

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) PROPOSAL COST BESTPRAC

Title of STSM: “Capacity building and Training for Project Management and Administration”

COST Action Number: TN1302-The voice of research administrators - building a network of administrative excellence (BESTPRAC)

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Home Institution: University of Novi Sad, Serbia (UNS)

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Host Institution: University of Split, Croatia (USP)

Date of STSM: 17th of April (arrival date) - 18th- 21st of April (4 working days) - 22nd of April (departure day)

Summary

The main objective of the proposed STSM was to help strengthen scientific/ research capacity, through upgrading and fine tuning the knowledge needed for successful project management and implementation from financial, legal, and administrative prospective. This was achieved through the exchanging of experience, sharing of best practices and knowledge about project administration and project coordination between home and host institution. Attention was paid to the evaluation and comparison of internal procedures, internal structure and work flows, in both pre- and post-award phase and major challenges and risks. Based on the experience of both Universities, operating in the same region, within the STSM “Capacity building and Training for Project Management and Administration” an exchange of best practices and mutual trainings were organized. A an added value steps for future collaborations are defined.

I Purpose

The main objective of the proposed STSM was to help strengthen scientific/ research capacity, through upgrading and fine tuning the knowledge needed for successful project management and implementation of international projects from financial, legal, and administrative prospective. This was achieved through the exchange of financial, legal and administrative experience, sharing of best practices and knowledge on project administration and project coordination between home and host institution. STSM “Capacity building and Training for Project Management and Administration” Attention was paid to the evaluation and comparison of internal procedures, internal structure and work flows, in both pre- and post-award phase. Based on the experience of both Universities, operating in the same region, within the STSM “Capacity building and Training for Project Management and Administration” an exchange of best practices and mutual trainings were organized. Steps for future collaborations are defined.

Emphasize was placed on following programs: HORIZON 2020, ERASMUS +.

II Detailed description of the work carried out during the STSM

Agenda of the visit

Day 1	Welcome meeting with the host senior researcher. Welcome meeting with the representatives of Project Management Office at USP. Introduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ General introduction of USP and Project Management Office role with special focus to the structure, activities and responsibilities of this unit.✓ Introduction to USP work flows and internal structure.✓ General introduction of UNS and Project Management Office role with special focus to the structure, activities and responsibilities of this unit.✓ Introduction to UNS work flows and internal structure.
	Erasmus + – previous experience in Croatia & Serbia

Day 2	<p>Detailed exchange of lessons learnt and sharing of best practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ With coordination of the project(s) ✓ With implementation and internal procedures ✓ With reporting <p>HORIZON 2020 – previous experience in Croatia & Serbia</p> <p>Detailed exchange of lessons learnt and sharing of best practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ With coordination of the project(s) ✓ With implementation and internal procedures ✓ With reporting
Day 3	<p>Pre- and post-award management policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ National legislation - audits ✓ National legislation - legal system RS ✓ National legislation - financial system <p>Risk Management and Methodology</p>
Day 4	<p>Training day:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cover both the proposal management and project management phase of a research and capacity building projects including topics such as budget planning and proposal development, staff cost calculations through project management, recording expenses, reporting and audit. <p>Wrap up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Discussion on list of identified best practices and weaknesses in project planning and administration ✓ Identifying areas for potential future collaborations between UNS and USP ✓ Definition of actions points ✓ Conclusions

The visit was structured in two parts. First part was dedicated, in first instance, to mutual presentation of University structures and Units included in project management and in second instance to joint discussion and sharing of knowledge and best practices which included:

- The overview of different programs and funding opportunities
- The overview of funding rules and regulations
- National legislation and financial rules in international projects
- Budget preparation in project applications
- Project Management
- Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 - Previous experience in Croatia & Serbia
- Financial implementation of international projects in national legal - financial framework
- Reporting
- Audit etc.

In this part discussions and knowledge sharing on aforementioned topics were organized between institutions.

Second was the practical, training, part. Training was organized as a workshop where really project applications were analysed and problems were assessed.

Training concept in detailed:

- Horizon 2020 – Identify adequate call and analyze the call text
- Practical work - analyzing existing applications, application strengths and weaknesses
- Erasmus + – Identify adequate call and analyze the call text
- Practical work - analyzing existing applications, application strengths and weaknesses
- Horizon 2020 – project application and budget development tips & tricks
- Erasmus + – project application development tips & tricks
- Using useful tools for project management.

The main objective of this training was to help strengthen scientific/ research capacity, through upgrading and fine tuning the knowledge needed for successful proposal development, management and implementation of internationally funded projects.

III Contribution to the goals of the COST Targeted Network

The aim of BESTPRAC is to allow networking and exchanging financial, legal and administrative experiences and to share and develop best practices. This STSM did just that - UNS and USP shared their best practices and at the same time we strengthened and extended our professional network within the world of Research Management and Administration. Besides the strengthening of the existing cooperation between UNS and USP and the exchange of general experiences in project management and administration this STSM achieved the following specific goals:

- Compared the services and units that are providing support to academic staff regarding both pre- and post-award stage of R&D and Capacity Building projects;
- Exchange of internal processes of project monitoring, e.g. communication between financial management and project management, as well as of internal processes of coordination and communication in UNS and USP.
- Identifying strengths and weaknesses/risks in project management procedures (financial, administrative and legal) on both institutions.
- Exchange tools, methods and best practices that are used in the home and host institution for project management.
- Mutual training on financial and administrative implementation of international projects in national legal - financial framework
- Establishment of new contacts which can be mediators in starting a closer cooperation between UNS and USP in the field of EU funded projects.
- Improving existing practices of UNS and implementing new practices at PMO of the UNS and USP in order to increase the quality of projects implementation;
- Identify the areas for future collaboration.

IV Description of the main results obtained

UNS, as home institution, and USP as host institution, have years of experience in project management and implementation of EU funded projects, especially in ERASMUS+ projects, and this was the main topic. Therefore, to extent, share and upgrade, practical knowledge in project administration was of great added value for me as an early stage project manager and administrator. Additionally, as UNS and USP are involved, majorly in similar ERASMUS+ projects (previously Tempus), and therefore there are very likely similar issues regarding the project administration and management. One of the main goals of this visit was to identifying weaknesses and risks in project management procedures (financial, administrative and legal) on both institutions.

Financial, legal and administrative management of international projects includes a wide variety of tasks which are most commonly done by scientific/ research/ academic staff. On the other hand, financial and legal services/ offices and non-academic staff on scientific/ research/ HEI institutions are not well-prepared and educated to provide the necessary assistance during the project implementation, but also to participate in writing the project proposals.

For these reasons, various problems arise during the project implementation. Some of them are:

- On the one hand, intuitional administration offices are lacking familiarity with the financial rules set up by donors, and on the other hand, these rules are often missed to be respected by the scientific/research/ academic staff also because they usually misunderstood funding rules and regulations in different project types ;
- Not understanding the importance of administration procedures by researchers;
- Communication problems with European Commission staff (Project Officer) and / or agencies that are responsible for implementation of certain EU programs;
- Reporting delay; Time recording system (Timesheets);
- Alignment of internal procedures and external policies;
- The audit / project controlling etc.

In order to overcome the above-mentioned problems, in Europe, more often we could meet people engaged to work exclusively on financial, legal and administrative issues related to project implementation. These people are usually project team members and their name varies from institution to institution (research administrator, project manager, project officer, financial officer, finance project manager).

Within our discussion we have identified key challenges that we are facing in projects and so have accordingly set out ways in which skills can be strengthened and knowledge increased so as to be best able to handle these main challenges.

The challenges are:

- **Identifying EU funding opportunities** that are appropriate to the size, status, and mission of the organisation, and which can be identified in a timely fashion. Unfortunately many HEIs are poorly informed of funding opportunities. It is also common for to find out about funding opportunities at a very late stage and therefore be ill-prepared to make applications, or they make applications for funding which are actually aimed at objectives beyond their core mission
- **Developing effective partnerships** for project-based work. Establishing partnerships with other organisations, in order to jointly implement a project, particularly if the partner is in a different country. Often it is a struggle to identify suitable partners and often form partnerships with little preparation and poor mutual understanding.
- **Being competitive** and prepare project proposals which are robust and credible, and well presented, is a universal challenge.
- **Effective project management** and having the capacity to appropriately manage EU grant contracts acquire a special set of skills. Very often, project staff is recruited on a project-by-project basis and therefore they frequently do not have sufficient institutional memory to know how to manage EU funded projects according to EU procedures and following internationally-recognised good practices. Making project management mistakes can be very costly and for smaller organisations can be very destabilising.
- **Reporting** on the use of EU funds and ensuring compliance to EU procedures is all part of good project management, as explained above. However, it is stressed here as a separate challenge, as many institutions lack

the capacity to provide the quality of financial management and reporting that the EU expects, and consequently many institutions find the burden too heavy to bear. But, by following sound and simple financial management advice, the experience of having to report on EU funds can significantly strengthen a long term capacity for transparency and accountability.

We dealt with the risks a lot and we identified the major risks we are confronting during the project implementation:

- Legal requirements – incompatibility between Funding Rules and National Regulations;
- Bureaucratic inertia – this is a common problem in Western Balkan Countries;
- Number of partner institutions – large number of partners in consortia could potentially bring a lot of trouble during the project realization;
- Passive/Silent participants – in majority of projects on both sides this is the common problem as usually in consortia there are at least two partners that are being passive in both implementation and also fulfilling administrative and financial requirements;
- Time/schedule constraints – when some problem in implementation arises schedule constraints could be a problem, but not identified as a high risk, as in majority of projects time table could be quite flexible;
- Language barriers – this is also not identified as a high risk, as there are several ways to overcome this;
- Different viewpoints – it is not easy to describe this in a few sentences. A lot of conflict situations and obstacles arise because project beneficiaries have different point of view on and different perspective of tasks that needs to be fulfilled;
- Organizational changes in partner institutions – In HEIs this is especially common as management structure is changing often;
- Purchasing policy and procedures
- Accreditation procedure requirements – for curriculum development projects;
- Aligning funding rules with institutional procedures – rigid accounting and legal units at both HEIs commonly are the main obstacle in project management and implementation.

Risk control should be a process that follows the project until its completion. The project manager/ administrator should be responsible to monitor and perform the risk management activities.

Risk Management Methodology should consist of the following four phases:

Identification – detecting the events that may impair the success of the project. The occurrence of these events might be estimated and identified by brainstorming, questionnaires, professional checklists, analysis of related literature and articles or by drawing on the experience of the project manager and other team members.

Assessment – evaluation should be performed using quantitative procedures and qualitative methods in order to define a scale for the magnitude of the risk. Every risk event is assessed by two parameters: its probability to happen and the impact onto the project. The risk scale is based on a weighted processing of these two parameters.

Response Plan – the risk management team, in cooperation with the relevant parties, initiates a program for response that includes responsibility assignment, strategy of response and the time for implementation.

Control – during the lifecycle of the project, a predefined monitoring system must be implemented, in order to maintain full control over the development of the risk events. Since there might be risk events that were not identified during the planning process, the procedures of identification and assessment should be re-initiated.

The risk management methodology should recommend ongoing continuous control and reports to monitor new risks and to update the partners regarding the status of identified risks.

Main conclusions:

We agreed that on institutional level a special course should be provided by experienced professionals offering substantial help and benefit to a wide range of individuals, such as project managers, project coordinators, research officers, legal representatives as well as those working in the International Relations Office of Universities, accounting and legal units, to deal with the ever-demanding needs of reporting and monitoring of EC funded projects.

All actors, directly or indirectly, participation in any project phase (pre-development phase, preparing project application, project implementation, reporting) should gain general knowledge and understanding required to understand key elements of Project Management for EU funded projects.

Following capabilities must be acquired in order to have smooth project implementation:

- Deal with EC project reporting;
- Comprehend the obligations for visibility & communication/dissemination of EC funded projects;
- Prepare & deal with obligations resulting from EC audits;
- Understand the importance of project monitoring & evaluation;
- Set up evaluation tools for the project;
- Set up performance indicators for project monitoring & evaluation;
- Understand financial risks related to EC funded projects for their company/institution;
- Implement mitigation measures for dealing with financial risks associated with EC funded projects.

The management of HEIs, as a decision body, should:

- Comprehend in depth the importance of efficient & effective management for EU funded projects;
- Acquire valuable knowledge in relation to the obligations arising from EU funded projects;
- Understand the responsibilities of those involved in project management & coordination;
- Understand the responsibilities of those in charge of the technical & financial progress of an EC funded project;
- Appreciate the importance of applying best principles and practices for good management;
- Learn to identify at an early stage the financial risks related to EC funded projects;
- Be able to set up mitigation measures for the identified financial risks.

V Future collaboration with host institution

The applicant and senior researcher supporting this application have met before in different events and meetings, organized within different projects, and they jointly agreed that this STSM would pave the way for a more fruitful and productive collaboration with the aim of advance and share practices about the management and financial issues of European Projects. This STSM has opened a new field of collaboration between the two HEIs. There will be further contact in the future and continued sharing of knowledge between the two institutions. Specific action steps:

- Host supervisor Ivana Bilić will be engaged as external evaluator within WP Quality control and monitoring in Tempus project “Fostering students entrepreneurship and open innovation in university industry collaboration - iDEALab”;
- Joint application will be prepared in some of the forthcoming calls.

VI Confirmation by the host institution of successful execution of the STSM

Accompanies this report as a separate PDF file.

VII Other comments

Strengthening capacities of project managers in Serbia and Croatia will significantly contribute to successful implementation of ongoing projects, as well as increasing the number of new international projects that will be implemented in our countries. This STSM training is a step towards achieving this goal. This STSM allowed me as an early stage project manager to establish a personal professional relationship with the experienced colleagues at USP thus supplementing my on-the-job training at my home institution. Moreover, the mobility strengthen the partnership between UNS and USP.

