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Transnational partner meetings in the face of the pandemic – the case of Strategic Partnerships implementing international projects

Abstract. During the pandemic of COVID-19 the work on projects that require team working has changed. The face-to-face meetings, with the physical presence of participants, were moved to virtual space, enforcing the change in the way of project partners' communication. The aim of the paper is to indicate the risks in the area of transnational project collaboration resulting from replacing face-to-face meetings with virtual mobility, from the skills' development perspective. The authors of the paper explain the mechanisms of transnational projects and present how the change of communication towards purely virtual mode may affect the development of skills needed in effective project collaboration and transcultural communication. The discussion is based on the review of the available literature on the challenges of global project teams, the instrumental case study combined with the analysis of statistical data on organisations' participation in European Strategic Partnerships within Erasmus+ Programme and authors' experience gained through participant observation of transnational meetings conducted in the period of 2018-2020. Project partners' participation in face-to-face meetings fosters their personal development and contributes to effective transnational collaboration. The great variety of cognitive, personal, social and communicational skills that face-to-face meetings elicit, and thus contribute to the quality of transnational project team collaboration in the multicultural environment depend on physical presence and interaction of partners. Replacing real presence of project partners with their virtual attendance reduces chances for these skills to be developed and thus may negatively influence the quality of the project collaboration. Taking into account the value that the real presence of project partners brings to international partnerships as well as the development of project team members, it is worth considering, as soon as the pandemic situation allows it, returning to planning and organizing face-to-face international partnership meetings.

Keywords: strategic partnerships, virtual teams, pandemic, transnational meetings, intercultural communication, sustainable development

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1. Introduction

The lockdown and social distancing, which are the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the importance of social contacts. It is not only the question of relationships with family, friends and collaborators. In the age when the whole world has become a global village thanks to the ease of travelling, we miss social contacts that extend far beyond our local community or culture. Given the fact that virtual contacts are becoming increasingly routine, we are beginning to appreciate the value of journeys involving encounters with other cultures in face-to-face contacts. This realisation can be observed in all aspects of our lives: from tourism to international collaboration. All these activities have one thing in common: willingness to learn from other people. For ages philosophers, like Aristotle (Steel & Primavesi, 2012), psychologists and sociologists pointed out that cognition was the driving force of human activity. From the epistemological perspective, the more contacts with various people, the better, wider and deeper our learning can be. It is especially important for professionals, who are often in search for the most optimal solutions, taking into account various perspectives, respecting diverse points of view and accepting different working styles in the process of solving a problem. This combination of factors in professional work is the basis for the idea of transnational, project-based work. The aim of the article is to indicate the risks posed to skills development in the area of transnational, partnership collaboration resulting from replacing face-to-face meetings of project partners with virtual ones, as a result of restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Project based collaboration and Strategic Partnerships

Projects existed long before project management was defined as a profession. In 2500 BC the pharaohs of Egypt built the pyramids. Another example of an engineering project is the Great Wall of China, most of which was completed in the early 3rd century BC. Projects have always accompanied the development of human civilisation, although the history of project management is relatively new, with roots in the beginnings of the 20th century. There are numerous definitions of a project. Generally, a project can be defined as “a sequence of unique, complex, and connected activities that have one goal or purpose and that must be completed by a specific time, within budget, and according to specification” (Wysocki, 2014, p. 4) or as “a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result” (*Project Management Institute*, 2013, p. 3). Although projects

may involve a single individual, they are more productive when a group of collaborators is working on the problem.

The continuing process of European integration and rapid globalisation have been important drivers of growing collaboration between organisations from different regions and countries. The European Union supports transnational collaboration and provides funds for establishing strategic partnerships. “They are called ‘strategic’ because they aim to contribute to the achievement of policy priorities and have a wider impact, they break new ground, they bring different areas together, they promote change for the better” (European Commission, 2015, p. 6).

This article is based on the analysis of educational projects conducted within the Erasmus+ Programme in the period 2014-2020. Participation in the programme is open to schools, universities, associations, foundations, employers’ organizations, entities involved in activities directed at social groups in need, as well as analytical centres and research institutes. Projects are implemented by strategic partnerships consisting of institutions from at least three different countries entitled to participate, so called programme countries. These include all member states of the European Union and 7 non-EU countries: North Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Turkey, Serbia, Great Britain. As defined by the European Commission “strategic partnerships aim to support the development, transfer and/or implementation of innovative practices as well as the implementation of joint initiatives promoting cooperation, peer learning and exchanges of experience at European level” (European Commission, 2020, p. 100). They range “from simple cooperation projects between small scale organisations (like schools or informal groups of young people) to rather sophisticated and large-scale projects focusing on the development and exchange of innovative outputs in all fields of education, training and youth” (European Commission, 2020, p. 122). The European Commission recommends that strategic partnerships should be composed of diverse organisations contributing their experience and know-how in specific fields, addressed by the project. A variety of organisations involved in a partnership and their complementary expertise are likely to lead to achieving high quality project results and thus more effectively respond to problems important for the EU countries. The duration of such projects ranges from 6 to 36 months, based on the objective of the project and on the type of activities planned over time. Partners in the partnership are led by the applicant organisation. By the virtue of the mandate signed by all partners, the applicant organisation is authorised to represent the partnership during project implementation.

Strategic partnerships supporting innovation can receive funds to develop intellectual outputs that are tangible deliverables of the project (such as curricula, pedagogical and youth work materials, open educational resources, IT tools, analyses, studies, peer-learning methods, etc.). Another important category of eligible activities are ‘Transnational Project Meetings’, which are face-to-face meet-

ings between project partners, organised for implementation and coordination purposes (European Commission, 2020). The meetings are typically organised in 3-6 months intervals with physical participation of all partners' representatives and each time hosted by a different partner organisation.

3. Skills in intercultural management

The variety of specialisations and cultural backgrounds that partners contribute to a strategic partnership ensures that a wide scope of aspects and perspectives can be taken into account during project work. On the other hand, managing international projects conducted by partners located in remote parts of the world, often in different time-zones, speaking different languages and following local calendars of cultural or religious festivals is likely to present numerous challenges. Successful managers of international partnerships are aware of these challenges and are able to benefit from the intercultural dimension of their project teams. Binder (2007, p. 24) states that "global project managers need to recognise how different attitudes, beliefs, behavioural norms and basic assumptions and values can influence collaboration among team members coming from multiple countries, and learn how to adapt their leadership style to the different cultures involved in the project". Work in intercultural environments also requires good communication skills. Jens Allwood (2013, pp. 34-35) emphasizes the importance of being cautious about stereotyping and generalizing based on cultural background. Cultural differences may impact the way the same communication is understood by project members coming from various countries. This is why it is clear that in addition to knowledge of the field, various skills are required from project team members to work successfully in the project environment, including management, teaching and communication skills.

According to Proctor and Dutta (1995, p. 18), skills can be defined as "goal-directed, well-organized behaviour that people acquire through practice". Of the many existing skills models, the one proposed by Kantambu Latting and Ramsey (2005) focuses on intergroup competences and is based on the approach involving three categories of skills: self-related, interpersonal (based on relations), contextual (building on critical thinking and consciousness) and organizational. Following this approach, the authors of this article identified four categories of skills that are crucial in educational projects, since they are related to four main spheres of interest regarding project work: cognitive, personal, social and communication skills. It is also possible to distinguish intercultural skills, but in this case, culture was not treated as a separate category, as it is inherently associated with international cooperation and is manifested in all other skills. The typology is shown in

Table 1. Typology of skills required in project-based work environment of international partnerships

Cognitive skills	Personal skills	Social skills	Communication skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting to know cultures in their own environment • Learning nonverbal signs • Learning cultural-dependent nonverbal signs • Peer learning • Ability to contextualize theoretical knowledge • Ability to put theory into practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long distance planning • Self-organization (self-management) • Ability to divide the work between personal and team work • Team management • Holistic approach to working • Responsibility for the working environment • Focusing on tasks • Self-awareness, self-esteem • Pursuing innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to negotiate • Assertiveness • Empathy and ability to recognize needs of others • Responsibility for the team in teamwork • Ability to build the network • Understanding of working and living style of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextualization of communication • Nonverbal communication • Communication with other cultures • Participation in intercultural dialogue • Fostering and eliciting various standpoints

Source: own study on the basis of Kantambu Latting and Ramsey (2005).

Table 1 and further referred to in Table 4, where specific skills developed in the process of preparing and participating in transnational meetings are presented.

The skills mentioned above play an important role not only in joint preparation of projects’ intellectual outputs, but also in project management, including its important aspect related to transnational meetings.

4. Virtualisation of project work

The growth in Internet accessibility, combined with the rapid development of ICT¹ and a simultaneous decline in the cost of communication encourage organisations to shift towards increased virtual work and implementation of global projects with other partners. This is achieved by means of global virtual teams, which can be defined as “teams comprised of individuals from various geographic locations and/or cultural backgrounds who rely on communication technology to interact with one another to some degree” (Carter et al., 2014, p. 225). Teams involved in transnational partnerships within EU Programmes are not entirely virtual, because, apart from virtual work, they also need to meet face to face to exchange experiences, ideas and build upon opportunities that physical presence

¹ Information and communications technology.

and interaction with members from other countries and cultures offer. This form of collaboration can be described as hybrid teams, which use a combination of computer-mediated and face-to-face communication, depending on which one serves better to achieve their goals (Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003). Face-to-face transnational meetings are embedded in this type of intercultural and European cooperation between various types of organisations from multiple countries. They have a positive impact on the exchange of knowledge, provide opportunities for learning about other cultures as well as experiencing and promoting European values and ideas. Physical presence of partners help to manage projects in a more efficient way. According to Rita Mulcahy the lack of face-to-face meetings of team members results in the possibility of increased conflicts, has a negative impact on the productivity of project activities, but also influences other factors that may cause changes in the schedule and increase of project costs (Mulcahy, 2005).

5. Methods

The considerations presented in the article are based on the review of the available literature on the challenges of global project teams, instrumental case studies (Langley & Royer, 2006) and the analysis of statistical data concerning participation in European Strategic Partnerships between 2014-2018 (latest available data). Case studies reviewed by the authors include a purposeful sample of international projects implemented between 2014-2020 by Strategic Partnerships within the Erasmus+ Programme and describe experiences gained through participant observation of 23 transnational meetings held in 2018-2020. The authors analysed the way face-to-face meetings enabled participants to develop skills that are important for transnational project collaboration in the field of education and sustainable development. The skills mentioned above are practised during face-to-face meetings, which involve a lot of communication, exchange of knowledge as well as multicultural contacts, particularly in international project teams. The main problem is discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most project work, including partner meetings, is conducted online. While this is definitely a more cost-effective option, it brings risks to global projects based on transnational collaboration and exchange of people, ideas and know-how. The COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent phenomenon. The literature so far lacks an overview of its possible impact on the social aspects of international cooperation, especially regarding threats to sustainable development projects.

6. Results

6.1. Growing interest in partnership transnational cooperation

The analysis of available statistical data related to international projects carried out by Strategic Partnerships within the Erasmus+ Programme (Key Action 2) from its start in 2014 until 2018 (latest available data) shows an increasing trend in the number of such partnerships. One key element in this form of collaboration is the transnational exchange based on short-time mobility of the staff involved. This form of international collaboration between organisations from multiple countries attracts more organisations each year in Europe, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. International projects carried out by strategic partnerships within the Erasmus+ Programme (KA2)

Year	Projects contracted		Organisations participating		Organisations participating as Coordinators		Organisations participating as Partners	
	Total	Poland	Total	Poland	Total	Poland	Total	Poland
2014	1732	123	9 823	no data available	1732	123	no data available	no data available
2015	1910	143	10 988	632	1910	143	9 078	489
2016	2374	200	13 164	777	2374	200	10 790	577
2017	2842	225	15 538	1053	2842	225	12 696	828
2018	3662	271	18 505	1287	3662	271	14 843	1016

Source: based on Erasmus+ Statistics, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/statistics_en

In 2018, in all of Europe over twice as many projects submitted by KA2 Strategic Partnerships were contracted as in 2014 – the starting year of the Erasmus+ Programme. For projects contracted in Poland the growth is even higher and amounts to 120%. In total, 88% more organisations were involved in Strategic Partnerships under the Erasmus+ programme in 2018 than in 2014. Details about participating organisations per country are available starting from 2015. Between 2015 and 2018, the number of Polish organisations participating in Strategic Partnerships conducting Erasmus+ KA2 projects grew by 104%. The growing trend can be observed regardless of whether organisations play the role of a coordinator or that of a partner.

The thematic scope of projects undertaken by organisations participating in Erasmus+ is wide. The authors have selected 7 Strategic Partnerships within the

Erasmus+ Programme, in the field of education, which meet the following criteria: focus on tourism and sustainable development, with the participation of at least one organization from Poland, representing both finished projects as well as ongoing ones. In the case of finished projects, the additional criterion was the label of a success story or a good practice awarded by the European Commission. The projects, with their partnerships, aims and further reference, are presented in Table 3.

The above sample of Erasmus+ projects involved 45 organisations from 18 countries and included over 25 face-to-face transnational meetings. The possibility of organising face-to-face meetings, which are an inherent part of this type of collaboration, without the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 lockdown, contributed to the success of transnational collaboration and made it possible to achieve high quality results.

6.2. Impact of the pandemic on transnational project meetings

Globalisation of project work accompanied by rapid development of supportive ICT increasingly prompts project teams to opt for virtual collaboration. The prospect of replacing face-to-face meetings with virtual ones has obvious economic benefits. It was also a perfect solution given the lockdown restrictions during the pandemic making it impossible to hold face-to-face meetings of project partners. Under the circumstances, shifting towards virtual meetings was inevitable and enabled project teams to continue project work. However, long-term replacement of face-to-face meetings with on-line communication may pose a serious threat to the added value that physical presence and teamwork bring to EU transnational projects and skills development of their team members.

Based on observations made while attending transnational project meetings before the outbreak of the pandemic and comparing them with online project meetings organised after March 2020, the authors conclude that the latter format may make it difficult for project team members to develop numerous skills necessary for successful project collaboration. The analysis addressed the main aspects of project team meetings, which are crucial in project management planning and are associated with the nature of international projects (like e.g. time or geographical coverage). Selected aspects of face-to-face and virtual meetings were compared. In the next step, the authors focused their attention on skills that are developed particularly during face-to-face meetings and whose development is severely limited during online meetings. These skills are important for

Table 3. Selected international projects implemented between 2014-2020 by Strategic Partnerships within the Erasmus+ Programme in the field of education, focused on tourism and sustainable development

Title	Participating countries	Number of organisations in the partnership	Project goal	Project status	Awards by European Commission	Link
TRY: TTransition Youth – sustainable development and local entrepreneurship (Transnational Youth Initiative)	Spain, Poland, Italy	3	The main aim of the project was to prepare youth groups for being engaged in local society activities, and a practical training of local entrepreneurship based on the rules of sustainable development.	finished	success story & good practice	http://try.youth.pl/
ecoPROFESSION – Strategic Partnership for adjusting systems of vocational education to the challenges of the green economy	Germany, Italy, Poland	8	The partnership's aim was to elaborate innovative attitudes, curricula and apprenticeship programs for 3 occupations key for the partnership: food production, building services, renewable energy sources, in 3 language versions.	finished	good practice	https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2015-1-PL01-KA202-017172
Youth Marketing Policy Makers for Sustainable Development	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, FYR of Macedonia, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	11	To increase the creativity of young people and to contribute to developing the capabilities of civil society organizations in the youth field through gaining marketing management knowledge about the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental benefits.	finished	success story & good practice	http://youmust.org/index.html resultsavailableat: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/573098-EPP-1-2016-1-MK-EPPKA2-CBY-AC-PALA

Table 3 – cont.

Title	Participating countries	Number of organisations in the partnership	Project goal	Project status	Awards by European Commission	Link
Sustainable Consumption and Production in Social Life	Estonia, Italy, Poland, Romania, Turkey	5	The project's objective was to raise students' awareness of sustainable consumption and production in social life.	finished	success story & good practice	http://sustainableconsumptionandproduction.weebly.com/
HI-GLOBE – Highlighting the Potential of English Language Learning for Global Education Purposes	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, Turkey	6	The objective of the HI-GLOBE project is to enhance the potential of English-language learning for Global Educational purposes.	ongoing	-	http://www.hi-globe.eu/
A Step forward in Wellbeing in the field of Adult Education – WELLNESS2	Bulgaria, Estonia, Cyprus, Italy, Poland	6	The project focuses on ensuring wellbeing in the learning environment in adult education. Wellbeing of learners, teachers and training managers is the basis for effective teaching and learning.	ongoing	-	www.projectwellness.eu
Access IT: Innovation for Accessible Tourism in Natural and Rural Areas	Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Poland, Spain	6	The project aims to build capacity of EU tourism SMEs operating in natural and rural areas to bridge accessibility gaps through stakeholder co-design of innovative solutions for tourism products for customers with specific access requirements.	ongoing	-	http://accessitpro.eu/

Source: Erasmus+ Project Results Platform, <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/>

Table 4. Aspects of transnational partner meetings affected by the pandemic and its impact on skills development

Selected aspects of transnational meetings	Situation before the pandemic	Situation during the pandemic	Skills developed in the process of face-to-face meetings rather than during virtual events
Preparation			
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date of the meeting usually announced several months in advance to enable all partners to find a suitable two-day slot 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires less advance notice as it is easier for partners to book 1-4 hours than two working days plus travel, as is the case in face-to-face meetings • Different time-zones of participants need to be taken into account 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long distance planning • Ability to negotiate • Assertiveness
Frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On average there are four partnership meetings in a two year project. The meetings are held in approx. six-months intervals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be made the same day, but partners need to confirm their availability owing to health and organizational risks resulting from the pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long distance planning • Self-organization • Ability to divide the work between individual work and teamwork
Geographical coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each meeting is usually organized by a different partner in the partnership and takes place in a different country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrelevant as the meeting is held online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextualization of communication
Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligations of the host: preparations of the venue and accommodation infrastructure • Obligations of the participants: travel arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligations of the host: preparations of communication platform that will be used for the meeting and granting access to all participants • Obligations of the participants: equipment to conduct the on-line meeting (computer, internet access, ear-phones etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team management skills • Self-organization • Holistic approach to working • Planning of wellbeing in team work (ability of recognizing the others' needs)
The actual meeting			
Way of conduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosted by one of the partner organizations in its country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online with the use of ICT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility for the working environment
Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically two working days plus travel time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda often shortened to one day (usually three-five hours) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on tasks • Knowledge of the working style used in different cultures
Social aspect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All partners meet in person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-verbal communication, ability to communicate outside the personal comfort zone. • Ability of networking for cooperation

Table 4 – cont.

Selected aspects of transnational meetings	Situation before the pandemic	Situation during the pandemic	Skills developed in the process of face-to-face meetings rather than during virtual events
Cultural aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners need to use non-verbal communication. They are learning to read face expressions – in addition to speech, they also pay attention to the behaviour of other partners Partners observe the hosts acting in their home-culture environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is largely limited to verbal communication The partners do not have an opportunity to observe anyone in the home-culture environment. This affects the process of communication Partners are focusing on understanding words, not people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-verbal communication Cognition of cultural-dependent nonverbal communication Contacting other cultures Intercultural dialogue Holistic approach to people in the team-working Cognition of cultures in their real environment
Focus of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advance planning, travel to the meeting place and being together with all participants in the same venue is conducive to focus entirely on the planned agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working from home, which in many countries is the recommended or even expected option, requires people to be able to divide attention, which can be distracted with aspects not related to the ongoing meeting, such as taking care of other household members or unexpected issues of every-day life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing on tasks Responsibility for the group you work with
Quality of communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct communication between partners in the working language of the project (in most cases in English) Personal interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dependent on the quality of the Internet connection and the participants' equipment. Interaction is difficult 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-verbal communication (mutual understanding) Ability to contextualise communication Networking building Peer learning
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Openness, direct presentation and brainstorming of new ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICT may limit the exchange of ideas and discussions with the involvement of all participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursuing innovation Fostering and eliciting various standpoints Assertiveness Nonverbal communication and perception of nonverbal signals
Personal visits to local organisations related to the project subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fully possible and thus providing an opportunity to exchange experiences, good practices and know-how between the countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impossible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability of contextualise the work planned in theoretical way Ability to put the theory into praxis Knowledge of working style of institutions in other cultural environment
Social activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social meetings apart from the work (lunches, dinners, trips, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings limited strictly to work-related aspects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding of working and living style of others Holistic approach to the process of cooperation

Source: own study.

successful project collaboration and for the promotion of values underlying the Erasmus+ Programme: mobility of people, thoughts and ideas. The results of the analysis are summarised in Table 4. It contains a list of skills that can be acquired or developed by attending face-to-face meetings, skills which are less likely to be used during virtual meetings. The table is divided into two main sections that correspond to the major phases of project work regarding communication in the form of transnational meetings.

The first phase is the meeting preparation. It requires mainly personal and social skills (see Table 1). Before the pandemic, the host of a face-to-face meeting was mostly occupied with on-site preparation, but all partners had to plan their trip, accommodation, take part in the planning of meeting activities, while the amount of effort required to prepare an online meeting is comparatively minimal. The planning of a face-to-face meeting involves more situations that require partners to reach a compromise, exercise assertiveness and be able to recognize the needs of others.

The second phase corresponds to what happens during the meeting itself. Because of the variety of matters that arise during meetings, there are many different skills that can be developed in the process of direct communication between people. Probably the most important factor is the variety of ways in which participants can communicate. Apart from the possibility of practice language skills, which is also present in online communication, the overall context, including nonverbal communication, plays an important role. Online meetings focus on verbal messaging, at the expense of gestures and face expressions, which are also very important in multinational partnerships and can be noticed only during a face-to-face meeting. The complexity of communication involves other groups of skills: personal, social and cognitive ones.

What is also important from the multicultural perspective is the ability to put communication and the working process in the cultural context. During a virtual meeting partners usually limit themselves to using the project working language, which is mostly English, while in direct contacts they are able to use other languages and experience non-verbal communication used in other cultures. This is extremely important for establishing common space for teamwork that accommodates different working styles. This aspect of transcultural communication is almost impossible to be developed without the partners' physical presence.

Of course, Table 4 does not include all skills that can be developed during face-to-face meetings, such as responding to a crisis situation or a conflict, but it shows the most common ones that could be observed by the authors.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Globalization has many consequences, not only of an economic nature. One of them is the ease and speed with which problems and crises spread across the globe, which requires transnational and supra-cultural action. It is for this reason that initiatives such as Erasmus+, one of EU's flagship programmes are so important.

European organisations tend to show a growing interest in becoming actively involved in transnational Strategic Partnerships offered under the Erasmus+ Programme. Between 2014 and 2018 the number of KA2 strategic partnership projects contracted in Europe more than doubled. One of the principles of the programme is the exchange of people, cultures, ideas and thoughts (European Commission, 2020). The physical mobility of staff involved in the projects constitutes a cornerstone of this kind of international collaboration. The idea of exchanging people and thoughts, however, involves the need to develop skills in intercultural communication. In the era of globalization, it is not possible to have intensive development without international cooperation. This in turn requires taking into account diverse cultural environments of participating partners, especially regarding communication and mutual expectations (Abudi, 2013).

The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic has forced people to maintain social distancing and shift towards virtual communication. Thanks to the easy access to information and communication technologies, transnational projects have been able to continue their work but entirely virtually. However, the widespread virtualisation of communication within transnational strategic partnerships has created a serious risk to the value that physical presence of project partners brings to EU projects. Face-to-face meetings, involving personal contacts and direct exchange of ideas between project partners, are a great opportunity to build good relations, establish trust and mutual understanding between project partners from geographically and culturally diverse areas. That added value of face-to-face meetings can hardly be achieved in the case of virtual meetings. Preparation and participation in face-to-face transnational project meetings is conducive to the development of participants' cognitive, personal, social and communicational skills. Replacing physical presence of project partners with their virtual attendance limits the opportunities for these skills to be developed and thus may negatively influence the quality of project collaboration (Mulcahy, 2005, p. 280). Online communication inhibits the development of a number of competences necessary not only for intercultural dialogue, but also for efficient management of projects created by international teams. This is par-

ticularly important given the fact that project results should be universal enough to enable their implementation in any European country or outside of Europe. International partnerships that focus on transculturalism and target global issues, like tourism or sustainable development, need to complement their virtual collaboration with the possibility of project partners meeting physically in order to develop deliverables in the physical environment of transnational space; otherwise, results will only be created in the artificial space of virtual reality.

Although the transition to the virtual sphere reduces costs and thus may be a tempting long-term solution for many organisations even after the pandemic is over, the experience of recent years shows that in our activities, productivity should increasingly give way to the quality of transnational collaboration. That is why, as soon as possible, we should revive the idea of direct cooperation in face-to-face meetings, even if it requires the allocation of funds to cover travelling expenses. One should not underestimate the variety of cognitive, personal, social and communicational skills that face-to-face meetings activate, thus contributing to the quality of transnational project team collaboration.

In the light of the above, it seems useful to continue the research how the long-term shift from face-to-face transnational meetings to virtual ones may affect the quality of results implemented by European partnerships.

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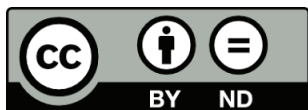
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Transnarodowe spotkania partnerskie w obliczu pandemii na przykładzie Partnerstw Strategicznych realizujących międzynarodowe projekty

Streszczenie. W czasie pandemii COVID-19 praca zespołowa o charakterze projektowym uległa zmianie. Spotkania współpracowników zostały przeniesione do rzeczywistości wirtualnej, co wymusiło zmianę stylu komunikowania się w partnerstwach. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie zagrożeń, z perspektywy rozwoju umiejętności zespołu projektowego w obszarze ponadnarodowej współpracy projektowej, wynikających z konieczności narzuconego przez pandemię COVID-19 zastąpienia rzeczywistych spotkań mobilnością wirtualną. Autorzy artykułu wyjaśniają mechanizmy międzynarodowych projektów partnerskich i prezentują, w jaki sposób pełna wirtualizacja komunikacji może wpłynąć na rozwój umiejętności ważnych z punktu widzenia międzynarodowej współpracy i komunikacji. Rozważania przedstawione w artykule opierają się na przeglądzie literatury poświęconej wyzwaniom globalnych zespołów projektowych, instrumentalnym studium przypadku, analizie statystycznej aktywności Partnerstw Strategicznych na przykładzie unijnego programu Erasmus+ oraz doświadczeniach autorów zebranych z wykorzystaniem metody obserwacji uczestniczącej podczas spotkań międzynarodowych przeprowadzonych w latach 2018-2020. Uczestnictwo partnerów projektowych w realnych spotkaniach sprzyja ich rozwojowi osobistemu i przyczynia się do efektywnej współpracy ponadnarodowej. Zastąpienie rzeczywistego uczestnictwa partnerów w spotkaniach ich wirtualną obecnością ogranicza szanse na rozwój wielu umiejętności poznawczych, osobistych, społecznych i komunikacyjnych uczestników międzynarodowych zespołów projektowych, a tym samym może negatywnie wpłynąć na jakość współpracy. Biorąc pod uwagę wartość, jaką realna obecność partnerów projektu wnosi do międzynarodowych part-

nerstw, oraz jej wpływ na rozwój członków zespołów projektowych, warto rozważyć powrót do planowania i organizacji spotkań partnerstw międzynarodowych w realnej rzeczywistości, kiedy tylko sytuacja związana z pandemią na to pozwoli.

Słowa kluczowe: partnerstwa strategiczne, wirtualne zespoły, pandemia, spotkania transnarodowe, komunikacja międzykulturowa, zrównoważony rozwój



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