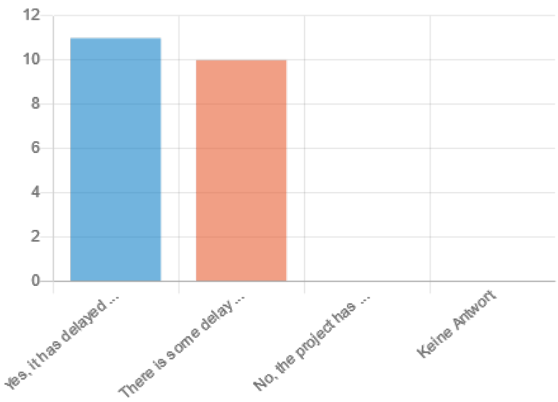
PEESA III – bi-annual survey January 2021

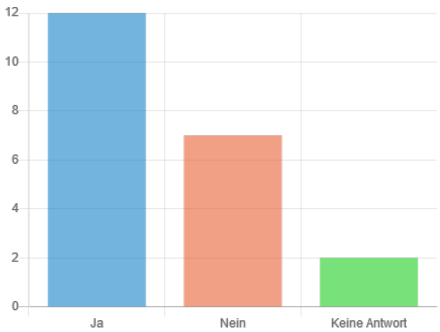
As part of the PEESA III project, the Quality Assurance agency ASIIN performs regular bi-annual surveys, documenting the progress of the project as well as the individual project partners and gathering feedback about the partners' satisfaction with the project itself, project management, and project meetings. With the development of the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020, the surveys have also started to cover aspects of the project participants' well-being in a pandemic working environment and the effects of the virus on the project and its outcomes.

The surveys are being programmed with the tool LimeSurvey and distributed in the form of internet links through the members of the project Board to all those individuals that have been actively involved in tasks of the project over the previously covered time-period. Consequently, the questionnaire is open to all participants, envisaging to cover the entirety of staff members involved in the project over a certain period of time. Thus, it follows the objective of complete coverage but with the number of total staff unknown to ASIIN, it cannot be stated to what degree the number of answers reflects the number of people working on the project. In the case of the present survey, a total of 24 participants was registered out of which 20 filled the survey completely. In the following analysis, the data refers only to those 20 completed surveys in order to avoid misrepresentations.

As in July 2020, when data concerning the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were first gathered, all participants confirmed to experienced on-going restrictions in work life during the second half of 2020, but interestingly, the form of restrictions has broadened thus outlining that the pandemic hits more people more intensely than before. Thus, while almost all suffered from bans of travelling and temporal home office, now 15% of the respondents experienced reductions of work contracts or working time, 45% were additionally burdened through necessary home-schooling of children (in July only 33%) and 20% suffered periods of quarantine without any working options. As was already expressed in the previous survey's comment section, again it was manifested that the pandemic circumstances required extensive additional daily working hours for those who could work as well as big additional investments in equipment for on-line learning as well as safety requirements by the teaching institutions. These conditions clearly limited the availability of time and resources for the project itself.



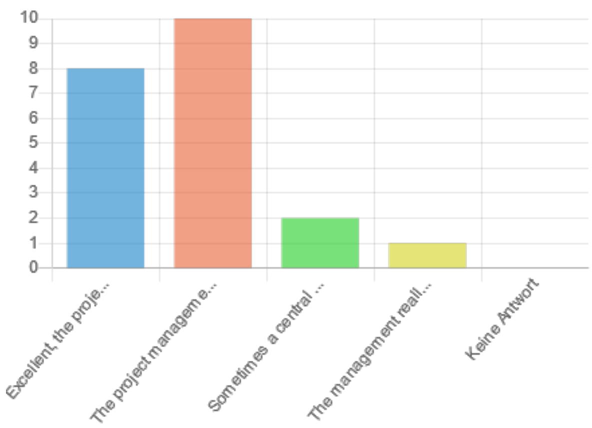
In addition, all participants were now of the opinion, that the pandemic led to a delay in the progress of the PEESA III Project; while 50% of the completed questionnaires thought there was a manageable delay, the other 50% were now convinced, that the project was delayed significantly by COVID-19. In July 2020, a majority of participants still considered the delay to be manageable or even saw no delay at all. More or less constant remained the estimation of the effects on the project quality due to the postponement of presence meetings and the transfer of internal work meeting to online formats. 40% of the participants saw a decline in quality, especially since meetings and conferences could not be held as planned, 30% thought this affected the quality but considered the performed online meetings to be a good alternative, and another 30% experienced no effect in the project quality at all.



Concerning the project budget, the partners saw no or little effects related to COVID-19 but did express difficulties due to the project extension for another year without additional funds. One participant explained that, consequently, project staff had either to be additionally funded by the university or had to be reduced in numbers resulting in a slow-down of the project progress. Additionally, the ongoing crisis did increase the funds needed by institutions for technical equipment. Several comments referred to substantially increased needs and serious procurement issues. These impressions are substantiated in summary by the question if the impact of the pandemic on the project progress increased compared to the situation in July 2020. This was confirmed by 60% of the participants.

Despite these difficulties, the survey showed that 75% of the participants are still convinced, that the PEESA III project is on a good way to achieve its envisaged objectives. As a reason for this optimistic perspective, several respondents named the good team-spirit and cooperation between the partners that did not suffer significantly from being transferred into a virtual environment. After a time of crisis and changes, most institutions now returned to proceed in their works and try to stick to the agree time-lines. The only real problematic issue was pointed out by one comment stating that “the project requirements imply one year teaching of the newly developed Master programs. As soon as some of the Master programs have not received the official accreditation, one year teaching will not take place.” As a result, it is feared that the EU authorities might financially penalize the project altogether. This issue certainly needs to be taken seriously and discussed in advance with the partners as well as with the EU commission.

Concerning the general project developments, survey respondents emphasized, that the internal communication between project partners was okay but could still be improved. Similar to previous survey results, only 20% felt in constant exchange about the project while 75% expressed to only get in contact from time to time if need be and one complained that there seem to be partners that have not talked to each other at all. Furthermore, some participants expressed their wish for more coordination and intervention by the project management over the previous six months. 15% of the answers indicated that the management could be improved and that central coordination and management could be more present than it currently is. Although 85% of the participants are content with the project management, these critical remarks should be taken seriously in order to ensure the project success in the long term.



With reference to the individual project performance of the project partners, the doubts concerning the time-lines were confirmed. 55% of the participants admitted to lag behind their original schedules but were still optimistic to catch up. Again, it was referred to the delayed South African accreditation procedures that might impede the start of the Master’s programmes in time to meet the project objectives to a full. Despite these limitations, all participants still showed themselves convinced of the additional value of the project for their institutions in a broad variety of aspects. Besides very positive effects in the fields of internationalization and exchange networks, a newly emphasized positive outcome was seen in the strengthening of online teaching formats that were open for national as well as international cooperation. Especially during the pandemic, the project with its focus on e-learning and blended learning was considered beneficial. One comment also explained that from the experiences with another Master's programme developed during PEESA I/II, the huge contribution PEESA III will have for the further development of the institutions can already be foreseen.

In summary, the survey documents that despite the significant issues surrounding COVID-19 and its effects on the project, PEESA III is still moving forward and that most partners are optimistic that the project objectives will be achieved, although maybe with some more delay. Nevertheless, what has also become apparent is that with the ongoing pandemic, resources and personal capacities are more and more stressed; consequently, if the pandemic situation continues far into 2021, the situation for people and project may yet deteriorate, as was already the case since the July 2020 survey. In addition, the project management should uphold a constant communication with the partners through alternative virtual platforms in order to make sure that all partners remain on track and do not feel left behind.