

PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS ON SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA, ON THE EXAMPLE OF ONE OF THE PROJECT PARTNERSHIPS OF “CREATIVE SPARK: HIGHER EDUCATION ENTERPRISE PROGRAMME”

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ABSTRACT

The article reviews practice of International educational projects on sustainable Institutional development in Georgia on the example of one of the project partnerships under the British programme “**Creative Spark: Higher Education Enterprise Programme**”. particularly, the joint partnership project of Georgian Technical University and Keele University, practical issues of the first year of which the present research is based on. The article also highlights specific details of the project management, discusses the problems that arose during the implementation, which according to the opinion of the authors, were identified during the process of working on the project. The article is based on a joint research by Georgian Technical University and Keele University.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions (HEI); Project; Action Plan; Entrepreneurship; Creativity; International Educational Project.

INTRODUCTION

International project management, as a separate management institution has a little background. It has been determined as an official management process since the last century and is still developing at different rates in different countries.

Many international projects have been implemented in Georgia to date. The international community is providing significant assistance to Georgia on its way to integration into the Euro-Atlantic area. This is illustrated by numerous support packages or initiatives that have been implemented in Georgia with the support of international partners. In recent years, among international initiatives, special attention has been paid to the development of mechanisms for the economic development and the basis for its long-term inclusive growth, which will contribute to raising the welfare of the population. It is impossible for Georgia to accomplish na-

tional tasks without encouraging the development of entrepreneurial skills and creative industries, using international academic and institutional partnerships. In present-day world, educational organisations are the main and primary flagships of such initiatives, and at the same time, they play a major role in sustainable development of common, national ecosystem. **One of the top priorities for achieving results in this direction are the initiatives that support innovation and technology, as well as creative industries.**

As it is well known, United Kingdom and its government are one of the most outstanding countries in terms of international supportive initiatives and grant activities. The presented research is based on the initiative from UK, as one of the most powerful global actors in nowadays world - “**Creative Spark: Higher Education Enterprise Programme**”, which is being implemented under the auspices of the British Council¹, in several post-Soviet countries, including Georgia.

The presented research refers to **the first-year part** of the current project partnership between Georgian Technical University and Keele University (Great Britain) within the above-mentioned programme. The main goal of the research is to determine the difficulties and problematic issues identified in the first stage of the project implementation; Review the results achieved and outline ways to develop further successful cooperation, which we think should be based on past experience and shall be useful for transforming the best practices into routine.

The theoretical and methodological basis of this paper are mainly practical examples (facts). The paper uses Management Theory concepts, methods of Systemic Analysis, Logical Analysis, Synthesis and other methods.

¹ The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. <https://www.britishcouncil.ge/en>

GENERAL INFORMATION ON “CREATIVE SPARK: HIGHER EDUCATION ENTERPRISE PROGRAMME” INITIATIVE

“Creative Spark” is a 5-year initiative by the United Kingdom. Its main goal is to support international university and institutional partnerships to develop enterprise skills and creative industries, and foster economic development and stability in the beneficiary countries by doing this. The program is being implemented in Great Britain, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

In these seven countries, in order to support higher education reforms and in response to unemployment statistics, the project aims to use the UK experience and expertise in order to develop the field of entrepreneurial education. It also aims to support more than 10,000 students and young creative entrepreneurs each year.

As of 2020, “Creative Spark: Higher Education Enterprise Programme” has involved a total of 50 international partnerships within the projects for two years, which were formed between higher education institutions and organisations working in the creative field in the UK and beneficiary countries².

Georgian Technical University is a member of one of the current partnerships. GTU is implementing the project with the status of a partner university, in cooperation with Keele University (UK), within the framework of the British Council grant programme: “Creative Spark: Higher Education Enterprise Programme”. Working on the project began in 2018, after the British Council and the project partnership foundation jointly announced a call for project application. At this point (Spring 2020), the 2nd year of the project is being carried out.

The main Part – Project Management matters

It is important for any institution, especially for higher education institutions, to attract projects, and just as important are the issues in further project management.

The relevant office of Georgian Technical University received comprehensive information about the grant competition through a letter from the Georgian office of the British Council and following information meetings.

GTU approached Keele University, one of the leading higher education institutions in the UK, which has a ten-year successful partnership with GTU. Consequently, a working group was set up by the two universities and the project application was submitted within the set timeframe, which subsequently received funding.

The role of GTU in the project application was mainly defined as a beneficiary, while the main role of Keele University was laid on mentoring.

The main goals of the first year project proposal:

The goals of the first year of the project, created

mutually by Georgian Technical University and Keele University, fully met the competition requirements and were formulated as follows:

- To develop enterprise competences in students and young individuals employed in creative industry;
- Support the start-ups and operation of a new business through incubation services;
- Knowledge-sharing;

Throughout the project, the following activities were planned and implemented in 2018-2019:

- With the moderation of Keele University staff, 14 members of academic and administrative staff of Georgian Technical University participated in so-called **Train the Trainers (ToT) programme**, these individuals were actively involved in relevant activities within the project. Within the project, a **training cycle “Entrepreneurial Skills Development”** was planned and carried out for teachers, students and alumni (5 trainings);

- **Big Idea Challenge** video pitching competition was held, which is the programme element of “Creative Spark” and participation is compulsory for all programme institutions. The competition format gives young people opportunity to form their innovative “startups” and introduce them to the world. Global competition of “Big Idea Challenge 2019” was held in three categories: 1. Digital Technology; 2. Social Impact; 3. Creativity. GTU received total of 27 applications, from which 10 best were chosen to represent the university and 2 teams qualified to country finals;

- With the assistance from the British Council, online **Business English Courses** were offered to GTU students and staff. A total of 60 beneficiaries have used the courses at GTU. It is noteworthy that GTU and Keele partnership submitted the project application for opening “English Club” at GTU. However, the application failed to receive funding at this stage;

- The first year project intended a **study visit to the UK**. The visit was conducted and four beneficiaries participated in it. For a week, visitors to the UK attended meetings, workshops, and so-called observational teaching activities;

- In order to develop practical competences in GTU students and cooperation between enterprise sector, “Creative Spark” first year project plan envisaged implementation of **“Keele Research and innovation Support Programme” (KRISP)**, which has been set up in the UK to stimulate and support close cooperation between educational institutions and small and medium enterprises. The programme has proven to be successful at Keele University. The programme is designed for people and businesses (small and medium-sized businesses) who are thinking or are in the process of creating a new product, process, or service.

Students had an opportunity to get involved in the project in two ways:

² Source: <https://www.britishcouncil.ge/en/programmes/education/creative-spark>

1. **“Novel Business Idea”** - the project envisages the generation of student ideas and its practical implementation, incubation and consultative work with professors.

2. **“Working on the real business project”** - includes cooperation with business sector, development of real business cases and project design of set tasks, joint consulting work with the business representatives and professors.

This is the task of the project, which in the second part (meaning “working on a real business project”), unfortunately failed for a number of reasons (the reasons are discussed further in conclusion). Although work in this direction continues and it will be implemented in the second year of the project.

- In the first year of the project, **number of workshops were held** among the members of the project organizing team, as well as with the participation of the business sector, academia, students, alumni and other stakeholders. Numerous **publications, information and press releases** have been published to disseminate the results and announcements of the project; Number of consultative, informational and public meetings were held; The members of the project management team took part in multiple **“Creative Spark”** public activities in Georgia and abroad, planned and organized by the British Council and partner organisations, where reports, presentations, etc. were present.

More than 150 students, academic and administrative staff were directly involved in the first year of the project as participants and/or beneficiaries.

it should be pointed out that during the first year of the project, with institutional support and the efforts of the project management team, all the main activities scheduled by the project action plan were carried out and all critical tasks were solved. It is known that various types of problems are an integral part of the management process, which often become particularly relevant in changing and unstable environmental conditions. At the same time, there may be positive results that can be achieved by solving problematic issues, or there might be no problem at all, when the process is going according to a properly selected and effective plan. Therefore, we would like to focus on two areas:

1. Identifying problematic issues;
2. Results - Learning by Doing;

Identifying the problem is one of the major and challenging issues of the project management process. The problem must be selected correctly, must be formulated accurately and effective tasks must be determined to solve it.

Problems and ways of solving them are often confused with each other. The problem is a deviation from any standard, desired norm or condition - expressed in a negative way. The problem is “what is it (what is the situation) now”, and the goal is “what it should be”. Con-

sequently, in our research we would like to put an emphasize on the first part and answer the question, what was it? (The situation), to identify the problems that the project management team encountered in the first year of the project. Thus, finding ways to solve these problematic issues are not examined in this paper, we assume it to be a subject for further research, especially since the second year of the project is already underway and most of the identified problems have already been resolved to some extent.

An important key to success in project management is that all members involved should focus on their own mistakes, which will help them avoid such complications in the future. **This is the purpose of our research, we want to share our experience with the public, what did we see?!, What did we learn ?! And how we see further prospects for cooperation.**

CONCLUSION

Following the discussion of **“the Creative Spark”** and considering our experience, we have drawn the following conclusions and suggestions, which were identified on the example of the first year of the project and are presented in the form of “Lessons”:

Lesson I – Necessary Contacts - In many cases, contact information provided by donors and potential addressees of the cooperation do not work for a variety of reasons, and the project organizing team should always have alternatives to achieve results. In this context, the following circumstance arose in our case: When the call was announced, the documents of the project competition were accompanied by an information booklet, which provided contact information to the educational organizations of the beneficiary countries about the relevant organizations in the UK. As soon as the decision was made by GTU administration to participate in the competition, the task was handled to the International Relations and Standards Office to develop proposals for cooperation with British organizations in the prescribed manner. The first difficulty encountered by the group working on the proposal, was that out of 14 contacts which were approached by the group, none of them agreed on cooperation in the project for various reasons. After that, using alternative methods in finding partners was put on the agenda. Based on GTU’s many years of international relations and cooperation, the focus has shifted to the use of existing personal and institutional contacts. The fact itself created a force majeure and difficulties with the deadline;

Lesson II – Bureaucratic procedures - It is a well-known fact that in many cases bureaucratic procedures take a lot of time and are useless. It takes more than expected, especially when it comes to financial matters, which often leads to changes in the timetable of the plan. Time control in the project is one of the most important factors, we know very well that the projects are clearly

written in timeline and have deadlines, which is desirable to stand in the schedule as it was planned. In order to get the result exactly at the timeframe defined in the plan, each task must be controlled in terms of agenda. We illustrate this by the circumstances that were created during the first year of the project. In particular, although all procedures were completed on time by the donor organization (in this case the British Council), as well as the partner organization (in this case Keele University), due to the current legislation and regulations in Georgia, transfer of the first financial tranche of the project budget at the relevant GTU account was delayed significantly, accordingly, the project management team had to change the timeline of the planned activities, which affect the overall project plan;

Lesson III – Motivation - Despite the fact that for direct motivational mechanisms, certain fees were provided for the performers of key activities in the project budget, this circumstance still did not prove to be sufficient to motivate the academic staff to be more involved in the project. This obviously had a variety of subjective and objective reasons, although those involved in project management believe that the project has encountered some problems in terms of involving academic staff. Especially circumstances were emphasized on the part of the project, which focused on one of Keele Research and Innovation Support Programme (KRISP) activity “Working on a Real Business Project” - which involved working with the business sector. Development of real business cases and project solution of the set tasks, joint consulting work with the business sector and professors. Unfortunately, very few members of academic staff have expressed willingness to get involved in this part of the project, which has forced the organizing team to move this part of the project to another period;

Lesson IV – English language proficiency - In the process of implementing the project, organizing team often faced problems with English language. As the project “Creative Spark” on its programme part was oriented on the English language communication activities, the organizational team often had cases where the beneficiaries - students, academic and administrative staff – decided not to participate in the project only for the reason that communication in English language was challenging for them. This circumstance had a rather large-scale impact on the results of the quantitative involvement of beneficiaries. Also, although English online courses were offered to the beneficiaries, the rate of their involvement was not massive and favorable, which has its objective causes.

Lesson V - Lack of involvement from business - Experience has shown that the success of a project mostly depends on the small and dynamic groups of people who act as catalysts. So, it is extremely important to accurately select the target groups while looking

for allies. At the initial stage of the project, the organizing group established a very effective communication with several medium and small business companies in order to involve them, but in the end, at the main stage of the project, most of them were not willing to actively cooperate with university and/or lacked sufficient resources. Overall, we believe that this is not just a local problem and its causes can be found in the context of the overall environment of the country (culture, stereotypes, inexperience, etc.).

Lesson VI - Insufficient professional literature and practical information material in Georgian language - Since the project “Creative Spark” is focused on the development of entrepreneurial skills and creative industries, the practice of working with beneficiaries has shown that scientific and practical literature in the Georgian language, as well as other information resources are insufficient. As a result, the combination of two problematic issues - low competence in English and lack of professional literature in the native language - created considerable difficulties during the organizational process, which the organizational group had to solve by performing additional activities and routine, time-consuming efforts;

Lesson VI - Lack of interest and involvement from top management - GTU is one of the largest educational institutions not only in Georgia, but also in the Caucasus, and its organizational structure is quite complicated. Therefore, in the first stage of the project, the interest and involvement of top management in the project activities was minimal. Consequently, this circumstance suggests that in implementing the project, the determination of power is of great importance. This will help us understand what place we have on the power diagram with our project; Helps us to determine opportunities, what we need to do and what not. It also motivates us to improve our position. While the results of the project were not unsatisfactory, the basics of management theory dictate that involvement and feedback from top management would have greatly increased the motivation and coefficient of efficiency (performance index) of all those involved.

In addition to presenting problematic issues in the form of “lessons”, we would like to highlight some of the positive results that have been exposed during the first year of working, that made it possible to more or less properly plan the cooperation through the project in the following years. Accordingly, based on the received experience, activities for the second year have been planned and already at this stage, necessities for the third year and further sustainable development of this cooperation in general are quite clear.

in this respect, we point out the positive factors: Good communication between partners and the formation of unified and motivated management team; Quite a large number of beneficiaries directly involved in the

first year project; Identified needs for the next stage and the possibility of correct analysis for further sustainable development of the project; Developing business relations with various institutions, both in Georgia and abroad, including the United Kingdom; Offering various additional opportunities; Increased role of functional units within institutions; Practical experience;

Thus, Georgia is a developing country, and one of the primary sources for the growth of developing countries is the implementation of international projects by its institutions. Accordingly, the leaderships of these institutions should be eager to create as favorable environment, as possible for participation in international projects, including enhancing knowledge in human resources.

To conclude, Project management in the higher education institutions of Georgia is in development phase. The process of project management is carried out at a medium level and it needs to be improved, which can be achieved by sharing experience by international organizations. One of the ways to do so is to implement international projects, through which the transfer of experience by a representative of one country to a representative of an allied country occurs, equally important are the implementation of educational programs and research through mutual cooperation. As a result, in the first year the needs were clearly identified, which was reflected in the action plan of the second year of the project to the greatest extent possible. Since the material presented in this article provides readers with quite comprehensive information to illustrate how the project team considered the so-called "lessons" of the first year of the project and how well they were reflected in the subsequent plans, we will briefly present the main action plan for the second year. Which, in our opinion, should further contribute to the sustainable develop-

ment of the Georgian-British project – in this case GTU-Keele partnership.

Main activities planned for the second, 2019-2020 year of the project:

- **Trainings** for development of entrepreneurial competences in teachers, students and graduates;
- In order to stimulate and promote entrepreneurial activities, a series of events "**Entrepreneurship Day**" will be held;
- To contribute to long-term development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, a study programme "**Entrepreneurship for Engineers**" will be developed, which is intended to be introduced as an elective course at Georgian Technical university;
- With the help of the British Council, the **online business/entrepreneurship English courses** will continue to be offered to GTU students and staff;
- **A long-term strategy document for sustainable development** will be prepared for GTU Innovation Center, which is a functional unit of the project "Creative Spark" at GTU.
- **The website** of GTU Innovation Center will be developed.

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