CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION FOR INNOVATION IN TOURISM: THE CASE OF OCEANOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT   One of the key cross-border collaboration areas covered by the support of the European Union is tourism. As a policy area of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, tourism is of strategic importance in the region. While EU reports present mostly aggregated information on the outcomes and achievements within respective programmes, this paper takes a case study approach and concentrates on a single project, aimed at introducing an augmented form of touring based on interactive multimedia guides in three oceanographic museums located in the South Baltic area. The research goal is to reveal the obstacles encountered during the project implementation, the solutions applied to ensure efficient cooperation, the project's influence on the mutual perception of the participating organizations and its benefits as seen from the perspective of the personnel involved in the project's realization as well as their general attitude to the project after its completion.

Introduction

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region considers tourism as an important growth factor and a focus industry of the region (EUSBSR, 2017). The European Union uses a number of programmes to facilitate the goals of its tourism policy (see Estol, Font, 2016, for its comprehensive description). While the respective programme reports may show the achieved results in aggregated quantitative terms of e.g. newly developed facilities or increase

of visitor numbers, it is interesting, what the individual project participants see as benefits for their organisations. As not all of the supported projects end successfully (see de Jong, 2014, p. 230, for an extreme case of failure), it is also worth investigating what project team members recognise as main issues.

In this paper, we address these research questions by performing a case study on the *BalticMuseums 2.0 Plus* project that implemented innovative solutions in tourism. This collaboration example was chosen, because it has been considered particularly *successful* from the point of view of both the authorities and the tourists. The project was presented as exemplary in an official guide (EC, 2015, p. 10), and its products were positively assessed by their end-users (not a single one of the 993 interviewed tourists evaluated them negatively – see Zdziebko, Drążek, Swacha, Muszyńska, 2017). The research results described in this paper reveal whether the partnership can also be considered successful from the point of view of the project participants.

Research method and surveyed participants

The chosen research method is a case study following a single-case holistic design. Such an approach has been successfully applied in the study of cross-border collaboration projects in the past (see e.g. Leibenath, 2007). The opinions of the individual project members were obtained with a computer-assisted self-interview. The survey contained 25 questions arranged in three sections: common, for museum employees only, and for museum managers only. The data describing age, sex, nationality and employing institution of the surveyed participants are presented in Figure 1. Sixteen project team members, including all three managers of the museum project partners, took part in the survey conducted 4 months after completion of the project.
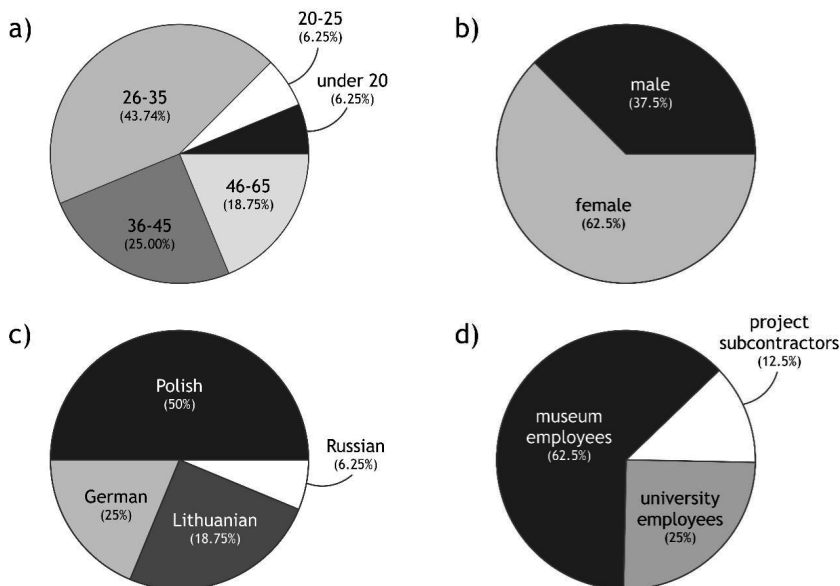

Figure 1. Age (a), sex (b), nationality (c) and employing institution (d) of the surveyed project participants

Source: own study.

The case project

The BalticMuseums 2.0 Plus project implemented multi-lingual electronic guides (e-guides) in three oceanographic museums: the NMFRI Gdynia Aquarium (Poland), the Lithuanian Sea Museum (Lithuania) and the German Oceanographic Museum (Germany). These museums had joined the consortium led by Stralsund University of Applied Sciences (Germany) co-operating with the University of Szczecin (Poland), the Museum of the World Ocean (Russia) and the Naval Museum Karlskrona (Sweden). With a total project budget of 1.1 million euro, part-financed by the European Union within the South Baltic Cross-border Co-operation Programme, the project team developed and shared multimedia content as well as translations, realized pilot investments for electronic devices and software and jointly tested the e-guides with visitors. Each museum applied different additional elements to their guided tours that exceeded the initial assumptions, according to their needs. While all the museums implemented multilingual e-guides, the Lithuanian Sea Museum developed tours in as much as six different languages, matching their broad international target group. NMFRI Gdynia Aquarium created a dedicated tour for kids, that had been developed together with teachers and kids' edutainment experts. The German Oceanographic Museum had built an outdoor tour in co-operation with the national park surrounding one of its locations. The BalticMuseums 2.0 Plus project, lasting from 2010 to 2015, was built on findings from the previous project, BalticMuseums 2.0, in which a similar project consortium had developed a prototype of an e-guide. This predecessor project enabled the team to build up mutual trust and gain experience in managing the complexity of cross-border, cross-industry and multi-organizational cooperation. Funded by the South Baltic Programme, the project had to comply with European, programme, and national regulations. Following the requirements of the programme, the project's lead partner was responsible for the overall project management and local implementation in its own organisation, while the partners were operating locally. The relations between the organisations were regulated by contracts.

Encountered obstacles

Figure 2 shows how the surveyed project participants evaluated the obstacles personally encountered during the realization of the project. The formal barriers connected to requirements, national or international law and internal rules were most challenging, as more than 40% of respondents assessed it as a serious or an average problem. More than 60% of the respondents did not consider sharing time spent on the project and other duties as deeply problematic. Similarly, communicating in foreign language and satisfying defined indicators was not a serious barrier to most of the respondents (almost 70%).

Only one of the surveyed project participants pointed to a problem from outside the list presented in Figure 2 – "many different tools to store and share information", noticing, however, that "their use became almost natural during the development of the project".
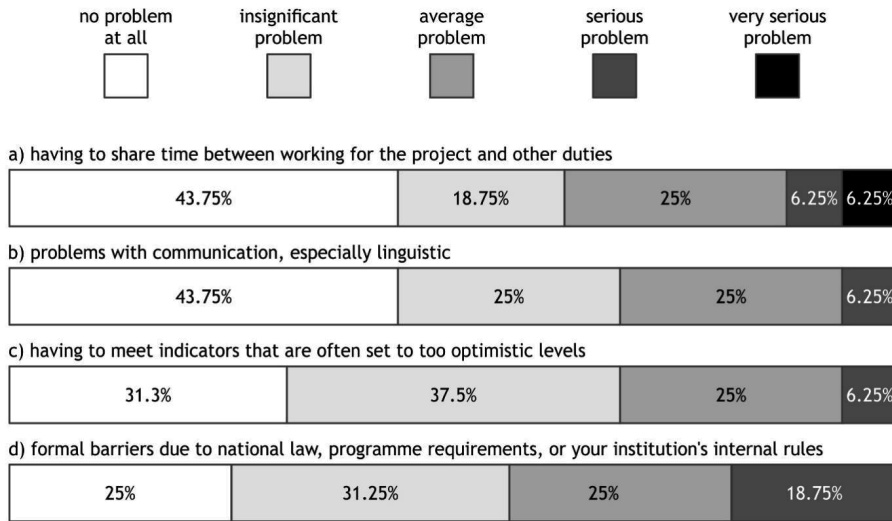
Figure 2. Evaluation of the obstacles personally encountered by the participants of the project during its implementation

Source: own study.

The managers pointed to other types of problems or challenges connected with project implementation, mentioning difficulties in:

a) collaborating with subcontractors as it covered two distinct areas (aquarium – and IT-related), whereas the museum managers were fluent only in the former, and the subcontractors only in the latter;

b) time management between the project and other duties;

c) upfront financing, especially due to the long delay (up to almost one year) between spending and the refund of the reported costs;

d) making museum administration staff agree to take part in the project.

Applied solutions

Due to the geographic dispersion of the institutions, the partners operated mostly as a virtual team. As a result, all but one of the surveyed project participants admitted that it made them learn to use new technologies. This was accomplished by knowledge transfer from other project partners and external experts, e.g. members of the advisory board. In fact, exchanging best practices and sharing knowledge was already found to be a key element of cross-border cooperation projects supported by the European Union (Ioannides, Nielsen, Billing, 2006, pp. 125–126).

This knowledge transfer was enabled by a culture of feedback and continuous improvement, along with formal and informal communication channels, and supported with a simple knowledge management system based on a wiki platform. Research outcomes show that such system has a positive impact on the project success (Gasik, 2011) and job satisfaction (Kianto, Vanhala, Heilmann, 2016).

The results of this knowledge transfer can be considered as a long-term benefit, as the surveyed project participants either have already used the technologies learned during the project outside of it (62.5%) or plan to do that in future (25%).

In the framework of a virtual team, face-to-face meetings gain additional importance. The rhythm, framework and content of these meetings were adapted to the project's needs, a success factor according to findings of Maznevski and Chudoba (2013). These meetings were dedicated to reinforcing trust by team-building measures at all partner locations, to take joint democratic decisions and to develop creative ideas.

All the surveyed project participants agreed that the face-to-face meetings were important for the project implementation, though they differed in what was their most important aspect. To most of the respondents (62.5%), it was "mainly because they allowed to establish direct interpersonal contacts and team-building, even if their substantive effects (information exchange and task coordination) could as well be obtained by using information and communication technology tools". Two other explanations (each chosen by 18.75% interviewees) were: "mainly because they allowed to make arrangements on priorities and task coordination in a quick and effective manner" and "mainly because they allowed for a more effective information exchange than information and communication technology tools".

All the three managers of the partnering museums declared that the participation in the project influenced their respective institution's marketing plans. The project's promotional success was based on several online and traditional campaigns that gained public interest, e.g. using billboards, search engine marketing, special events and an online photo competition. The project also used the programme's communication channels as well as national and international conferences to promote its products. It gained attention well beyond the programme region, being presented at a European Tourism Conference by the European Commission, in the meeting for members of the European Parliament in cooperation with the German Marine Research Consortium, and mentioned as a best-practice example in the European funding guide for tourism by the Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry of the European Union (EC, 2015, p. 10). The educational effects of the project were also presented to marine educators and scientists during the European Marine Science Educators Association conference in Gothenburg, Sweden (EMSEA, 2014).

Acknowledged benefits

Asked what was the major benefit from the project (Figure 3), none of the surveyed picked the financial aid from the European Union as an answer that reflected their opinion; 62.5% chose the exchange of knowledge and experiences between the project partners, which confirms De Sousa's (2012) observation that cross-border collaboration is "a learning process", and 37.5% – establishing closer ties between the project partners which may provide results in the future in various ways.

Regarding the established contacts, Figure 4 shows how the surveyed project participants evaluated their various aspects. Exchange of information and experiences during the project was assessed as of primary importance by more than 80% of the questioned. More than half of the respondents considered institutional contacts as of primary importance. Interpersonal contacts were essential for almost 90% of the project associates. One person indicated another aspect as of primary priority, i.e. building EU consciousness based on shared values.
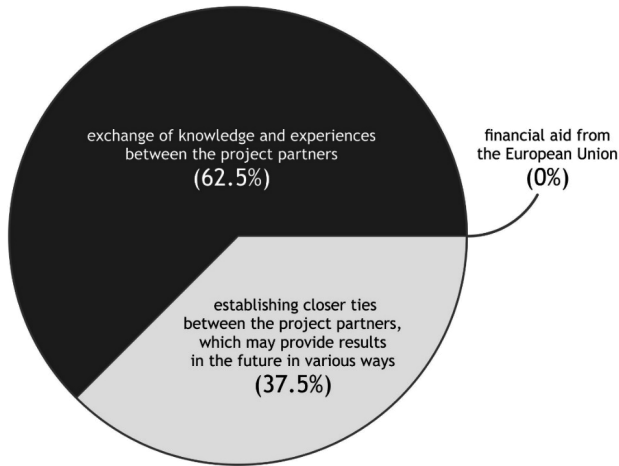
Figure 3. The primary benefit from the project in the perspective of its participants
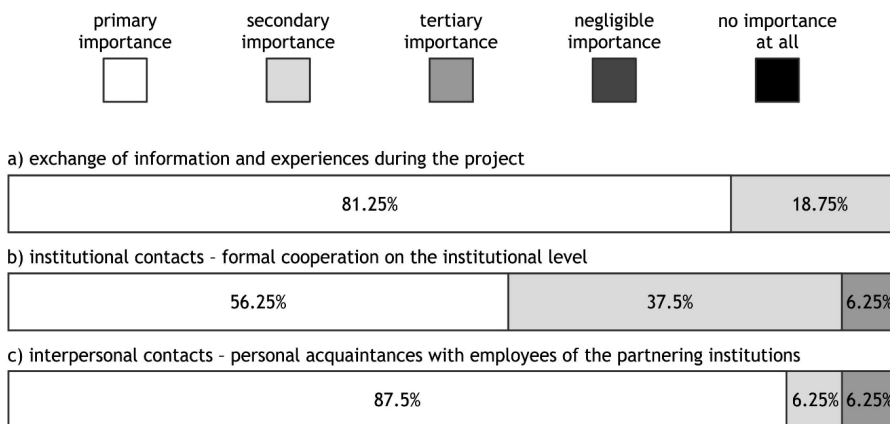
Source: own study.

Figure 4. Evaluation of various aspects of established contacts by the surveyed

Source: own study.

The respondents considered project results important for their respective institutions mostly because of increased attractiveness for visitors (80% of answers) and introduced modern form of visiting (20%). No one indicated increased income from sold tickets as relevant. It is not possible to evaluate what was the particular impact of introducing e-guides on the number of visitors as this number is influenced by many other factors.

In the opinion of 80% of the surveyed participants, the main project outcome (the e-guides) would not have been introduced in their respective institutions had they not taken part in the project, with 50% pointing to high

investment cost and 30% to the high risk of commercial failure of the investment. Only 20% believed it would be introduced anyway, yet later.

Regarding the role of scientific partners in the project consortium, the museum employees attributed the main benefits to them being part of the project in:

– their contribution in organization and coordination of the project (indicated by 80%),
– the knowledge of technology they brought in (indicated by 60%),
– their different point of view which helped in solving issues that emerged during the project development (indicated by 60%).
– their direct contribution in the project implementation (indicated by 30%).

General evaluation of the project partnership

The experiences of project participation are generally evaluated positively by both museum and non-museum employees, as 87.5% of the interviewees declared they would like to get personally involved in similar international projects in the future, whereas none answered in a definitely negative way. All the three museum managers confirmed that they would support their respective institutions' involvement in similar projects in the future.

Comparing their expectations from the moment they joined the project to what it actually turned out to be, 50% of the surveyed declared they were surprised positively and not a single one declared to be surprised negatively, whereas almost 44% stated that the project turned out to be exactly what they had expected.

The participation in the project also positively influenced the mutual perception of the museums. Before the project started, only 20% considered the other participating museums as potential partners for cooperation; at the end of project, this number grew to 100%.

Limitations

The results presented here come from a case study of just one project. The survey was performed soon after the end of its successful completion, which may be considered as a bias factor contributing to overly optimistic evaluation of the project participation. On the other hand, benefits of the project fully unfold in a longer period of time after its termination.

Without a wide-ranged survey, it is impossible to tell to what extent the identified problems, solutions and benefits are characteristic for the case project alone or cross-border collaboration projects in general. Still, the study results, as they are, provide a valid base for future research in this domain.

Conclusions

In this paper, the case of a cross-border collaboration project aimed at implementing innovative solutions in South Baltic tourist attractions has been used to learn how people who personally contributed their work to the project perceived its implementation from a post-project perspective.

The results of the survey show that the representatives of the partner institutions share the positive opinion on the project, also expressed by the authorities and tourists. Although they are aware of the obstacles they had to overcome, such as formal barriers, time constraints, cross-industry communication challenges or pre-financing, for nearly all of them the project met or even exceeded their expectations.

While most of the respondents acknowledge that the new technology (e-guides) increased attractiveness of their respective sites for visitors and would not have been introduced without the financial support of the European Union, they especially appreciate its benefits in other aspects, such as the exchange of information and experiences, and developing contacts – even more interpersonal than institutional. The two key enablers of project success as perceived by the project partners are the established direct personal contacts and the applied knowledge management solutions.

The positive perception of the partnership allowed its further development: four of the initial five project partners continue the cooperation under the umbrella of a new project, BalticMuseums: Love IT!, also part-financed by the Interreg South Baltic Programme. This project aims at developing gamified multimedia Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) e-guides, hence it forms a natural continuation of the BalticMuseums 2.0 Plus project, which provided e-guides on museum-owned devices. Uniting nine project partners and eight associated partners, the new project significantly extended its collaboration network. The positive perception of the case study project of the participating institutions likely spread beyond the project network, encouraging other organisations to join the cooperation.

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