



ELEGANT Erasmus + Project
Project No. 610265-EPP-1-2019-1-HR-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Graduate Employability
Through University – Enterprise Cooperation
ELEGANT

External Evaluation Report

December 2022

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1. Introduction

Project Title: Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Graduate Employability Through University–Enterprise Cooperation

Project Acronym: ELEGANT

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The Elegant project is an Erasmus+ project, originally funded from 15.11.2019 to 14.11.2022, now extended by one year to 14.11.2023. The total budget is €968.814,00.

The partners of the project are:

P1 Dubrovnik University, Croatia

P2 Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Jordan

P3 Jordan University for Science and Technology, Jordan

P4 Al Balqa Applied University, Jordan

P5 The Information and Communications Technology Association of Jordan, Jordan

P6 Modern University for Business and Science, Lebanon

P7 Beirut Arab University, Lebanon

P8 The Syndicate of Computer Sciences of Lebanon, Lebanon

P9 Staffordshire University, UK

P10 Università Politecnica delle Marche, Italy

P11 Psicoglobal Co., Portugal

It is coordinated by the University of Dubrovnik, Croatia.

1.1 Project Aims and Objectives

The Elegant project aims to enhance university enterprise cooperation in Jordan and Lebanon, in order to improve teaching and learning in partner universities, enhance the employability of graduates and create conditions for applied research, cooperation and knowledge transfer between partner universities and enterprises.

The project's specific objectives are:

- to stimulate the development of an enterprise cooperation culture at partner universities
- to develop new forms of industry oriented education in partner universities by establishing close cooperation with a number of enterprises through the newly set up Liaison Offices, arranging placements for students in companies, and involving qualified company employees in teaching and mentoring student projects and theses
- to update and upgrade the capacities of academic and technical staff of partner universities through study visits to EU partner institutions and to improve the ICT curricula with the support of EU partners and local partner enterprises
- to strengthen the internationalisation of partner country universities by engaging EU professors in teaching and in improving the curricula of ICT courses.

1.2. Work Packages

There are six Work Packages which cover the main activities foreseen to achieve these objectives:
WP1: (Preparation) Establish a University-Enterprise Cooperation Network in partner universities in JO and LB, signing MOUs with companies, finding placements for students.

Activities include: visits of senior staff of partner universities in JO and LB to EU partners to learn about EU experiences of cooperation with industry; establishing Liaison Offices in JO and LB partner universities and appointing and training Liaison Officers; Arranging Enterprise Surveys in JO and LB.

WP2: (Development) Implementation of new forms of industry-oriented education.

Activities include: arranging Seminars on University-Enterprise Links in JO and LB; running workshops on university-industry cooperation for students and staff; arranging lectures by company staff; preparing a database of students' industry-related projects; training industry experts to be mentors; holding competitions for Best Student Project and Best Mentor; developing virtual internship platform.

WP3: (Development) Improving the human capacities of university staff and revise/upgrade the ICT curricula in partner universities.

Activities include: Study visits by JO and LB staff to EU partners; revising curricula of ICT programmes with company input and assistance from EU staff; purchasing equipment.

WP4: (Quality) Quality control and Monitoring.

Activities include: preparing the Quality Plan; regular monitoring of project activities, monitoring visits; external evaluation of the project.

WP5: (Dissemination and Exploitation) Sustainability and Dissemination.

Activities include: establish project website, social media accounts; produce publicity materials; hold National Exploitation seminars and a final project conference

WP6: (Management) Management of the project.

Activities include: produce project management plan; overall academic and financial management of the project; annual planning and monitoring meetings; submission of reports; external audit of the project.

2. The External Evaluation of the project.

The external evaluation of the project is undertaken as part of WP4 (Quality Control and Monitoring).

The External Evaluator, Mrs Jenny Herbert, has been subcontracted to carry out this activity. She has many years of experience of managing 20 large Tempus and Erasmus+ Capacity Building in HE Projects in both Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East and is familiar with the aims and objectives, rules and regulations of the Erasmus+ programme.

The aims of the external evaluation are:

To provide an independent evaluation of the project's activities, and assess their effectiveness, efficiency and achievements as outlined in the project application. This report covers the first three years of the project. A further report will cover the final year.

2.1. Methodology

Due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation on LB. (see further in section 3.2) visits to partners in LB were not possible by the External Evaluator. Therefore, the methodology undertaken for LB partners had to be adapted.

1. a thorough review of the Application, including the detailed project description and budget, the Technical Report, the Grant Agreement, Erasmus+ guidelines and the Erasmus+ and project websites including access to the documents deposited on the website (Quality Plan, Management Plan, Dissemination Plan, and minutes of meetings).
2. attendance at several annual and monitoring meetings of the steering and management committees of the project (where additional meetings were held with the LB partners) to review ongoing progress and observe the problem-solving strategies of the coordinator and other partners.
3. visits to JO to the three JO partner universities, discussions with JO staff and meetings in JO with representatives of LB partners.
4. discussions with both JO and LB staff attending workshops hosted by SU, UK.

2.2. Evaluation criteria

The External Evaluator has considered the following criteria when reviewing the activities and achievements of the project and discussing the project with both project staff and those who have participated in project activities:

1. Activities
2. Relevance
3. Effectiveness
4. Impact
5. Sustainability
6. Project management

3. Key Findings

3.1. Initial observations

The External evaluator considers that the project team and all partners should be congratulated on the way in which they coped with the unprecedented problems and issues created by the COVID-19 pandemic and also the political and social situation in LB.

After holding the Project Kick-off Meeting in February 2020, thereafter it became impossible to carry out any of the project activities as planned, not only for the initial phase of the project (WP1-preparation) but also all other activities as foreseen in the application, particularly:

- the mobility of university senior staff
- the visit of JO and LB university staff to EU partner universities for updating curriculum development visits
- the mobilities of EU academic staff to JO and LB universities to teach and run workshops
- the training of JO and LB Liaison Officers at EU universities

- the purchase of equipment, which was badly disrupted by supply difficulties
- planning and monitoring meetings

Adopting a flexible approach, the management team adapted the activities of the project in the following ways in order to continue the work of the project and achieve its objectives: for example, in WP1 Liaison Officers were appointed and their training took place online instead of at EU partner universities. In WP2 and WP3 Webinars and on-line Workshops replaced the planned Workshops for students and staff in partner country universities and EU staff conducted on line workshops for JO and LB staff. Equipment was purchased where possible, although tremendous delays were experienced.

3.2 Project activities

As a result of the flexibility of the project management team, good progress has been made in all work packages, despite the problems caused by the pandemic.

WP1

The senior staff of JO and LB university partners were unfortunately unable to undertake their planned visits to EU universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, support for the project by the senior staff of the JO and LB partner universities is clear, with the Vice Rector of MUBS, LB acting as the contact person for the project and senior staff of other partner universities heavily involved in activities.

All JO and LB University partners now have established Liaison Offices and trained Liaison Officers who have forged links with companies and also coordinated the signing of Memoranda of Understanding with them to further cement the relationship between the universities and local industry. All universities have arranged placements of students in their partner companies.

The Enterprise Surveys were carried out in LB and JO in the first year of the project, identifying the gap in knowledge and skills of ICT graduates and assisting university staff in their updating of curricula.

All these activities contribute to filling the skill gap of graduates and better preparing them for the labour market, making them better qualified to enter the world of work.

WP2

The workshop on University-Enterprise Links was held in JO at the time of the Kick-off Meeting (February 2020). Unfortunately, it has not been possible to run one in LB due to the Covid pandemic, conditions in LB and ongoing travel restrictions for some partners.

Many other activities of this WP have taken place, either virtually or face to face, as conditions have allowed.

A large number of Workshops have been organised in all JO and LB partner universities, many involving experts from industry sharing their knowledge and experience with students (for details see the project Website under LO activities).

In both JO and LB senior staff from several companies have delivered lectures to students giving them a valuable insight into the latest developments in various fields of ICT and the way industry and commerce contribute to the development of the economy and the provision of employment and wealth to the population.

Staff of JO and LB partners have been trained by staff from Psicoglobal Co. so that they can run Mentor Training Workshops for experts from industry involved in working with students on their

projects or assessing students' projects. The competitions for Best Student Project and Best Mentor will be run at the end of this academic year.

Liaison Officers are working together with companies to organise placements for students. The number of students successfully undergoing placements in companies has increased since the beginning of the project, and a number of students have been offered employment as a result of their period of work experience in the company.

The framework of a virtual internship platform is being developed.

WP3

The project application envisaged 50 curriculum development visits to EU partners by JO and LB staff.

Due to the Covid pandemic it was impossible for staff to travel to EU partners from March 2020 to late in 2021. Even when some travel became possible (airlines began flying) restrictions placed upon travellers by certain countries effectively made travel for the purposes of project activities impossible until early 2022. Long delays to obtain visas also caused great difficulties. In order to continue with project activities, and in an attempt to generate the foreseen benefits of the project, the management team organised seminars and workshops online.

Up to the end of 2021, 8 online seminars/workshops, conducted by EU staff, took place reaching a total of 186 JO and LB academic staff. The benefits of such activities at that time cannot be overstated. The online webinars have continued in 2022, even though face to face workshops have become possible. Four webinars in March 2022 organised by MUBS in LB had a total of over 300 participants, including students, staff and alumni.

Since the start of 2022 Workshops have been held face to face, with JO and LB staff travelling to EU partner universities for curriculum development activities. During 2022 six workshops have been held with a total of 68 participants from JO and LB, thus exceeding the target foreseen in the application. More workshops are being arranged during 2023 to reach more academic staff in partner institutions and enable them to benefit from the experience of visiting EU universities..

Five EU staff visits have taken place so far, with staff from Psicoglobal, PT and SU, UK delivering training and curriculum development workshops to staff in JO. More EU staff visits will take place in the final year of the project.

The purchase of equipment for JO and LB partner universities was extremely difficult as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many companies were no longer trading. Of those companies that were still trading, some no longer supplied all the equipment needed by the universities, so compliance with national tendering rules was difficult. Those that did submit tenders suffered many long delays in obtaining the ordered goods and, in the meantime faced increased prices.

The equipment was purchased for LB partners more quickly as there were no changes in the list of equipment and partners started the process immediately after the Kick off Meeting. The equipment was delivered to the two LB partners in March 2021. But in JO, the process took much longer. Following three public tenders, all the planned equipment has now been purchased for partners and installed in the universities. At PSUT, JUST and ABAU, the external evaluator has seen the equipment, in situ, with Erasmus+ stickers attached, and recorded in the universities' inventory of goods.

WP4

The project Quality Assurance Plan was prepared and deposited on the project website soon after the Kick-off Meeting.

Monitoring visits by the Coordinator and Project Manager were adversely affected by travel restrictions as a result of Covid, so many monitoring/management meetings were held electronically as issues arose. For example, in May and June 2020, four online meetings were held to discuss how, and which, activities could be moved to on line delivery as soon as possible and make decisions about the form of implementation of future activities. A monitoring meeting of all partners was eventually held in November 2021 when travel to Italy became possible and a further planning meeting was hosted by UNIDU in May 2022. A monitoring visit to JO partner universities by the Project Manager and External Evaluator took place in December 2022.

All activities of the project have been monitored and evaluated by the partners in charge of QA activities (Psicoglobal and JUST). Evaluation questionnaires have been sent to all participants of various activities (meetings, webinars, workshops, etc.) and the results communicated to the Project Management and Steering Committees. The quality of implementation of activities, as shown by the analysis of questionnaire surveys has been very positive.

WP 5

The Dissemination and Visibility Plan has been prepared and deposited on the project website.

The main tool for the dissemination of project activities and achievements is the project website: www.elegant-project.eu. The website is easy to use but does not appear to be up to date with information on events, photographs etc.

The project website lists all objectives, aims, work packages and activities, as well as the progress and achievements. Publicity materials (leaflets, posters) have been produced and used at events which have been reported in local and national media.

The National Exploitation Seminars were delayed as a result of Covid and will take place during 2023.

WP6

The Project Management Plan has been prepared and deposited on the project website.

The management of the project has been undertaken by the Steering Committee composed of the Project Coordinator and Project Manager from UNIDU, the Project Administrator, the Project Coordinator in JO, and contact persons from all partners. A smaller management team deals with day to day issues and reports to the Steering Committee. A Scientific Committee has been formed to look at academic issues such as the revised curricula. Different partner universities and EU partners share responsibility for different WPs, helping partner country institutions gain project management experience. Virtual meetings of the Management Committee were held frequently during the Covid pandemic when face to face meetings were not possible. Now that travel has become possible the management team are continuing their work by a combination of electronic and face to face meetings. There is close and regular communication between all partners via two WhatsApp groups/zoom/email.

3.3. Relevance

University-enterprise cooperation is a national priority for JO and LB, alongside the internationalisation of the HE system. Unfortunately, no senior staff of the partner country universities were able to travel to the EU at the planned time because of the Covid pandemic, but

JO and LB staff are now able to visit EU universities to see how courses are taught and to establish relationships with staff at EU partner universities. Of course, some of the senior staff of partner country universities have been involved in the Workshops organised at EU universities in their position as academics and met with senior staff of host institutions (PSUT, ABAU, JUST and MUBS are in this category, where Vice Presidents, Deans and Vice Deans have participated in EU Workshops, thus fulfilling the aims of the visits under WP1).

The high rate of graduate unemployment in JO and LB means that employability skills are even more important to partner university graduates to give them a good chance to gain employment and a career.

Links between universities and industry i.e., between education and the world of work, are particularly crucial and relevant in our post-Covid world, where many companies have ceased to trade, travel and links between enterprises is still difficult and economies struggle with the effects of world events such as the war in Ukraine and the rise in fuel prices. In any situation if a student can show that he/she has studied an up-to-date curriculum and been accepted by an enterprise to undertake a work placement, they are far better equipped to enter the labour market and make steady progress with their career, thereby contributing to the country's wealth and well-being.

Developing relationships between universities and industry was the topic of the Seminar on University-Enterprise Links held in JO in February 2020, enabling senior staff and other colleagues of partner universities to learn from the experience of EU partners. It has not yet been possible to organise a similar event in LB until now but one is planned for March 2023.

Partner universities in JO and LB have cemented their links by signing about 100 MoUs with companies and placing over 200 students in companies for internships. The signed MoUs are an indication of the commitment of both the university partners and the companies for a long-term relationship.

3.4. Effectiveness

As a result of the unprecedented effects of the Covid pandemic, the project has not been able to be run as anticipated in the application, nor have activities taken place according to the Work Plan – thus an Emergency Work Plan was adopted by partners by September 2020. Despite this the objectives of the project have been largely met and work will continue until the end of the project to further achieve those aims. More workshops are planned and also visits by EU staff to JO and LB where possible, to enable JO and LB staff to learn from their EU counterparts. The universities have also invested in establishing Liaison Offices and appointing Liaison Officers to organise the placements and internships of students, and setting up the “Best Student Project” and “Best Mentor” competitions in the final year of the project.

The results of the internal evaluation or monitoring conducted after each event by questionnaires administered by Psicoglobal and JUST, as part of WP4 (Quality), have shown high levels of satisfaction of participants with the standard of teaching and information in workshops, the quality of the EU staff and the organisation of events.

All project activities have taken place in the most cost-effective way and according to the relevant limits and unit costs. Spending in accordance with the Work Plan was not possible. As a result of the Covid pandemic, the Steering Committee had to readjust the Work Plan and budgets to take into account those activities that could not take place or had to be postponed or replaced with others where possible.

The lack of travel had a major impact upon the spending of the budget, along with extensive delays in obtaining equipment in JO. As a result the consortium was not able to spend the required amount of funds by the deadline (70% of the first prefinancing instalment of the grant) by the end of the second year of the project. This was due to the effects of the pandemic – it had not been possible to spend the planned travel and costs of stay budget as only the Kick off Meeting in February 2020 had taken place before travel became impossible. It had also not been possible to spend the whole of the equipment budget due to supply and delivery delays in JO. It is regrettable that the EACEA could not be more flexible over the implementation of this regulation in these unprecedented times and allow more time for the funds to be spent. As a result, the project lost 127,203 EUR from their initial budget and had to make reductions to almost all budget headings. Fortunately, the reduction in travel and costs of stay spending due to the cancellation of certain mobilities has allowed some flexibility and means that the project can manage the reduction without adversely affecting the remaining activities and are thus should be able to meet the objectives of the project.

3.5. Impact

Staff have confirmed to the External Evaluator the value of their visits to EU universities and the opportunity to network with staff from other partners and all had the intention to maintain and develop these contacts and the benefits that would bring to their curriculum development, teaching and research.

Perhaps the biggest impact so far has been upon students who have had the benefit of placement periods in companies and an introduction to working in a company. Clearly these placements have been successful, as some students have been offered permanent employment after graduation.

The impact of revised curricula which include employability skills as well as the knowledge of specialist areas identified as gaps by companies will become evident as current students graduate and enter the labour market.

Many staff have had the benefit of travel to EU partner universities to see in situ the teaching and research in ICT subjects at host universities. At the same time, they also have been able to include new material on the latest developments in their syllabi and also incorporate employability skills in their own subjects.

3.6. Sustainability

Long established links between the staff of the Coordinating Institution working on the project with several of the JO and LB partners strengthens the sustainability of this project as project personnel understand the JO and LB education system and not only what is needed but what can be achieved.

The universities in JO and LB have established the Liaison Offices and appointed Liaison Officers and fully recognise and support their work. The placement period of students is a recognised part of students' study period. Academic staff have revised and updated the curricula for their subjects and incorporated employability skills and the identified areas of knowledge in them. New equipment has been purchased and installed in all JO and LOB partner institutions. Students will benefit from updated staff, revised courses and new equipment for many years, and will carry their newly learned knowledge and skills to the workplace, thereby benefitting their employers too. The updated study programmes will have an impact on many students.

The links between industry and universities is now established and will be long lasting, through the many joint activities promoted by this project: signed MoUs; placements for students; mentoring of student projects; industry experts giving lectures to students and advising on curricula changes; the benefits to companies of more skilled and well-educated graduates.

3.7. Project Management

The detailed and comprehensive Project Management Plan was prepared before the management team had a true understanding of the impact of the Covid pandemic and what that would mean to the project's implementation. Clearly changes have had to be made to the management of the project – substituting on line meetings for face-to-face meetings and adjusting the activities so that as many as possible could continue despite lockdowns and the impossibility of travel.

Communication within the Consortium has been effective utilising a number of methods: email, phone, on line meetings, face to face meetings, WhatsApp group messages, etc. Communications from the EACEA are efficiently forwarded to all partners by the Coordinator to keep them fully updated. Any problems are discussed by all partners and solutions reached by consensus.

As the External Evaluator has seen from the meetings she has attended, all partners take part in decision making and are fully informed of the progress of activities and if any partner needs to increase its efforts to carry out activities and achieve results. The allocation of tasks and duties are openly discussed as well as the distribution of the budget.

The project Technical Report was submitted on time.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The project is well managed and the majority of the activities have been completed or are on target to be completed by the end of the project period. Given the global situation as regards Covid, restrictions on travel, national lockdowns and the economic and social situation in LB, the project team has done a remarkable job in keeping the project's plans alive, undertaking tasks, adapting different methods but still achieving the project's aims and objectives, opening up activities to a wide audience. The major difficulties which the consortium faced from March 2020 onwards should not be forgotten when evaluating the progress and achievements of this project.

Project personnel are fully involved and committed to achieving the targets and outcomes of the project. The activities of the project are closely monitored and active attempts are made to both prevent and manage any difficulties. The internal evaluation of activities is carried out thoroughly and efficiently and the results are a testament to the organisation and quality of the project. The updated curricula will be incorporated into the partner universities academic programmes for the benefit of future generations of students, providing a long lasting legacy of the project. The benefits to JO and LB staff learning from and cooperating with their EU counterparts is invaluable. It should be noted that the numbers of staff benefitting from EU staff seminars/webinars and attending Workshops at EU partner universities has far exceeded the target numbers in the application, and such events are still ongoing in the final project year. Similarly the number of students who have attended lectures/webinars delivered by company executives and EU staff has far exceeded expectations.

The following recommendations are made to ensure that the maximum beneficial effects of the project can be achieved through activities in the remaining project period.

- While an impressive number of MoUs have been signed by partners, some partners should step up their efforts to sign more agreements and strengthen their ties with companies.
- Partners should consider putting a list of the companies who have signed MoUs onto the website to publicise this achievement.
- Partners should run the Seminar on University-Enterprise Links in LB to introduce the concept to a wider audience, even if it is run as a webinar.
- A small amount of the equipment budget remains unspent, and partners should consider purchasing some books for JO and LB partner universities during the remaining project period.
- The Project Website is not up to date. This should be remedied as soon as possible as it is difficult for people from outside the Consortium to find out the true situation with regard to what activities have taken place. Also, even when an event is reported on the website, not all the details are included (list of attendees, for example). The photo gallery is also lacking in pictures, thus not showing the project in its best light and not publicising its many achievements sufficiently. Not all partner videos are uploaded.
- There do not appear to be links from all partner university websites to the project website. Partners should try to achieve this if at all possible. Most partners reported some events and activities on their website.
- Greater visibility of project events and results could be achieved by more posting of information on partner university websites.
- The consortium should continue to produce a Newsletter (WP4) to summarise the achievements of the project and post it on line on its social media accounts and on the project website to publicise the achievements of the project to a wide audience. One Newsletter is about to be published now but the practice should continue.