

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON PROJECT MANAGEMENT APPROACH IN THE EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Armenia ANDRONICEANU

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
armenia.androniceanu@man.ase.ro*

Bianca RISTEA

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
bianca.ristea@yahoo.com*

Abstract

Nowadays, project management is common for many areas and industries, including the educational sector. The international cooperation between educational institutions and the students' international mobility are built on major projects and programs established through European and national institutions. The aim of this article is to review the best practices of project management implementation in public secondary education. The analysis is focused on three European countries: France, Spain and Finland. Using Eurydice tools and network, OECD reports, the national project agency reports and scholar's researches, we compare the project management background and characteristics within these three decentralized educational systems. The results are considered useful for school managers that are going to implement major projects in their institutions.

Keywords: Project management, Education, Comparative research, Decentralization.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that the educational system has to adapt and rearrange on flexible structures and all major decisions must be connected with the stakeholder's interests and the national and international context. Scholars and government experts through the world are searching for the best alternatives to improve the education system in terms of financing, curriculum, and adaptability to stakeholder's particularities and requirements.

Every Government is searching for best alternatives to settle a modern, flexible and efficient educational system. Recently, major decisions were taken for the decentralization of educational services, expecting to achieve a graded level of organizational and financial autonomy. The decentralization empowers school representatives to react to external expectations that may vary from settlement to settlement

(Radó, 2010). The school managers need to be aware of the changing environment and adapt to the technological innovation, globalization and international labor migration (Ristea et al., 2014).

Scholars argue that projects may become an important tool for school managers interested to increase training and improve the skills of young people and also for the Government and other local authorities in the process of reform and decentralization implementation (Rondinelli, 1990).

Projects are developed through multidisciplinary efforts and may allow there consideration of the goals, contents, methods and procedures which govern the activity of an educational institution (Ristea, 2013).

Nowadays, the school manager has a dynamic role and needs to learn to overcome some old habits. For their school success, they will have to prove to be able to initiate, implement and manage educational projects and programmes oriented towards their school internationalization develop student's competencies and skills required by a globalized society (Ristea et al, 2014).

Using projects developed through national or international programmes, or projects with local stakeholders, the schools managers and staff may support their ideas and attain their institutional goals. Projects may help create new learning opportunities, increase cooperation, attain innovation, ensure students mobility, sustain social and work integration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Project management has evolved from a management philosophy restricted to some areas and types of enterprise to an organization project management system affecting every functional unit of an organization. More and more institutions are now regarding project management as being mandatory for their survival and all the organizations that were opponents of project management are now advocates (Kerzner, 2013).

Organizations are devoting significant effort to improving the project performance which does have a major economic benefit to them. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to be in any organization without being involved in project management in one way or another (Levi, 2009).

The European Commission, an institution highly oriented in projects development, describe the projects as a series of activities aimed at bringing about clearly specified objectives within a defined time-period and with a defined budget (European Commission, 2004).

Project Management Book of Knowledge states that project management represents an application of knowledge, skills and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently (PMBOK, 2013).

In the educational system there are different projects categories: the curriculum project for designing curricula and materials, the educational project for the development of student's specific competence and the institutional development project as a strategic tool for manager's educational policy. Other distinctive categories of projects are the international projects in cooperation with an international organization and the public-private partnership projects for schools infrastructure (Ristea, 2013).

International efforts for project management in the educational sector were undertaken by many international agencies like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank along with European Union programme for education and training, established since 2006. These institutions have offered in the past decades key solution to financial difficulties of developing and developed economies. Their implication in the education systems is stated in many official reports and it is also debated in scholars' researches (Dale, 2008; Robertson and Dale, 2009).

The EU member states, but also other countries collaborate in international projects for the educational sector. The cooperation in this field was supported through Lifelong learning Programmes: Comenius, Leonardo, Erasmus, Grundtvig, etc. and currently through Erasmus Plus Programme.

Given the educational management particularities, the implementation of project management tools and techniques has some challenges. In the secondary educational institutions can be identified some particularities like: human resources different professional background and mobility, special regulation governing the system, the financing issues, annual schedule and national examinations, daily mandatory activities, etc.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

School management in the European context needs to be flexible and to adapt to the best practices and European regulations and expectations. Also, nowadays, the school manager is more than an administrator and regulations executor, he is more oriented on the learning processes and the school outcomes. Recently, they started to emphasize their ability to initiate, implement and manage educational projects for school staff competencies development.

Regarding the specific objectives of the research, these aim:

O1: to establish the differences and similarities of the school project management within the analyzed countries;

O2: to compare the perspectives and the school strategies for project management implementation.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results are based on the analysis of Eurydice tools and network, the national project agency reports, scholar's researches and school case studies. The findings are structured as follows: general data concerning the educational system, analysis of national agency involvement in project implementation, project management school case study.

4.1. Project management in French secondary educational institutions

The Department of National Education governs the French educational system, within the framework defined by the Parliament. Recent regulation, in the educational field was adopted in 2013 through the Law no 595 of July 2013 reinforcing the decentralization actions. However, scholars see the French educational system as preserving a republican tradition and a centralized perspective of the curriculum.

In the educational system, the decentralization of competences started in the 1980's, when the local authorities started to play an important role in school governance. The Government has transferred a part of its competencies, mostly infrastructure development and maintenance, less curriculum related decisions or school personnel recruitment.

In the French educational system, the school head is appointed from the school staff or selected from a list of inspectors or educational tutors after an oral and written examination. Concerning the project implementation, the French national agency for international project (fr. *L'agence Europeen pour l'Education et la Formation des adultes*) considers school managers as key person of influence. Therefore the Agency efforts were dedicated to enrich school manager perspective on international projects, students and staff mobility. The French national agency manages the budget assigned by the European Commission for education and training and motivates educational staff to involve in international projects. The budget evolution is represented in figure 1.

The figure emphasizes the European preoccupation for sustaining international education and the possibility of attaining financial resources for educational projects. In the French educational system, project management processes are highly influenced by the school manager. He or she can motivate the teachers and the stakeholders to propose and implement a project necessary for institutional development. The school manager coordinates the project activities and improves the process whenever necessary. Project implementation is supported by the *académie*, a local administrative district of Educational Ministry. These districts establish local strategies for educational development and encourage school manager's decision regarding project management.

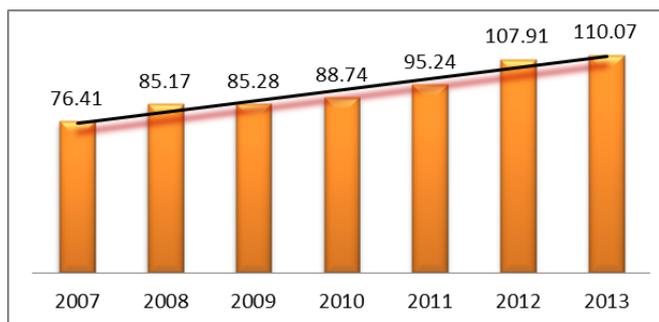


FIGURE 1 - BUDGET EVOLUTION (MILLION EURO) OF EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAM IN FRANCE
Source: Annual report of French National agency for European projects (2013)

In French secondary educational institutions, project managers are subordinated to the school head. Their responsibilities are to establish connections with different stakeholders, identify international partners and opportunities for cooperation. The project team is constituted for every project considering the particularities and complexity of the project and participants.

4.2. Project management in Spanish secondary educational institutions

The Spanish educational system is currently governed by 2006 Education Act, modified in 2013 by the Act on the Improvement of the Quality of Education. The main objectives of the educational system are to reduce school leaving rate, to improve educational results and to stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit among students. Both governors and teachers aim to prepare the students for the changing situations of the knowledge-based society.

As mentioned by Eurypedia, European Encyclopaedia on National Education System, the 2013 Act changed the curriculum and the distribution of competencies, the participation in the public schools governance, the school autonomy and the evaluation of the educational system (Eurypedia, 2014).

The schools have pedagogical, organizational and managerial autonomy for their resources. This autonomy is accompanied by the participation of the education community in the schools' organization, governance, running and evaluation (Ristea et al., 2014). The Education Act enacted in 2006 promotes a collegiate headship in public secondary schools', the management team carries out its duties in accordance with the instructions of the head-teacher.

The head-teacher is elected among the teachers of the concerned institutions', the selection process is carried by the school itself after an analysis of candidates' academic and professional merits and the assessment of their management proposals.

Project management in the Spanish secondary educational institutions' is guided through the same

principles as in other European countries. The school management is following the National Agency for European Projects (sp. *Organismo Autonomo de Programas Educativos Europeos*) guidelines and writes projects according with the European requirements and the administrative procedure. The project team establishes the project activities according to the institution requirements, but also considering their partners' demands and calendar.

The projects are selected considering the internal strategy and priorities, have an inter-curricular setup and involve sufficient team members, so the tasks may be efficiently distributed. The school manager selects a project coordinator in charge with supervision and evaluation of activities. In some educational institutions there is a constant preoccupation for project management implementation, therefore is a permanent position of project manager. His tasks are including identify any available partnerships, constantly communicate with school stakeholders, promote project management discipline for students and school personnel, support school managers' preoccupation for project implementation (Lopez et al., 2009).

The Spanish National Agency for European Projects supports schools' decision to implement projects dedicated to personnel mobility, school infrastructure improvement, social and civic competencies. The available budget, figure 2, increased since the Agency foundation, in 2006, therefore the Spanish educational institutions have the opportunity to implement their international partnerships.

Project management contribute to school modernization, to increase school teachers' initiative and cooperation with national and international stakeholders. Project management barriers are related to the procurement of adequate partners with same degree of interests, the team project motivation to dedicate extra time for activities implementation.

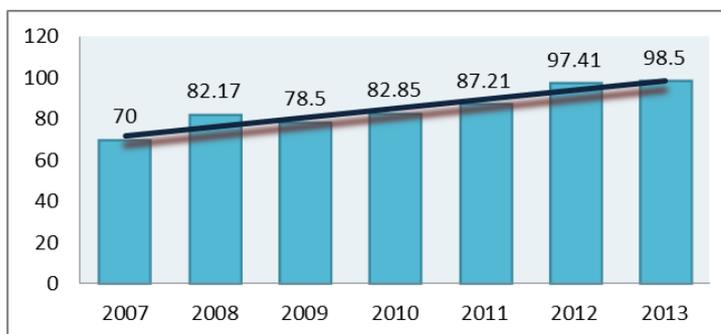


FIGURE 2 - BUDGET EVOLUTION (MILLION EURO) OF EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAM IN SPAIN

Source: Annual Report of the Spanish National Agency for European Projects

The project starts from a needs assessment, after systematically examining stakeholders' interests, identify the social and environmental conditions and opportunities. Once established an overall purpose,

the project team member identify potential partners, sponsors and contact the decision-makers for project initiation.

4.3. Project management in Finnish secondary educational institutions

In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education develop the national educational aims, the contents and methods for primary, secondary and adult training.

A characteristic of the Finnish educational system is that the local authorities solely determine the school autonomy that must be passed on schools. The schools must respect the current regulation but they have the right and the option to provide educational services as they consider optimum for their community. Therefore, the budget management, the acquisitions required for pedagogical matter and the recruitment of personnel are fully schools responsibility (Ristea et al., 2014). Table 1 emphasize the distributions of responsibilities in the Finnish educational system.

TABLE 1 - COMPETENCIES DISTRIBUTION IN THE DECENTRALIZED FINNISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

List of competencies	Stakeholder category		
	Ministry of Education and Culture	National Board of Education	Local administration
Establish an educational policy	■		
Implement the policy aims		■	■
Establish educational objectives	■	■	
Propose curriculum content and teaching methods		■	
Funding and infrastructure			■
Curricula implementation			■
Staff recruitment			■
Project management implementation			■

Source: Adaptation after the Ministry of Education and Culture Report, 2012

The decentralization process of the Finnish educational system started in the early of the 1970's, when flexible structures, adapted to student's needs of development, replaced the rigorous general framework.

The decentralized system allowed teachers to adapt the curriculum to students' personal development and chose the strategy they consider the best. They were entrusted with pedagogical independence and autonomy in adapting the national curriculum. OECD perspective on Finland's high performance is generally attributed to a high degree of organizational autonomy in the decision-making process (OECD, 2007).

The school management is attributed to school principal, who are assisted by vice principals. They are elected among successful teachers and appointed by the local municipal authority, after open procedure recruitment. An appointed manager must have a master's degree and to prove knowledge and

competencies regarding school administration.

Educational projects are considered a priority in the Finnish educational system and the students' mobility is highly encouraged. The Finnish Centre for International Mobility (CIMO) supervises a large number of programmes and projects, e.g. Nor plus, Nordic Master, Eritrea Program, HEI-ICI, Training and working abroad and the European Programme for education and training.

CIMO is an expert organization, established in 1991 that supports schools' and educational institutions' networking and international projects. It creates opportunities for increasing skills and expertise through exchange periods for students and educational staff.

CIMO annual reports emphasize that 71% of Finnish educational institutions were involved in international projects in the past years. The educational institutions have organizational structures dedicated to project management related activities. The management and school external stakeholders are the one that encourage the preoccupation and commitment for project management skills and techniques.

According to the Finnish National Board of Education, the vocational educational training institutions manage their projects through a project management office that define and maintain standards for project implementation. The office may coordinate a portfolio of projects and report progress to school manager for strategic decisions, but also maintain a close relationship with stakeholders available to initiate another project.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the educational system, the projects may be considered an important tool, necessary for the changing environment and through the globalization process. Project managers can implement their ideas and create bridges for cooperation with different national and international stakeholders. The projects in the educational field allow the implementation of a new curriculum, design teaching programs, computerization of educational activities, workshops development and apply new managerial techniques.

The educational institutions increased autonomy and accountability is demanding new connections that can be managed by qualified leaders, oriented towards cooperation and innovation. Nowadays, the school manager must transform into a powerful leader able to manage the institutions' basic activities, develop networks and partnerships.

The European integration brought a new perspective in the educational project management sector. The institutions all over Europe may involve and cooperate through international projects. However, efforts need to be done for connecting projects to school strategies and priorities. Project manager role in educational institutions must be rewarded and attributed to a person with high qualifications and interdisciplinary skills. Project management offices must be seen as an important structure for school future development and international cooperation.

The analysis of the project management discipline in the European decentralized educational systems revealed a general preoccupation of national and international institutions for project implementation, but an uneven implication of school management. There are some explanations for this matter, general ones like the lack of experience in the field, the ongoing educational reforms, but also some particular ones like manager and staff insufficient implication.

The Finnish educational system demonstrates a high interest in educational project management and can report a constant preoccupation for international cooperation and students' mobility. The projects are different, they vary in scope, duration, amount of resources, therefore the school management and the project manager need to adjust their perspective to these particularities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/142115 „Performance and excellence in doctoral and postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain”

REFERENCES

- Dale, R., (2008). Neoliberal capitalism, the modern state and the governance of education, *TertiumComparationis*, 13(2).
- Eurypedia International Database. Retrieved from: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Main_Page.
- European Commission, 2004. Lifelong Learning Programme, Retrieved from: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/lfp/>, accessed on 28 October, 2013.
- Kerzner, H.R., (2013). *Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling, and Controlling*, Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- French Ministry of National Education. (2012). School Education in France. Files on school education, Paris.

- Levi, R. (2009). Innovative approaches in project management for personnel in the educational and public administration fields, Szent István University Faculty of Applied and Professional Arts.
- Lopez, C., Morante, F. and Miranda, T. (2009). *Coordinadores de proyectos europeos. Guía práctica*, Retrieved from: ieptl.cesga.es/pdf/ieptl_guide_es.pdf, accessed on 28 March, 2015.
- Ministry of Education and Culture Report, (2012). Helsinki, Finland.
- OECD, (2007). *School leadership for systemic improvement in Finland – A case study report for the OECD activity Improving school leadership*, OECD, Paris.
- Project Management Institute (2013). *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)*, 5th Ed.
- Radó, P. (2010). Governing Decentralized Education Systems: Systemic Change in South Eastern Europe, Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Open Society Foundations, Budapest.
- Ristea, B. (2013). Integrated Project Management Approach in Secondary Education, *Administration and Public Management Review*, 21, pp. 43-57.
- Ristea, B., Ciobanu, A. and Ivan, M. (2014). School manager profile in the decentralized educational system – comparative research in the European countries, *Administration and Public Management Review*, 23, pp. 60-79.
- Robertson, S.L. and Dale, R. (2009). *The World Bank, the IMF, and the Possibilities of Critical Education. The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*, New York: Taylor&Francise-Library.
- Rondinelli, D.A. and Midleton, J. (1990). *Planning Education Reform in the Developing Countries*, U.S.A.: Duck University Press.