

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION ACTIVITIES (TCA)

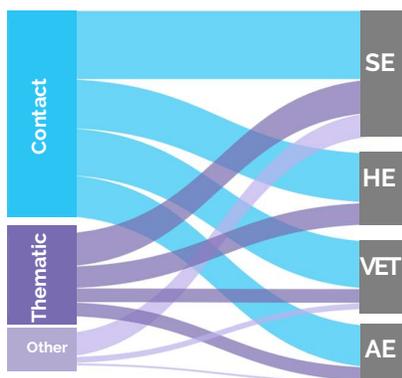
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Does Erasmus+ TCA Networking Work?

1. INTRODUCTION. Education Exchanges Support Foundation (*ŠMPF, Lithuanian National Agency*) provides an opportunity for existing and potential beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ Programme to participate in TCA. TCA encompasses a number of events (i.e., contact seminars, thematic conferences, study visits, and other) which take place abroad.

Over the past three years (2017-2019), ŠMPF funded 167 TCA participants. The chart below illustrates the distribution of participants by education field

How TCA participants distributed by education field? N=167



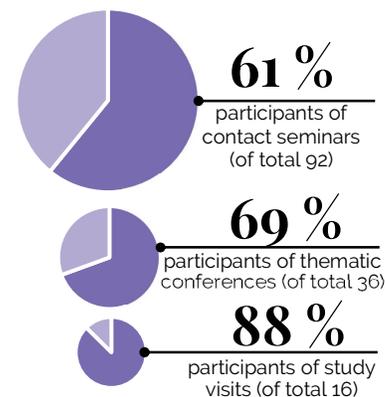
Source: ŠMPF

(where SE is school education, VET is vocational education and training, HE is higher education, AE is adult education) and type of event. Most participants went to contact seminars dedicated to networking. The effectiveness of this networking at contact seminars wasn't based on evidence, as participants reports within one month of TCA, when the benefits of the contacts have not yet materialized.

Other TCA participants went on thematic conferences, study visits or learning events. Their results are less defined and more difficult to measure, so the effectiveness of all TCA has been assessed mainly in terms of networking. According to the Erasmus+ Implementation Guide for National Agencies, TCA networking is effective when the contacts or ideas gained during the event are used in projects.

2. METHODOLOGY. The purpose of evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of TCA networking. In other words, to assess the extent to which contacts made during TCA are used to initiate projects or other

What share of the respondents answered to the questionnaire (by type of TCA)?



Source: ŠMPF, TCA participant survey, 2020

joint activities with foreign partners. The evaluation also seeks to identify factors that affect the effectiveness of TCA, such as an experience of the participant or a represented education field.

8 interviews, 95 responses to the online survey (response rate was 66%).

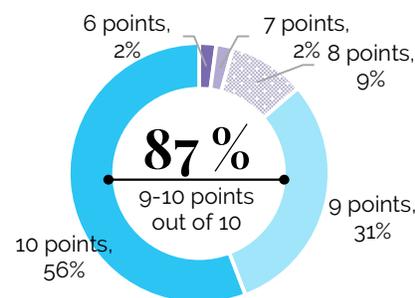
In April 2020 eight interviews with the participants from the contact seminars were conducted.

Interviewees represented all four education fields. Also, in May 2020 the data collection was done through an online survey. The survey's contact list included 167 participants, but survey invitations were successfully sent to 144. The list of contacts has been shortened due to the elimination of duplicates (the same participant was surveyed once), extraordinary attendees (e.g. participants in the EC anniversary event) and returned letters (when the participant e-mail address is no longer used).

A very important limitation of the evaluation is that TCA took place 6 - 36 months ago. This could lead to inaccurate reporting (e.g., too positive). However, the results are useful because they reflect the general attitudes of the participants towards the networking, international seminars and their benefits.

3. TCA QUALITY. Respondents rate the quality of TCA very positively. Survey finds that 87% of respondents are very satisfied with the TCA because they rated the quality of the event with 9-10 points (on a scale from 1 to 10).

How respondents rate the quality of TCA? N=95

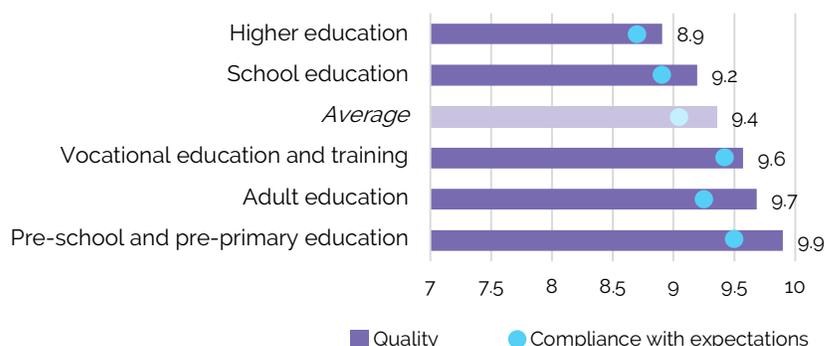


Source: ŠMPF, TCA participant survey, 2020

The differences between TCA types are not very significant, but study visits stand out as a particularly favourable (mean value 9.7 points, while contact seminars mean value is 9.4 points, thematic - 9.1 points).

Some greater differences in TCA quality assessment were noticed among the respondents in the different education sectors. The quality were assessed the best by

How respondents rate TCA quality and compliance with their expectations (on scale from 1 to 10 points)?



Source: ŠMPF, TCA participant survey, 2020

the respondents of pre-school and pre-primary education and the worst assessed by the respondents of higher education (the diagram above). However, it is important to note that a relatively long time elapsed after the seminars. Therefore, this assessment of TCA quality reflects the general attitude of the respondents to the international seminars rather than an objective quality of the TCA event.

The assessment of expectations shows that surveyed TCA participants were mostly looking for new project partners (67%, the chart below). The interviewees emphasized that it is very important to meet partners directly, to get to know them personally before starting the project.

„It was very useful to check partners face-to-face.“

However, only a minority of respondents (27%) expected to present their ideas or organisation to others. Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants were more willing to become partners themselves than to find partners for their coordinated project.

The interviews also show that participants usually go without a project idea to offer to partners. According to the survey, 33% of participants expected to formulate an idea for the project during the event.

„It encouraged us to start a project.“

The other two important expectations of TCA participants were to improve qualification (55%) and meet new people (47%, the chart below). The analysis of the comments shows that foreign contacts are considered valuable in themselves, even without follow-up.

What were the main expectations of TCA participants? N=95



Source: ŠMPF, TCA participant survey, 2020

Overall, according to survey, 81% of respondents had expectations regarding the development of international activities. The rest were concerned with their qualification or personal development (e.g., broadening their horizons and learning professional news).

The TCA best met the expectations of respondents from pre-school and pre-primary education field, and the least from higher education field. The comments from surveys and interviews suggest that expectations were often not met due to a lack of specific topics (e.g., about project dissemination or management) or insufficient matching of participants' interests (e.g., absence of participants representing gymnasiums or high-profile libraries in specific event). Nevertheless, study visits fully met participants' expectations (mean value 9.6 points on a scale from 1 to 10). Apparently, the main expectation for study visits was less specific (i.e., to improve qualification) than for other TCA (i.e., to find partners). Contact seminars and thematic seminars met expectations slightly less (mean value accordingly 9 and 8.8 points).

Survey analysis shows that meeting expectations varies according to participants' experience. The respondents who indicated that they have experience as an Erasmus+ participant (e.g., have ever been abroad under a mobility scheme) are slightly more satisfied with TCA event. Meanwhile, respondents with experience of strategic partnerships, place higher expectations on TCA. This group indicated slightly lower satisfaction with the events.

Interviews show that experienced project coordinators perceived themselves to be more *givers* than *receivers* in such events, because their knowledge and lessons were very useful for new coordinators. However, experienced participants usually expect to

What benefits did participants get from TCA contacts?



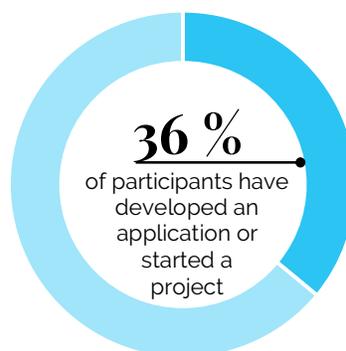
Source: ŠMPF, TCA participant survey, 2020

meet even more experienced or high-profile professionals, making their expectations more difficult to meet.

In addition, interviews show, that experienced coordinators are no longer looking for new partners. Usually they have already formed their own network. According to interviews, experienced project managers usually find partners through previous successful projects or recommendations (choosing partners' partners). Therefore, TCA events were more useful for beginners who lack contacts.

3. TCA EFFECTIVENESS. The survey finds that all participants (except one) met new people in TCA. These new contacts were mostly useful for gaining knowledge (the chart above). Interviews show that some participants have common social networking groups that share programme information so far (e.g., receive partnership requests).

What share of participants have initiated projects thanks to TCA contacts? N=95



Source: ŠMPF, TCA participant survey, 2020

More than a half of the respondents said that TCA was useful in writing project applications (the chart above).

Although 46% of respondents say they have found project partners through TCA, the actual percentage seems to be lower. Based on the analysis of the survey comments, it can be stated that 36% of the respondents developed an application or started a project using TCA contacts (the chart below).

TCA initiated project applications of Erasmus+ KA1, KA2, eTwinning, Nordplus and other.

The interviews show that most of the interviewees feel motivated by TCA, but not all initiated the projects. The main reasons for this were not receiving proper support from their organisation (e.g., managers did not prioritise projects) or did not have enough experience in writing applications (e.g., failed to reach agreement with partners or didn't pass application process). By sector, the most of "success stories" (i.e., comments on successfully initiated projects after TCA) come from school education respondents and the least from higher education.

Representatives of higher education institutions, as well as participants from organisations with many years of experience in international projects, usually have a wide range of partners and choose partners for future projects

based on past practice (e.g., their former partners or partners' partners). Meanwhile, others, especially those just starting out in international projects, make more use of the contacts made during TCA. For Erasmus+ newcomers, this seems to be a good opportunity to find their first partners.

TCA benefits have been felt not only through the project initiation, but also in other areas. Both the interview and survey comments show that these events are important for personal development. Improved foreign language skills, increased motivation and confidence, and enhanced status in their own organisation were the most frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

Still, the greatest satisfaction from TCA comes through friendships. The survey finds that the strongest correlation is between the compliance with TCA expectations and TCA contacts that have grown into personal relationships. Consequently, the personal connection (more than new applications, projects, or knowledge) allows the event to be perceived as meeting expectations.

New personal connections are what increase participants' satisfaction the most.

Survey comments show that respondents value long-term relationships with TCA participants. However, the survey find that only 29% of respondents believe that TCA networking has evolved into personal relations. According to interviews, the main barriers to establish contacts were the lack of personal initiative, insufficient knowledge of a foreign language, and the feeling of a *beginner*.

5. CONCLUSIONS. TCA helps representatives of educational and other organisations initiate projects and stay inspired in their daily activities. TCA was most effective when it helped to build long-term personal relationships. In other words, it allowed to meet like-minded people who can advise, invite to a joint project, or provide opportunities for new activities. The survey shows that the representatives of school education made the best use of these opportunities, and those of higher education the least. According to survey, 36% of participants have prepared an application or are already implementing a project thanks to TCA.

Survey found that despite the high quality of TCA events, the participants often perceived TCA as a *one-way* action. Most of the participants in the events did not seek to present their ideas or organisations but were still willing find project partners.

Survey data and interviews show that the majority of participants were looking for new information about the programme and project implementation. Although, these needs can be effectively satisfied at the national level (e.i., through participation in national events).

Therefore, TCA planed in such a way that people with similar interests meet, are the most effective. An effective TCA also requires the preparation of participants. Participants could be encouraged put more effort on formulating interests of their organisation or developing proposals to potential partners. Finally, foreign language and networking skills are essential for effective TCA.

Experienced project coordinators can be attracted to TCA events by the opportunity to meet management or education experts. While new project managers can be attracted by the opportunity to join a project or find partners for their first project.