooperation.

The above-mentioned study is the first research in the field of adult education in Slovenia. The results have clearly shown that international cooperation has a positive impact on the professional development of staff, who – through application of international knowledge and experience – impact the activities of their own organisation. Moreover, international cooperation fosters development within the local community, and – in the long term – improves the quality of adult education system, while strengthening adult educators' intercultural competences.

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