

Analysis of a Multi-Country University Collaboration: The Erasmus + Friends Project

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The paper examines the pros and cons of a three-year collaboration among 11 universities from 5 Asian countries and 4 Eastern European universities. The FRIENDS project, sponsored by the European Union, was centered on the theme of Internationalization at Home (IaH), to provide international experiences to university students staying on their home campuses, without traveling abroad. The methodology and analysis are based on interviews, over three years of the Project, with delegates from the 11 participating universities. Key focal points of the interviewees (of their choosing) were the nature of Europe-Asia collaboration, variations among the universities (especially disparities in size), unexpected consequences arising from the collaboration, and difficulties in the implementation of project activities. Suggestions are made regarding future such collaborations especially for small universities who find it difficult to meet stringent targets for student numbers and other outputs.

Keywords: Collaboration, project, internationalization, goals

INTRODUCTION

An increasingly popular form of international collaboration is the project sponsored by a large nation, group of nations, or organization, to bring together countries with similar problems or issues. In such cases, the host country or organization funds the project that invites countries to participate in workshops, seminars, etc., in search of solutions to common problems.

The dozens of European-funded Erasmus+ projects are prototypical of such projects (Erasmus+, 2022). For example, one such Erasmus+ funded project (223,000 euros) was the Innovative Approach in Mathematical Education for Maritime Students. Eleven universities from four countries with maritime students – Latvia, Estonia, Poland, and Croatia participated in the 30-month project, the key actions were cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (European Commission, 2022)

The FRIENDS project

The project describes itself in a ‘Welcome to the FRIENDS Community’ message as follows (FRIENDS, n.d.):

The FRIENDS project title stands for Furthering International Relations Capacities and Intercultural Engagement to Nurture Campus Diversity and to Support Internationalisation at Home. The project is built around the concept

of Internationalisation at Home (IaH) that reframes the traditional perceptions of higher education internationalization in the five Partner Countries involved, namely Bhutan, Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. The notion of IaH is based on the assumption that for various reasons the largest part of the universities’ student body will remain non-mobile and therefore deprived from access to global knowledge and skills.

The ‘Goals and Objectives’ statement of the project narrates:

The FRIENDS project aims at strengthening the internationalization capabilities of HEIs in Bhutan, Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand and at developing students’ global competence through the integration of intercultural dimensions into Partner Country (PC) HEI’s formal and informal curriculum. To achieve this, the European HEIs from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Turkey and the 12 PC HEIs will engage in a series of activities that contribute to the five project specific objectives:

1. To outline Partner Country Higher Education Institutions’ (PC HEIs) internationalization landscapes and to identify levels of integration of international and intercultural dimensions into PC HEIs’ formal and informal curriculum: by April 2019.

2. To improve PC HEIs' capabilities for internationalization through staff training and by translating general awareness of the Internationalisation at Home (IaH) concept into streamlined institutional policies and actions embedded in IaH Action Plans: by November 2019.
3. To build students' intercultural knowledge and sensitivity to cultural diversity through the introduction of Intercultural Passport virtual module into PC HEIs' elective formal curriculum: by July 2020
4. To transform PC HEIs International Relations Offices (IROs) into vibrant multicultural focal points through the establishment of FRIENDS Teahouses and the induction of Home away from Home Programme for integrated international student care: by February 2021.
5. To promote virtual mobility and campus diversity across the 5 PCs as key tools for students' global competence development: by November 2021.

Similar to other Erasmus+ collaborations, universities applied to the project management (in this case, Varna University of Management - VUM in Bulgaria) for acceptance into the project. Thus, the universities did not select the other universities with which to collaborate; the choice was made by the project management at VUM.

METHODOLOGY

Delegates from all participating universities (both Asian and European) were interviewed informally (i.e. no fixed agenda) over three years of bi-annual meetings among the participants. In fact, these could better be termed 'conversations', since they were open-ended and not planned. Rather, the delegates got to know one another quite well over the three years, and quite often offered their own unsolicited opinions. As a result of the long period, opinions may have evolved, and indeed, become more detailed, as delegates opened up to one another after repeated contact.

The persons interviewed were almost all natives of their home countries. There were, however, four Europeans (U.K., U.S.A., Australia) among the country delegates. The project rules specified that all work done for the project must be full-time employees of the university. That is, a university could not hire outsiders to perform project work. Thus, the persons

interviewed for this study were quite knowledgeable about their universities and the role played by their universities in the project.

OBSERVATIONAL RESULTS

Responses from the interviewees

The delegates were unanimous in their view that the project benefited their universities, and that the objectives of the project had been realized. Indeed, the many project activities contributed to the 'internationalization at home' of the universities, so that they could provide international experiences on their home campuses without the difficulties and expense of travel abroad. Student and faculty responses to questionnaires showed an almost universally positive attitude towards the project activities and towards IaH in general.

On the other hand, the interviewees became increasingly aware over the three years of their lack of creative input into the project, and the priority of jumping through the hoops of the project management.

The project was entirely designed by the VUM management team, down to the smallest detail of each event. Thus, participating universities had little or no say in the design or choice of project activities.

To be sure, the activities were designed to benefit the member universities, and the university delegates interviewed were aware of the activities and their benefits before applying for project membership.

Still, it became clear from interviews with the delegates, that many member universities applied to join the project more with a view to acquiring the marketing prestige associated with an international project, as well as the financial rewards associated with work done for the project. Dewey International University, Cambodia, did not pay close enough attention to the finer details of activities described within the 80-odd page project document, especially the numerical quotas and benchmarks required.

By the end of the project, participating universities became more involved in satisfying the strict demands of project management, and less in providing meaningful activities for their students. To be sure, the activities did benefit the students, but the mindset of those producing the events was focused on following the letter of the law as laid down by the management in Europe.

European-ASEAN collaboration

Some of the interviewees expressed a negative view that Europe was dictating its own educational system and values to Asian universities. Their views are summarized as follows:

There is a risk that European universities may treat ASEAN universities as second-class citizens in the academic world. The European system is well-established, while the ASEAN systems are 'developing'. This can turn the collaboration into a process of the Europeans preaching to the Asians 'how to do it'.

This attitude could be seen in the FRIENDS Project. The universities from Bulgaria, Hungary, Turkey, and Poland received no suggestions or materials on how to change their own systems. Rather, their role was to instruct the ASEAN universities on how to 'internationalize' their programs. In most cases, this amounted to the sharing of European ideas and programs among the ASEAN universities, but in many cases the European participants instructed the Asian ones on how to educate their students about European or Western education and culture without actually traveling outside of Asia.

For example, one activity of the collaboration was the "intercultural fair". Groups of students presented cultural programs designed to acquaint the student body with cultural memes from other countries. This may be observed to be a laudable objective. However, it also means that Western countries as well as Asian countries will present cultural shows. The Western memes will seem more strange and exotic to the Asian students, who are already familiar with Thai food or Malaysian costumes, and may have a more impressionable impact on the Asian students.

One of the activities of the project was the implementation of a 'Teahouse'. This was a set of cultural booths where students could sample snacks from various countries, read brochures and other materials about foreign universities, or watch videos about those countries. Of course, these activities included Western universities as well as Asian ones, but the very name of 'Teahouse' suggests a rather colonial attitude harkening back to old views of China and Japan rather than ASEAN countries.

To relate to the interviewees's views from the author's point of view, and as Elkin (2017) said that Europe has done an outstanding job over the past several decades of amalgamating the patchwork-

quilt of the various university systems into a single integrated system applicable and transferable to all European countries, they are rightfully proud of the achievement, and they would naturally like to see such standardization applied to Asian universities.

Variations among universities

According to the conversation with delegates from all the participating universities, some of the observational results are reported as the following.

Normally, bilateral collaborations between universities involve, for instance, exchanges of students or teachers, or joint research projects. Universities with different strengths may exercise David Ricardo's Principle of Comparative Advantage. A university with a strong engineering program may engage in student exchanges with another university with a strong IT program.

On the other hand, when universities are of greatly different sizes or structures, there may be unreasonable expectations foisted on some partners. In the FRIENDS project, a given activity such as a Career Fair was required to attract a prescribed number of exhibiting companies as well as a prescribed number of students. A small country like Bhutan, or a small university with under 500 students, had considerable difficulty in meeting the targets meted out to all participating universities, including those with as many as 50,000 students.

The size of the collaborating university also affects the staffing of the project. Project staff must be employees of the university. There are not that many existing employees of a small university to choose from, and these must be asked to supplement their usual university tasks with project work. Some universities, notably my own, insist that if a worker on a full-time salary does project work during normal working hours, then that work is already covered by the salary, and thus any project funding must go to the university, and not to the worker in question. This situation adds insult to injury when the worker is paid initially from project funds (to document the project payment) but then required to turn over the money back to the university.

This practice breeds ill-will among staff. In future, they will be reluctant to take on project work, for which they will not be paid. In fact, our own staff suffered overwork, resentment, and burn-out and firmly opposed any future project work.

Sharing online courses

The observational results from the conversation with the delegates from all participating universities suggested that there are several ways to share online courses among universities:

1. Totally Centralized – all lectures, online meetings, homework assignments, etc. are done by one institution and broadcast online to the partner universities.
2. Lecture-Tutorial – Lectures are prepared and delivered from a central source university, but tutorial or recitation sessions are held locally by local teachers.
3. Multiple lecturers – Each partner university is responsible for conducting some classes, providing their own lecturers and tutorial sessions. For example, each week or month is the responsibility of one partner university to disseminate to the students of all the universities.

Shared courses can be a big cost and resource saver. Why have 5-10 different teachers preparing lectures on the same topic? Such courses also provide a degree of standardization: students in all partner universities receive the same instruction and are graded to the same standards.

In the FRIENDS project, the European universities prepared a course (MOOC = Massive Open Online Course) on intercultural awareness, which was broadcast centrally from Europe. Students from all participating ASEAN universities took the course for credit. This might have worked well, except for a few difficulties:

1. Delivery of the course by European universities to Asian students reinforces the mentality of Europe dictating material to ‘developing’ ASEAN universities.
2. Europe, through its Erasmus programs, has gone a long way towards standardizing its university structures and curricula. Credit-hours have been made uniform, so that course credits can be transferred from one country to another. This is not the case in Asia, where some countries have inherited an English educational structure, others the French structure, and others the American credit system. The MOOC handed down by the European universities does not uniformly fit the various ASEAN structures. FRIENDS

partner universities were forced to chop up the material into courses of various credits or squeeze them into Procrustean beds of multiple faculties. (For example, the subject of intercultural awareness may not fit neatly into either the Faculty of Social Sciences or some other faculty or department, forcing the course to be split into two courses in two separate faculties.)

3. In most ASEAN countries, adding a new course, or changing the course structure, requires the approval of the Ministry of Education or its equivalent. This entails the preparation of many documents such as course outlines, evaluation methods, or attendance policies.
4. If a new course is added as a requirement, then some other existing course will probably have to be eliminated. This elimination can be a difficult choice, especially if it gives rise to strife among departments or faculties, each of which does not want to see its own courses eliminated.
5. The FRIENDS Project required at least 150 students from each partner university to enroll for the MOOC. This proved to be a hardship for small universities, while the larger universities had little trouble in garnering the required number of students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Collaborations sponsored by outside agencies are designed to be win-win proposals. Universities and other organizations tend to view only the substantial surface benefits, and so they apply for such collaborations tending to disregard the fact that the donor agencies aim to benefit in their own right in some way from the collaborations.

To give a concrete example, suppose a developed country, say Japan, offers to build a road in Cambodia. Of course, this will benefit Cambodia. But Cambodia must also weigh the benefits to Japan before agreeing to the project. There may be hidden agenda that only become apparent at a later date.

Dewey International University in Cambodia, and apparently other universities in the FRIENDS project (according to the interviews with project delegates), jumped at the opportunity to join a prestigious, well-funded project, without considering the hidden or not-so-hidden strings attached to their participation.

This is not to say that such projects must be avoided; rather, potential participants must enter the collaboration with eyes wide open to the benefits accruing to all parties.

Some of the interviewees had participated in previous projects, and understood what was at stake. They provided strong guidance to Dewey International University in Cambodia and other neophyte universities. An English interviewee from a large Thai university, as well as a Filipina from a large university in Cebu, had both participated in previous Erasmus+ projects, and both opined that the rewards of the project were positive enough to apply to the subsequent FRIENDS project. They were both well aware of the pros and cons of participation, and they deemed that participation was well worth their while. On the other hand, the director of the FRIENDS project in Dewey International University felt that in the future, we should not apply to similar projects without first considering the required large inputs on our part. This opinion underscores the feeling that the exigencies of the project led to a mindset not of considering what is best for our university, but of satisfying the rigorous demands laid down by the project management in Europe.

Universities in particular must be aware that in joining collaborations, they may be giving up sovereignty and autonomy in decision making. They may be forced to alter their curricula to fit project straitjackets. They must be aware that “He who pays the piper calls the tune,” that is, they must obey the strict regulations laid down by the donor agencies.

Universities eager to join such collaborations should read project documents in great detail, with thought given to consequences. In particular, universities should consider whether their particular type of institution can enter into collaboration with other types of universities. This is especially true of small universities that must satisfy the same project numerical requirements as much larger institutions.

Universities should also take into account the very positive benefits of establishing relations with other project universities, even if this is done outside the formal project. These can provide many benefits and future bilateral collaborations far into the future. They should be mindful of this message of conclusion: look before you leap.

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