

# Educational Project Partnership: Problems and Ways of Solution

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*Abstract* – Educational Project Partnership is the part of the Bologna process. Saratov State Technical University (SSTU) participates in it for several years. The aim of the paper is to describe problems occurring on different stages of international educational cooperation in the context of engineering education.

First of all it is necessary to accent general problems typical for collaboration as a whole:

- intercultural communications;
- language problems;
- differences in educational standards
- insufficiency of financial resources of Universities.

Then we'll examine the stages of the educational project development. They are the following:

1. creation of the project idea;
2. realization of the project;
3. sustainability.

Every mentioned stage is rather important and influences the success of the project. But every step has its own difficulties. We have ranged them according to the order of the development the educational project.

1. Creation of the project idea. Here we may emphasize such difficulties:

- partner search and in the frames of it necessity of mutual visits of the representatives of the Universities for creation of joint projects (on the first stage of the project development).
  - support of the University authorities;
  - low motivation of lecturers and students to joint educational activity;
2. Realization of the project:
- possibility of refusal of the international partner from the previous agreements in connection with the change of authorities, University strategy and so on;
  - necessity of mutual faith between partners and mutual approval of the quality.
3. Sustainability:
- mutual recognition of the results of educational programmes;
  - dissemination of the experience;
  - use of the ideas and materials of the project for further development of the Universities.

**The objective of the University is to analyze the situation and to find ways of problems solution.**

*Key Words*- Consortium, educational project, international cooperation, partnership.

## INTRODUCTION

Internationalization is a worldwide phenomenon, and a principal feature of higher education systems all over the world. Modern higher education should be characterized by its international dimension: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances.

Russian Universities can't be apart from this civilization mainstream. They develop different types of educational cooperation: bilateral and multilateral agreements, organization of conferences and workshops, teacher and student mobility, research collaboration.

Saratov State Technical University (SSTU) involves in this process as well. Our University has bilateral agreements with 20 foreign Universities from Europe, Asia and Northern America, and 5 bilateral agreements with such corporations as Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Toon Boom Technologies, Meridian Technologies and Aptech World Wide. During the last 5 years SSTU was participating in more than 30 international projects. Joint projects were done with the financial support of the foundations of: Ford, Bell, Spenser, McArthur, Eurasia, INTAS, Institute of Open Society, Norwegian Investigation Committee. Now international cooperation is realized in the framework of such projects as Bridge, TEMPUS and Erasmus.

Educational Project Partnership is a very important part of University collaboration with foreign countries. It stimulates new views on old problems, gives useful experience in different scientific spheres especially in engineering. It goes without saying that modern engineering is impossible without cooperation and partnership.

Advantages of international cooperation are evident. The key advantage is a multicultural communication, which allows enlarging horizons of academic staff and students, to build up open-minded and tolerant individuals. Teachers and

researchers participating in international collaboration use their experience in training what helps to increase the quality of education and research. Students taking part in mobility get international experience during study what allows them to make a quick start in international career.

At the same time there are many problems facing international cooperation. Thus, educational project partnership is not a simple activity. It also puts questions, which are necessary to answer.

SSTU tries to solve nascent problems and to use the best from good traditions in engineering and technological education existing in Russia and to develop new tendencies guided by international contribution to international education.

The aim of the paper is to describe problems occurring on different stages of international educational cooperation in the context of engineering education.

### PROBLEMS OF EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

We communicate with Russian Universities as members of international joint project consortia and discuss different questions. It allows us to summarize the experience, to distinguish positive and negative features of the activity, to analyze the situation and to find proper ways of problem solution.

First of all it is necessary to accent general problems typical for collaboration as a whole:

- intercultural communications;
- language problems;
- differences in educational standards
- insufficiency of financial resources of Universities.

According to generally accepted rules any Fund or the EU Committee for TEMPUS or Erasmus Projects is only denoted the field of scientific investigation, not an appointed topic of a concrete research. On the one hand, it gives a wide expanse of thoughts, but, on the other hand, it is very difficult to formulate a certain idea of mutual interest, especially when partners of consortia do not know each other and the opportunities of Universities.

The problem may be solved by cooperation with partner Universities. In this case we have deep knowledge of human and technical recourses of the partners, their spheres of interest.

Now let's examine the stages of the educational project development. They are the following:

4. creation of the project idea;
5. realization of the project;
6. sustainability.

Every mentioned stage is rather important and influences the success of the project. But every step has its own difficulties. We have ranged them according to the order of the development the educational project.

1. Creation of the project idea. Here we may emphasize such difficulties:

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- support of the University authorities;

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2. Realization of the project:
- possibility of refusal of the international partner from the previous agreements in connection with the change of authorities, University strategy and so on;
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- mutual recognition of the results of educational programmes;
  - dissemination of the experience;
  - use of the ideas and materials of the project for further development of the Universities.

### WAYS OF PROBLEM SOLUTION

Now we try to analyze all factors mentioned above and present our ways of problem solution.

General problems typical for the whole project:

a) Intercultural communications.

Increasing internationalization makes intercultural sensitivity an issue for the whole institution. There is still a lot of work to be done in this respect [1].

Cooperation is impossible without close relations, mutual assistance and understanding, confidence between partners. Therefore the participants of the projects have to pay attention to national stereotypes and to take into account business cultures of the representatives for better communication.

b) Language problems.

Everybody understands that the first prerequisite of international cooperation is the guarantee of mutual understanding by means of language study. One of the main objectives of any University is to prepare their students for communications. Nowadays the meaning of contacts and communications grows greatly. It is not only personal contacts but professional as well. It is necessary for individuals to speak a foreign language. It is a demand of a modern job market. Now the linguistic skills of employees become increasingly important. Today conversion of world economics and world market is characteristics of internationalization of higher education.

We understand that knowledge of a foreign language is an obligatory factor of a highly educated engineer.

That is why there is the development of intensive foreign languages studying for special purposes among our priorities in engineering education.

We must emphasize the role of EU support in the improvement of foreign language skills of Russian teachers and students. Participation of SSTU in TEMPUS/TACIS projects in the field of language training allows developing a new strategy and a new system of teaching foreign languages at the technical university. Our partners are University of Surrey (Great Britain) and Oldenburg University (Germany).

A special course "Foreign Languages for Special Purposes within the Technical University" will provide significant educational and economic opportunities for our students, graduates, and teachers. The ascent is done on the self-study approaches. Units of language e-learning in the

course will be validated to EU standards and accredited through an analysis of learning outcomes matched to assessment criteria. A practice strategy will be disseminated among other technical Universities by using the transferable model. Electronic materials and programmes will enable individuals to bridge the gap from formal learning to employment and thus develop the necessary skills alongside their technical expertise to work more effectively in the global market.

c) Differences in educational standards.

The problems connected with differences in educational standards, approaches and curricula require discussions between participants of the project. It is necessary to know about educational rules functioning in the countries of the participants.

As to Russian educational standards followed by Universities they are defined by the state. According to the state requirements a curriculum of any speciality consists of the obligatory component more than 60%. Organization of the academic process is based on hours, spent by students, whereas other countries do it in credits. Only few Universities in Russia use a credit system. SSTU was among experimental Universities in 2003-2005 where credits were probated.

There is a great difference in the teaching approach. According to the traditional teaching strategy Russian lecturers declaim their lectures to the students. During seminars and labs students repeat a topic given on the lecture and get practical skills. Not all lecturers use presentations and case - studies. This type of teachers puts a problem before students and discusses the variants of its solution. They use technical equipment and analyze case - studies. The project participation gives a great opportunity to get acquainted with new teaching methods and technologies and to adopt new pedagogical models and educational materials. It also allows to establish, to spread, or to reform educational programmes.

The attendance of all subjects in curricula is obligatory for Russian students. There are 30-40% of contact hours and 70-60% of self-studies in foreign Universities. The main problem for Russian Universities is in effective organization of students' self-studies and formation of tutors system.

d) Insufficiency of financial resources of Universities.

To our opinion the assistance of international funds helps to solve the problem of low University budget. But modern economic situation and permanent increase of inflation influence the decrease of the financial component of the project. May be the fact would be taken into consideration during the planning made by Funds or EU Committees.

Further we describe 3 main stages of the project development and give our recommendations how to avoid barriers in international educational collaboration.

Every project starts with the search of appropriate ideas.

1. Creation of the project idea.

a) Partner search.

SSTU uses different ways to find project's partners:

development of all types of University international cooperation;

participation in the international workshops and conferences (IEAE, iNEER and etc.). Here we may stress a great argument in favour of iNEER annual workshop. With its focus on partnership and networking, free membership, information sharing, and resource leveraging, iNEER represents a new mechanism for international cooperation [2];

participation in the European educational and research consortia (TEMPUS, INCO-COPERNICUS, etc.);

use of international database listed the potential partners;

direct contacts with the international offices and profile departments of the Universities, including direct-mail via Internet.

All these approaches are rather fruitful.

Usually all preliminary arrangements achieved by Internet – discussions. They are very useful for further cooperation and help to save time in the project preparation.

We also stress the necessity of mutual visits of the representatives of the Universities for creation of joint projects on the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the project development.

We think that it is very difficult to create a good project if the participants do not acquaint with each other that is why we offer to include in the project description mutual visits on the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the project development. It helps to exchange opinions and to elaborate a common point of view.

We may confirm the statement by own experience. In autumn 2006 SSTU started new Bridge Project “Web-based Technologies” concerning joint educational programmes together with the University of West England. We invited the partners to Saratov to discuss the ideas and to prepare the Project and the step gave good results.

b) Support of the University authorities;

The most important factor especially for Russian Universities is the support of the University authorities. It is not only a tradition but also an organizational structure. So international partners have not to forget this component and pay much attention to contacts with the authorities. Experience has shown that the assistance of the Academic Board of the University and University authorities in the development and further fulfillment of the project is the key factor of success.

c) Low motivation of lecturers and students to joint educational activity.

It is necessary to establish a fact that University lecturers and students are low motivated to take part in joint international projects. They often do the work in the frames of a project at their free time. Too little lecturers of the University society are involved in the project according to objective and subjective reasons. To change the situation it is necessary to explain the profits of the project, to show a personal interest of everybody in the project result, to create a motivation system. Payment for a work and spiritual satisfactory play the main role in the motivation of the project partners. It may be done by different ways close to national traditions.

The next stage is:

2. Realization of the project.

It's the main part of the activity, which has its own problems.

a) Possibility of refusal of the international partner from the previous agreements into the project in connection with the change of authorities, University strategy and so on;

The life changes and sometimes it leads to new priorities, where there is no place for old agreements and decisions. A University may be in such situation and it is very difficult to give any advice. To our opinion the problem will be solved when a special paragraph concerning the question will appear in the project description.

b) Necessity of mutual faith between partners and mutual approval of the quality.

If the mutual faith is a moral component, mutual approval of the quality is based on the assessment and quality assurance system of education.

During TEMPUS Projects SSTU staff studied EU quality assurance systems and developed our own QA strategy based on the best international practice.

The University policy of quality in education consists of the following aspects: increase of the level of the quality of specialists' training; guarantee of the high professionalism of University lecturers and graduates;

- perfection of the system of quality management at the University; use of effective training technologies;
- development of research schools, fundamental and applied investigations; optimization of material, financial and labour outlays. The integrated assessment of SSTU activity includes licensing, certification and accreditation. Much attention is paid to the external assessment and expertise. The objectives of the external integrated assessment of the University activities are the following: education improving; optimization of a management activity; getting of a license to conduct educational activities and a certificate about state accreditation. The task of the external expertise lies in the establishment of the correspondence of the content, level and training quality of graduates to the requirements of the state educational standard on the base of an independent expertise of the students' residual knowledge, reports on the self-investigation and documents, regulating the University activity. The main stages of the system of the quality management in education at the University are:

1. definition of the policy in the sphere of quality; formation of the organizational structure of the quality system; elaboration of the normative documentation; monitoring of the basic processes at the University; realization of the inner audit and self-appraisal of the University; realization of correction. And concerning the educational project partnership the last but not the least:

3. Sustainability.

a) Mutual recognition of the results of educational programmes;

We think that it is one of the most difficult and discussable problems. Now educational systems of Russia and foreign countries are so different that it takes a lot of time to come to mutually acceptable decision. And creation of the system of the quality management at the University will help to reach better understanding.

The next important factor on this stage is a preparation of high-qualified experts capable to evaluate Russian students' level of knowledge according to the requirements

of international partners. Our University makes the first step in this sphere by sending senior academic staff to European quality assurance agencies for training as QA auditors in order to prepare SSTU educational programs for international accreditation. We think that it is a confirmation of achievements of the University. The existence of the own qualified specialist capable to evaluate students professionally helps to bring together different opinions and influences the prestige of Russian Universities participated in joint educational projects.

b) Issue of diploma or certificates confirming the results of joint educational programmes;

The natural output of the mutual recognition of the results of educational programmes is an issue of diploma or certificates confirming the results of joint educational programmes. It is a very important component of cooperation. Our University puts into practice the idea.

There are 3 educational programmes: 'Information systems and technologies', 'Advertising' and 'Tourism management' are accredited by Edexcel (Great Britain). Within Bridge programme SSTU develops 2 joint courses in IT (partner: University of West England), in hospitality management (partner: University of Brighton).

Possession of an international diploma or a certificate gives an individual wider range of opportunities and choice on the job market.

c) Dissemination of the experience;

The significant factor of joint educational projects is an experience expressed in the ideas, reports, and other materials of the project. The main value of a project is the use of its results. It is necessary to think about dissemination that may be done in different ways: creation of database, web-sites, online and paper journals; organization of conferences and workshops.

We think that it is very important to continue relations between consortia participants. There are many variants of further collaboration and the previous partners may find a suitable one.

To summarize the report we may emphasize that educational joint partnership is a perfect opportunity to change methods of teaching, to use new pedagogical approaches, to establish or to reform educational programmes, to do scientific investigations.

## CONCLUSION

Here we present our point of view to the educational project partnership in the context of engineering education. We think that the factors listed above are rather typical for participants from any country. The objective of the University is to analyze advantages and disadvantages of educational project partnership, to instruct to benefit from received opportunity, and to prepare to overcome the difficulties.

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