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BELL ERASMUS+ CAPACITY-BUILDING PROJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN LIFELONG LEARNING IN BELARUS

One of the main goals of the Erasmus+ programme is to “foster quality improvements, innovation excellence and internationalisation at the level of education institutions” (European Parliament and Council, 2013). The programme’s capacity-building module (CBHE) has as its objective enhancement of “the international dimension of education, in particular through cooperation between [the European] Union and partner-country institutions in the field of higher education through targeted capacity-building in Partner Countries” (European Parliament and Council, 2013). Altogether this means that the Erasmus+ programme provides opportunities for higher education institutions from eligible Partner Countries, including Belarus, for cooperative enhancement of quality of higher education and improving the level of skills at universities through introducing new approaches, methods, and technologies of education.

Recently it has become evident that not only formal education (general, vocational and higher), but also additional skills and knowledge

acquired outside formal education have become of paramount importance. Lifelong learning inside regional communities plays an important role in the development of informal education. In addition, according to the initiatives of the Bologna Process, higher education institutions play a significant role in lifelong learning, since lifelong learning has become the leading paradigm for debating the quality of education systems and carrying out their reforms (UNESCO Rethinking Education Towards a global common good, 2015). Higher education institutions have a key role to play in transferring knowledge and strengthening regions, and the lifelong learning process “must improve access to quality educational opportunities for adults at all stages of their lives, regardless of gender and personal or family circumstances, in order to promote their individual and professional development, empowerment, adaptability, employment and active participation in society” (Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, 2018). In addition, lifelong learning is one of the key factors in meeting the needs of the changing labour market. Therefore, it is important that employers understand that adult learning is an important factor in promoting employment opportunities and mobility in the labour market. That said, in joint cooperation between universities and enterprises, it is necessary to expand opportunities for the continuous development of competencies and strengthening lifelong learning. Another equally important factor is the modernization of education and application of innovative methodological approaches for various target groups of students.

In modern education systems, digital means play a significant role, including the introduction of online learning tools. Needs and opportunities of distance learning are specifically reflected in situations in which different external circumstances can affect and even limit the possibilities for free access to full-time education. The BELL project of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education programme aims to enhance lifelong learning education in Belarus with effective use of distance learning and Bologna instruments through the collaborative de-

velopment of five distance and online education courses applying the European Union (EU) partners’ best practices in the domain of student-centred learning design.

The issues of integration and international collaboration in the field of education, the exchange of experience in the creation and modeling of training courses using the latest achievements of pedagogy, the widespread use of IT-based distance technologies in the educational process are currently relevant for higher educational institutions in the EU and Belarus. Therefore, in 2015, the idea was born to combine the experience of EU universities in developing and delivering training courses using IT-based distance technologies and to organize such courses at the Continuing/Lifelong Learning Education Institutes at universities in Belarus. It was decided to invite regional universities to participate in the project which was named “Enhancement of Lifelong Learning in Belarus” and was financially supported by the European Commission.

The choice of the project participants from the Belarusian side is justified by the situation in the regions, where, in contrast to the capital city, it is more difficult to get a job in a specialty, a small number of professional courses allowing to undergo retraining, etc. EU participants are also regional higher education institutions that have similar problems and experience in solving these problems, which has brought in additional values to the project by showing importance of lifelong learning for supporting lifelong learning and labour market in regions.

Ten higher educational institutions from five European countries have taken part in the project. Four of the ten partners are from four different countries of the European Union:

1. Project coordinator — Rezekne Technological Academy (Rezekne, Latvia);
2. The Open University (Milton Keynes, United Kingdom);
3. Linnaeus University (Växjö, Sweden);
4. Cadiz University (Spain).

Six Belarusian partner universities represent five different regions in the country:

1. National coordinator — Polotsk State University;
2. Belarusian State Agricultural Academy;
3. Brest State Technical University;
4. Vitebsk State University named after P.M. Masherov;
5. Gomel State Technical University named after P.O. Sukhoi;
6. Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno.

To achieve the goal of the project, which is to enhance lifelong learning in Belarus with the effective use of online education and blended learning and the tools of the Bologna Process for the development of the regional labour market, the project has fulfilled the following tasks:

1. Integration of six regional distance learning universities into the inter-university network for lifelong learning;
2. Training teachers and management staff of the Continuing Education Institutes at the six Belarusian universities in the best practices of the EU partner universities;
3. Development and testing five new online (blended) training courses for the public; improve them upon completion of training;
4. Approval of the five new training courses by the university councils of the six partner universities in Belarus;
5. Raising awareness of the regional communities about the project, increase its visibility and dissemination of its project.

The study of the needs of the population in educational programs of continuing education for adults made it possible to identify five most popular areas (English, financial literacy and entrepreneurship, legal literacy, computer literacy, energy and resource saving). Thus, five subject alliances were formed to build up the planned inter-university network including all six Belarusian partner universities in the following areas:

1. English (responsible: Institute for Continuing Education at Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno);
2. Financial literacy and entrepreneurship (responsible: Vitebsk State University named after P.M. Masherov);

3. Legal literacy (responsible: Belarusian State Agricultural Academy);
4. Computer literacy (responsible: Brest State Technical University);
5. Energy and resource saving (responsible: Gomel State Technical University named after P.O. Sukhoi).

As it is the main objective in any capacity-building project of the Erasmus+ programme to share and adapt best practices that are used at EU higher education institutions by partner country universities, a number of fruitful study visits were organized for teaching and managerial staff of the Institutes of Continuing Education at the six Belarusian partner universities. Each visit was dedicated to a separate important and up-to-date educational innovation, didactics and technologies.

The study visit to Rezekne Technological Academy in Latvia was aimed at sharing and adapting the technological issues and didactics of using VLEs in education on the example of the MOODLE platform. The study visit to the Open University in the United Kingdom helped the Belarusian colleagues to train skills of learning design on online courses using the MOODLE platform. At Cadiz University in Spain the Belarusian teaching learnt technological methods, tools and online resources to form up the course contents of online courses. Colleagues of the Linnaeus University in Sweden organized practical sessions and workshops for Belarusian staff where they were immersed in the study process combining e- and b-learning modes.

The development strategy in the project was to adapt the EU partners' experiences to the Belarusian educational reality and develop curricula and teaching materials for the five training courses. Due to the close interaction between the EU and Belarusian partners in the process of development of training courses in the form of discussions of the contents, teaching and learning methods and technologies before the launch of the courses for the regional communities, in the form of monitoring the running pilot courses and discussing the positive aspects as well as aspects that had to be improved, the development of the five courses was a continuous process at the stages of course design and piloting.

The implemented continuous Quality Assurance process allowed to verify and make changes in the curricula, design and contents of the courses. Different questionnaires and interviews with students triggered analysis of the problems and good practices used in the five courses which helped to make updates in the five courses' design and contents as well as in the approaches to motivating students in their learning, stimulating their further interest in the course leading them to complete the courses successfully, and decreasing the students' drop-out. The EU partners' and the external evaluator's active involvement in the advice for and evaluation of the courses' development and implementation effectively secured the high level of the academic advancements on the courses and their management within the inter-university network.

Another very important impact of the project, which has actually become an added value in the project, that was built due to the employment of the EU partners' best practices, is introduction of collaborative development of and responsibilities for the delivery of the five b-learning courses into the academic culture in Belarus. The practice was not easy to be effectively elaborated and carried out since in the Belarusian educational reality development of courses is a single-person responsibility and there is little cooperation within academic departments, between academic departments and between different higher education institutions. The effect of the collaborative development and delivery of the five courses showed their progressive character and longstanding impact on different target groups and stakeholders.

Finally, regular follow-up activities and the additional, second, piloting of the developed five courses, which was not originally promised in the project, have fixed and secured the high-quality delivery of the courses and effective collaboration of the teaching and managerial staff that are involved in the delivery and further updates of the courses.

All the results of the project — the inter-university network uniting attempts of continuing education at the six Belarusian partner universities, the five b-learning courses, didactic approaches, methods and technologies of education used in the delivery of the online courses — will

continue to be exploited after the end of the project. Some Belarusian partner institutions have already made plans of extending the developments achieved within the project to other academic subjects at the level of continuing (lifelong learning) education and to the other academic levels — bachelor and master.

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