PEESA III Project Survey – Summer 2020

A bi-annual survey concerning the on-going development of the PEESA III project was carried out by ASIIN Consult GmbH in July/August 2020. The surveys are performed on a regular basis twice a year and form part of the internal quality assurance process of the project management. In addition to the regular questions concerning the project progress, a number of additional questions relating to the project partners' experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic enlarged the July survey. The objective of this part of the survey was to gather information, about the consequences of health, work or travel restrictions in the context of the PEESA III project.

The survey was distributed among all project partners involved in order to obtain a complete overview and the broadest quantitative basis possible. In total, 16 individuals received a link to the online portal of Lime Survey where the survey was hosted; the link was not closed or restricted since theoretically, other people than those acting as partner representatives may have been working actively on the project during the past months. Consequently, 18 individuals participated in the survey, thus constituting a very sound quantitative basis to obtain a general impression on the project group's experience as a whole. Nevertheless, three participants did not complete the entire survey or answered all the questions, therefore the number of respective total answers to the particular questions may deviate from the total.

In general, all participants agreed, that they or their institutions experienced restrictions in work life due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the first half of the year 2020. These restrictions took different forms and degree of severity: Two thirds of the respondents suffered from the worldwide ban of travelling and 14 out of 15 experienced at least temporary work from home. A significant challenge posed the necessity to home-school the respondents' children, something 33% of the partners had to manage. A minority of the respondents dealt with even more severe problems; 3 out of 15 had their work contracts or working time reduced due to the crisis and 1 needed to quarantine for some time without any working option. Thus, the pandemic affected all of the partners' personal life and work life in different ways but definitely imposed unprecedented novelties to the management of an international project. The ban of travelling as a general restriction demanded for significant project restructuring and a large number of participants needed to cope with additional tasks such as home-schooling or, as was specified by one person, additional workload due to the switch from presence to online teaching formats from one day to the other. All such elements potentially affected the work dedicated to the project.

Consequently, the survey revealed that a majority of the partners responding to the survey saw a delay in the progress of the PEESA III project. While 6 respondents assumed that the project was delayed significantly, 7 saw some delay but were of the general impression that this was manageable. Only 1 person saw no delay. Being asked, whether the postponement of presence meetings and the transfer of workshops/conferences into a virtual format affected the project outcome quality, a majority of 6 answered that the outcome quality suffered as event could no be held as planned. Another 4 thought that it was partially affected because presence meetings had to be delayed. Nevertheless, online workshops and conferences actually turned out to be a good alternative. But still, 4 participants were of the opinion that there was no reduction of quality at all since virtual meetings could equally replace presence activities.

The partners were further asked, whether the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic led to changes with their budget calculation, a question that was answered by 10 of the 18 participants. Among these, 7 confirmed no immediate changes although there might be effects in the future while others pointed out, that the COVID-effects together with the project extension until October 2021 did indeed incite serious difficulties. One participant outlined that with no meetings and project activities occurring (mostly due to the travel restrictions) there was no means of paying their additional project staff. At the same time, if staff was paid for little activities during the COVID-restrictions less budget now remains for another 12 months when all remaining activities have to be scheduled for a probably short time period in 2021. These remarks, although only individuals, should be taken into account, especially as the pandemic is continuing through the second half of the year.

In conclusion, it can be stated that COVID-19 posed a significant burden on all project partners and their work within the project. Especially the closure of Universities and administrations caused delays in the processes of programme accreditation and development that need to be monitored closely in the upcoming time period.

Following the sometime sceptical outlook on project performance in the COVID-pandemic on 11 out of 18 participants were still of the opinion that PEESA III is on a good way to achieve its envisaged objectives. While the granted project extension is seen by several as fundamental in order to achieve the project goal in time, others point out that COVID delayed the formal programme approval from external South African agencies (DHET, CHE and SAQA). One participants details that this may lead to a reduction of the budget as originally it was envisaged to have the Master programmes running for at least 12 months. With the delayed approval, this period will most likely not be achievable. Furthermore, the respondents see the return to presence teaching and working on campus with the pandemic still ongoing critical. This is an issue that may cause further delays and problems in the coming months.

In this line, the effectiveness and efficiency of the project during the first half of 2020 is seen sometimes critical. 9 out of 18 see effectiveness and efficiency as generally positive in the project but 5 do not see much or even very limited progress during the past months. This may be because of very individual circumstances. Exemplarily, one respondent explains that a project member resigned, leaving a significant gap behind that could not be filled equivalently.

The communication within the project was considered generally satisfactory, but certainly improvable. A majority of 10 respondents confirmed that project partners do get into contact from time to time but only 4 saw a constant exchange about the project going on. One even expresses the opinion that there seem to be partners that haven't talked to each other at all, clearly expressing the desire for a more frequent exchange and communication. Nevertheless, almost all of the participants considered the management to be great (6) or at least okay (7).

Doubts are expressed mostly concerning the timeline of the project. 11 out of 15 respondents admit to be lagging behind a bit. However, they are still confident that they will be able to catch up soon. In hindsight, this still optimistic perspective may certainly be questioned under to continuing severe restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from this time issue, 14 out of 15 are still convinced that the project actively contributes to the further development of their institutions and degree programmes. The participants identified a number of positive effects from the project, among them developments in blended learning, benchmarking with other institutions, and capacity building opportunities for staff members. One emphasized that especially in the light of recent events, the development and adaption of degree programmes to a changing world is more relevant than ever, and the bi-lateral cooperation agreements between European and South African Universities were also highlighted as positive outcomes from the project.

Concerning helpful modification among the cooperation partners 4 persons identified the need to enhance communication with the partners as well as the need to invest more time into administrative tasks than before; otherwise, the invoicing of staff, material, and travel costs will not be completed in due time.

In conclusion, the survey demonstrates a generally positive impression of the project progress but clearly outlines that the pandemic has already had a certain impact on peoples' lives and project work. While the pandemic continues and the situation may even get worse during winter, effects may be more significant and could even result in the delay of some deliverables. Project management should clearly monitor in how far programme registration with external South African agencies or internal University bodies that do not work as supposed due to the pandemic will affect the project outcome as well as time management. Similarly, the participants clearly encourage the project management to emphasize internal communication and exchange in order to stay in contact while presence meetings are not an option.