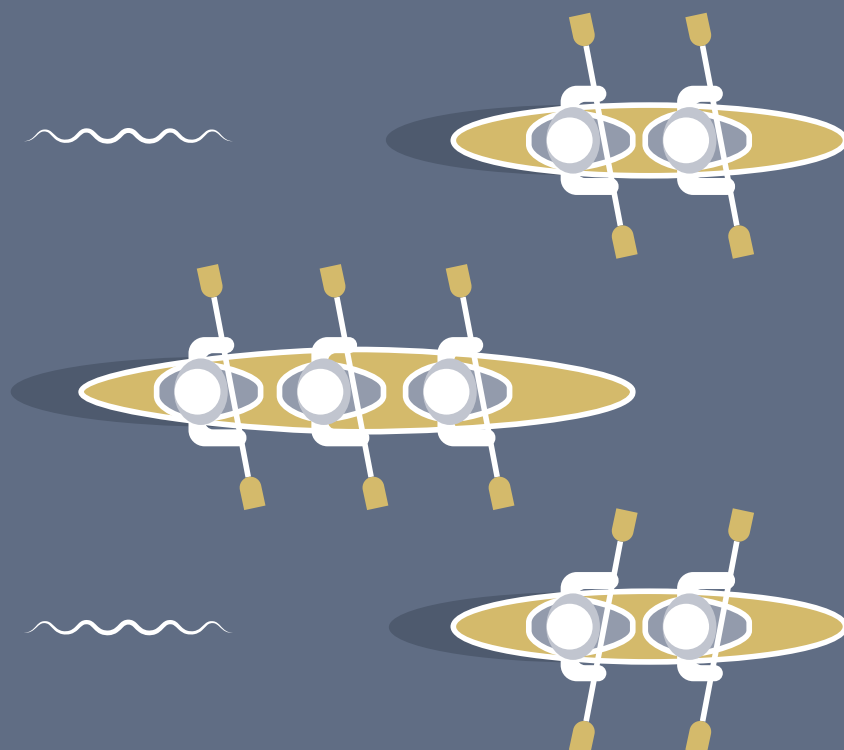# Strategic Partnerships
in Higher Education

Research report on Erasmus+
Strategic Partnerships in Poland

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Strategic Partnerships in Higher Education

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Introduction

The main aim of Strategic Partnerships carried out under the Erasmus+ Programme in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework was to enable institutions and organisations to develop and implement innovative educational solutions, as well as to strengthen international cooperation and facilitate the exchange of experience. In the field of Higher Education, the most common beneficiaries of such projects were Higher Education Institutions, which – thanks to the projects – modernised their education methods, improved their quality, joined international initiatives and adapted more closely to the needs of the society and economy. Since various types of organisations and institutions from several countries could participate in Strategic Partnerships, extensive exchange of experience was possible and often took place between education providers operating in different fields.

The project outcomes included new programmes of study, courses and teaching materials (especially e-learning ones), innovative teaching methods, textbooks, guides, collections of good practices, videos and educational games. As a rule, all outputs have been made available to the public and widely disseminated on the websites of individual projects and on the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform[1]. In addition to activities directly related to partnership cooperation, these projects often included joint staff training and intensive courses for students. The majority of the activities were transnational, but some (e.g. smaller seminars to disseminate project results) took place locally.

The examined Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education were funded in the period 2014-2017. The study included all projects submitted in 2014-2016 and those from the 2017 call for proposals that were completed and settled at the time of the survey. The study was conducte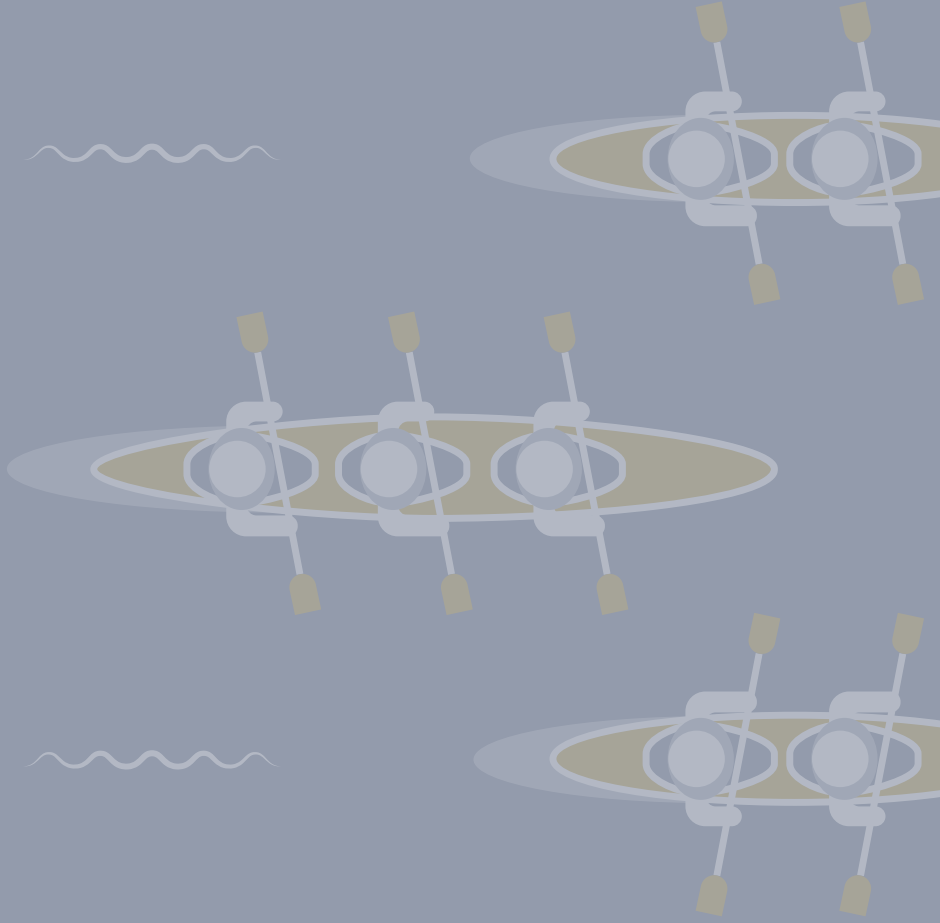d by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (acting as the National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme in Poland), and the respondents were both coordinators of Strategic Partnerships projects (quantitative and qualitative part) and persons performing management functions at HEIs involved in these undertakings (qualitative part of the study). In all projects discussed in the report, Polish HEIs and institutions operating in the Higher Education sector acted as the leaders of the partnerships.

This report discusses issues such as: the selection of partners for projects, the course of activities, the analysis of outcomes in terms of their usefulness and sustainability as well as the evaluation of project outcomes and the partnerships themselves by HEI authorities. The study also focused on cooperation with the Erasmus+ National Agency in Poland, which granted funding to projects and supervised their compliance with the Programme

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1   Erasmus+ Project Results Platform, bit.ly/3nxHwWG [accessed: 17/11/2020].

principles. Moreover, the respondents evaluated the system for Strategic Partnerships project implementation and presented their recommendations in this regard. The conclusions drawn by the interviewees can be found in the final chapter.
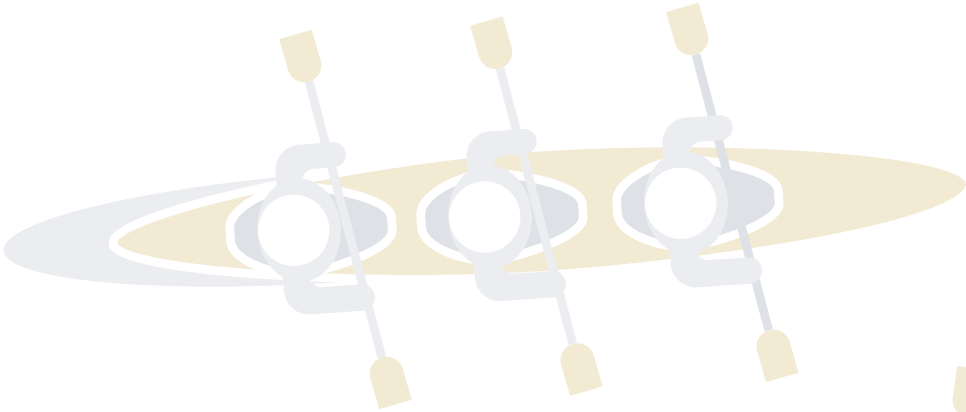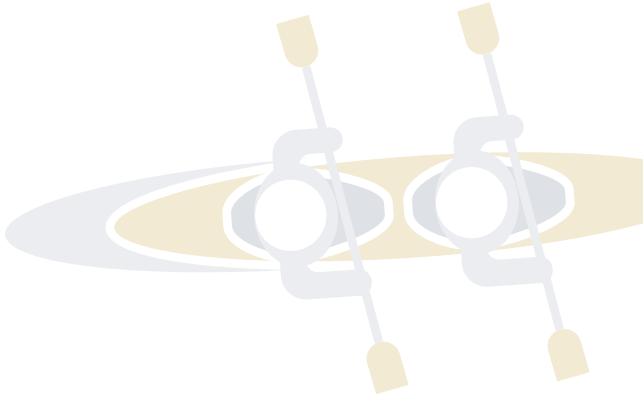
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Background
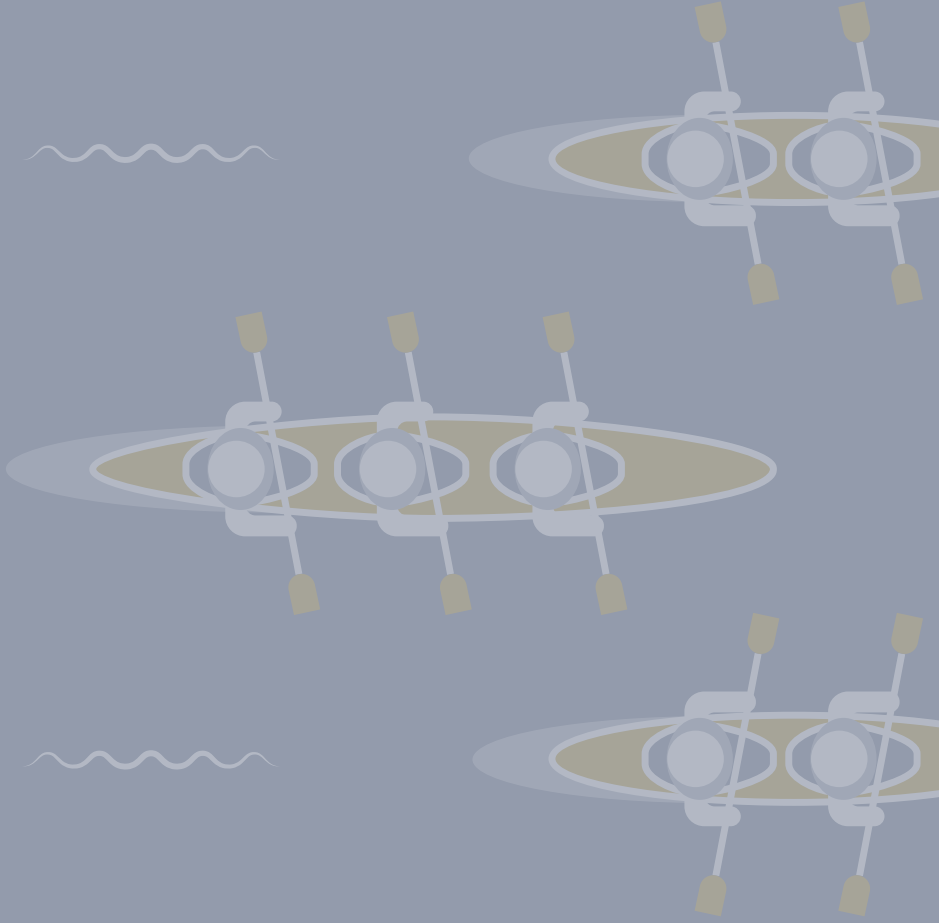
Key Action 2 – transnational projects in the field of Higher Education

Under Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices) in the field of Higher Education, three types of projects could be supported[2]:

→ **Strategic Partnerships** aimed at the implementation and dissemination of innovative solutions at Higher Education Institutions in Programme Countries[3]. The projects were to result in the modernisation of the teaching offer and an increase in the quality of education. Grant applications were submitted to the national agencies in the Programme Countries.

→ **Knowledge Alliances** (centralised action)[4] – projects run by universities in cooperation with enterprises. They aimed to promote innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, employability, knowledge exchange and support for multidisciplinary teaching and learning. Applications for funding were submitted to the Executive Agency in Brussels.

→ **Capacity building in the field of Higher Education** (centralised action) involved cooperation with Partner Countries from other regions of the world. They aimed to support the modernisation and internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions and systems. Applications for funding were submitted to the Executive Agency in Brussels.

Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education

As stated in the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*, the overarching aim of Strategic Partnerships was "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"[5]. Such projects were therefore primarily of a didactic rather than scientific nature. Their overriding goal was to modernise the education offer, adapt it to the current needs of the society and economy, and ultimately raise the quality of education. They could be implemented in the following Erasmus+ fields: Higher Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Adult Education and Youth.

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2   Erasmus+ website: bit.ly/3pytbLH [accessed: 18/11/2020].

3   Programme countries are the countries that can fully participate in all key actions of the Erasmus+ Programme. The list of Programme and Partner Countries is available in the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*, pp. 22–24; bit.ly/3vRay8G [accessed: 18/11/2020].

4   The centralised actions are managed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in Brussels.

5   *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*, p. 106.

Strategic Partnerships had to address the general horizontal priorities (which do not only apply to the field of Higher Education) defined by the European Commission for Strategic Partnerships and (or) with priorities specific to Higher Education. In subsequent calls for proposals the priorities could be slightly modified and updated.

Horizontal priorities for Strategic Partnerships included the following areas:
→ supporting opportunities for all in acquiring and developing key competences, including basic skills;
→ social inclusion;
→ common values, civic engagement and participation;
→ environmental and climate goals;
→ innovative practices in a digital era;
→ supporting educators, youth workers, educational leaders and support staff;
→ transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications;
→ sustainable investment, quality and efficiency of education, training and youth systems;
→ social and educational value of European cultural heritage, its contribution to job creation, economic growth and social cohesion.

Erasmus+ Programme Guide also contains a list of priorities for the field of Higher Education. These are:
→ promoting internationalisation;
→ tackling skills gaps and mismatches;
→ rewarding excellence in learning, teaching and skills development;
→ building inclusive Higher Education systems;
→ fostering civic engagement;
→ supporting the implementation of the European Student Card;
→ fostering effective, efficient and sustainable system-level funding and governance models;
→ support for teacher training;
→ digital inclusion and open educational resources;
→ modernisation of European Higher Education systems.

The Strategic Partnerships projects were open to organisations; universities, Higher Education Institutions, enterprises, and associations operating in Programme Countries. The partners carrying out a given project formed a consortium (minimum three organisations from three different countries). In exceptional cases, if it was necessary to achieve the project's objectives,

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organisations from the Partner Countries could also join a partnership. One of the partners acted as a consortium leader and project coordinator (its tasks included, for example, submitting a grant application). Any entity established in a Programme Country could act as a coordinator, and the project could be carried out, among others, by: Higher Education Institutions, schools, non-profit organisations, enterprises, public authorities at any level, research institutes, cultural institutions, and NGOs. Social partners and labour market representatives could also join the partnerships.

Strategic Partnerships projects in the field of Higher Education could last between 24 and 36 months, and in exceptional cases the duration could be extended by up to six months, provided that the total duration of the project did not exceed three years.

Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education enabled, among other things:

→ developing new methods of teaching (e.g. aimed at stimulating creativity, developing entrepreneurial skills);
→ preparation of teaching materials and tools;
→ development of programmes of study (course, module, degree programme), including joint degrees;
→ introducing a greater variety of forms of learning (including virtual ones);
→ development and implementation of cooperation strategies within the institutions;
→ creating quality standards;
→ developing cooperation between HEIs and enterprises (e.g. involving students and university staff in projects carried out together with companies);
→ carrying out research, preparing analyses and case studies (concerning education in a given field);
→ learning, teaching, participation in training (mobility).

For projects which included mobility, there were additional criteria concerning the duration of the activity.

Duration of different types of mobility

Mobility type	Duration
short-term staff mobility for training	from 3 days to 2 months
long-term staff mobility for teaching assignments or training	from 2 to 12 months
intensive programmes (courses)	→ from 5 days to 2 months (students), → from 1 day to 2 months (teachers)
blended mobility of learners/students	short-term mobility to a partner HEI: from 5 days to 2 months, combined with virtual mobility (distance learning)

Institutions willing to implement a project had to participate in a call under Key Action 2. Each proposal was examined by experts who assessed it based on four criteria:
→ significance of the project (max. 30 points);
→ quality of the plan and its implementation (max. 20 points);
→ quality of the project team and methods of cooperation (max. 20 points);
→ impact and dissemination of the project (max. 30 points).
A total of 100 points could be scored.

In accordance with the principles of the Programme, only proposals that scored 60 or more points and received at least 50% of the maximum scores in each of the four categories were granted funding. They also had to address at least one of the priorities for Strategic Partnerships.

The maximum amount of funding for Strategic Partnerships projects was calculated as follows:

grant amount = number of months of project duration x EUR 12,500

The maximum grant amount (EUR 450,000) was available for projects lasting 36 months.

Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education in the years 2014–2019
Between 2014 and 2019, Polish institutions submitted 360 applications
for funding to the National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme, and support
amounting to nearly EUR 26 million was granted to 99 projects. The smallest
number of proposals (47) was submitted in the calls in 2014 and 2018,
the largest number (80 applications) was submitted in the 2016 call. The ratio
of proposals approved for funding was stable between 2014 and 2017 (ranging
from 13% to 26%). In the next analysed period (2018–2019), an upward trend
was observed. The ratio was 43% and 64% respectively.

**Proposals submitted and approved for funding in subsequent calls
under Key Action 2 in the field of Higher Education (N=360)**

Year	approved proposals	submitted proposals
2014	12	47
2015	11	72
2016	10	80
2017	14	64
2018	20	47
2019	32	50
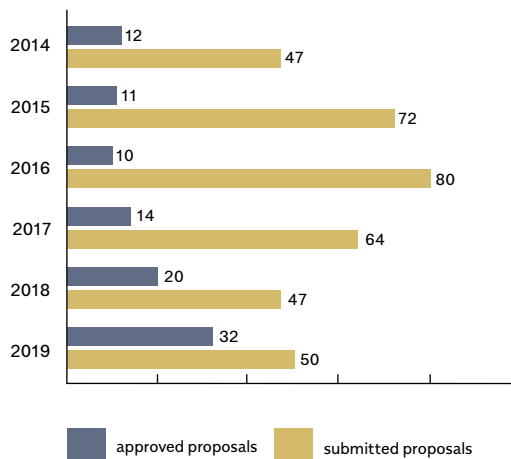
Source: erasmusplus.org.pl

Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education coordinated by Polish
institutions were large-scale undertakings, covering a wide range of topics
and areas. They have produced many useful educational outputs (including
programmes of study, teaching and training materials).

Main topics of Strategic Partnerships approved for funding in Poland in 2014–2019

Topic	Value
innovative study programmes or educational materials	79
ICT/new technologies/digital competences	21
international cooperation	18
quality and relevance of Higher Education in partner countries	17
entrepreneurship	15
distance learning	15
research and innovations	12
quality assurance	12
quality improvement in the institutions	8
inclusive education	7

Source: erasmusplus.org.pl

In accordance with the principles of Erasmus+, a Strategic Partnership had to address at least one horizontal priority or at least one specific priority relating to Higher Education. More than three quarters of the projects focused on learning, teaching and training. They improved knowledge and skills of more than 5 000 HEI staff and students.

It is worth noting that a total of 540 organisations (mainly from Europe, but also from other parts of the world) carried out Strategic Partnership projects coordinated by Polish institutions. Partners from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany were the most favoured. Higher Education Institutions formed the largest group of partner organisations in the projects (over 70%).

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Types of institutions involved in Strategic Partnerships in 2014–2019

- HEIs — 73%
- enterprises
- educational institutions
- foundations
- NGOs
- accrediting organisations
- research institutes
- local authorities
- other — 8%

1.1%
1.9%
2.4%
2.8%
2.8%
3.7%
4.3%
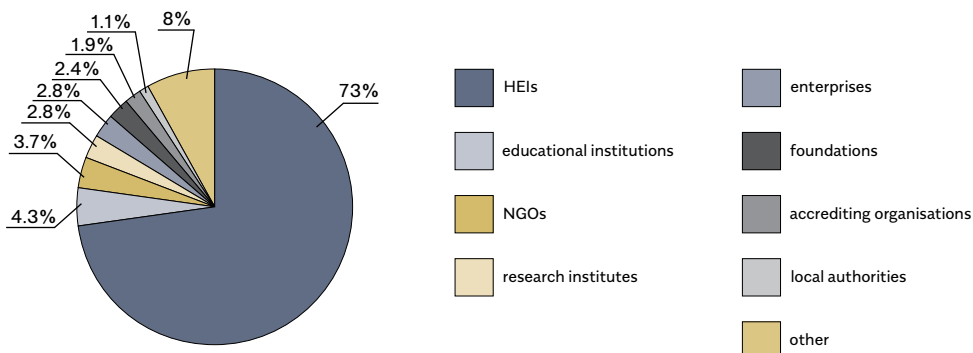
Source: erasmusplus.org.pl

A total of 56 different organisations carried out Strategic Partnerships projects in Poland. The largest number of projects – five each – were carried out by two universities from Łódź (Łódź University of Technology and University of Łódź). Just behind them was the University of Warsaw with four projects. The following HEIs coordinated three partnerships each: Gdansk University of Technology; Lublin University of Technology; the Jagiellonian University in Kraków; Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń; University of Szczecin, University of Silesia in Katowice, Warsaw University of Life Sciences and a private university – University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów.

The projects were mainly developed by public HEIs (33) non-public universities run 16 projects.

Methodology
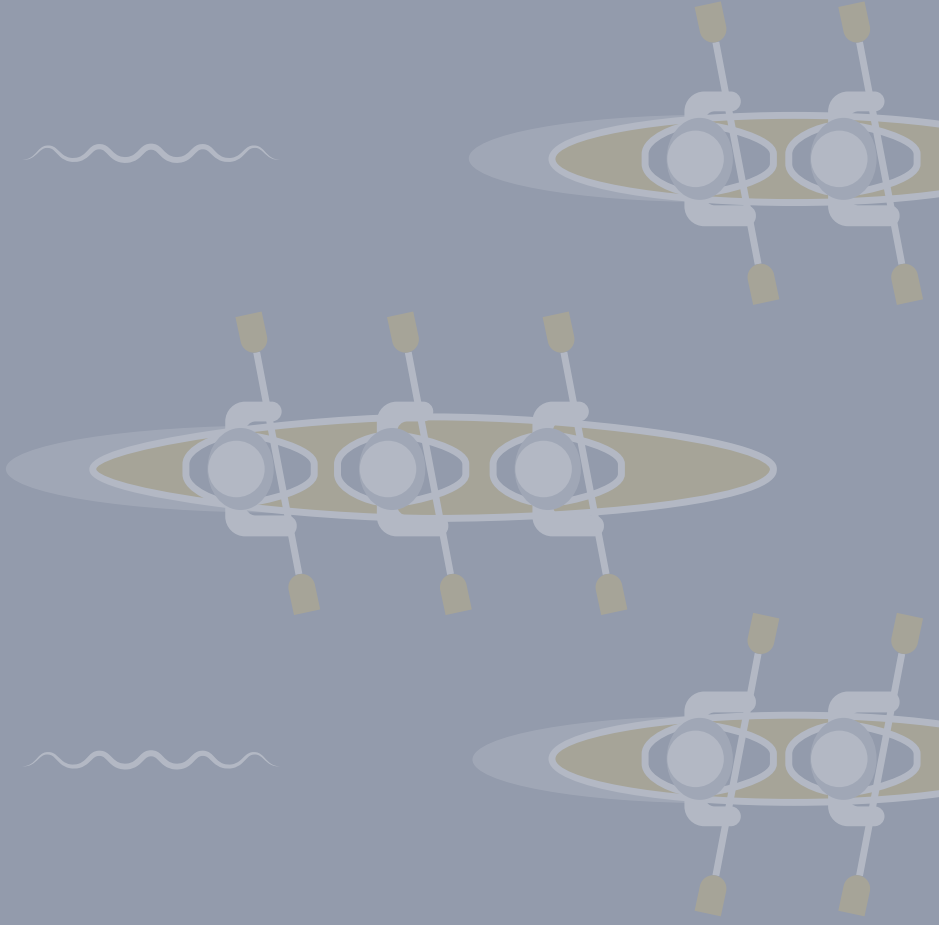
The aim of the survey was to collect beneficiaries' opinions on the implementation of Strategic Partnerships by their institutions. The survey questions concerned, among other things: the initiation of the project, finding partners for cooperation, the course and implementation of the project and project outcomes. The sustainability of the developed solutions was verified and it was checked if the institutions involved in the project continued their activities after the formal completion of the project. One of the aspects of the study was the assessment of the impact of the Strategic Partnerships – both on individual participants and on the whole institution. Another analysed aspect was the approach of university authorities to the implementation of the Strategic Partnerships projects. The respondents were also asked about the university's cooperation with the Erasmus+ National Agency at different stages of the project, so that possible areas for improvement could be identified. The respondents also evaluated the very formula of a Strategic Partnership, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses.

In the course of the study, it was possible to collect a wide variety of opinions that made it possible to summarise Strategic Partnerships projects, both from the perspective of the individuals and institutions directly involved in them. The survey was not designed to evaluate or audit projects. The projects had already been formally completed, evaluated and settled.

The study combined two approaches: quantitative and qualitative. It was divided into two parts – both were carried out in a similar period (February--March 2020).

Quantitative study

The first part of the study involved quantitative methods. It comprised an online survey addressed to university coordinators of all Strategic Partnerships projects that were completed and settled at the time when the survey began.

Research tool

The survey was conducted using the CAWI technique[6], which is a proven, effective, fast and accessible for respondents method for collecting quantitative data. The online survey was posted on the webankieta.pl platform. The questionnaire consisted of 42 questions. The majority of them were closed questions. Some questions were asked to selected respondents only. There were also a number of open questions allowing respondents to elaborate on or justify

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6   CAWI – Computer-Assisted Web Interview.

their answers. On average, it took respondents about 35 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Survey sample
The survey in the quantitative part of the study covered all Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education that were awarded funding in the three calls for proposals staged in 2014, 2015 and 2016. During this period, a total of 199 grant applications were submitted and 33 project proposals were approved for implementation. Six projects funded under the 2017 call, which were completed and settled at the time of the survey, were also included in the study.

Composition of the survey sample in the quantitative study

Year of the call for proposals	Number of completed and settled projects at the time of the survey
2014	12
2015	11
2016	10
2017	6
	Total: 39

   The survey questionnaire return rate was 59%. Out of 39 coordinators invited to take part in the survey, 23 responded. Data collection took eight weeks and a link to the survey was sent directly to project coordinators.

Qualitative study
The second part of the study aimed at a more in-depth and detailed analysis of selected issues. This part focused on project outcomes, and in particular on their impact not only on people directly involved in the projects, but also on the whole institutions. The individual in-depth interview (IDI) technique was used in this part[7]. The interviews were conducted by an experienced moderator, who was using a script (interview instructions) developed for this purpose, so that the conversation was structured and covered all relevant topics.

Survey sample
Nine projects were selected for the qualitative study. They were completed by institutions of various types (state and private universities, with different profiles) operating in different regions of Poland. All the surveyed universities

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7   IDI – Individual In-Depth Interview.

acted as project leaders. What is important, not only successful projects, but also those that failed to achieve all of the intended outcomes were selected for analysis.

As part of the study, two interviews were conducted with representatives of each project (18 interviews in total). The interviews were held with:

→ a project coordinator at the university;
→ a member of the management from the Higher Education Institution (e.g. vice-dean, dean, chancellor, institute director, vice-rector, rector).

Such a selection of interviewees aimed at juxtaposing two points of view – a narrower one (the perspective of the person responsible for project implementation) and a broader one (the perspective of a person who could look at the project from the angle of the entire organisational unit of the university). The interviews were conducted individually with each respondent, so that they could freely assess the project in question and present their conclusions. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes each and their basic assumption was the presentation of independent opinions and the anonymity of the respondents (the statements presented in this report do not allow for the identification of the interviewees or their home institutions). All statements quoted in this report have been edited to eliminate respondents' interjections, digressions, unfinished thoughts and colloquial language and, where necessary, abridged to present the respondents' views clearly.

Due to the introduction of epidemic emergency in Poland related to the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviews (15) were conducted on the phone.

Analysed projects

The quantitative part of the study was population-based – it included all projects completed and accounted for at the time of conducting the survey.

The Strategic Partnerships addressed different priorities in the field of Higher Education. The respondents who provided information in the survey most often indicated that the main priority for them was the modernisation of European Higher Education systems. The promotion of internationalisation was also a popular topic.

**Priorities for Higher Education taken into account in surveyed
Strategic Partnerships (multiple choice question, N=23)**

modernisation of European Higher Education systems	16
promoting internationalisation	12
tackling skills gaps and mismatches	9
digital inclusion and open educational resources	8
rewarding excellence in learning, teaching and skills development	3
building inclusive Higher Education systems	3
support for teacher training	2
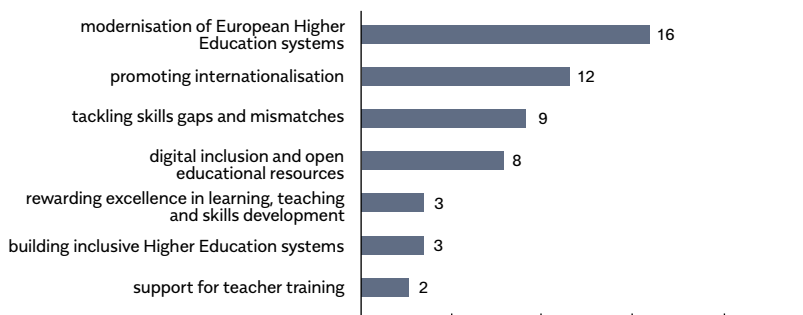
The projects included in the second (qualitative) part of the study were very diverse in terms of their topics. They included both projects strictly focused on teaching (aimed at e.g. creating new courses at the university, preparing teaching materials) and general projects concerning e.g. climate change, social problems and international issues, development of soft skills or cooperation between science and business.

In the majority of cases, a Strategic Partnership project in question was the first initiative of the kind implemented by a given institution. Only two entities (out of nine) had previous experience in this area[8].

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8   Detailed data on the examined projects can be found in Annex 3.
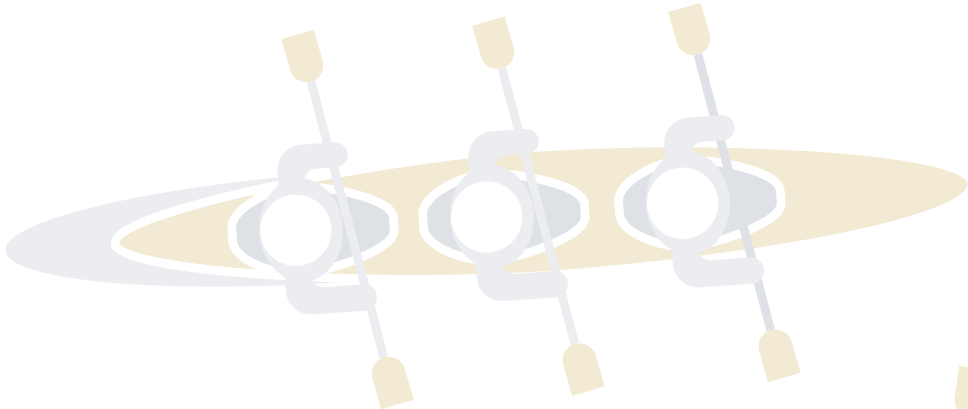
Project idea
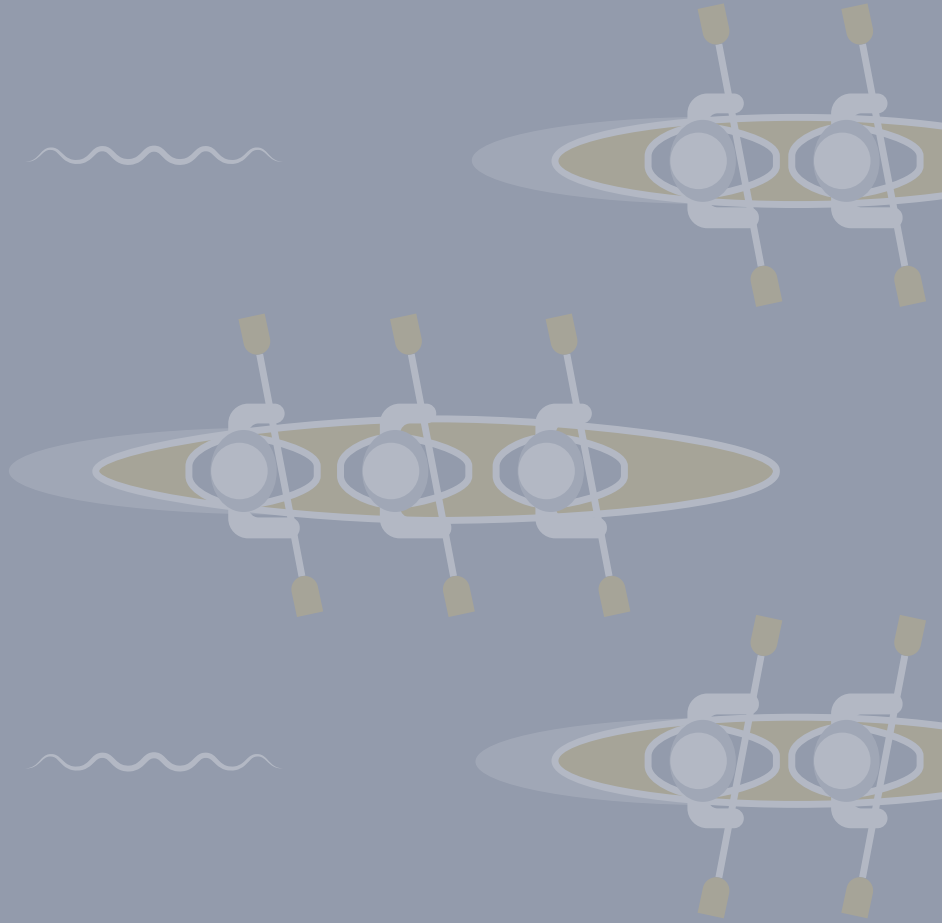
The initiation of Strategic Partnerships projects by the examined institutions was caused by a variety of reasons. In some cases it was **the desire to produce a concrete result**, in others the **need to work directly with specific partners** abroad proved more important. The majority of representatives of surveyed entities indicated that the **project was an initiative of the project leader**. In one case it was the initiative of a partner institution that did not become a project coordinator. Among the main motivations for implementing a Strategic Partnerships project, the coordinators mentioned issues such as:

→ establishing international cooperation focused on the development of innovative teaching methods;

→ bringing Higher Education programmes closer to reality, a more practical approach to teaching (skills, not just knowledge) and drawing on the experience of entrepreneurs;

→ internationalisation of study programmes, enabling students to study at universities abroad;

→ obtaining funding for the implementation of an innovative teaching idea in cooperation with a foreign partner;

→ development of the university and the establishment of permanent cooperation with international partners;

→ expanding the teaching offer and making it more attractive – developing a high-quality study programme drawing on the diverse experience of several countries and adapted to the needs of the labour market;

→ a broad exchange of experiences and increased international cooperation.

The two main objectives of the projects were: to develop educational offer of the university and to establish or expand a network of international cooperation. Therefore, Strategic Partnerships projects implemented by universities can be divided into: those directed "inwards" and "outwards"[9]. This is, of course, a schematic and conventional classification, which should not be treated very rigidly, as very often the development of single project resulted from both of the premises (as well as other, additional ones).

Projects directed "inwards" focused primarily on the development of concrete results and on the achievement of tangible outcomes (e.g. the preparation of a new teaching path, training course, the creation of teaching materials, the conduct of field research, making a publication or a report). These projects were primarily intended to produce lasting, tangible outcomes, mainly for the institutions participating in the activity.

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9 The classification of project types was developed by the authors of the report.

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On the other hand, outward-oriented projects were primarily intended to contribute to the building of broad networks of interaction, and to create lasting links between partners that could be developed and used in the future.

The original idea was an interdisciplinary connection of our fields and the knowledge of partners who deal with different topics.

[a project coordinator]

The project partners most often considered the following activities as the main outcomes: organisation of conferences, workshops, exchange of experience, staff mobility, increasing cooperation with local businesses and self-governments, raising social awareness, influencing the culture and society. The most important factor in this type of projects was achieving possibly the largest impact of the outcomes.

Interviewees claimed that **most often the idea to implement a Strategic Partnership project came from the coordinators or their colleagues.** It was usually a bottom-up initiative. The implementation of the project was not imposed in any way by the university authorities.

This was an initiative of people in the department, where the coordinator worked.

[a manager]

The coordinator was given freedom in project implementation. It was him who developed the idea, organised the team, submitted the proposal, and contacted partners. The dean merely gave him the "green light" to launch formal action.

[a manager]

This was something that I really wanted to do. I conceived the project, developed it myself and implemented it, too. No one from outside suggested to me that something like this should be done. It was entirely my initiative.

[a project coordinator]

Given that **Strategic Partnerships were mainly teaching rather than research oriented**, they directly addressed the needs of those involved in the teaching process. Coordinators often spoke about "starting from a problem" or initiating a project in response to immediate requirements of students and the university environment, e.g. the labour market. The observed deficits in the competences of students or teaching staff concerning specific practical skills often became the impetus for starting project activities.

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I think our work at the university is sometimes detached from reality. While there are no problems with the keeping the theoretical knowledge up-to-date, sometimes we lack reference to practice. We do not show how certain phenomena operate in the world or how various tools can be used. This is why I wanted that our project to focus on developing practical skills.

[a project coordinator]

The idea for the project resulted from our experience. We all have at least ten years of work experience, so we know what is really lacking, what solutions need to be prepared. This was our motivation for launching the Strategic Partnerships.

[a project coordinator]

My advice to project developers is that they should only carry out projects that arise from the immediate needs or interests of staff and universities. This guarantees a quality and effective project.

[a manager]

In the quantitative study, 22 coordinators stated that their project was implemented in response to the real needs of the university.

Project partners
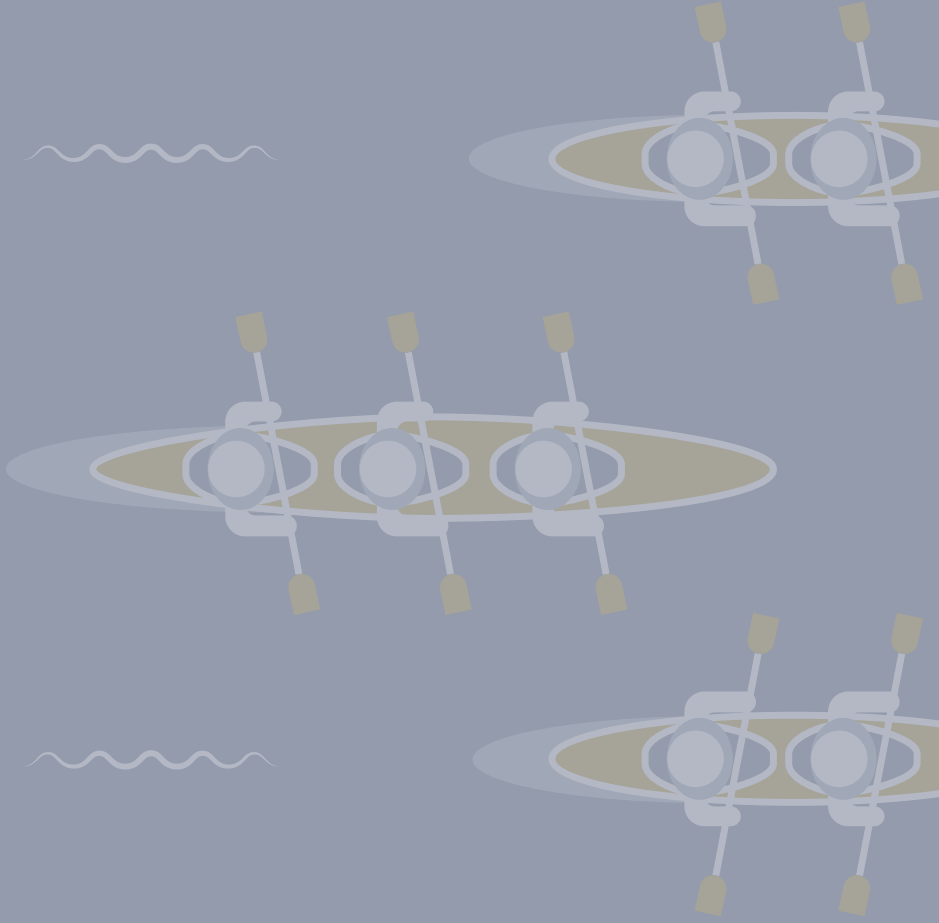
Many factors determine the success of a project (e.g. the type of project activity, the scope of the project, its objectives and reach). One of the most important factors, which was mentioned most often by the participants of the survey, was the **right selection of partners**. It was no different in the case of Strategic Partnerships, hence the study discusses issues related to acquiring partners, criteria for their selection and mechanisms for reaching out to relevant institutions.

Between three and nine institutions formed consortia in the surveyed projects. In the quantitative survey, the respondents were mainly the coordinators of smaller projects with up to three partners and the leader. According to the respondents, this number of institutions provided the necessary diversity and complementarity, while not affecting the quality of the communication process between them (which became more complex as the number of partners increased).

The partners of the Polish institutions in the surveyed projects were mainly foreign universities. National HEIs institutions and organisations working in the field of Education and Higher Education also participated in the projects. In several cases, project consortia brought together companies, NGOs of various types and research institutes.

Types of partner organisations in the surveyed projects (multiple choice question, N=23)

Type of organisation	Number of responses
foreign university	22
Polish university	8
an institution or organisation active in the field of Education and Higher Education	6
company	4
NGO, association, foundation	4
research institute	2
chamber of commerce and trade	1

When indicating the reasons for starting Strategic Partnerships activities, the respondents very often mentioned the willingness to establish cooperation with foreign institutions. Interestingly, the need to develop cooperation with tried and tested partners (16 indications) and cooperation with new partners (15 indications) was almost equally often indicated by the respondents. This means that regardless of whether the project was a continuation of the partners' previous activities or a completely new venture, the aspect of cooperation was an important reason for participating in the Strategic Partnerships. It is worth

noting that among the reasons for starting the project, the respondents were more likely to mention only:
→ the need to broaden the teaching offer (18 responses);
→ the need to increase the level of internationalisation (17 responses).

The respondents also emphasised that they were motivated by the desire to establish permanent cooperation with various institutions, which was important both in the context of implementing a specific project and for achieving long-term outcomes (e.g. gaining a permanent partner for further initiatives).

Methods of finding partners
The majority of respondents **had known the institutions they were inviting to participate in the Strategic Partnerships.** The leaders were most willing to implement joint projects with the organisations they have worked successfully before.

Sources of finding project partners (multiple choice question, N=23)

Source of finding partners	Number of responses
we had previously known partner institutions	21
we had used contacts made during trips/conferences	16
we had asked the international projects/international cooperation department of our institution for help	3
we had used personal contacts	2
we had used tools such as eupartnersearch.com	1
we had sent e-mails to the universities	1
we had used contacts of partner institutions	1

This theme, being one of the key aspects affecting the course and success of the project, was examined in more detail in the qualitative part of the study. In individual interviews, the respondents emphasised several aspects regarding the acquisition of institutions for projects.

First of all, they emphasised the need to **build a base of potential partners on a continuous basis** by establishing new contacts and maintaining existing ones as part of the day-to-day work of the university. Participation in scientific conferences, seminars, international staff exchanges, summer schools, cooperation in inter-university teams and groups that bring together people from outside the institution – these kinds of activities are an excellent opportunity to establish professional contacts and make valuable acquaintances. This kind of networking is carried out regardless of whether

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the institution is currently looking for partners for a specific project or not. Meetings that bring together representatives of institutions working in a similar area provide opportunities for creating a database of contacts that can be used in the future. Maintaining the relations in the long-term and in a reliable way and participating in the various projects involving partner cooperation makes the implementation of subsequent projects easier, as they are based on experience gained (also in terms of selecting partners).

We have had a strategy of finding partners for many years. We receive many invitations from organisations and universities abroad, and we also try to establish cooperation and join consortia.

[a project coordinator]

Sometimes cooperation with new institutions was established on the basis of recommendations from other partners. In the projects surveyed, the consortium participants represented institutions with which the leader had previously cooperated, as well as new entities recommended by the partners. Using the referrals and experiences of project partners was a fairly common source of acquiring new team members.

Two Spanish institutions were recommended to us by a partner from Lithuania. We had not had the opportunity to work with them on any project before. It was therefore important for us to have a recommendation from a trusted institution that knew these partners.

[a project coordinator]

It is worth noticing that it was the coordinators' job to find a new partner. Most often, they were given freedom in the choice of partner institutions. The university authorities did not participate directly in the process of finding a partner, but only finalised it by signing the partnership agreement (or by giving the coordinator a mandate to do so).

I was not heavily involved in the project at the preparatory stage – it was more of a supportive conversation, I tried to give hints, suggestions.

[a manager]

Partner selection criteria

The methods for attracting partners were varied. However, all of them took into account the importance of previous joint experience and the need to build a contact base from which, later on, new partners could be selected for further initiatives, depending on the needs.

What, then, were the criteria for selecting institutions for individual projects? What were the main considerations for leaders when choosing from a group of potential partners?

When looking for institutions to cooperate with, coordinators first of all took into account the nature of the project. Often **the subject matter, purpose and scope of the project affected the selection of prospective partners.** The partner organisation had to be appropriately selected in terms of the knowledge held. When a project dealt with climate issues, for example, and its participants wanted to compare countries with different conditions, they turned to institutions in Spain and Finland. When they wanted a partner from a neighbouring country, organisations from Lithuania and Germany were invited to cooperate.

An important criterion for the selection of partners was the pure merit of the institutions – their knowledge and competences. In the quantitative part of the study, 20 respondents (out of 23) admitted that the partner's human resources had a strong or very strong influence on their choice. From the respondents' perspective, it was important that the competences of the institution were complementary to those of the project team.

It is worth finding diverse partners.

[a manager]

An important aspect in the selection of partners was the complementarity of competences in the project.

[a project coordinator]

All but one respondents stated that **previous project experience and knowledge of the institution** and their staff were one of the most important criteria while selecting a partner for the project.

It is important that partners have varying experiences. Our project will benefit from someone who is different from us, not from someone who is very similar to us. This can bring added value – and that is what a good partnership is all about. The selection must therefore not be random.

[a manager]

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As the survey results show, two aspects – access to research infrastructure at the partner institution and its reputation in the academic community – were evaluated independently of each other. Thirteen respondents said that the latter aspect had a greater influence on the selection of project partners (infrastructure was indicated by ten respondents).

The most frequently mentioned criterion for the selection of consortium members was previous cooperation of the coordinating institution with a prospective partner. According to 21 respondents, good contacts and completed projects had big or very big impact on starting another joint venture.

As one of the coordinators emphasised in an interview, good and effective cooperation cannot be based solely on general institutional knowledge of both organisations. Individual, interpersonal contacts, experiences, relationships and friendships are crucial, he believes. The collaboration does not link two impersonal institutions, but specific people directly involved in the project. How they interact with each other, share information, communicate and engage in joint activities determines the success of the entire project.

The quality of the cooperation does not depend on the institutions, but on the people, the experts assigned to the project. The fact that an organisation employs many specialists means nothing. What is important is their approach to work and their commitment in the project.

[a project coordinator]

A lot depends on the ability of individuals to work together.

[a manager]

Some respondents felt that working with people you had not met before entails considerable risk. However, in some cases partners were invited to the project at the last minute (usually to complete the consortium for formal reasons).

It was a bit problematic that we did not know a prospective partner, but we chose it because we simply needed the fifth institution to join the consortium. We didn't know the way and style of their work, so it was potentially very risky. Fortunately, it turned out OK.

[a project coordinator]

However, such situations were sporadic. In the quantitative study, almost all coordinators (except for one) responded that they had previously worked with some of the partners involved in the project. Seven respondents implemented projects in which all partners had known each other. Participants in the study

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emphasised that, regardless of how long and how close they have cooperated with an institution, **the selection for the project was neither a spontaneous nor random decision**. It was always a matter thoroughly thought over, as the success of the whole project depended on it. Very often, when seeking partners, project coordinators relied on their (private) contacts, established and developed over many years.

Our partners have proven themselves in previous cooperation. The contact was not accidental or anonymous – the teachers had known each other from previous academic exchanges.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

The partners have been "tested" to some extent, although they have never before taken part in such consortium.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

For the project I have selected the partners with the best possible potential for the cooperation. I did not rely on luck – I thought long and hard about each institution.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

Very rare were the cases of changing a partner during the project. This was the case in three surveyed projects. As the coordinators declared, this change contributed to the final success of the project.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents had no problems finding a partner (11 survey participants found this task "easy" or "very easy", 10 considered it as "moderately difficult"). Only two people said that this stage was "quite complicated". The use of professional contacts and previous cooperation experience helped to run partner selection process smoothly.
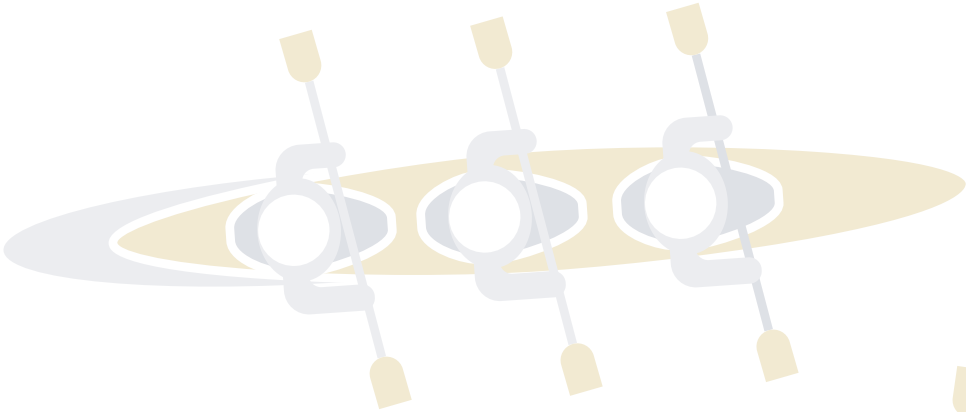
Project development
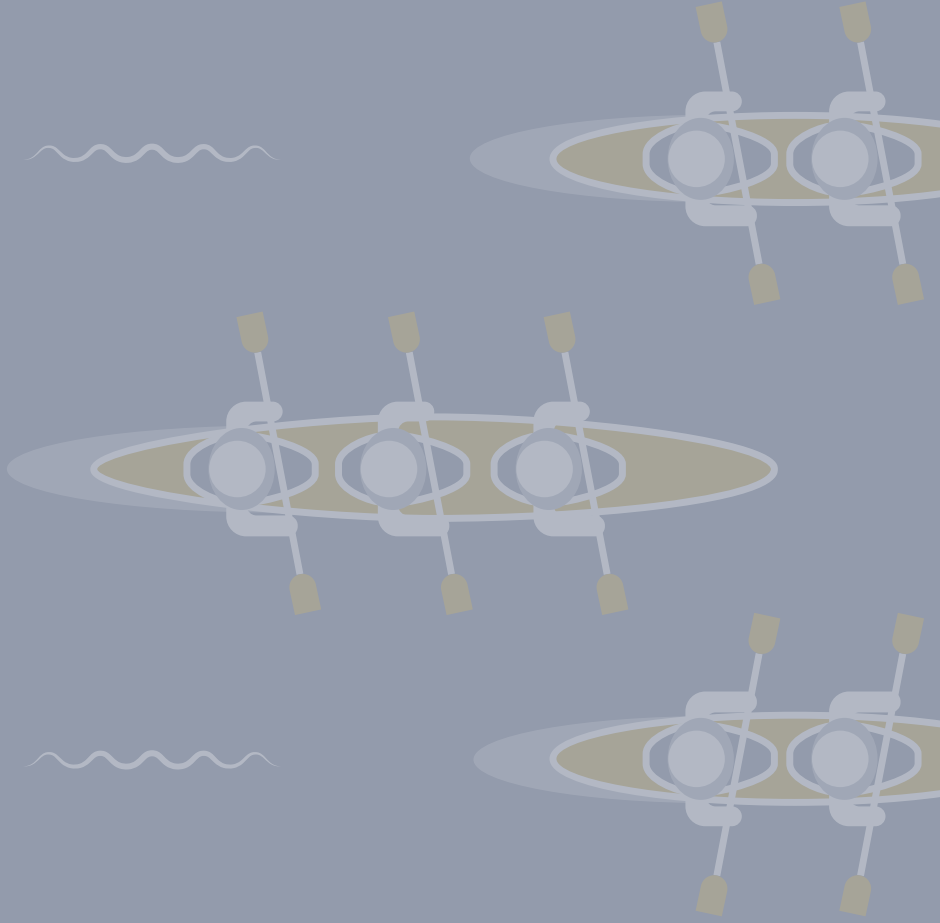
Preparation and evaluation of the proposal

The initial phase of the project is mainly about constructing the concept of the activity, selecting partners and preparing and submitting the application for funding.

Participants had differing views about the level of difficulty in preparing the proposal. Divergent opinions were given depending on **whether the Strategic Partnership had been implemented for the first time** at a given university or for the first time by a particular coordinator or it was another venture at the institution. Those who had submitted proposals under other calls (even those that were not successful) were able to draw on their experience.

This was our second application. The first, filed a year earlier, was not successful. However, we received feedback from the evaluators who pointed out the shortcomings in our proposal. On this basis, we have made the corrections.

[a project coordinator]

The basic source of knowledge at the application stage was, for most coordinators, the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*. There were also those who, when developing the project, were guided by their own intuition or referred to their experience in applying for funds under other EU or domestic programmes.

I have carefully read the Erasmus+ Programme Guide*, several times. In fact, it contains everything you need to know to write a proposal correctly.*

[a project coordinator]

The survey also asked if **future partners were involved in the preparation of the project** (which is a recommended practice). In several cases this was the case; the proposal was developed with the participation of all institutions that were to participate in the implementation of the planned project, which helped to establish the division of tasks and the contribution of each participant of the consortium from the very beginning. The partners accepted the subsequent stages of preparing the proposal, so they received updates on the progress of the work and the shape of future activities.

All partners were involved in the development of the proposal – so they were well aware of what they were signing up to. We didn't have a manager from the outside telling us "Here is a project, please read it and implement it". We created the concept for the whole project ourselves from the beginning, and each party understood what it was all about.

[a project coordinator]

Sometimes, however, the proposal was prepared entirely by the coordinator, who selected participants for future activities only after this process had been completed. In such a situation, the partners had no influence on the shape of the future project. They were only performing tasks in accordance with the vision and concept of the project initiator.

The ambivalent assessment of the process of preparing a project proposal was particularly evident in the data from the quantitative study. More than half of the respondents found this stage as "moderate" in terms of difficulty (which was the middle answer on the proposed scale). However, a significant number of coordinators felt that preparing the proposal was not straightforward (a total of 10 responses saying that the process was "very complicated" and "quite complicated").

Level of difficulty of preparing a project proposal in the opinion of survey participants (N=23)

- very complicated
- quite complicated
- moderate
- quite easy
- very easy*

* None of the respondents gave this answer.
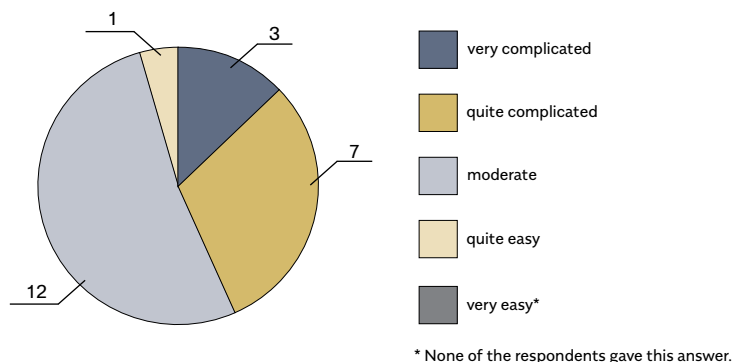
As the preparation of the application posed some difficulty, the study examined the most common problems indicated by project coordinators in the qualitative study:

→ **The schedule is too detailed:** the application already from the beginning requires very precise information in terms of the schedule and individual activities in the project. In the respondents' opinion, with projects lasting two years or more, it is very difficult to define at their beginning the precise deadlines for the implementation of individual stages of the activity.

In my opinion, the structure of the application form is incorrect. The document is too complex and requires that even small processes are discussed. This leads nowhere, because anyone who has been involved in a project lasting more than six months knows that the schedule becomes outdated on the second day of its implementation.

[a manager]

→ **It is impossible to focus on the results:** According to the respondents, the application form mainly focuses on scheduling and financial issues. In their view, it would make more sense to take a broader view of the project's intended outcomes. When applying for a grant, beneficiaries usually have a clear vision of final outcomes and would like this to form the basis for the assessment of the application.

I call for the grant application form to be simplified so that more emphasis is placed on the outcomes rather than schedule and financial issues.

[a manager]

→ **The structure of the application form:** The respondents claimed that the construction of the application requires them to include the same content in several sections (although expressed in different words). In practice it comes down to paraphrasing previous points when filling in the application.

The only difficulty with the application form is that you have to write the same thing down several times. You have to repeat yourself every time you fill in the documentation.

[a project coordinator]

The process of submitting an application in the system was rated more leniently than the preparation stage by the respondents. The vast majority of the respondents found the task "quite easy" or "very easy", and only two people found it somewhat difficult. The survey therefore shows that the applicants may have difficulties with creating the content of the application, and not the "technical" aspect of submitting the application.

Level of difficulty of submitting a project proposal in the opinion of survey participants (N=23)

- very complicated*
- quite complicated
- moderate
- quite easy
- very easy
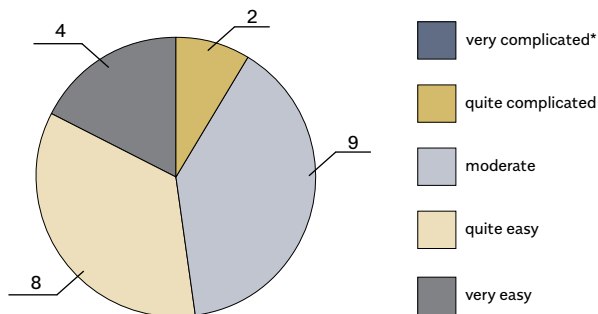
* None of the respondents gave this answer.

The key stage after preparing and submitting the proposal is its assessment by the experts. As the coordinators are not directly involved in the process, their view was mostly based on hunches or observations. It happened that the participants in the study received funding for their projects only at the second or third attempt, which influenced their opinion. Some said that despite completing the application form in accordance with the instructions and with the applicable principles of the Programme, the assessment was not positive. Others pointed out that **they could not appeal against the experts' decision**. Coordinators called for the possibility of contacting the person assessing their application and the possibility for clarifying issues giving rise to concerns or doubts.
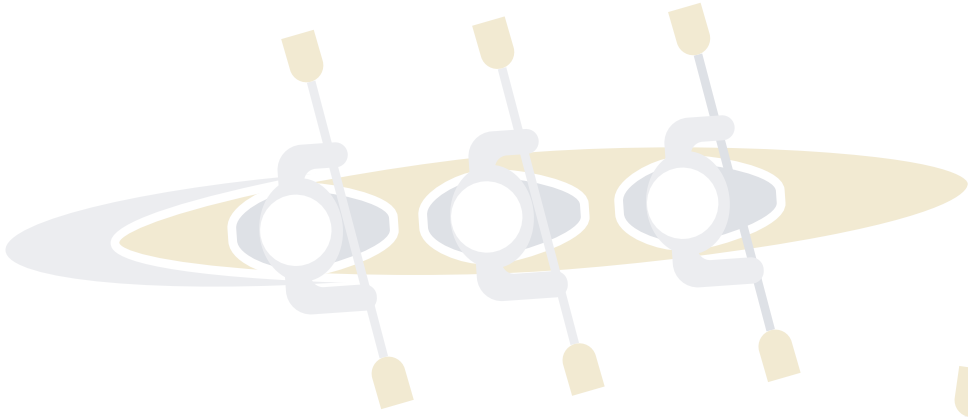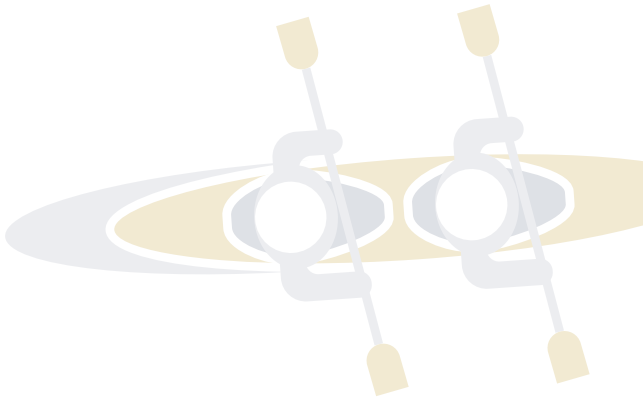
Project implementation
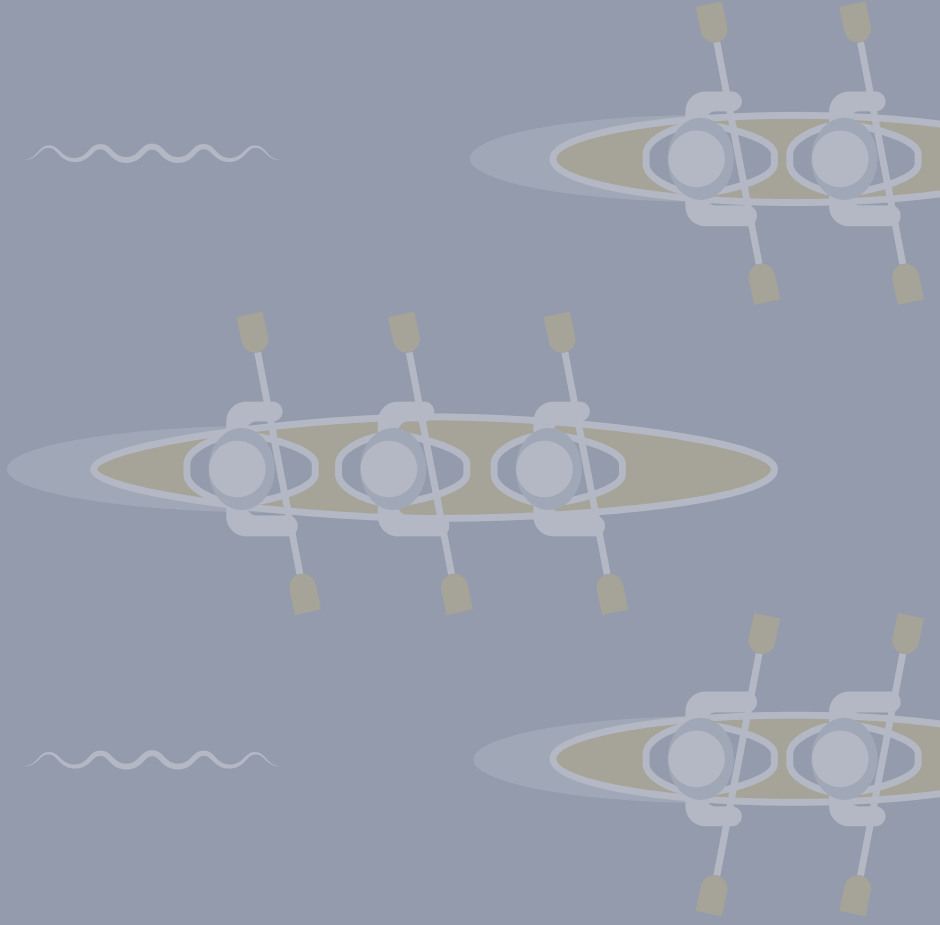
The assessment of how difficult it was to implement the project varies considerably, which is due to many factors, including the scope of the project, the selection of partners and the experience of the implementers. None of the respondents described the experience as "very easy" and opinions were quite diverse on this issue.

Overall assessment of the level of difficulty of project implementation (N=23)

3

5

6

9

very complicated

quite complicated

moderate

quite easy

very easy*
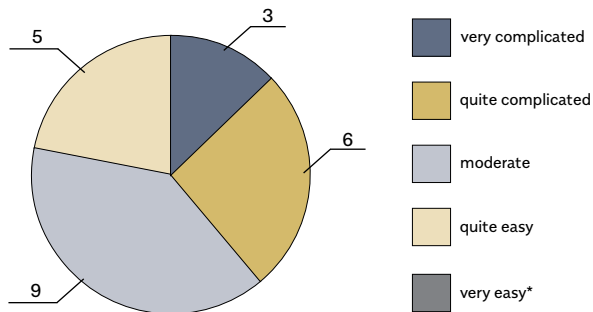
* None of the respondents gave this answer.

Evaluation of cooperation with the partners

When summing up the implementation of project activities, what came to the fore was the evaluation of cooperation within the project team, i.e. the interaction with partners. This was a key factor affecting the success of Strategic Partnerships projects.

Many respondents stressed that a necessary (though of course not exclusive) precondition for a project to run well is the **right choice of partners**. In the quantitative survey, they had the opportunity to assess their cooperation with partner institutions in several areas such as:
→ carrying out tasks entrusted to them;
→ communication within the consortium;
→ meeting established deadlines for the completion of tasks;
→ division of tasks between institutions;
→ the quality of the outcomes produced.

All the aspects mentioned above were rated at a similar level. Survey participants were satisfied with them to a "sufficient" or "very high" extent (there were a few responses like "satisfied to a small extent").

Several coordinators mentioned that during the implementation of the project there were problems related to cooperation with partners, differences in interpretation and understanding of concepts, terms or rules among consortium

participants. However, such difficulties were occasional. In one project, a partner institution left the consortium[10] and broadly defined "problems in cooperation with partners" were reported by two coordinators.

Some of these themes also emerged in the coordinators' statements in the in-depth qualitative study. They argued that difficult experiences could have been avoided by formulating a detailed definition of common concepts, rules and principles of cooperation. Problems in projects were sometimes caused by the wrong assumption that certain concepts are understood the same way by all the partners.

Another problem pointed out by the respondents **was the difference in the approach of the project leader and partners to the implementation of the activities**. While for the coordinating institution the implementation of the planned activities was usually a priority, for the partners the project could have been one of several equally important undertakings conducted at the same time. This is why, there were problems with meeting deadlines for the completion of tasks or with the quality of work performed. Leaders had no formal instruments to influence their partners, so coordinators could only appeal to them to keep the agreements.

The attitudes to deadlines or commitment to project activities resulted from a number of factors, including cultural differences. It is therefore worth emphasising once again that a key factor in the success of the project was **prior knowledge of the partners** (or at least mutual knowledge of their preferred working styles). Stereotypes about the way representatives of different nations (e.g. northern European or Mediterranean countries) work were not always confirmed during the projects.

> *Our expectations were totally different from what actually took place in the project. We assumed, somewhat stereotypically, that it would be difficult to work with Spaniards and that we would have no problems with Norwegians. It turned out that the opposite was true.*

[a project coordinator]

One of the respondents considered the best partners to be the representatives of the countries from a cultural background similar to Poland. In his opinion, it was most difficult to have effective and smooth cooperation with representatives of Anglo-Saxon countries.

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10 In this project, after the withdrawal of a partner institution, its place was taken by another organisation.

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Habits resulting from belonging to a particular culture do matter. It was very difficult for us to work with the Dutch and Britons. But the Central European partners are a bit closer to us mentally and, in my opinion, it is more effective to work with them.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

One of the coordinators stated that the **large diversity of participants in the project could be both a strength and a considerable handicap**. The great diversity contributes, among other things, to a different understanding of certain concepts and definitions, which requires clarification within the project team.

Our interdisciplinary group of specialists includes professors, PhD holders, and assistant professors. These are people who demonstrate profound knowledge, but at the same time they have been working for years in their systems and got stuck in the rut. The first year of project implementation was quite challenging. Although all participants were very committed, everyone wanted to impose their point of view.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

The quality of partnerships is related to the overall experience of the institutions implementing projects under the Erasmus+ Programme. It is important not only to know the specifics of Strategic Partnerships projects, but also of other, similar in essence, undertakings funded by the European Union, which oblige the beneficiaries to report and make financial settlements. Institutions with previous experience of implementing such projects were – regardless of their country of origin – more desirable partners than institutions participating in projects for the first time.

Other problems while implementing the projects

In the quantitative study, the coordinators were asked whether they faced any significant problems during project implementation. One in three people (8 respondents) acknowledged that there were challenges. **The issue of partnership cooperation** was considered the most problematic. Difficulties were also caused by a **change in the position of project coordinator** during the project (this occurred in several of the surveyed projects). The people replacing them had to take over all the duties connected with the implementation of the planned activities in a short period of time.

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I was included in the project when it was running. The previous coordinator, instrumental in preparing the application, had left our university. As a result, I had to take over a large, complex project on the fly and clarify some inaccuracies at the outset.

[a project coordinator]

Partnership projects were often large undertakings involving many foreign partners and producing a large number of different results, so the person taking over as coordinator was faced with a huge challenge. In each project, the participation of people who were directly involved in planning the whole project and preparing the application was of utmost importance. They usually had the broadest experience and knowledge of the activities envisaged in the project. Thus, when such people opted out, there were difficulties in continuing the implementation of projects, especially larger ones. It is worth noting, however, that even though there were replacements in the coordinator role, all of the surveyed projects were completed.

Problems appeared when one of the main architects of the whole project – the colleague who had written the proposal and had managed the project from the beginning – opted out. The people who replaced her had a huge problem. This project was a bit too big for our execution possibilities.

[a project coordinator]

As a rule, extensive and multi-threaded Strategic Partnerships involve a **relatively long time horizon.** Such projects lasted three years at maximum, which, according to the respondents, was quite a long period in the context of the development of science and changes taking place in the field of scientific research. It is, of course, natural that an extensive project carried out by many institutions in an international team requires a long time to be completed. On the other hand, in the course of its implementation, many of the teaching assumptions e.g. regarding the needs of the labour market or cooperation with entrepreneurs, may become outdated. Therefore, according to the respondents, the project should be as flexible as possible and allow for changes and modifications during the implementation of the activities.

It is important to strike a balance between the assumptions presented in the application and reality, between project plans and the real world. The project itself lasts three years, but a four-year perspective must be taken into account. A lot of time passes before a proposal is submitted, assessed, implemented and finally evaluated, and everything around it is changing.

[a project coordinator]

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According to the coordinators, another problematic issue was that **the scope of the project was too broad.** Some beneficiaries carrying out the Strategic Partnerships had planned so many activities and final outcomes that it proved very difficult to achieve all of them within the time frame set. All the more so, as not all academics could take advantage of the reduced working hours as part of their standard duties (e.g. reduced teaching load), which meant that project tasks had to be carried out after working hours, in their free time.

We had planned too many interdisciplinary outcomes that we wanted to achieve. It turned out that we did not have enough time. We painfully confronted the reality.

[a project coordinator]

Some coordinators mentioned that the handling of the **project administration** at their universities was a challenge. For administrative staff in some academic centres it was problematic to settle the project based on a different system than usual, i.e. on the basis of lump sums.

The university administration had not been prepared to run our project. The administration staff was used to seeing project profits whereas the formula for Strategic Partnerships was different. So the beginnings were not easy.

[a project coordinator]

Strategic Partnerships: finances
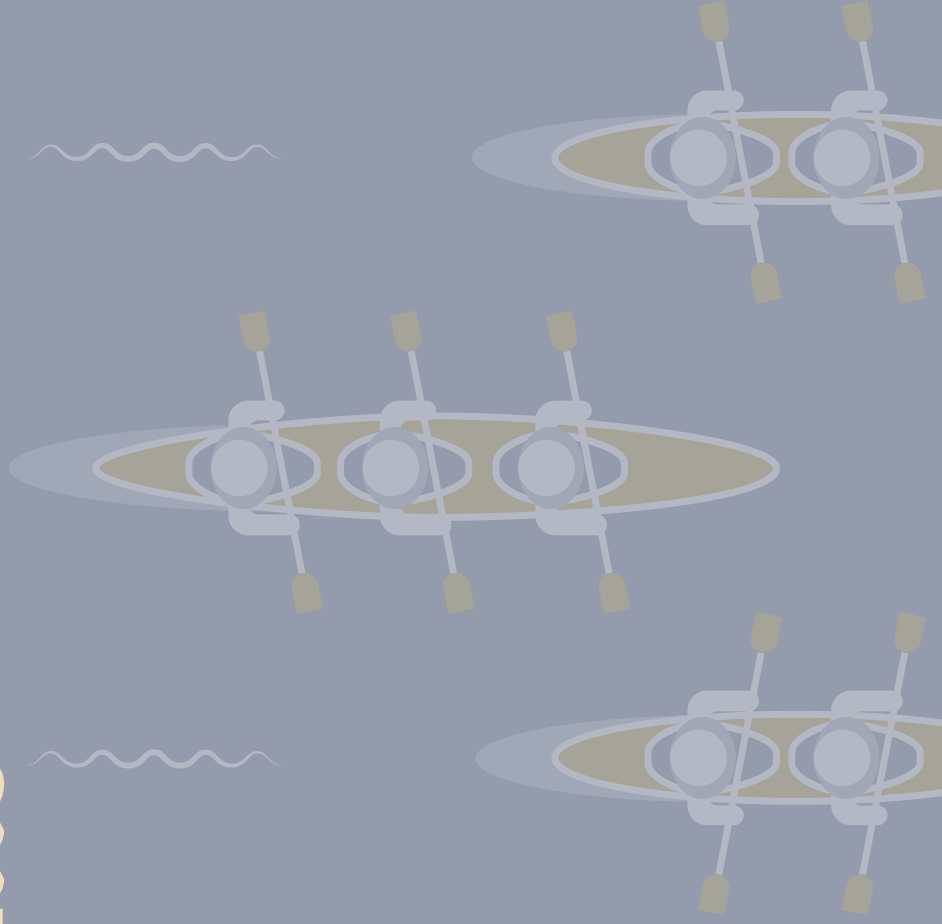
The Erasmus+ principles state that a project budget is the result of two components – the grant received and the contribution of the applicant institution. However, it seems that prospective beneficiaries, financial managers at the universities in particular, are not always aware of them.

Aspects related to the settlement and financing of Strategic Partnerships projects were one of the main sources of problems for the partners during project implementation. Although one half of the respondents said that financial matters did not cause them much difficulty[11], as many as seven participants in the survey (out of 23) found them complicated.

One of the challenging issues was the **limited possibility to fund the participation of external experts** in the project[12]. As far as possible, all the tasks, were to be carried out by the staff of the partner institutions, and they did not always have sufficient competence in a given field. In order to overcome these shortcomings, project leaders invited a variety of institutions with complementary knowledge resources to collaborate. However, it was not always possible to meet the project needs with the help of the people employed in a given institution. Coordinators mentioned that being able to contract external contractors on an ongoing basis as part of Strategic Partnerships would make it easier for them to carry out certain tasks.

Organisations, especially smaller ones, are not always able to carry out all the activities themselves. They could use the services of an external expert or even a company, which would prepare something for them. However, the character of these projects is such that most of the funds are consumed by staff salaries and there is no way to cover exceptional external costs.

[a project coordinator]

Another financial matter raised by survey participants was **the settlements made in Strategic Partnerships projects based on lump sums**. The staff of institutions that previously had implemented other international projects was accustomed to the so-called indirect costs (when part of the funds was used to finance the operations of the university). Settlements based on lump sums required from institutions securing funds for the project and adequate staff resources.

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11 This is the middle answer on a five-point scale indicating that this task was neither very difficult nor very easy.

12 This was only possible under exceptional costs, which had to be planned and covered by the agreement concluded with the National Agency of the Erasmus+.

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Our unit had extensive experience in running EU projects, both scientific and structural ones. They have different character. They are settled based on actual costs. Strategic Partnerships involve flat rates. This solution is simpler, but you need to prepare for it. If you are dealing with it for the first time, it takes time to get the right practice.

[a project coordinator]

The Strategic Partnerships projects **mainly dealt with teaching issues** and therefore did not bring direct financial profits to the universities, and by definition the units had to cover a part of the costs. As a result, coordinators sometimes found it difficult to convince the unit or university authorities to carry out this type of project.

This project differed from all that we had done. The costs of the university's work were not included in it; on the contrary, our institution had to cover a part of the expenses. For the authorities of our university, prestige in the international arena is important, but it is also important that we have the money to run a project at the institution.

[a project coordinator]

The representatives of university authorities who participated in the survey also mentioned other operation schemes in their institutions. Some universities secured funds for project activities in advance, which ensured smooth implementation of subsequent projects.

We have been implementing projects for years, so I have created special purpose fund to cover unforeseen expenses. As a result, we can afford to meet project financial guarantee requirements (up to a certain ceiling).

[a manager]

In addition to securing funding, some universities offered additional **administrative support** to coordinators to relieve them of the burden of carrying out the project activities. Among other things, there were dedicated units (e.g. international project offices) which were assigned to assist in submitting applications, implementing projects from a formal point of view and settling them. The need to organise administrative support for project coordinators was reflected in specific activities of the university authorities.

The settlement of the projects is handled by a relevant administrative unit – the International Projects Office. The Office also helps us to prepare applications and reports. Project authors, coordinators and participants are not left alone.

[a manager]

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Seven respondents said that the funding received under the Programme was sufficient to cover all the incurred costs and none of the partners had to subsidise the project with their own resources. Others confirmed that their institution made a financial contribution towards the project. The largest group of respondents (six people) estimated that the costs amounted to 10–20% of the project value. Four people each indicated ranges below 10% and above 20%.

Number of responses concerning the percentage of the institution's own contribution in relation to the total project value (N=14)

0%   10%   20%   own contribution paid (%)

Funding rates for Strategic Partnerships

Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships are divided into four groups of countries with differentiated rates for staff costs. The coordinators participating in the survey expressed their dissatisfaction with what they considered to be the excessive disparity in the rates paid to staff in each country for producing intellectual outputs under the project.

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Differentiation of the grant rate in Erasmus+ projects per group

Funding levels in projects

- Group 1
- Group 2
- Group 3
- Group 4
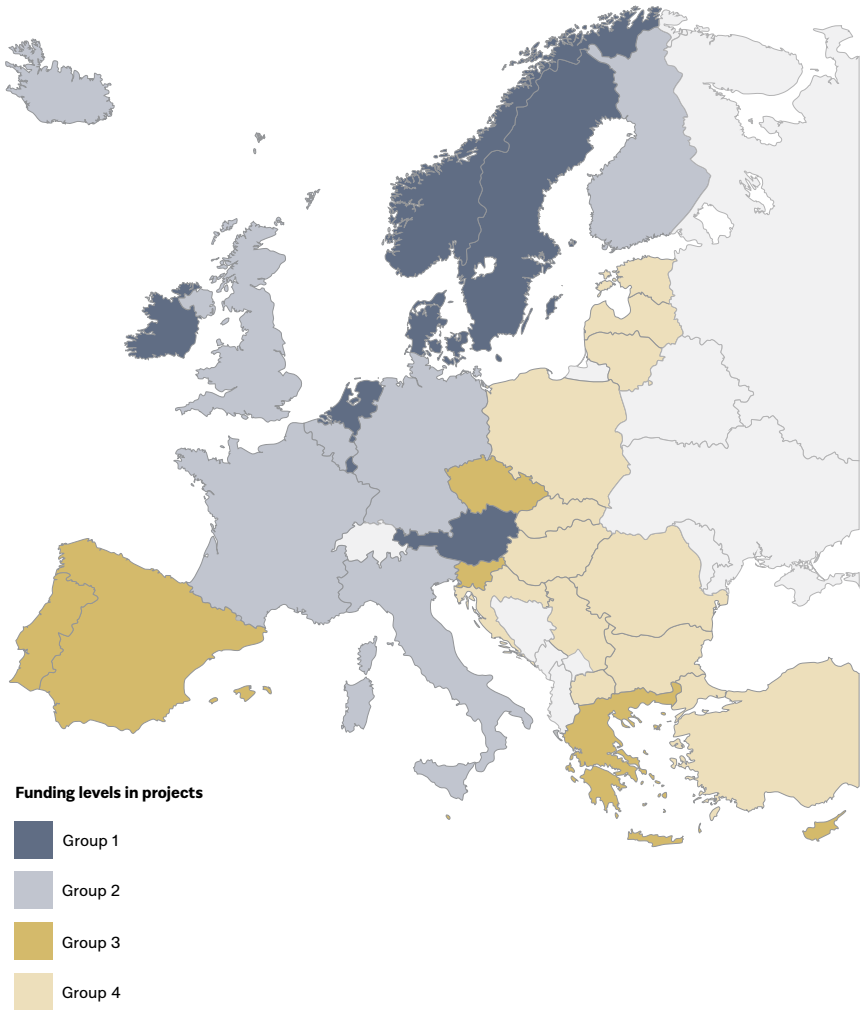
Source: *Erasmus+ Programme Guide.*

The daily rates for producing intellectual outputs in a Strategic Partnerships project depend not only on the country of the participating organisation whose staff is involved, but also on the profile of staff involved in the project.

Four staff profiles were distinguished:

→ manager;
→ teacher/trainer/researcher;
→ technician;
→ administrative staff.

The disparity in lump sums between the different groups is significant and is mainly motivated by the difference in the costs of living in each Programme Country.

Per day rates of co-financing for producing intellectual outputs for individual staff profiles under Strategic Partnerships in Programme Countries (amounts in euro)

	Manager	Teacher/ trainer/ researcher	Technician	Administrative staff
Group 1 Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden	294	241	190	157
Group 2 Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, Iceland, United Kingdom	280	214	162	131
Group3 Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain	164	137	102	78
Group 4 Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkey	88	74	55	39

Source: *Erasmus+ Programme Guide.*

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The per day rates for different staff profiles within one group of countries are similar. Considering the two extremes of project roles in terms of funding across all four groups, the lowest per day rate (administrative staff) is about half of the highest amount paid to a manager (ranging from 44% in Group 4 to 53% in Group 1).

When comparing groups of countries within the same staff profile, the greatest absolute differences are seen in rates between Group 2 and Group 3 countries. The amounts envisaged for staff in Group 1 countries are only slightly higher than for those in Group 2 countries.

The biggest controversy and objections among respondents were caused by the differences within the same staff profile between countries in different groups. Poland was classified in Group 4, so project implementers received funding at the lowest possible level.

There is one important thing that needs to be changed – not at the level of the National Agency, but at the level of the European Commission in Brussels. It is, of course, about per day amounts, which result in different treatment of the partners. Everyone gets the same travel allowance, but the worth of a day's work is calculated very differently. A Pole working in a given project is paid, for example, 74 euros, while a Dutchman in a similar position receives 241 euros. That is almost four times more! I am more than sure that the difference in the living costs between our countries is not as much as 1:4. Czechs get almost twice as much as Poles.

[a project coordinator]

The differences in per day rates were assessed very critically by the coordinators. There were opinions voiced that it was: "extremely improper", "quite hurtful, depressing", "causing a great sense of injustice".

In each staff profile, the representatives of the group of countries to which Poland belongs received over three times smaller remuneration than staff members in Group 1 countries. In the case of administrative staff, the amounts were four times smaller. Moreover, a manager in a Group 4 country received less than one half of the amount paid to a Group 1 technician. The most stirring issue were the differences within the amounts paid to teacher/trainer/researcher groups from different countries working on a joint project. A coordinator from Poland was paid less than any other staff member in the project coming from a Western European country. Moreover, the differences in the amounts paid to partners in the same staff categories working on the same project were very large and did not depend in any way on the workload.

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This is quite unfair to the Poles. Unfortunately, the rates were not commensurate with the work input. They should be flattened out so that there are not such big differences between the countries. I feel that we are not being treated fairly.

[a project coordinator]

According to the respondents, the differences in the living costs across countries are not as great as the per day amounts in each group would suggest. They argued that the lowest rates were insufficient to cover project needs, while the highest rates allowed implementers to earn a satisfactory remuneration per day of work. Many coordinators considered it a disadvantage of the Programme that for the same work, an Irish or Dutch partner would receive more than three times larger amount than an Estonian or Lithuanian.

This is a hurtful issue. As project leaders, we worked the hardest of all the partnership participants and received the smallest remuneration. The differentiation of amounts for different EU countries should be reconsidered.

[a project coordinator]

When asked about a solution to this situation, **coordinators suggested flattening out of per day amounts for producing intellectual outputs in projects**. According to them, the current differences are so great that they negatively affect the implementation of project activities. According to the respondents it is difficult to motivate project participants to work hard, while others receive several times higher remuneration for similar activities.

Obviously, the rates do not have to be the same, but since we assume that every partner has equal rights, it is difficult to require that the lower paid ones work with the same intensity as others. Raising the lowest rates would be a good solution.

[a project coordinator]

Some coordinators themselves decided to solve the pay gap issues within the project at the very beginning. They introduced their own rules to bridge the gap, which aimed to ensure fairer treatment of the partners.

We agreed within the consortium that we would not join the project unless the partners consented that there would only be two rates. In more developed countries a little higher, in others lower. It took a lot of budgeting work for us to put this in place, but we felt it was worth doing it, so that nobody in the project felt disadvantaged.

[a project coordinator]

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Talking about finances, there were also opinions that the **rules for accounting for exceptional costs** were not fully transparent. According to the coordinators, the rules for including expenditure in this category were not clear and generated a lot of confusion and doubt[13]. It is therefore worth paying more attention to this category during information meetings with beneficiaries.

Overall assessment of project progress

When evaluating the implementation of their Strategic Partnerships, the respondents agreed that, despite minor difficulties, the projects ran smoothly and without serious problems.

Some praised **the lump-sum based settlements** (despite the reservations about the rates), finding it a convenient and transparent solution for universities. Both project leaders and partners believed that this aspect did not cause them much trouble[14].

I did not have any problems with settlements. After receiving the grant and signing the agreement, our accountant and I attended a training session, during which all the rules were explained to us. Certainly, lump sum based project accounting saves time for both us and the university administration.

[a project coordinator]

Very often, when discussing the course of project activities themselves, the respondents referred to cooperation with partners. According to them, good cooperation between the partners and the leader was a crucial factor for the success of the project and its smooth running. If everyone was involved, helped each other and was well matched in terms of their competences and resources, the project was usually well assessed by its participants. The respondents stressed that there is added value to be gained from close cooperation in an international setting.

The diverse composition of the consortium was an advantage. In such a team it was much easier to find people competent in a particular area. The diverse perspectives on the topic and different cultural, geographical and economic backgrounds were amazing. The partners were motivated, helped each other and were willing to share knowledge. This would be difficult to achieve in a "normal" project with two Polish and one foreign partner.

[a project coordinator]

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13 In fact, the settlement of such costs requires planning, reporting and sending documentation to the National Agency.

14 See the section "Other problems during project implementation".

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Both Strategic Partnerships coordinators and unit managers at universities agreed that **Strategic Partnerships** within the Erasmus+ Programme **were relatively straightforward and easy to implement**. This assessment was probably influenced by the fact that the accounting system was quite simple in terms of formalities and that there was the possibility of implementing various activities with partners.

When I asked the coordinator about any difficulties, he said that compared to other projects, e.g. research ones, this project fitted quite easily into the structure of the university (in the sense of cooperation with other departments).

[a manager]

Strategic Partnerships: results
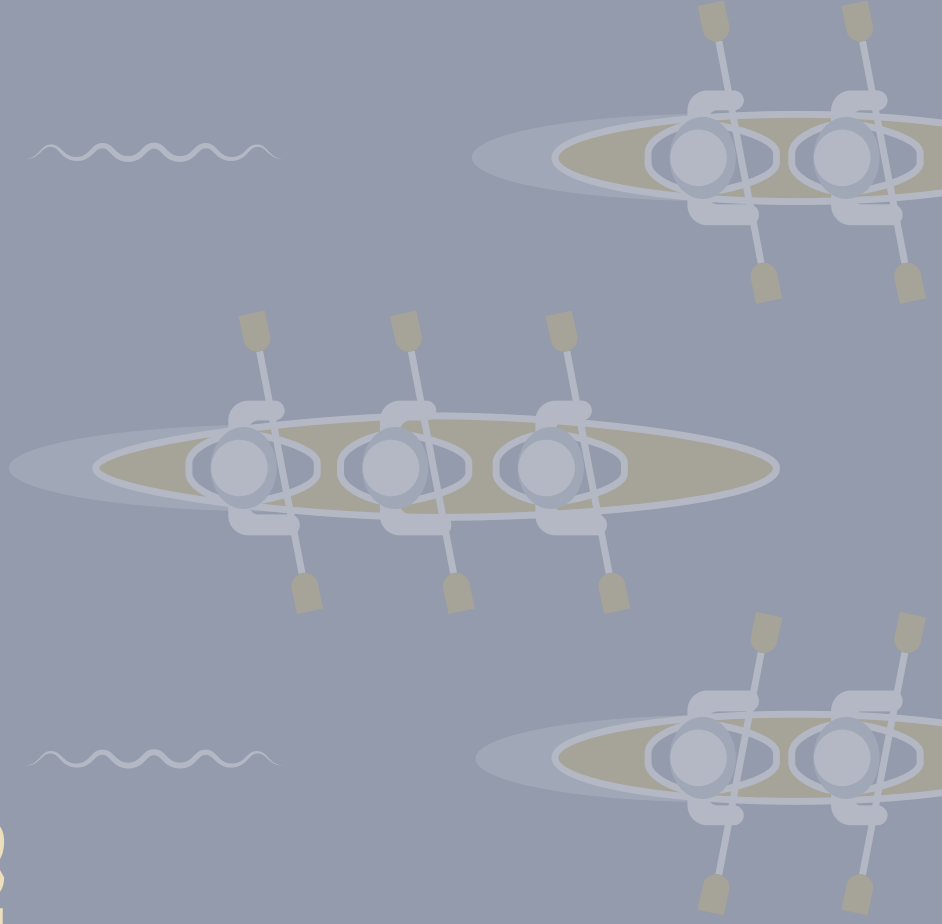
Although the Strategic Partnerships mainly focused on teaching, their results were broader in scope. Project leaders paid particular attention to make sure that the **products developed with partners could be used in different ways** at their home universities (which was appreciated by the management of these units).

We have prepared solutions that were teaching oriented, but could also be used in research. We tried to combine the two areas.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

In the majority of the surveyed projects the aim was to develop new teaching methods, study programmes, teaching aids and materials, or to establish or develop cooperation between research centres. In one in four projects surveyed, more results were produced than originally planned.

We had planned to develop two atlases, but we managed to collect material for three of them. Our guide is a little broader in scope than we had intended. We added one section to it. In the course of the project, we came to the conclusion that it was worth doing it. With additional work (but no increase in funding), we achieved more.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

In the Strategic Partnerships projects surveyed, the most common plans included:
- → development of teaching materials, tools and aids;
- → development of new study programmes, courses, modules;
- → introduction of a greater variety of forms of learning (including virtual ones);
- → development of cooperation of the university with research institutions abroad;
- → preparation of scientific publications.

The outcomes took the form of both **tangible outputs** (e.g. publications) and **soft outcomes** (related, for example, to the development of inter-university cooperation and to increased internationalisation of the university). The most common project outputs were teaching materials for new courses or modules, as well as syllabuses for entire programmes.

We have developed a handbook for university teachers containing materials to be discussed in class. The researchers made a substantive contribution, which is so universal that the

book can be successfully used during lessons in secondary school or in classes conducted by NGOs.

[a project coordinator]

In addition to the planned publications, we have produced additional project outputs. These include syllabuses for innovative learning activities – a summer course, e-learning course, small research projects and student-conducted lessons in secondary schools.

[a project coordinator]

In many projects, the prepared didactic publications exceeded the planned volume – as a result of working in partnership, new materials were created that enrich the planned solutions.

The respondents emphasised that the additional material was produced thanks to excellent cooperation with partners. Their involvement made it possible to complete or carry out extra work (sometimes after the formal completion of the project) – thus the results were evaluated positively.

We have achieved everything we wanted and more. I believe that this is due to our great determination. The effects of our work were produced thanks to the strong will of the partners and their conviction that they were doing something really special.

[a project coordinator]

In addition to textbooks and other publications, some projects have succeeded in developing new course curricula with international focus (also aimed at international students).

We have introduced new courses and modules (including English-language courses) into the study programme, so our project has reached out not only to Polish students, but also foreign ones who come to us as part of mobility programmes.

[a manager]

The projects resulted in **increased qualifications and skills of the participants**. In one case, a partner was an expert in the field covered by the project and therefore organised training for the staff of other institutions forming the consortium.

Sustainability of Strategic Partnerships results

Sustainability is one of the key criteria for project evaluation, both in evaluation studies and more broadly in impact studies. A distinction can be made between

the sustainability of the effects of an action and its results. In this section we will look at the latter aspect.

The sustainability of the results of the examined projects was very high. Only one project was reported in which the developed results were not used after its completion[15]. In other cases, the coordinating institutions continue to use the outputs, and on average in seven out of ten cases it is done continuously.

We apply to subsequent research initiatives the methods invented, verified and developed in the projects.

[a project coordinator]

As indicated by the respondents, the results were used after the completion of projects not only in the coordinating institution, but also, very often, in the organisations forming the partnership (as reported by 18 of the surveyed coordinators).

We continue to develop project outcomes. We have launched a compulsory entrepreneurship module in all degree programmes and developed an e-learning course related to it.

[a project coordinator]

In the 21st century, there is no such thing as local learning any more. You cannot escape the fact that education has a global dimension.

[a manager]

In the group of 23 surveyed respondents, as many as 21 reported that their projects produced sustainable results. The coordinators emphasised that in **teaching oriented projects their results were of the greatest value**. The results taking the form of new publications, learning paths, learning modules and courses are ready-made solutions that can be introduced to existing education systems. Some coordinators attached particular importance to making the results available as long as possible after the project ended.

Sustainability can also be looked at from an institutional perspective. From this perspective, it mainly means the possibility to continue the project, e.g. the operation of relevant structures (units) at the university, the involvement

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15 According to the coordinator's declaration, it was not the aim of the project to use its outputs after its completion.

of the management of the institution[16]. In the survey, the coordinators were asked whether any solutions were developed after the completion of the project – a quarter of them confirmed this fact.

Our department continues cooperation with partners from Greece, Finland, England and Ireland. Together, we are involved in various events, exhibitions, actions, and we prepare conferences.

[a manager]

Many coordinators emphasised in their interviews that projects did not end with their formal completion and settlement. Often the **same or similar activities were carried out by the teams in subsequent projects** or simply in **the course of international cooperation**. The most important element of the new initiatives were institutions that had previously worked together as part of Strategic Partnerships projects.

It is important that our research translates into further scientific activities, that there is continuity. We hope that our new project will contribute to that.

[a manager]

The very good thing is that when a project formally ends, it can be continued and developed (as part of the same or a slightly modified consortium). As a result the outcome can be much better as it can be improved in several projects rather than just one. This is a strength of Strategic Partnerships.

[a project coordinator]

According to the respondents, the opportunity to use the experiences and achievements of the Strategic Partnerships projects was a particular value of these initiatives. They strongly engaged all participants and fostered closer ties between institutions from different countries. The established contacts have often been the starting point for further joint activities on an international arena.

We are continuing the project and our cooperation is even more intensive than it was, more lively and deeper.

[a project coordinator]

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16 *Glosariusz Terminów i Pojęć Używanych w Europejskich Programach Współpracy w Dziedzinie Edukacji* (2004), Warsaw: Foundation for the Development of the Education System, p. 523.

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According to the coordinators, the period of two or three years over which a Strategic Partnership project could be carried out was too short to implemented the planned activities. There was not enough time to fully implement all the assumptions and achieve the results, which were sometimes of a long-term nature (e.g. increase in international cooperation of the university or improvement in the quality of teaching). The most common reasons for this was too optimistic project planning and a rather tight schedule that did not allow for delays. Survey participants were very positive about the possibility of **continuing projects or further cooperation between partners**.

Dissemination of project results

The perception of sustainability of project results is influenced by the way they are disseminated, i.e. by the fact if the results are shared with the widest possible audience. Dissemination implies not only informing about the developed solutions, but also (and perhaps above all) contributing to their wider, general application. In the survey and in the qualitative study, the respondents were asked about the methods of disseminating the project results that proved effective in their projects.

The orientation of the analysed projects on teaching contributed to the fact that the main groups of recipients interested in their results were teachers, lecturers (academic staff) and trainers. The solutions developed were therefore mainly aimed at employees of research and teaching institutions, as well as students. Almost one half of the coordinators declared that **the recipients** of **the project results were research and expert communities.**

Dissemination activities were not limited to the above mentioned target groups. They were usually wider in scope. Three channels for reaching prospective audiences were mentioned most frequently by survey participants.

By far, the most popular method of informing about the project and the place of sharing its results and products, was the **project website**. It also enabled ongoing monitoring of interest in the outcomes of activities (e.g. through traffic analysis, number of file downloads, new visit rate).

To date, three years into the project, we are recording a few downloads per week. Users interested in our solution enter their details (institution, first name and surname) and receive files from us at the indicated e-mail address. This allows us to find out who our results reach.

[a project coordinator]

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Project implementers also organised **dissemination events** (conferences, training courses, seminars), which not only allowed the presentation of the outcomes, but also facilitated getting to know partners better and maintaining or even establishing new research and teaching contacts.

Over 40 people attended each of our dissemination events – in total we reached 300 potential users.

[a project coordinator]

Publications, including books, scientific articles and reports on research carried out as part of the project (in print or made available in electronic repositories), were particularly appreciated by those dealing with the research, and not only the didactic side of the university's activities.

The students and teachers who took part in our project regularly produced teaching or research articles using the experience gained in the project. In this way, knowledge of the outcomes is disseminated within the scientific community.

[a manager]

More than half of the participants of the study stated that effective dissemination can also take place by **including project outcomes in the study programme** or **by introducing changes at universities**, e.g. starting a new course, specialisation, possibility of earning a double diploma, new method of teaching (e.g. e-learning). What is interesting, only less than half of the respondents thought that dissemination of project outcomes via social media (thematic project profile) proved effective.

A large percentage of university staff believed that a printed publication formed the most important, tangible and sustainable product of a Strategic Partnerships. Opinions were voiced that the printed publication gives more importance to the activities undertaken in the project and at the same time facilitates its dissemination (e.g. thanks to the library circulation).

The printed books have been distributed to 30 libraries in various countries, and their digital versions are available on many websites. The number of downloads indicates that a lot of people are really using them. These publications have found their way to the Reaserchgate website, from where they are also downloaded and recommended by researchers around the world. This is a very big achievement.

[a project coordinator]

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Effective dissemination of project results also took place thanks to their **use in the daily work of the university**, e.g. in the implementation of a new course using teaching aids, syllabuses or publications developed in the project. An important source of inspiration and information exchange, and indirectly a way to disseminate the results, was the recommendation of teaching materials by academic teachers.

However, it is worth emphasising that dissemination of project results is always one of the final stages of a project. Due to the need to complete too many planned tasks in the allotted time, the dissemination phase was sometimes cut short. Furthermore, not in all projects sufficient financial and human resources were provided to carry out dissemination in an appropriate manner.

Everything is on my hands, I operate on a voluntary basis. Unfortunately, I do not have time to analyse the subsequent steps, to deal with dissemination, to monitor. This should be included in the project, but over a longer time than just three months. In fact, this type of action should take at least a year.

[a project coordinator]

It should be noted that this stage is no less important than the implementation of substantive activities of the partnership. Effective dissemination of project outcomes and outputs extends the life of the whole project and increases its impact. A large group of respondents attached very high importance to the dissemination process. They realised that it is not only related to the "continued life" of the outcomes after the project, but is also an expression of the social responsibility of universities implementing projects financed with public funds.

It is clear that solutions must be developed first and then disseminated. I believe, however, that the latter task is particularly important, both in terms of building the university's international prestige and its image as a socially responsible institution.

[a manager]

Project support from university authorities
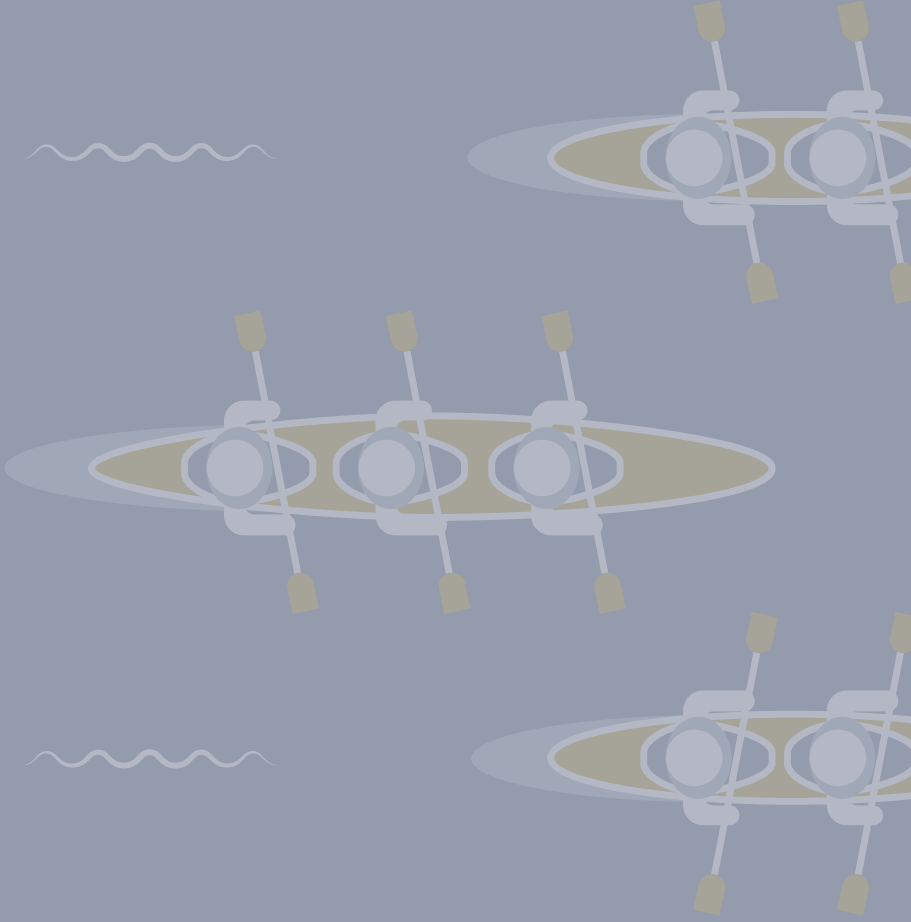
One of the issues analysed in the survey was the attitude of university management towards Strategic Partnership projects. Along with interviewing the management of a given teaching unit (dean, vice-dean) or the authorities of the university (rector, vice-rector, chancellor), the coordinators were also asked about the involvement of their superiors in project implementation. They could express their opinion both in questionnaires and during individual in-depth interviews. The quantitative survey shows that they rated the involvement of the unit's management slightly better than that of university authorities, although the differences were small – both responses oscillated around 15 points on a 20-point scale.

Participation of the teaching unit management (e.g. department) in the implementation of the Strategic Partnerships (N=23)

1	**15.3**	20
the management obstructed project implementation	mean score	the management supported project implementation

Participation of university authorities in the implementation of the Strategic Partnerships (N=23)

1	**14.7**	20
the authorities obstructed project implementation	mean score	the authorities supported project implementation

However, the analysis of the responses provided in in-depth interviews indicates that coordinators had different expectations of the support provided by the leaders at the two levels. In the case of **university authorities**, coordinators indicated that the mere **provision of an own contribution, credit for expenditure or the provision of infrastructure and human resources for the administration of the project** was regarded as significant support for the project. They also mentioned the participation of a representative of the authorities in selected project events (e.g. the opening of the summer school, conference at the start or end of the project, international meeting of participants). Sometimes, although relatively rarely, there was a greater degree of involvement in the project. University managers were members of the project team (even acting as coordinators) and were involved in the monitoring of project work.

From the survey participants' statements, it can be inferred that university authorities were involved in the project in exceptional situations, generally in critical situations or these requiring them to make decisions that could not be made by those at lower management levels. This argument was confirmed by

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the representatives of the authorities themselves, who spoke about
the full delegation of tasks to subordinates and involvement in the project
only in problematic situations.

> *During the project there were no critical situations that had to be solved by the university authorities. I tried to overcome all difficulties during my work by myself. The project was implemented successfully and on time, so there was no need for interference from top management.*
>
> [a project coordinator]

> *Every project has a schedule. It's normal that sometimes things go according to plan and sometimes unforeseen events occur. However, I did not notice any major disturbances in our venture. I felt that everything worked well thanks to good cooperation. So I do not recall having to intervene at any point.*
>
> [a manager]

The formal affiliation of representatives of HEI authorities to the project team usually "opened many doors" and facilitated the resolution of problems arising during the implementation of the activities. On the other hand, there were also claims that the supervising unit did not support the activities of the project management or that the university authorities hindered the implementation of the project by – as one coordinator mentioned – "introducing too much red tape and making simple things unnecessarily complicated".

Certainly, the **participation of university authorities was necessary in the final phase of the project** and even after its completion, at the stage of dissemination of the outcomes, e.g. when deciding on the introduction of a given topic or new courses to the study programme.

Representing the university at project events, supporting the process of introducing changes to the curriculum or providing own contribution (e.g. to exceptional costs) are activities also mentioned in the case of the **management of a respective university unit** (generally a department). However, the assessment of support provided for project activities by the representatives of this level of administration also covered other aspects concerning virtually every stage of a project life cycle. During the **planning phase**, the unit's management assisted in the search for partners and the selection of project staff. In turn, during the **implementation phase**, the authorities proved to be helpful in booking conference rooms, computer labs, admitting students to summer schools, selecting panellists for events and verifying the contents of the developed outputs. Their participation in the output **dissemination phase** and involvement in promotional events were repeatedly emphasised. In some

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cases the project was initiated by the management of a given university unit, which meant that they were actively involved in its implementation (in one case the head of the unit acted as the project manager).

The interviews conducted as part of the qualitative study revealed that **HEIs underestimate Strategic Partnerships** (although the coordinators' opinions on this matter differ from those of the unit management or the HEI authorities). Coordinators are much more pessimistic about this. They believe that projects of this type (neither science, nor research oriented) are not at the centre of management's attention and therefore cannot be considered a priority.

We may not see reluctance, but we don't see much enthusiasm from the university authorities either. This is because these are not research projects. Unfortunately, undertakings of didactic nature are brushed aside because points count. Not everyone yet understands that teaching staff must first be educated in order to have good students, doctoral candidates and staff later on. It won't come from nowhere, so it's worth investing in education.

[a project coordinator]

When accounting for an employee's output, a strictly scientific project is held in higher esteem than a teaching project. And this difference has been evident for many years. In short, Strategic Partnerships are not appreciated by universities. And it should be noted that running this type of a project is very labour-intensive and requires high qualifications.

[a project coordinator]

Very rarely did the coordinators mention that their project had been appreciated in some special way by the university authorities. In one of the institutions this was the first international teaching (not research) project, so the management tried to familiarise the teachers and lecturers with its specificities. The assistance in this case had a very practical dimension. In addition to personally informing individual departments about the project, the university authorities agreed to purchase souvenirs for guests from abroad, provided patronage over the events and helped to select teachers for training organised as part of the project (e.g. the vice-chancellor sent letters to relevant deans).

It was a small teaching gem among purely research-oriented endeavours. We created a favourable climate around the project, which was also appreciated by the university authorities.

[a project coordinator]

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As mentioned earlier, a slightly different perspective on this aspect was held by those representing university leadership. In their statements, they emphasised that **despite the lack of research dimension to the activities, the role of teaching projects carried out in international consortia was appreciated**. According to the management, such projects contribute to a greater internationalisation of the university, and the contacts established abroad are a gateway to further projects, including research ones. Some representatives of HEI authorities mentioned that Strategic Partnerships also carried out scientific tasks, e.g. at conferences or expressed in the contents of publications produced.

The perception of education projects has changed over the years. From my point of view, they are extremely valuable. In some cases they are even more important than research initiatives.

[a manager]

My job is to attract as many international students as possible to our university, and Strategic Partnership projects strengthen the standing of the university or a particular department on an international arena. Thanks to them, we gain partners, we have an overview of the global situation, we establish contacts and conduct exchanges. These are the plus sides of participating in initiatives of this kind.

[a manager]

In the vast majority of cases, projects were initiated by people who became project coordinators or by teams that later took part in their implementation at the university. They were generally staff from a single department who sought support from their colleagues or were drawing on their experiences from previous projects. In both cases, project initiators sought partners using their personal contacts, and sometimes were assisted by the unit management (at department level).

The project was based on contacts established, among other things, under an Erasmus+ Programme, during academic exchanges, as well as part of international contacts of our management staff (mainly the dean).

[a project coordinator]

The implementers had to deal on their own with problems that appeared during the implementation of the project (without involving the management). For example, after receiving information about the award of an Erasmus+ grant, one of the partners dropped out of the project. The coordinator, together

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with another participant in the project, looked on their own for contacts at other German universities that could substitute for the missing member of the consortium.

The professor involved in this project is an independent person who does a lot of things on her own, so I was confident that she was capable of handling the project (and she did). There was therefore no need for me to become personally involved in its implementation.

[a manager]

Support from university management is more important when applying for a grant. Their involvement in the project is facilitated by personal acquaintance with the coordinator or by the fact that the subject matter coincides with the manager's area of interest. The same is true when monitoring project implementation and when the management takes interest in the project and keeps an eye on subsequent activities. This type of situation occurred only at the level of the department's governing authorities (vice-dean, dean).

Firstly, I held meetings with the coordinators. From time to time, I also received project materials, meeting agendas and all relevant information from them. When the dean asked me what was going on in the projects, I was prepared because I had up-to-date knowledge.

[a manager]

In most cases top management of the university learned about the project idea at the time of signing the application documents or granting the power of attorney. Their participation in the application process is necessary and forms part of financial commitment procedures. Very often, the fact that project documents were approved by a specially designated unit in a given institution was a signal to the university authorities that the project conformed with the university's vision and, moreover, complied with all internal procedures of the institution and the grantors' requirements. In other cases, the financial security of such a project was due to the direct application of **university internal procedures**.

Every project had to be given the "green light" by the dean. The initial idea would be discussed by the deans' college and, if it was approved, a team would be set up to look at it and report on the progress. This was done at department level, but the grant application was formally submitted by the international projects department on behalf of the whole university (this was the principle adopted at our university).

[a manager]

The concept of 'green light' is particularly evident at universities, where **special project offices have been set up to account for international projects**. At some institutions this function is performed by an international cooperation department, foreign cooperation department, international research project office, in others by a development project office. Irrespective of the nomenclature adopted, these are departments which bring together knowledge, resources and at least several years' experience in implementing various types of projects, including these of international nature. When these units prepare grant application documents, approve proposals prepared by departments having factual knowledge or consult the provisions of project documentation, the university authorities are certain that the proposal is correct from the financial point of view. Establishing and running such units by universities is an indirect expression of their authorities 'favouring' projects, including international Strategic Partnerships. Although projects of this type do not generate additional income for the university (it is often emphasised that it is impossible to include the institution's overheads in the project's indirect costs), they are an opportunity to improve the competences of the staff and the quality of education, as well as, to some extent, make savings on international cooperation.

None of the participants in the survey mentioned a **case of interference by university authorities resulting in stopping the grant application process or halting the implementation of project activities**. At the proposal stage, discussions took place about the contents of the application, suggestions were made for actions to be taken and it was at that point that department managers had the opportunity to affect the shape of the project.

The process of implementing Strategic Partnerships is significantly influenced by a given unit's procedures. The participants in the survey mentioned above all the internal regulations relating to project settlement, which e.g. made it impossible to incur indirect costs in the project. In such cases,

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the intervention of top authorities of the university, who can make the relevant financial decisions, was required.

It is worth paying attention to the opinions of some coordinators regarding the involvement of university authorities in the project. According to them, **university authorities are the final instance when solving problems**. If they were not forced to approach them, they would not have done so. Managers were seen as the supreme decision-makers, especially in challenging situations that could not be solved by subordinate staff.

I believe that talking to the authorities is the last resort when we cannot come to terms with our university administration.

[a project coordinator]

Strategic Partnerships projects allow for direct involvement of representatives of university leadership (or of a respective university unit), in particular at the stage of initiating and submitting the application. At several of the surveyed universities, a vice-chancellor, dean and vice-dean were among the participants in the Strategic Partnerships In such cases, the involvement of the institution's management in project matters is greater. The monitoring process is also different. The initiative in this respect comes not only from the coordinator, but also from the representatives of the management of the unit who are interested in the progress of the work and the results developed. In addition, as the survey confirms, **top university authorities have more confidence in projects implemented by their deputies or personally supervised by them**.

Our dean knew the project, was interested in it and we received full support from him. This was probably because he was personally involved in drafting the proposal.

[a project coordinator]

As a vice-dean, I opened each summer school run within the project. As part of my responsibilities as a vice-rector, I met the participants, including these taking part in mobilities during the academic year. I also visited partner universities, and if I could not go, I sent my deputies.

[a manager]

Overall, it can be said that **representatives of university top authorities were relatively rarely involved in the implementation of the project**, let alone in its monitoring process. Apart from the most common situations where the Rector's approval is required to grant a power of attorney or deviate

from accepted internal regulations, managers have been involved in a project at the request of the coordinator. The participation of the authorities in the events organised within the framework of the project was very important for the organisers, as it raised the profile of a given event and at the same time increased the prestige of the whole undertaking.

At my request, a vice-dean attended meetings with foreign partners. He talked to them, asked for details, found out what stage the project was at. Both the rector and the vice--dean always opened the summer school, performed representation duties and were very supportive of us.

[a project coordinator]

The survey showed that representatives of university authorities and department management **were more or less familiar with projects results.** On the one hand, this was because the developed results were often related to the introduction of new curricula or elements of curricula, and on the other hand, because they were part of the university's development strategy (e.g. concerning the introduction of ICT to teaching, the development of students' social competences in accordance with the defined learning outcomes, the university's declaration of social responsibility).

I was neither a direct participant in the project nor its manager. I observed this initiative from the outside. There were not many documents related to it on my desk either. However, at the final stage I had to become more involved, as the solutions developed during the project were implemented as courses forming part of various degree programmes.

[a manager]

Managers (both at the level of the unit and the university) were definitely more involved in the project at the stage of dissemination of its results. This resulted, on the one hand, from the need to make decisions concerning the introduction of changes to curricula, and on the other hand, from the desire to promote the developed tools or issues covered by the project or other project outcomes. A small group of respondents suggested that projects were only noticed by management when they were appreciated by external institutions, e.g. won awards.

We were appreciated when our project turned out to be the best. Before that, we were simply supposed to do our jobs.

[a project coordinator]

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The project, its outputs and outcomes are mainly discussed at the department where it is carried out. The situation changes when a venture becomes successful and gains recognition. Then information about it is posted on websites, materials are published and information reaches the whole academic community.

[a manager]

The coordinators indicated that **the management of a respective university unit was more involved** in the projects **than the top authorities**. This seems obvious – one can hardly expect that the rector is more involved in project activities than the dean of the department where they are carried out. Although some opinions were voiced about the lack of interest in the project on the part of university authorities or these concerning bureaucracy hindering the implementation of the activities, this aspect of the project is generally assessed positively. The interviews held with coordinators show that the university authorities should, above all, introduce procedures enabling both a streamlined application process and implementation and settlement of the project, acting in accordance with the principle followed by physicians – *primum non nocere*.
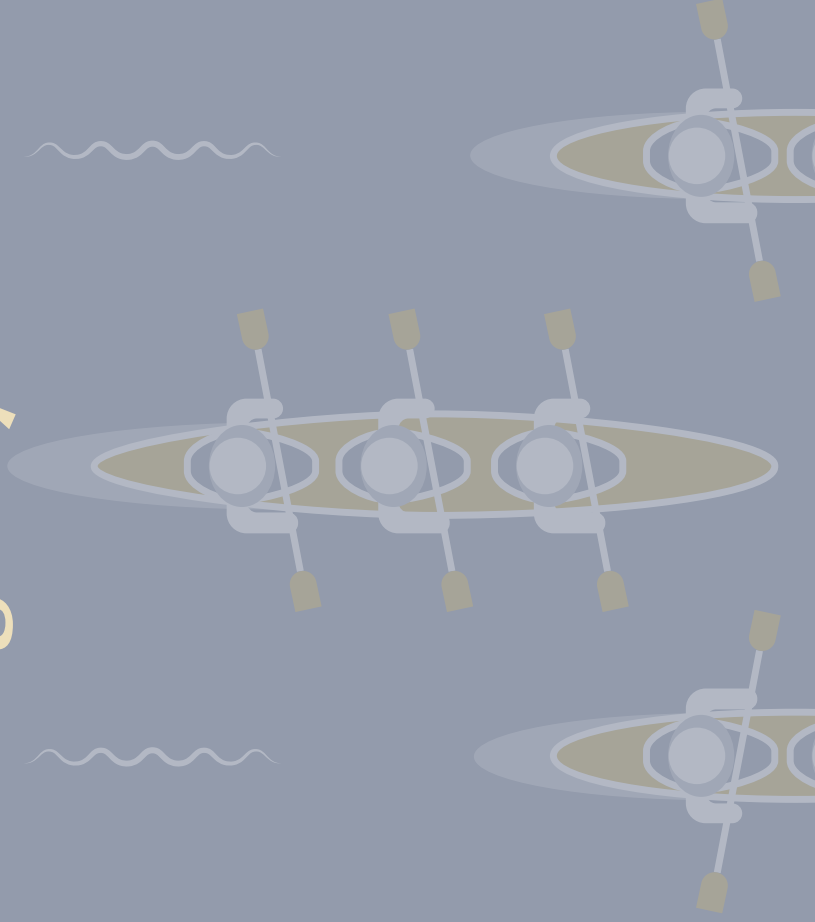
University management should not put obstacles in our way. On the contrary, they should act to remove potential difficulties where possible.

[a manager]

The rector neither encouraged nor discouraged us from carrying the Erasmus+ projects.

[a manager]

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Cooperation between beneficiaries and Erasmus+ National Agency

Overall, **cooperation with the National Agency was highly rated by the respondents**. The vast majority of participants in the survey claimed that it went 'well' or 'very well', at the stage of project preparation, implementation and settlement. Almost all the respondents participated in meetings for beneficiaries organised by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System and stated that during these meetings they obtained all necessary information on the projects.

Evaluation of cooperation with the National Agency of the Erasmus+ (N=23)

Project implementation stage	Evaluation			
	very poor	sufficient	good	very good
project preparation				
procedures related to the call for proposals and submission of the application				
signing of the contract				
project implementation				
project settlement				

1   21

* No one in the survey gave a 'poor' rating (this was another value on the scale).

The qualitative survey confirmed good opinions on the collaboration, however a few points are worth noting. The answers provided by the respondents show that the motivation of beneficiaries to participate in **group information meetings** varied, depending on e.g. the type of HEI represented or the experience of the coordinator. It would seem that employees of institutions which have been running aid projects for years would not be interested

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in participating in such meetings (representatives of projects approved in a given competition are obliged to take part in only one information meeting). It turned out, however, that representatives of this group did not use such events to gain knowledge on the formal aspects of project implementation (e.g. settlements), but treated them as a platform for exchanging experience with implementers of similar projects (both in the area of implementation and financing).

We willingly share our knowledge. At the request of the National Agency, we repeatedly talked about our previous project and showed potential implementers such a project from the inside. We want others to benefit from our experience.

[a project coordinator]

We presented our projects and answered many detailed questions from prospective implementers of similar projects. In fact, you can say that we were informal advisers to them.

[a project coordinator]

The representatives of universities who had implemented many projects were mainly interested in specific issues rather than in the general principles of the Programme. They were therefore most likely to attend individual consultations and this form of a meeting was best suited to their needs. However, they also mentioned that meeting in a larger group of project implementers was also valuable to them as it allowed them to benefit from the experience of people working on similar projects.

I benefited a lot from the meeting. It was attended by over 100 participants, including experienced project implementers. Many important questions were asked and answers provided.

[a project coordinator]

Coordinators who (usually for the first time) ran Strategic Partnerships projects formed the second group of respondents who attended meetings organised by the Foundation. Moreover, for some of them, running an international project was a completely new experience. Most of them believed that participation in the meetings organised by the Foundation was essential for proper planning of the application and/or implementation of the project. There were also people in this group of respondents who did not participate in the meetings and who relied on their knowledge and assistance of other university staff when preparing the application.

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Another group was composed of people with extensive experience in project implementation (including coordinators) who represented universities with many years of experience in this area. Despite their extensive experience, both they and other representatives of their Higher Education Institutions participated in group information meetings organised by the National Agency.

Although I was familiar with the application process thanks to the implementation of previous projects, I attended information meetings together with a colleague who was preparing a new project. She had intensive consultations with other participants and representatives of the Erasmus+ National Agency.

[a project coordinator]

The information meetings were attended both by coordinators who are responsible for the substantive tasks in the projects and professionals dealing with financial settlements. The composition of the university representation at these events depended largely on the structure of the unit concerned. Some HEIs had separate units responsible for preparing the projects and their settlements (not only under the Erasmus+ Programme), which supported the academic staff (and often the coordinators themselves) in bureaucratic tasks. Their staff carried out administrative tasks based on their own experience and practice from previous projects. These units specialised in the implementation and settlement of all types of grants, and general knowledge accumulated in them enabled more efficient management of Erasmus+ projects (e.g. by finding solutions to problems more quickly). Often the participants in the study reported that the project staff is divided into a group of implementers and a group of specialists dealing with financial settlements.

Our university has a dedicated unit that deals with the preparation, implementation and settlement of projects, in cooperation with experts.

[a project coordinator]

We hold onto the international programmes department for support in project implementation. There is a lot of bureaucracy involved in our substantive work, so the staff of this unit makes sure that we spend money in the right way and do not make mistakes. Their assistance is of great importance.

[a project coordinator]

In some HEIs, the responsibilities of a specialised unit supporting the project implementers at the stage of preparing the application or during its

implementation fall on individual persons. As a rule, they have many years of experience in project implementation, and have extensive knowledge about the procedures and acceptable changes in projects. Sometimes this role was played by Erasmus+ project coordinators, some of whom had more than ten years of experience in leading international projects. It is worth noting, however, that regardless of the experience of the institution or individual staff members contacts were maintained with the National Agency (via e-mail and the phone), especially concerning the eligibility of certain expenses.

> *I highly value the work of the National Agency. We collaborated at all stages of the project, exchanged emails, phoned each other. We obtained detailed answers to our questions and any doubts were quickly dispelled.*
>
> [a project coordinator]

One-to-one consultations were another aspect highlighted by the respondents in their evaluation of cooperation with the National Agency. In fact, they took place at each stage of a project life cycle, but the respondents mentioned that they most often took place during the preparation of a grant application. The National Agency's assistance was also used when problems arose (e.g. resignation of partners, changes in the consortium's composition, changes in the schedule of meetings or training sessions, changes of venues, failure to meet the number of participants in certain activities as set out in the application or the settlement of expenses). The National Agency was also consulted at the reporting stage and in connection with audits or monitoring visits.

According to survey participants, it **was a very good practice for the National Agency to appoint project supervisors** – i.e. persons who were in contact with the representatives of the beneficiaries. Although the supervisors did not always solve problems immediately or in line with the HEI's expectations (e.g. with regard to the eligibility of certain costs), the supervision system was evaluated positively.

> *I think it is a great idea that a particular coordinator from the National Agency is assigned to a project. Problems arose when such individuals were absent (e.g. on holiday). In general, however, a person who knows our project makes our work much easier, especially in the case of larger and more complex projects. We often used her help and consulted her on many issues.*
>
> [a project coordinator]

We could not come to an agreement on the per day amounts. It was difficult for the supervisor to understand that we cannot find experts and translators who would work for 74 euros per day when more is earned by someone doing a less labour-intensive task in another country. There were also discrepancies in construing certain contract provisions. We were not given specific information, just general remarks that we could include anything in the management budget.

[a project coordinator]

Beneficiaries were very familiar with the contents of the Erasmus+ website (erasmusplus.org.pl). One coordinator mentioned that she prepared a project proposal mainly based on the information provided in the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* that is posted online. She participated in the information meeting organised by the National Agency mainly to clarify with experts specific and detailed questions she had after reading the guide.

I prefer to learn on my own rather than, for example, take courses. So I didn't benefit much from the information meeting, as I had basically already collected all the information beforehand on my own. I believe that a project implementer who reads (preferably several times) the Erasmus+ Programme Guide *will know everything before the meeting.*

[a project coordinator]

However, it happened so that even people who mainly used the website approached the National Agency with requests for clarification on certain aspects of project implementation.

When working on the first project, we contacted the National Agency. We had two consultations (it was mainly about formal matters, e.g. how to calculate the rates). In the next project, there was no such need – we already knew everything.

[a project coordinator]

It can therefore be concluded that the website is the primary source of information mainly at the application preparation stage, although it still does not completely satisfy the information needs of prospective beneficiaries.

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Strategic Partnerships: outcomes
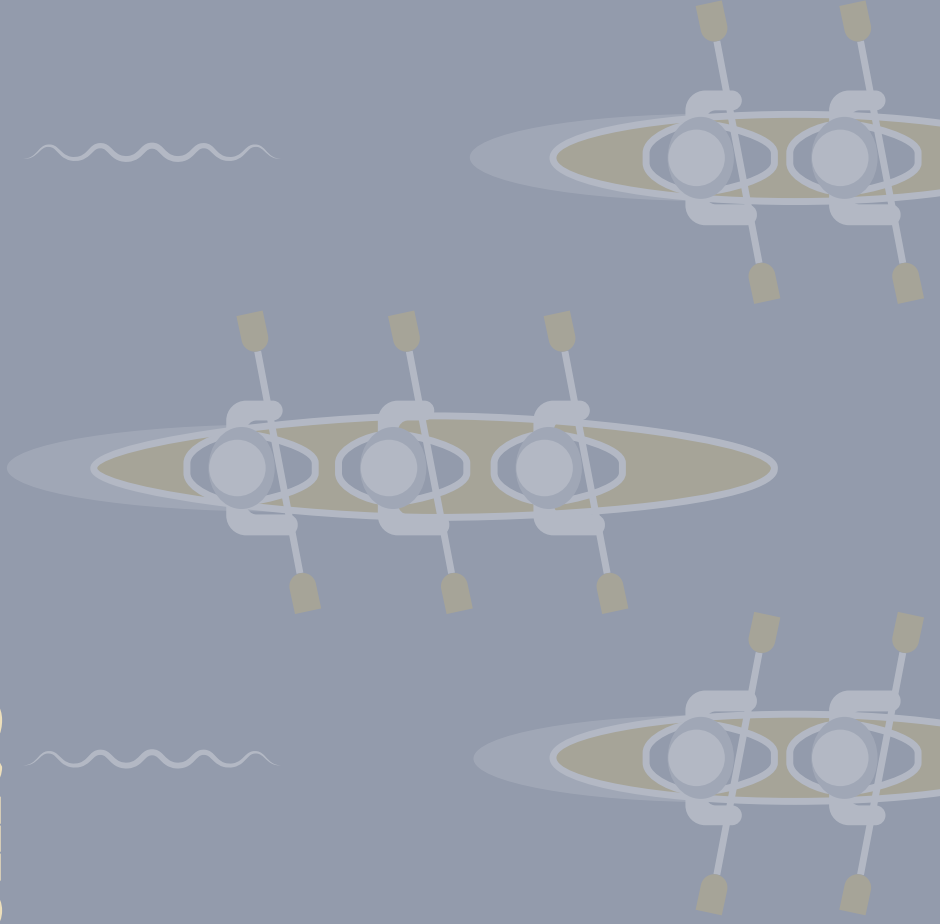
Considering the diversity of the outcomes produced under the surveyed projects and their sustainability, Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education can be rated very highly. Effective and efficient dissemination of project outcomes can be considered one of the reasons for the success of these projects. Almost 90% of the coordinators were of the opinion that the solutions developed in the projects were recognised outside their home institution, and as many as 21 out of 23 survey participants would recommend the implementation of a Strategic Partnerships project. This reflects the high level of satisfaction with this type of projects.

The effects of the projects can be considered both from an institutional perspective (the coordinating university together with its partner institutions) and from the point of view of individuals involved in them (both staff of the institutions and students). The study also analysed the added value of the projects, i.e. additional, often unintended benefits of working in international project teams.

Outcomes for the institutions

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits for the institution was the **establishment of lasting cooperation** with other institutions operating in Poland and abroad. According to 20 survey participants, activities within Strategic Partnerships have increased overall project activity of their HEIs. This means not only interacting with project partners, but also establishing lasting ties with them and building a network allowing for future activities. Many respondents (both coordinators and university management representatives) emphasised that good cooperation is likely to generate further projects and make it easier to engage, together with tested institutions, in initiatives of a similar nature.

The establishment of a long-term cooperation with universities that acted as our partners in the project is certainly an added value.

[a manager]

The project promoted the exchange of knowledge and was based on intensive cooperation. It became a habit with us, we wanted to cooperate more and more.

[a project coordinator]

Another effect of partnership projects resulting directly from the established cooperation was the increased **internationalisation of the surveyed universities**. This process is understood as the internationalisation

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of an institution, the broadening of the scope of its activities and the transition from domestic to foreign markets. Thanks to Strategic Partnerships, Higher Education Institutions, which previously carried out their activities exclusively in the domestic environment, open up to students, academics and teaching staff from other countries and participate in a widely understood international scientific circuit.

Our university has expanded its scope of cooperation. It operates more on an international arena. When we plan overseas activities, we simply contact our relevant partner. The distance has decreased considerably.

[a project coordinator]

We have met many universities and we run interesting projects with them. Internationalisation brings us substantial benefits. Previously, there was only one student on the exchange per semester, and now there are more than a dozen. We are working with new partners and have signed agreements with them. We now have more potential for development.

[a project coordinator]

Respondents mentioned that the **summer schools** organised as part of the projects were particularly popular (among academic staff and students themselves).

Our students were unconvinced by the mobility at first. However, when participants in a summer school told them about their experiences and were responsible for the selection to the next editions, we immediately had many candidates. First-hand experience has proved invaluable. Attitudes towards international cooperation have changed a lot over the past years. More and more people want to be involved.

[a project coordinator]

Cooperation within international teams and opening up to students from different countries also fostered **the development of language skills** of project participants. The universities introduced courses taught in foreign languages, which were attended not only by foreign visitors, but also by the Poles. Projects have also often resulted in the **introduction of new courses** to the curriculum.

In short, project outcomes translate into teaching activities. This applies to classes taught in Polish and English. This is very important.

[a manager]

Another important aspect, especially for university leadership, was the **increased recognition enjoyed by the universities**, especially on an international arena. Thanks to carrying out large projects in partnership with other research centres, the potential reach of each institution in the consortium increased. This is particularly important nowadays, when studying abroad is not only possible, but also increasingly accessible. A university brand becomes more recognisable and the number of potential students increases as a result.

For me, as a vice-rector, the increased recognition of the university in Europe, in the countries with which we have cooperated, is of the utmost significance.

[a manager]

During conferences and other events we do not act as a single university, but as a consortium (together with institutions from Lithuania and Spain). So together we have more clout, there is a very clear synergy effect.

[a manager]

The internationalisation of the university enables it to develop in every field; be it teaching, research and marketing. It contributes to the prestige of an institution and opens up completely new opportunities that would be inaccessible without partnerships.

Nowadays, science and research have little meaning when carried out only at local level. They can only have a wider impact when networks are created, new relationships are established and knowledge is exchanged. This is what partnerships promote.

[a manager]

No less important for the university is the **development of academic staff** as a result of participation in international projects. Above all, it is reflected in the adoption of new teaching methods. Modifications to the way classes are conducted, implementing modern forms of teaching (e.g. e-learning), drawing inspiration from the practices and experiences of lecturers from other countries – such activities enrich not only the academic teachers themselves, but also increase the prestige of the university and the level of student satisfaction. It is worth mentioning that the lecturers participating in the projects often shared their knowledge and innovations with their colleagues, so that the positive effects of the projects had a wider reach.

Thanks to the project, the teachers improved their teaching skills. They observed what others were doing, learnt what solutions were used in other countries, and this changed

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them. Participants in international partnerships modified their teaching methods and became more open-minded. What's more – they passed on their knowledge to other teachers at our university.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

The willingness to introduce new solutions and apply new study programmes was evident among the lecturers. First, however, they had to learn a lot in order to be able to pass on knowledge effectively to their students. This kind of development is invaluable in such a partnership.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

Bringing together people from different (sometimes very distant) fields of science in one project was also a big plus of Strategic Partnerships. The projects were most often **interdisciplinary**, allowing to look at a given research field from different perspectives. Moreover, in many cases the exposure to different areas of study also meant learning new teaching methods and techniques, which influenced the development of the academic staff's teaching skills.

Perhaps the greatest value of the project was the fact that lecturers teaching different courses and using different methods had the opportunity to work together, create outcomes together and exchange experiences. There were psychologists, educators, computer scientists, sociologists, representatives of science and humanities involved, so the exchange of experiences was very interesting. The project participants were able to see that their teaching methods are not the only correct ones, that it is possible to teach using different techniques when teaching any degree programme.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

According to the coordinators interviewed, the outcomes of their projects are more easily accessible to a wide audience. Of course, who will use them is largely determined by the subject matter of the project, but overall accessibility is high. It is worth noting that, according to many respondents, the **project outcomes were much broader than expected**. Although the implementation of project activities required a great deal of work on the part of the implementers, and often went beyond the assumed time frame, the solutions developed and the long-term effects of some projects greatly exceeded the initial assumptions.

I can say that the outcomes were above the assumed standard. These include not only compulsory elements, but also student projects that have been evaluated and continued in various locations around the world.

<div align="right">[a project coordinator]</div>

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In the survey, an average of eight out of ten coordinators admitted that the implementation of the Strategic Partnerships project had inspired them to start further international projects. Thus, in the vast majority of cases, cooperation between partners continues in various forms. As many as 21 coordinators said that the project had been an **impetus** for them **to seek funding from other sources**. In the survey, respondents mentioned programmes such as:

→ Knowledge Alliances, European Universities (Erasmus+);
→ NAWA International Academic Partnerships[17];
→ Operational Programme Knowledge, Education, Development;
→ The European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework Programme;
→ Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA);
→ Education Programme (EEA FM);
→ programmes run by the National Science Centre;
→ European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST).

In the opinion of the respondents, the **opportunity to participate directly in joint activities with people from abroad**, as well as observing the working methods applied in other institutions was particularly valuable. In their view, cooperation as part of Strategic Partnerships is much more stronger and intensive than in other types of initiatives, such as mobility-based projects.

The exchange of experiences in Strategic Partnerships is very intense. We have more discussions, exchanges of ideas, sharing of experiences. We can meet in different places and observe how certain mechanisms work abroad. In typical research projects this element of 'positive rip off' is absent.

[a manager]

Another benefit of international cooperation is the **building of a strong and sustainable team within the institution**, which can carry out further projects in the future, both focusing at teaching and research. Using the team's potential is also an example of positive, albeit deferred, outcome of Strategic Partnerships.

This potential will certainly be used in an improved form in future initiatives, not necessarily under the Erasmus+ Programme. Experiences of international cooperation or partnership networks are later translated into further research and teaching projects in other areas.

[a manager]

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17 NAWA – Narodowa Agencja Wymiany Akademickiej [National Agency for Academic Exchange].

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An added value of successful projects is also the fact that these initiatives **encourage taking up more challenges** and launching new international partnerships. Universities, seeing the benefits of such projects, and at the same time having relevant experience and "blazed trails", are more willing to engage in further activities.

> *It was one of those projects that changed my perception of the university and that gave me the impetus to do more on international stage. The fact that we are carrying out more projects is a direct result of the success of our Strategic Partnerships.*
>
> [a project coordinator]

Outcomes for individuals

Partnership projects also result in **personal benefits for individual students**. Like many other international initiatives, Strategic Partnerships have enabled the development of not only knowledge, but also various soft skills. Students participating in the projects could, among other things: learn to cooperate in a culturally diverse group, develop communication skills, find out how to organise work in an international team, observe other ways of working and visit research centres abroad.

> *I think the project has given a lot to the students. They repeatedly mentioned that they now look at science and the world in a completely different way. They have learned much and changed. Thanks to two-week trips to Spain or the classes held in Poland, the students mastered working together, learnt foreign languages and gained a lot of general and factual knowledge from the courses. Many of them have grown, some have become different people – more open and willing to do new things. A large number of of our students' theses were related to topics discussed during the summer school.*
>
> [a project coordinator]

Personal benefits are also reflected in the **building of an international network and community**, both by the students and teaching or research staff. Carrying out international activities in a group brings people together, and the friendships formed often last many years after the projects have finished. Quite often the end of one project meant the beginning of another, carried out with the same group of collaborators.

> *A positive outcome of the project was that an international community was formed which is growing and working together.*
>
> [a project coordinator]

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An extremely important outcome of Strategic Partnerships is their impact on **students' further academic pursuits**. In several cases, the project activities became the inspiration and the beginning of students' academic careers (e.g. undertaking doctoral studies).

Many of the participants commenced academic development after the summer school and wrote many articles (including scientific ones) in collaboration with their teachers. This year two students, inspired by the project's topic, want to take up doctoral studies.

[a project coordinator]

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Summary
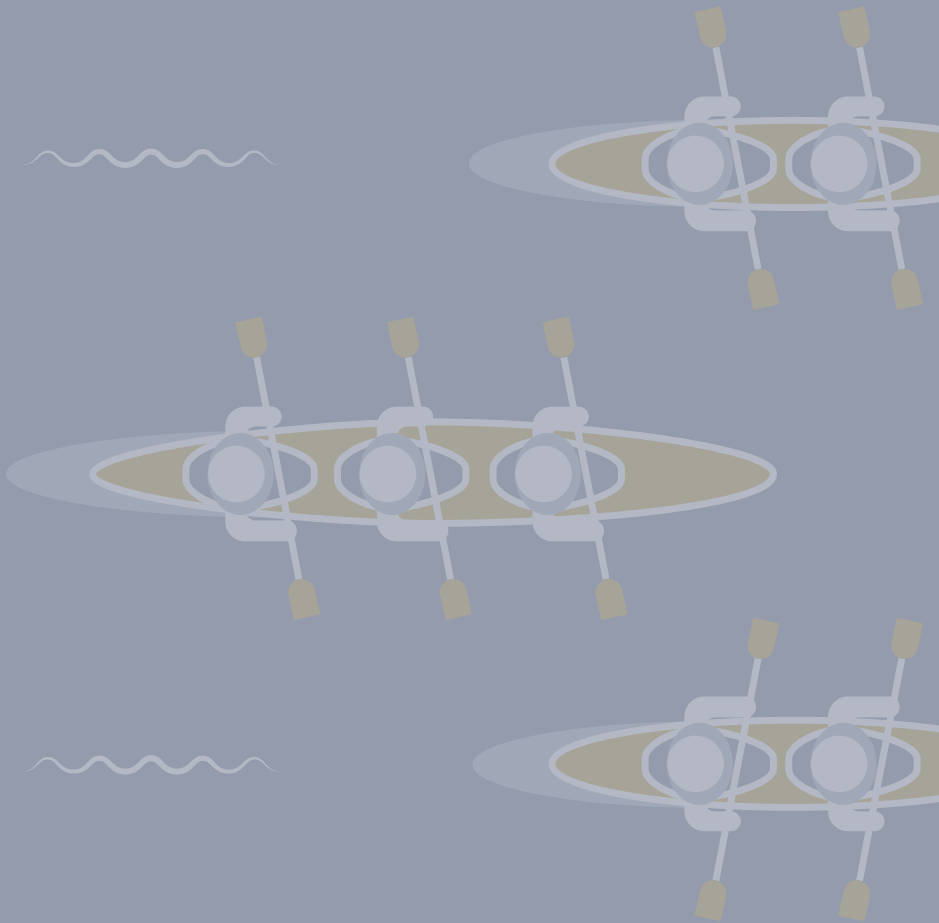
The main conclusion reached from the analyses is that the examined Strategic Partnerships projects, which required a lot of time and work from the implementers, have produced very concrete, positive outcomes and sustainable outputs. All of the projects examined achieved their objectives and often went further than planned.

Most often HEIs chose Strategic Partnerships projects because they wanted to expand their teaching offer or increase the level of internationalisation of the institution. Both of these motivations were reflected in the projects – the Strategic Partnerships mainly focused on teaching activities and were co-implemented mostly by foreign institutions. Once the decision to proceed with a project proposal was made the question of finding cooperation partners appeared. As the respondents unanimously stressed, the selection of partners was one of the most important stages of the whole project. According to the participants of the survey, an extremely important factor was the participation in Strategic Partnerships of institutions and individuals who had previous project experience or had cooperated with the project leader. The selection of partners usually rested with the project coordinator (as a rule university management was not involved at this stage of the project) who searched for partner institutions according to their profile, previous joint activities, knowledge of the subject matter and potential. Some coordinators emphasised that the key to selecting partners was their diversity. Depending on the topic and field of the project, an analysis was made how these actors could contribute to the venture. According to the survey participants, partner acquisition was one of the least problematic stages of the project.

A project proposal was most often prepared by the project coordinator who often used the support of the partners. In such a situation, partner institutions from the outset influenced the design of the project and had insight into the scope of the assigned tasks. In individual cases, where the coordinator had a clear vision of project activities, the proposal was entirely prepared by him and his team. When joining a consortium, the partners were given specific tasks to perform and had no direct influence on the whole project.

Irrespective of who the author of the grant application was, the start-up phase, when the activities and tasks for the partners from different countries were defined, was particularly important in the joint implementation of the project. This action needed to be properly defined so that, despite e.g. cultural differences, the planned tasks for individual institutions were understood in the same way by all parties. Automatically assuming that partners have the same perception of priorities, have the same understanding of definitions and key substantive concepts led to difficult situations, delays and even abandonment of the project by institutions during the project.

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It was important that the project was carried out by people involved in the work on its concept and in the preparation of the proposal. As Strategic Partnerships tended to include a wide range of activities, lasted for a relatively long time (up to three years) and involved the development of a large number of outputs and outcomes, a change in the position of a coordinator made it very difficult to run the project (as well as to introduce a new person to these responsibilities). However, it is worth emphasising that such situations were relatively rare, and did not affect the achievement of the original objectives.

Many projects were difficult to implement because their initiators assumed that too many outcomes would be produced. Sometimes the number of planned tasks and products was so large that it required almost full-time work, which the coordinators usually realised not earlier than during the implementation of the activities. At the same time, it must be added that the participation of a given employee in Strategic Partnerships did not result in a reduction in standard responsibilities at universities. This is why sometimes it happened so that, especially during periods of greater concentration of activities, the projects were carried out after hours. The interviewed coordinators unanimously called for the time devoted to such international projects to be counted as part of their working hours and resulted in, for example, a periodic reduction of their teaching load (such decisions can be made by university authorities). There have also been postulates for the activities carried out as part of teaching projects to be taken into account during the parametric evaluation of a researcher. Currently, because Strategic Partnerships do not directly lead to results in the form of scientific publications, they do not have a fundamental impact on the grade awarded either to a university unit or its individual staff members.

It is worth emphasising that all the examined projects managed to achieve the planned outcomes and some of them also produced additional outputs. Above all, project outcomes included raising the level of internationalisation of the university and establishing lasting relationships with partner institutions. Very often, after project completion, the consortium (coordinating university and partner institutions, in the same or very similar composition) continued joint activities as part of a subsequent project. Another additional effect was to encourage universities to look more widely for sources of funding for international projects. Furthermore – according to the respondents – Strategic Partnerships offered a unique opportunity to directly participate in joint international activities and observe working methods applied by institutions from different countries. The respondents emphasised that such knowledge exchange was of great importance for teaching.

The study also sought to identify challenges and difficult moments that Strategic Partnerships project coordinators had to face. There were some

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problems with financial settlements. All respondents mentioned the differences in the per day amounts applied for various country groups in Erasmus+ with reference to producing intellectual outputs in projects. According to the respondents, these discrepancies were too large and were not directly linked to the costs of living in individual countries. In addition, financial differences demotivated those implementing joint activities, because some people were paid several times less for performing similar work. Many respondents recommended reducing the discrepancies in daily rates between individual country groups.

Among the challenges relating to the implementation of projects, coordinators also mentioned issues related to submitting a grant application and its assessment, and ultimately to the award of funding. Some respondents claimed that this document was not well structured, as it required providing the same information in its different sections. In addition, the survey participants noted that the detailed timetable for project tasks included in the proposal quickly became outdated, due to the nature of project work involving large teams. They asked for a possibility to provide less detailed information as part of project descriptions and have more flexibility in performing the activities included in the schedule. Some respondents also drew attention to what they considered to be weaknesses in the application assessment process. Respondents recommended the introduction of dialogue with the experts at the assessment stage. It was proposed that the author of the proposal was allowed to submit explanations in case of doubts. They pointed out that there was no procedure for clarifying the information contained in the grant application.

Another issue surveyed was the support given to project implementers (e.g. the coordinator) by university authorities. It often happened so that the management was not aware that their unit was running a project. Usually many projects of this kind are carried out simultaneously at universities and their top authorities (e.g. rector, vice-rectors) are not directly involved in their preparation and implementation. The situation is slightly different with persons managing a given university unit (e.g. a dean, the head of an institute) – in their case the knowledge about the progress of projects is wider. In general, managers do not interfere with the work of coordinators and partners during the implementation of project activities. They become interested in the project usually at the dissemination stage, when the main activities are completed. It was emphasised in the study that if project outcomes of a didactic nature were widely disseminated, they could also bring benefits in other areas of the university's operation than those in which they were originally applied.

At some universities, there were internal institutional problems with project settlement. Funding for Strategic Partnerships was mostly based on lump sums,

which posed some difficulty for administrative staff who were accustomed to a different way of accounting for expenditure. Respondents' recommendations on project finances concerned the need for a precise definition of exceptional costs (many project amendments resulted from a misunderstanding of this very category). Templates of documents to be attached to the application could be helpful in the proper preparation of grant applications.

Strategic Partnerships are projects based largely on diversity. The interdisciplinary nature of the topics and issues covered by a single project, as well as the diversity of experiences and resources of the various partners make this type of initiative conducive to achieving results that go beyond those envisaged in the proposals. The added value of such projects includes the establishment of contacts that can be used in subsequent initiatives. The focus of project outcomes on teaching allows them to be used in other areas and other fields of study. It is therefore worth collecting examples of good practices and outcomes of Strategic Partnerships projects, and thus facilitating their broader use – also in areas other than these originally intended.
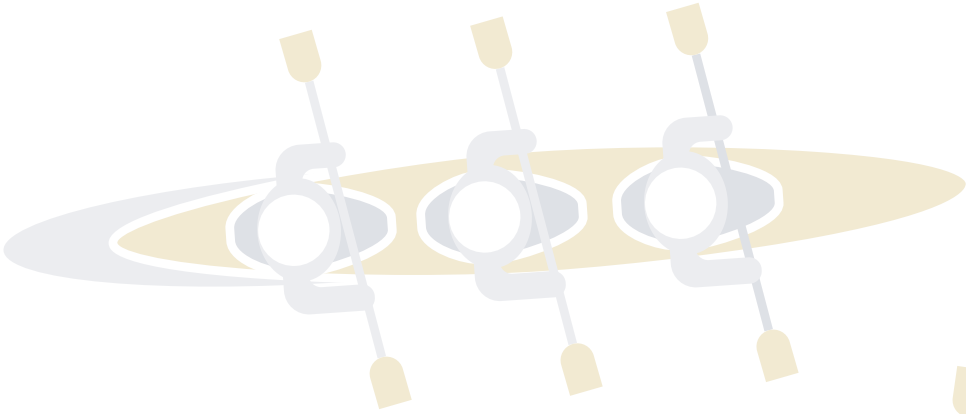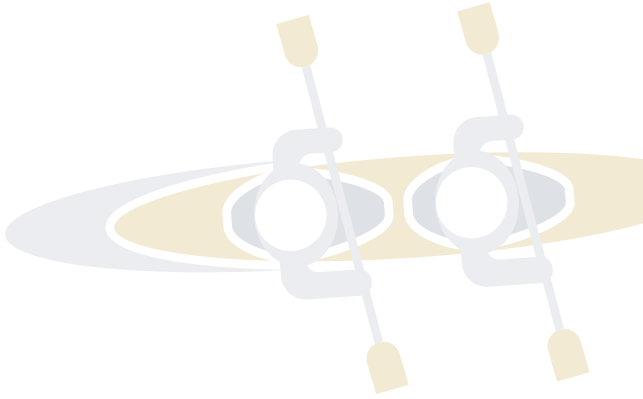
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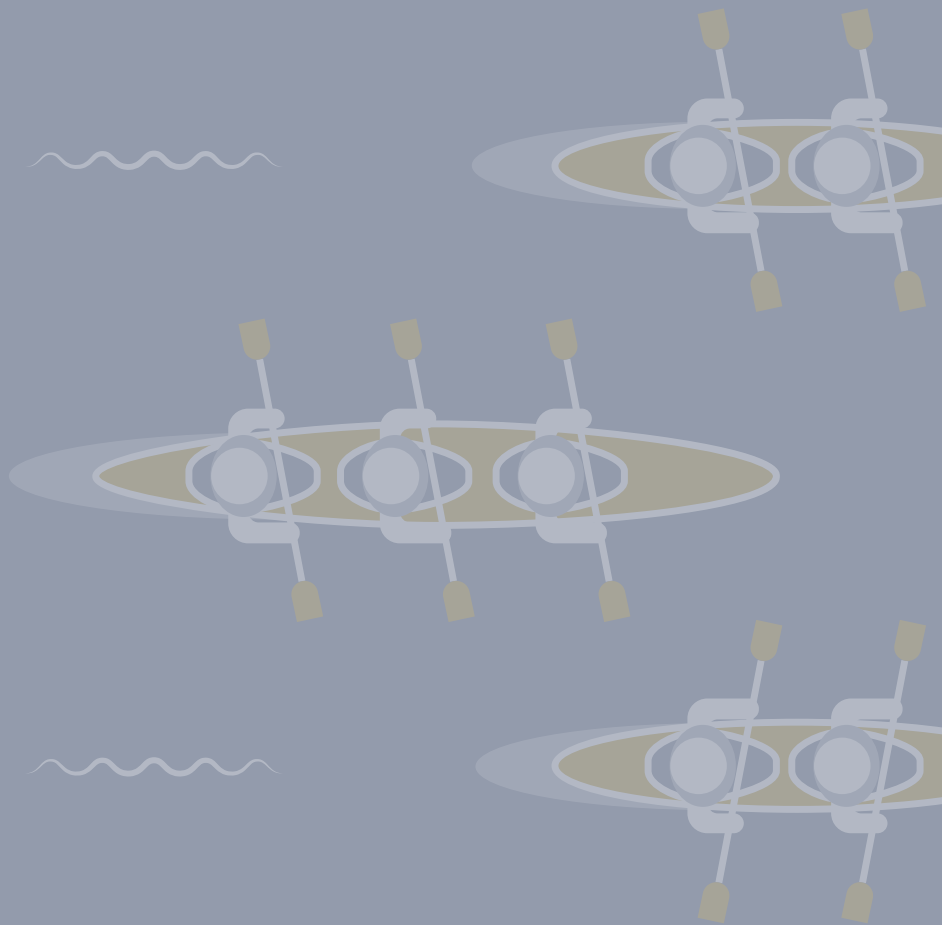
Annex 1.

Cooperation of Poland with Erasmus+ countries within the framework of Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education (KA203) in 2014—2020*

Country	Projects involving Polish partners co-financed by the National Agency of the country concerned	Projects involving partners from a given country co-financed by the National Agency in Poland
Austria	2	9
Belgium	3	17
Bulgaria	2	12
Croatia	2	12
Cyprus	2	7
Czech Republic	10	24
Denmark	5	6
Estonia	5	16
Finland	4	15
France	24	11
Germany	15	38
Greece	4	20
Hungary	6	12
Iceland	0	2
Ireland	2	8
Italy	22	45
Latvia	5	7
Lithuania	2	22
Luxembourg	6	1
Malta	0	5
Netherlands	6	15
North Macedonia	1	5
Portugal	3	32
Romania	10	11
Serbia	1	4
Slovakia	8	9
Slovenia	4	15
Spain	27	37
Sweden	6	4
Turkey	16	6
United Kingdom	11	17

* As at 12th August 2020.

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The most active partners from Poland in Strategic Partnerships (KA203)
co-financed by foreign National Agencies in 2014—2020*

Higher Education Institution	Number of funded projects with the participation of the HEI
Jagiellonian University in Kraków	14
University of Warsaw	13
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań	12
University of Łódź	12
Warsaw University of Technology	10

* As at 12th August 2020.

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Annex 2.

**Topics of Strategic Partnerships co-funded by the National Agency
in Poland in 2014–2020 in the field of Higher Education (KA203)***

Thematic area of the project	Number of projects submitted	Participation in all funded projects
new innovative curricula, new teaching methods, development of training and courses	97	75%
ICT, new technologies, digital competences	31	24%
international cooperation, international relations, cooperation aimed at development	24	19%
quality and relevance of Higher Education in partner countries	23	18%
entrepreneurship learning/education	19	15%
research and innovations	16	12%
open and distance learning	15	12%
quality assurance	14	11%
pedagogy and didactics	13	10%
institutions and methods for quality improvement (including school development)	10	8%
social inclusion – equality	9	7%
environment and climate change	8	6%
labour market issues (including career guidance, youth unemployment)	8	6%
overcoming (basic/general) skills mismatch	7	5%
cooperation of education institutions with business	6	5%
enterprise, industry and SMEs (including entrepreneurship)	6	5%
European citizenship, European awareness and democracy	6	5%
social and environmental responsibility of educational institutions	6	5%
language teaching and learning	6	5%
cultural heritage	5	4%
health and well-being	5	4%
intercultural and intergenerational education and lifelong learning	5	4%

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Thematic area of the project	Number of projects submitted	Participation in all funded projects
creativity and culture	4	3%
energy and resources	3	2%
recognition of education, transparency, certification	3	2%
regional dimension and cooperation	3	2%
civic engagement, responsible citizenship	2	2%
disability, special needs	2	2%
migrants	2	2%
natural sciences	2	2%
social entrepreneurship, social innovation	2	2%
transport and mobility	2	2%
agriculture, forestry and fishing	1	1%
early childhood education and care	1	1%
early school leaving, combating educational failure	1	1%
gender equality, equal opportunities	1	1%
integration of refugees	1	1%
key competences (including mathematics and literacy) – basic skills	1	1%
reaching out to policy makers, dialogue with decision makers	1	1%
recognition (in non-formal and informal education)	1	1%
social dialogue	1	1%

* As at 12th August 2020.

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Annex 3.

Statistics on surveyed Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education (projects carried out in 2014–2017)*

Year of the call for proposals	Number of projects co-financed in a given call for proposals	Number of institutions in the project		Project budget		Duration of the project		Type of coordinating institution		Points awarded to the grant application		Points awarded to the final report	
		up to 4	5 and more	up to EUR 200,000	more than EUR 200,000	up to 30 months	more than 30 months	public HEI	non-public HEI	up to 90 points	more than 90 points	up to 90 points	more than 90 points
2014	12	7	5	5	7	9	3	8	4	5	7	12	0
2015	11	7	4	3	8	6	5	8	3	9	2	9	2
2016	10	2	8	0	10	4	6	8	2	10	0	7	3
2017	6	3	3	2	4	6	0	5	1	5	1	6	0

*Only projects completed at the start of the study are included in the table.

Strategic Partnerships in the field of Higher Education were carried out by Polish and international institutions working together for a period of two to three years. The aim of the study on which this report is based was to collect opinions on this form of cooperation from coordinators and managers working at Higher Education Institutions and acting as project leaders. The report summarises Strategic Partnerships showing both the perspective of individual project participants and the institutions directly involved in managing and implementing the projects.

The publication forms a part of FRSE's analytical and research reports series.

Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE) operates since 1993 and is the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme implemented in the years 2021–2027 as well as the Polish National Agency of the European Solidarity Corps. FRSE is also responsible for other European educational and information initiatives in Poland, such as eTwinning, Eurodesk, Eurydice, Europass, ECVET and EPALE. The Foundation also supports cooperation with countries in the East via the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund, the Polish-Ukrainian Council of Youth Exchange, SALTO-EECA Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre. Since 2014, FRSE has been involved in the implementation of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development.

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