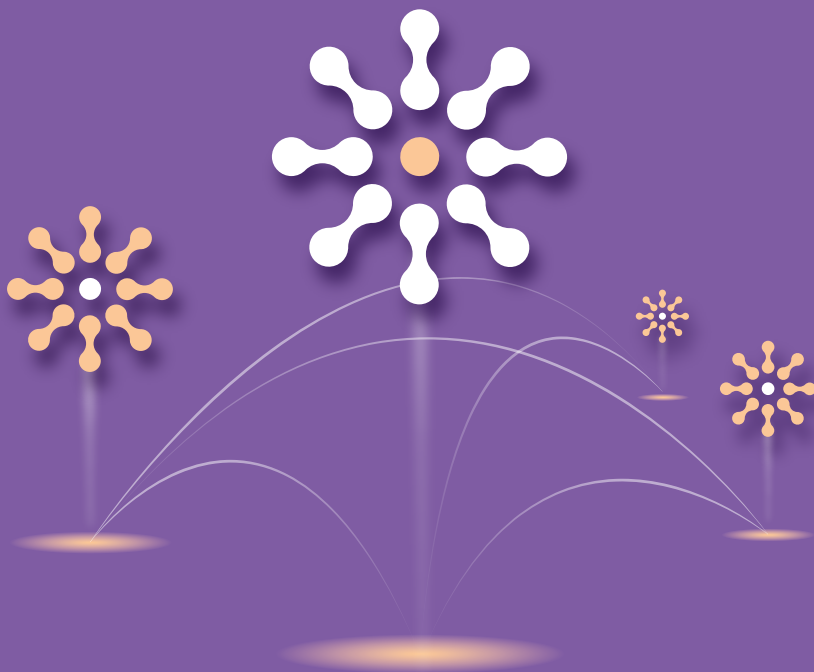


Leaders in Internationalisation

Good practices and challenges
faced by school project coordinators





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Leaders in Internationalisation. Good practices and challenges faced by school project coordinators

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Introduction



Thanks to EU programmes providing support in the implementation of educational projects, there is a steady increase in the number of schools establishing international cooperation. The schools that are willing to carry out projects of this type are often recognised as those actively working to make their teaching more attractive for the learners. The success of a project carried out with foreign institutions is most often perceived as an effort of the whole school, and this often translates not only into an improvement of the image of a given school, but also into its attractiveness in the eyes of prospective candidates. However, ongoing monitoring of the work of schools benefiting from the programmes managed by our institution shows that the success is mainly owed to project coordinators who not only are responsible for project activities, but also play an important role in establishing collaboration with foreign partners and in the implementation and dissemination of project outcomes.

This report concerns a study aimed to identify the role of school project leaders in activities focusing on international cooperation of Polish education institutions. The collected results are presented in three chapters preceded by the description of methodology used (Chapter I). Each chapter introduces different aspects of daily work of project leaders. Chapter II presents the circumstances in which teachers undertake to coordinate projects and general organisation of the tasks related to leadership. Chapter III presents the effects of internationalisation taking into account the changes that the coordinators considered to be the most important from the perspective of both personal development and general improvement in the functioning of their home schools. The last chapter focuses on the opinions of respondents. Chapter IV describes the support that project leaders receive from sending institutions in the scope of international cooperation. It may seem that international cooperation should involve the whole school community. However, the results of this research show that the coordinators cannot always count on sufficient help from other teachers, and the vast majority of project-related responsibilities rest on the shoulders of one or more people who are responsible for project implementation, starting from the submission of the application to the settlement of the awarded grant.

The participants of the interviews, when talking about the results of their projects, often stressed that they brought tangible benefits to their schools, especially when both students and teachers were involved. On the other hand, they admitted that international cooperation often requires much more support than that provided to coordinators by their schools. The responses to the questionnaire also show that the responsibilities of project leaders often go beyond the daily working hours, and the scope of the tasks is not always covered by the generally accepted competence framework for the teaching profession.

This means that not every teacher is willing to engage in additional activities related to international cooperation.

We hope that this report will show how formidable and arduous the work of project leaders is and that it will encourage schools to provide more support to teachers without whom international school projects would not have been possible.



Home



I. Methodology and research procedures


Scope of the study

The research focused on international cooperation established by Polish primary and secondary schools (both lower and upper secondary schools), which actively use the offer of European educational programmes managed by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (Polish acronym: FRSE)¹.

The scope of the research covered primarily projects funded in the years 2007–2016 carried out as part of the following grant programmes:

- Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) implemented in the years 2007–2013 and addressing institutions operating in the education sector. Among others, LLP included Comenius and Leonardo da Vinci subprogrammes;
- eTwinning, which enables remote cooperation of schools and kindergartens;
- Erasmus+ launched in 2014 as a result of merging LLP subprogrammes into one initiative that supports the development of education and training and implementation of projects aimed at improving the quality of education within the European Union (EU);
- projects funded under the European Social Fund (ESF), under which FRSE has provided support to beneficiaries from the LLP and Erasmus+ reserve lists since 2012 (projects are implemented under the rules applicable to these programmes), and other measures supporting Polish educational institutions.

Within the framework of the above mentioned programmes, the Polish educational institutions organised foreign visits and carried out educational projects in cooperation with partners from other countries. The activities of beneficiaries within the projects under this study were addressed both to education sector staff and students attending the institutions concerned². The activities carried out were aimed at establishing and strengthening partnerships between education institutions in different European countries and could be carried out in each of the countries participating in a given

1 The research formed part of a larger project, which also included interviews with school heads and representatives of local government bodies (school running bodies). Detailed results of the research administered among local government representatives were presented in the publication entitled *Samorząd a umiędzynarodowienie szkoły. Raport z badania roli organów prowadzących w szkolnych projektach europejskich*,  <http://czytelnia.frse.org/pl/samorząd-umiędzynarodowienie-szkoly>.

2 In the LLP programme (and as part of complementary actions funded by ESF) applications for project financing could be submitted by both individuals and institutions, whereas in Erasmus+ only institutions or organisations could do so. Detailed conditions of participation in projects depended on the type of a given action.

programme, especially in the EU Member States (depending on their status in a given competition year³), in countries associated with the EU within the European Free Trade Association – EFTA, or the European Economic Area (EEA) (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway), and in the EU candidate countries (depending on their status in a given competition year).

Where students formed the group of direct project beneficiaries, they mainly participated in international educational mobility, inter-school exchanges or benefited from international cooperation project outcomes during their classes.

In the cases where the representatives of the staff were the direct project beneficiaries, the projects concerned mainly school management staff and teachers who attended courses and training abroad, observed the work of foreign teaching institutions (job shadowing), taught classes in partner schools abroad (teaching assignment) or implemented international cooperation projects and exchanged good practices with partners from other countries.

In the study, the following assumption has been adopted: teaching, as the primary role of the school, makes students the ultimate beneficiaries of the majority of schools' international projects, even if direct beneficiaries of these activities were the teachers or other persons responsible for the teaching process in the schools.

Sample selection

The study was carried out using qualitative methods and the structured in-depth interviews, which were conducted in the schools. The interviews were held with teachers responsible for the implementation of international projects in a given institution. Desk research and ongoing monitoring of FRSE beneficiaries' activities showed that these individuals often acted not only as project coordinators, but also took the initiative in establishing cooperation with international partners. Their role usually stems from their competencies, because in many cases they were proficient users of foreign languages (mainly working as language teachers) or displayed advanced social skills that allowed them to easily establish a rapport, regardless of language barrier and inter-cultural differences.

The main sources of information about the target group of the interviewees were contact persons indicated in project documentation. The analysis of the applications selected for the research showed that in institutions, which

3 Both the list of EU Member States and candidate countries (i.e. their status as programme countries or programme partner countries) evolved in successive EU financial perspectives. In addition, the scope of these countries' participation in individual selection rounds of a given programme also changed.

actively implemented European projects, the data of the contact person (or the project coordinator) often did not change over the years, regardless of the requirements of a given grant scheme or the nature of the project. Most often this was the person who was selected by the school management as an interviewee. However, on many occasions it turned out that this person did not act alone. In such cases, two people responsible for the overall coordination of project activities in a given school participated in the interviews. Rarely did the school head have difficulty with appointing the right people to participate in the research. If this was the case, it was usually due to staff rotation and the appointed teachers displayed a thorough knowledge of international activities that the school had carried out in the past.

Research questions

The research was exploratory in nature and the main purpose of the interviews was to determine the role of project leaders in the process of school internationalisation and to identify the problems that arise in their daily work during the implementation of international cooperation projects. Therefore, the main research questions concerned the following areas:

- working methods and organisation of project leaders' work,
- the exploitation of results by project leaders,
- problems related to the implementation of international cooperation in schools,
- support provided to project leaders by other school staff.

The above issues were treated as thematic blocks of interviews with additionally assigned questions and areas to explore. This in turn helped to define the instructions on how to use the research tools. It was assumed that each interview with school project leaders should last at least 90 minutes and cover all the thematic blocks included in the research, with particular emphasis on the areas related to regular school operations, the impact of projects on school community and the day-to-day activities of the institutions, especially their teaching. Due to the differences in organisational structure of the schools and in relation to the number of prospective respondents involved in project management, the in-depth interviews were held with one, two (when a given school decided that two people were responsible for projects at the school), or three respondents. All interviews were conducted by trained moderators, according to streamlined instructions. The guidelines were prepared with reference to the thematic blocks described above.

In addition to topics related to the internationalisation of schools, the interviews also addressed the issues concerning the course of projects

and their outcomes, especially in the context of the potential for using the effects of international cooperation in Polish system of education.

Selection of schools

The research was carried out on a sample of 24 Polish schools which in the past two perspectives of the EU funds programming (2007–2016) were active implementers of transnational projects funded by the programmes managed by FRSE. The criteria applied to select the research sample concerned both the number of implemented international projects and their diversity. The basic source of information that allowed for the development of the above criteria were ranking lists in individual calls for proposals under the LLP, Youth in Action, Erasmus+ and projects financed by the ESF (under the Human Capital Operational Programme and the Knowledge Education Development Operational Programme).

The availability of data stored in FRSE databases made it possible to compare the results of individual calls for project proposals and then to select the schools with the highest number of grants. The results were subject to a cross-cutting analysis concerning the nature of the projects. The predefined criteria made it possible to identify various schools, which displayed a high level of internationalisation and which were diversified both in terms of geography, social and organisational conditions. Eventually, the schools selected for the research were located in different regions and developed various project activities under the examined programmes.

The selected institutions were notified of the research by FRSE, and then their data were passed on to the moderators who were responsible for staging the interviews.

Data analysis and ethical principles

With the consent of beneficiaries, the moderators recorded all the interviews, and later a full transcription of the recordings was made. The written records formed the basis for the analysis of the results. On the basis of identified thematic areas and key questions, a list of topics was developed, which was used for coding the collected qualitative data. This helped to identify the individual threads in different types of interviews and to find the quotations that confirmed the hypotheses and preliminary conclusions of the study.

It should be noted that the statements quoted in the report have been abridged or edited to eliminate interjections, digressions, unfinished trains of thoughts and colloquialisms. This was mainly the case with transcriptions of longer and multi-layered statements, the full publication of which would make it more difficult to read the report.

The interviewees' statements were also edited because of the specific character of qualitative research, where the quoted statements usually aim to describe broader practices or reflect certain general trends related to the analysed phenomenon or social group. The quotations were adapted to the needs of the report also to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. This is why the report does not feature any details about the sample of schools, their supervisory authorities or interviewees. All information provided by the interviewees that could lead to identifying a given school or person has been anonymised or removed.

II. Who are project leaders?



In order to arrive at a better understanding of the nature and working conditions of school international project coordinators, it can be helpful to analyse the circumstances in which they have taken on the responsibilities associated with running of the projects. The research participants were eager to recall their beginnings as project leaders. They often admitted that acquiring project management skills initially required a lot of effort and a lot of additional time was necessary to cooperate with foreign partners in order to bring measurable benefits. They also stressed that the activities undertaken as part of the projects required extra skills, which went beyond daily duties of a teacher. This resulted in the need to expand their working methods and to acquire completely new skills indispensable for collaboration with international partners.

How did projects originate?

The research showed that most of project coordinators remembered well the beginnings of international cooperation in their schools.

Many respondents stressed that they themselves were its initiators or co-authors. The project initiative often resulted from the observation of the results of similar activities in other institutions. This happened at the meetings, conferences and project fairs, during which project outcomes were disseminated and good practices that had contributed to improving the quality of schools were shared. The positive examples of change often inspired teachers to initiate similar activities in their schools. Teachers engaged in projects in other schools proved to be not only a good source of information on project implementation, but also the role models.

Do I remember the beginning? It was an idea of two people, my colleague and I, to try something new.

I have been the author of all projects that have been carried out at our school. The first project was a language project as part of a youth exchange with a school from Hungary. [...] We came up with the idea at a conference, where the outcomes of projects implemented by schools in our region were shown. I envied the schools the great projects they had carried out. At the stands, we could observe the commitment and joy of young people who presented project outcomes. [...] It turned out that my colleague knows a German teacher who works at a Hungarian school, and that is how it all started.

The teachers reported that the beginning of international cooperation was a big challenge for them, as it required new skills that differed from those used in their daily work. Some of the respondents admitted that initially they were not pleased with their new responsibilities, because their scope seemed to go beyond their capabilities. Interestingly, the initial doubts were felt not only by the teachers who had been appointed project coordinators by their superiors, but also by those teachers who had initiated this process themselves. Some concerns about taking up new responsibilities as part of international cooperation were to a large extent caused by competence gaps resulting from a completely different nature of project work as compared to standard teaching responsibilities. Moreover, new tasks often resulted in many unexpected situations and challenges that the coordinators could not predict. This often was an additional stress factor and necessitated additional effort related to the implementation of project tasks. However, despite new professional duties, the implementation of project work brought more and more satisfaction and the performance of new tasks gave more and more positive results.

The beginnings were terrible. Preparing the application was a nightmare, because you had to write it in English and Polish. Now work is easier because we only fill the questionnaires in English. [...] But back then, in order to translate more than a hundred pages into Polish, I had to devote two weeks of my life to do it. [...] It is much easier now because of the streamlined financial procedures. At that point we planned that the students would go to Malta, which then dropped out of the project, which in turn affected our budget. The meeting finally took place in Italy, so we had to use some of our own resources. These were our beginnings.

It was seven years ago and, as even now, when I recall the first flight [...] and the moment when you had to meet your partners for the first time, I can still feel stressed. I have always been a shy person.

I was not happy about it at first, but you had to deal with it. The boss told me to do it, so I was in. Later I felt grateful, because I had just not realised that it was such an interesting alternative for me.

Many of the project coordinators emphasised that one of the biggest obstacles for them was lack of knowledge about the EU programmes, and they meant not only formal requirements, such as terms and conditions of the calls

for proposals, tools, project forms, etc., but also the practicalities resulting directly from the nature of international projects. This made it difficult not only to manage the substantive aspects of undertaken activities and their logistics, but also to find reliable partner organisations, which for example would be willing to implement projects with an inexperienced school from Poland. Lack of basic practical knowledge in the field of preparing project proposals often made the first attempts to apply for funding unsuccessful, which significantly limited the possibilities of obtaining funds for cooperation with international partners. However, as it was emphasised, the experience gained during subsequent attempts helped the coordinators achieve success. In this context, the experience of other schools and institutions, and especially coordinating partner organisations also proved useful.

We were appointed primarily because of our language skills, as when it comes to management and reporting we were basically in the dark, because we lacked any experience whatsoever. [...] Everything was new to us and we learned from our mistakes. But we also looked at the experience of other project partners.

I was a new teacher at the time who lacked experience of working in education. [...] I submitted a proposal, and it was rejected. But I received feedback about what was wrong with it. You have to work things out for yourself, as there is no ready-made formula for success. An obliging soul could give you a hand, but we were all groping our way.

And then I made contact with another school, and I asked the teacher how he did it. He offered me help. There was a platform, and you would visit it and search for partners. I wrote many e-mails at the time. [...] And when I found partners, things became easier.

How does a teacher become a leader?

The research identified two different patterns of professional development for teachers involved in the internationalisation of their home institutions. A significant group of project leaders were teachers with many years of professional experience. Because of their expertise and commitment to the life of the school, they were asked to initiate or continue cooperation with institutions abroad. However, when these teachers volunteered to be included in international cooperation, their decision was most often based on their individual experience of participating in European projects. It is worth adding that such an initiative was often driven by institutional needs, especially when

a given school wanted to benefit from the EU funds provided as support to the implementation of projects.

I have worked in the same school for 26 years. I teach mathematics and computer science and I have been involved in European projects since 2002, when the school decided to cooperate with the countries in the European Union, already two years before Poland joined the EU.

The school head appointed me the leader of the Young Europeans Club. [...] I suggested that I would attend a course and the school teacher agreed, although it cost a lot. [...] And that is how it started. The school teacher had good intuition.

Another major group were young teachers who upon their commencement of work were asked to take on additional responsibilities related to the implementation of projects with foreign partners.

This was most often the case when new initiatives were launched by the school management and at the same time the staff with adequate competencies or willingness to run such projects was lacking. This was particularly the case when the newly hired person had already had experience in running projects or had previously been involved in such activities.

It all started over fifteen years ago when I commenced work at this school. [...] At first, it was very complicated, but after returning from a school visit abroad, I thought that maybe I could do it and then I started writing projects.

Last year, when the school management changed, I suggested to the new school head that we should manage the issues related to the international projects and all the EU projects run by the school and those run by the district where our school is a contractor.

Unofficially, I have the longest experience because I have been involved in these projects for a long time. When I was a secondary school student I was helping my mother with running them. My mother and I verified the applications and reports before sending them. I always knew what was going on in the projects. Sometimes I helped with translations or proofread the presentations for some small errors. [...] It is clear that many people are afraid to take on the responsibilities of a coordinator, although we have been involved in projects for many years.

Some respondents also mentioned that the impulse to start cooperation with foreign partners was the arrival of a person from outside of the institution. And although these individuals did not undertake projects on their own, they sparked international activities by showing opportunities for institution development that such activities bring. Such people were not only a source of inspiration, but also of knowledge concerning the practical implementation of projects, and not infrequently provided contacts to partner organisations abroad. Quite often these people worked in a given school part-time. Having had an experience of working on a daily basis in institutions that carried out international projects, they were eager to share their experiences.

The turning point was the arrival in our school of an English teacher who worked permanently in another school. She stayed with us for about two years. [...] She encouraged me to implement the projects and gave me contact data to a project group coordinated by a teacher from France who was looking for a Polish school to work with.

Our colleague, an English teacher, entered a competition for a school head. He had a great potential and an interesting vision of the school. I remember when at a meeting he first mentioned projects, many teachers said that they did not see any sense in engaging in such initiatives, [...] after all, when there were no projects, they had no additional work and then they were asked to do something extra. When I went abroad, I became truly committed, and then I decided I could do it myself.

The teachers who took part in the research acknowledged that, although they were at the time responsible for coordinating the entire partner collaboration in their schools, their initial involvement in project activities was not so much their own initiative, as the need to take over the responsibilities of persons previously responsible for the implementation of international projects. Sometimes they were persuaded to make the decision by their colleagues who wanted to delegate project duties to them because of their predisposition and professional skills. However, it is worth adding that in many cases joining the projects or taking over all responsibilities was voluntary.

When the new call for proposals under the Erasmus+ programme was announced, my colleague wrote three applications and asked me to cooperate. When she left school, I took over her duties. [...] Then we started to develop more projects together with another teacher.

I have carried out projects for ten years, now. A colleague who no longer works at our school carried out the first project, thanks to which we have a school garden and to this day we tend it. She had various contacts, thanks to which we were invited to participate in further activities. I agreed to take over her responsibilities because I speak English and I have had experience in similar initiatives.

When I started to work at the school as an English teacher, I was offered to take over the duties of a teacher who was retiring. Language teachers find it easier to implement such projects.

Apart from situations where the school took up international cooperation as a result of teachers' own initiative, many partnership projects started as a result of an initiative and sometimes a casual proposal of school management. In such a situation, it was an arbitrary decision of a school head that made a given person agree to take on the role of a project coordinator. Teachers who were appointed to such cooperation stressed during their interviews that it was as much a distinction as a challenge for them, as they lacked experience in project work. However, they emphasised that the appointment to carry out such a responsible task was a token of recognition for them and a sign of appreciation for their work.

I was thrown into deep water, but I am glad that the school head saw my potential and she was able to use my skills for the benefit of the school.

The beginnings were a milestone for me. Before, I was not sure if I wanted to work in education, and maybe if the school head had not appointed me to engage in these projects, I would not work at school today.

Some of the teachers were active participants in international initiatives prior to becoming project coordinators. The experiences that affected the decision to start cooperation with partners abroad included participation in individual mobilities under the Comenius programme and educational mobility experiences, including those during studies. The statements of the interviewees allow us to state with certainty that these were very positive experiences not only for their professional development but generally in their life. This is why project coordinators recall them with sentiment, and also support others – both students and teachers – in gaining similar experiences through international exchanges and training projects. In this context, the attention was also paid

to the fact that foreign educational visits and trips for students and teachers are more and more common and accessible. The interviewees pointed out that nowadays it is now much easier to benefit from the projects. They are much more accessible to the school education sector than in the previous decades, when Poland was not yet a member of the EU.

I am a veteran of such trips. I used to attend many courses abroad. They are a good impulse for a teacher to develop. You can see what life and culture is like in another country.

I remember that in the last year of my studies I had the opportunity to go to Greece for an internship and I learned a lot there. I overcame language barrier and then I started working on projects at the school.

I attended a methodology course for English teachers in England. I met teachers there from whom I learned that you can write similar projects for schools.

What makes you a leader?

In many cases, the appointment of a given teacher to implement projects was driven by their individual competencies, which greatly facilitated cooperation in international partner consortia. The desired competencies usually included language skills. In the opinion of the vast majority of teachers, it is a foreign language proficiency that is an indispensable tool for a project coordinator. And although such opinions prevailed, especially among the teachers who teach languages (mainly English and German teachers), teachers of other subjects shared this opinion. They admitted that without the knowledge of a foreign language they would not have been able to communicate with partners and to implement projects, even if the school provided support to them at the stage of preparing project proposal.

I have worked at school for 22 years. I have coordinated almost all school cooperation projects. I teach English and [...] I look for cooperation opportunities in order to motivate students to learn English. [...] Our first project concerned students with special educational needs and disabled students. Then this subject matter [...] changed a little, but we always keep these students in mind.

Well, we are English teachers, so it is natural that we are proficient English speakers, and we were the ones who wanted to carry out these projects. So we decided to develop project applications, and next we coordinated their implementation. It all came naturally.

I am a teacher of English, Spanish and Russian. I have worked at the school for eighteen years. I have been working on projects since 2014, when I started cooperation with a colleague who wrote three projects at the time. We started to work together and organise trips.

The majority of the interviewees were teachers responsible for several tasks in their schools, often teaching several subjects and at the same time performing important functions, e.g. school counsellors, subject group coordinators or practical training managers in vocational schools. The thesis that multitasking also facilitates the coordination of international cooperation seems justified. The teachers often emphasised that the ability to perform varied professional duties entails flexibility and facilitates work, especially when unexpected situations and problems require applying unconventional and innovative solutions.

Because of my position, I am a practical training manager, I have been responsible for the projects from the very beginning. They have been carried out at our school for many years and in principle I take part in each one of them. First you have to write an application, which is always thoroughly read, analysed, possibly supplemented or corrected before being sent. And then there are all organisational matters, such as scheduling work, selection, contracting and more.

When I was the head of foreign language team, the school head asked me to develop a project. I wrote to all potential partners informing about our plans. A lot of schools got back to us. We prepared two projects and they both were approved. Later, I participated in a preparatory visit to Malta. These were our beginnings.

The interviews show that leaders in internationalisation have trodden very different paths of professional development and have different experiences at work.

Before they started work in education institutions, many of them had been involved in other activities, thanks to which they gained experience, which helped them supervise and implement international projects. Sometimes the need to hold specific competencies and aptitudes that are not directly

related to school work has resulted in assuming tasks related to international school cooperation by people with experience gained outside the education sector. Such experience proved useful, for example, in performing administrative tasks or those requiring leadership skills or the ability to work in international environment.

I have worked at the school for 12 years. Why school? I graduate from the teaching department. Upon graduation, I sent my CV to several companies and schools. This school accepted my application and here I am.

Even though I am in my fifties, I have worked at school for 14 years, now. I transferred from a corporation and it transpired that I had project management experience, as that is what I did in my previous job. It was a little bit different, but you can call it project management. And the fact that I am proficient in Excel... You know, Excel is not common knowledge, and for me it was daily bread. So it just turned out that I could things that others did not even think about.

What qualities does a leader have?

The information collected during the interviews indicates that the function of a leader in international activities at school is determined not only by professional competence, but also by personal predispositions and specific personal traits of each individual. The traits that enable a teacher to become more active and to become more involved in the work and life of a school seem to be of particular importance. The teachers often stressed that they perceive themselves as active individuals who are not afraid of challenges and are capable of making sacrifices for their school.

In fact, it probably all happened due to a little coincidence. I am an active person who is involved in many undertakings. I still remember when we were looking for partners, when we started to write our own project for the first time. [...] I became the head of practical training at our school shortly before that.

At that time, I worked as a teacher-librarian. I do not like to brag, but I just simply could not sit still; I was always looking for something to engage with and coming up with ideas to make cool things happen in our school.

Why me? Because most other teachers were too afraid to undertake such an initiative, and I am certainly not. [...] Someone recently said that if I had been taken off the projects, it would be like depriving me of oxygen. But I do not worry about it. I am sure I would find something else to engage in.

Some of the respondents also pointed out that the coordination of projects gives them great satisfaction, mainly due to the nature and specific character of such activities. The foreign cooperation has brought an important value to their lives and turned out to be an important factor complementing their daily duties as a teacher. Often projects turned out to be not only an engaging variation from their professional routine, but also a source of new passion for international cooperation.

I thought that maybe if there was a chance for our school to write a project that we would also get to take part in it. This possibility got me so excited [...] that we decided to give it a go. And just like that, it became my passion.

It would be absolutely impossible to coordinate such projects if you did not have passion for it.

The interviewees also drew attention to the competencies which translate into the organisation of work within the projects and to the logistical aspects of working with partner organisations. In this context, the main emphasis was placed on organisational skills, the ability to plan one's own activities as well as tasks facing other members of the project teams. Such traits allow an individual to effectively manage the large number of tasks which accompany the implementation of the project and ensure the expected quality of the outcomes.

It is hard to talk about myself, but I think I am a composed and relatively well-organised person. I think that these characteristics of my personality are useful, because they allow me to implement projects which are of a high standard. Our projects are often brought up as an example of good practice, and the final reports on the implementation of the projects are considered exemplary; we get praise... I may have already thrown it away, but I was given a "Thank You" card by the coordinator at the foundation. To me, this is some form of recognition, probably for being so organised and accurate. These are positive qualities which I possess, and they come in handy.

The self-assessment of the respondents was also frequently accompanied by comparisons with other members of the teaching staff who do not display much initiative. In contrast with their peers, project leaders see themselves as people on whom the quality of the school's work and its further institutional development often depends.

I think that in every professional group there are people who identify themselves with their profession and with their workplace. And there are also people who just show up for their shift. I do not think it is at all unusual, it is a common occurrence.

No, I do not believe that it is dictated by fear. I think it is simply laziness. Writing a project really takes a lot of effort. Application forms are extensive documents. You have to dedicate your time, fill it all in, collect signatures – all of that, with no guarantee that something will come of it [...], and people just do not want to be bothered.

It should also be added that not all interviewees perceive themselves as initiators of changes in their schools. Some of them prefer to describe themselves as project coordinators, or simply as individuals implementing specific student exchange projects or professional learning courses for teaching staff.

Me as a leader? I was appointed because this is my fourth project. Sometimes we wrote the projects back to back; as soon as the previous one ended, we would start writing a new one. But I would not call myself a leader.

Does the leader have to act alone?

During the interviews, the participating teachers were asked to outline their responsibilities as project leaders. The information gathered showed that the schools differed significantly in terms of the nature and scope of the coordinators' tasks. Some respondents emphasised that the vast majority of the project tasks and often all of the main activities were solely their responsibility. Others acknowledged that the success of their projects would not be possible without the support of their fellow teachers. And although some of the interviewed teachers pointed out that they were most comfortable with the individual nature of their work, the vast majority of the respondents admitted that they appreciated the help of other people involved in the projects.

There was one project which was coordinated by our colleague from the Vocational Training Centre. All of the other projects which are currently being carried out are basically written by me and are being implemented under my coordination. [...] I am constantly trying to participate in various project activities, and whenever I have the opportunity, I look for contacts and partners. Foreign language teachers are also involved in the projects – they translate the application forms and help me a lot with international communication.

It should also be noted that not all internationally active schools have had teachers who have taken over most or all of the responsibilities and tasks involved in the implementation of the projects. There were also schools where different people were responsible for the projects, which often meant greater involvement of the school head's office in the process of managing the internationalisation of a given school.

We have quite a large group of language teachers in our school. We are currently involved in one project, which I am coordinating, but last year we completed another project, for which another person was appointed. We are all working together. It is easier to work with several people who have an idea of how it works, instead of having only one person who has to deal with everything.

The results of the study show that the coordination of the projects is often carried out by more than one teacher, and the arrangements between them make it impossible to define clearly who the main coordinator of individual project activities is. Most often there were the teams of two people who worked in this way. The study showed that such a solution often proved to be a very significant factor in improving the quality of the project due to the diversity of competencies and different predispositions of each person involved.

We formed a project group, and in the beginning there were, if I remember correctly, around five people in it. We had a few meetings, started to explore the possibilities, and also attended training workshop for applicants in Warsaw. Afterwards, only two of us remained from the group – me and my fellow English language teacher. At the earlier stage, we were also helped by a German teacher.

Importantly, people running projects in teams of two often emphasised that the added value of organising work in such a way is that each member can complement the other in the implementation of project tasks. Effective performance of tasks in a team often depends on good contacts between coordinators, and working together on the project is often parallel to being friends outside school. This not only enables more productive project

management, but also allows them to facilitate problem solving. Overcoming adversity together, which often occurs at the least expected moments, helps such duos to motivate each other to continue working.

We do everything as a duo, therefore all of the roles are shared.

We have divided the responsibilities between us: my colleague organises trainee placements for students, and I have recently written, in cooperation with an external company, the teachers' mobility projects.

My colleague, who is the driving force and coordinator of all school cooperation projects, has contributed to the fact that the previous, as well as the two current Erasmus projects, could take place in our school. [...] In the case of cooperation between schools, she brings together the activities, and in the case of educational staff mobility, my role is to cooperate with FRSE and to render all the documents related to teacher mobility abroad into an online format. At a later stage, I am also responsible for the dissemination of the training results. Maybe my role is smaller than hers, or maybe we just complement each other.

III. Leaders at the forefront of changes in schools



Thanks to international cooperation, project leaders seem to have significant influence on changes taking place in their home educational institutions. Therefore, it seems justified to analyse which outcomes of the projects are most important for them, both in terms of individual benefits and in the context of wider changes that translate into the entire school community and its institutional environment. This chapter focuses on those effects of international cooperation that the interviewees most frequently mentioned as a motivation for the further internationalisation of their schools.

Individual benefits

The interviewees were eager to share information about the results of the projects they implemented in their respective schools. They often stressed that when international cooperation brings measurable results, working on projects can be a source of great satisfaction. This stems not only from the possibility of observing how the school, its teaching process or students' results are changing. In the opinion of the participants of the research, an important factor motivating them to continue running the projects was also the opportunity to test themselves in a new field, to go beyond the framework of everyday didactic work, and often to break up the routine. This was especially true of those individuals who emphasised that in their work they need additional incentives to reduce the risk of burn-out.

It all depends on the given person. Personally, I am quick to get bored with things, so participation in various projects is also a way to avoid professional burn-out. It has been 12 years since I started working as a teacher, but as the saying goes "A person is only as old as they feel". Looking for new ideas abroad is a very interesting experience and gives me great satisfaction.

It was a bit of a coincidence that I started implementing projects [...], but I will keep doing it as long as I am having at least a little bit of fun with it. On one hand, it is hard work – logistics, documentation, etc., but on the other hand, it is a great development opportunity for students and teachers alike. I benefit from every trip, either linguistically, culturally or in other various ways.

An important factor motivating teachers to continue their activities in the field of international cooperation was the acquisition of new competencies and skills acquired as a result of the projects. The vast majority of the declared benefits in these areas primarily involved the change of attitudes and the development of soft skills, including greater openness and going beyond

the framework of everyday didactic work. Such changes were often caused by the need to overcome personal barriers, and this was directly attributable to the nature of the project work, which was vastly different from everyday work at school. Since a significant proportion of the project tasks are carried out as a team, the work of the coordinator requires overcoming barriers related to interpersonal relations or conflict resolution. In this context, the interviewed teachers paid particular attention to intercultural competences, the augmentation of which was facilitated by cooperation in international teams.

I still consider myself to be a shy and introverted person, but the projects have forced me to take control of certain aspects of my personality that I struggle with. I like the way I have changed, because it really helps me a lot in my daily work with students and it makes it easier for me. [...] I think that the fact that I was able to work on myself and make some changes gives me the motivation to encourage my students to do the same – to tell them it is worth it. After all, it does not matter if you are a shy person from a small town, because if you want to change, you simply can.

The interviewees stressed that at the beginning of the projects, the fear of communicating in a foreign language was an obstacle.

This aspect was particularly important for people without linguistic preparation who teach non-language subjects in their day-to-day work. It should be added, however, that foreign language teachers also admitted that initially they were afraid to make linguistic mistakes in their contacts with foreigners. For some of the respondents, the implementation of the projects has increased the motivation to start or continue learning more languages. This was especially true when project partners came from countries where knowledge of English or German (the main communication languages in projects) is not common enough to be deemed sufficient for everyday communication during the teachers' stay abroad.

I think that all our projects have had a huge impact on myself as well. I say that because I remember the level of my language skills at the beginning of the projects. I knew several languages, as I had studied them in secondary school and during my time in college, but I feel – and our partners confirm it too – that our communication skills are improving every year. Two years ago, I also decided to start learning German. We have partners in Austria and Germany, so often we would benefit more from knowing German than other languages. That is why we try to develop these skills.

This is a great boost to our communication and foreign language skills. [...] Such trips always provide opportunities for linguistic development. I must admit that I have learned Spanish relatively recently, and mostly because I had to visit Spain a lot, mainly for courses, and because of that I met people with whom we are in constant contact. All our communication is in Spanish, which is not the language that I studied at school. Because of that, I had a chance to obtain a great deal of knowledge and the ability to communicate through interactions with the live language, instead of just through books.

The teachers also pointed out that significant benefits for further professional development often come from the very act of being involved in project management, especially when a given person had no previous experience in performing the function of a coordinator of international activities. Involvement in such a function contributes to increasing not only managerial and interpersonal skills, but also organisational skills, such as those related to task planning and time management. In the opinion of project coordinators, one significant benefit resulting from the implementation of projects was the acquisition of strictly administrative skills, which teachers usually do not possess due to the nature of the teaching duties they perform in their daily work. In this context, working with documents, budget planning and other administrative and financial activities were listed. It has been pointed out that new skills often result from the necessity of interactions with supervisory bodies, such as local governments, regional educational authorities or other entities operating in the school environment, and this involves the necessity of overcoming administrative barriers resulting from bureaucracy, including the necessity of knowing the procedures regulating the work of these institutions.

In addition to linguistic aspects, I have also gained other experiences. Even the paperwork itself; its passing through the district office... This teaches resourcefulness, and such additional skills then become very important in our work. To be honest, the responsibility for dealing with formalities is the least pleasant aspect of the projects, therefore, it is difficult to find people here who want to take care of it at all. Some paperwork takes longer for the district office to process because it has its own specific responsibilities and very often the office sees such projects as additional work.

I think that each of our new projects becomes progressively more advanced from an organisational point of view, because, based on our experience, we are able to do more and more, and each time we improve the solutions we have implemented so far. This helps us to structure this work better and correct the mistakes we have made in previous instances. We have taken a huge step forward with regards to implementation

of the projects, compared to how it was when we started. Everything is structured in a better way, despite the fact that it is increasingly more complex and difficult.

The opportunity to establish professional contacts with representatives of foreign partner institutions was also mentioned among the list of benefits.

In the opinion of the research participants, maintaining these relations, which frequently turn out to be long-lasting, often allows for the implementation of subsequent joint projects, as well as the exchange of information about possible future activities.

Moreover, it enables the continuation of internationalisation processes even during those periods when the school is not involved in any project activities. Some respondents stated that individual contacts over the years can turn into true friendships. This is seen as an important added value resulting from the cooperation undertaken at the institutional level.

Thanks to social media, we exchange information with teachers we have met abroad. We stay in touch and share information about future trips, and we also cooperate through the eTwinning platform.

I have very fond memories of the first projects we participated in. At that time, the most important thing for us was to get to know teachers from other countries. Now I use these contacts for the development of the school.

It was often emphasised that institutional benefits resulting from the development of the teachers' potential have an impact on the quality of the education process, and the active participation of teachers in the projects leads to a much greater involvement of students; both with regards to the mobilities abroad, and to the joint activities of schools from different countries. Attention was also drawn to changes in teaching methodology and teachers' working methods, which often stemmed from an observation of the educational process carried out in other countries. It was pointed out that changes in the way the classes are conducted also lead to an increase in the motivation of students to participate in the projects.

After the completion of methodology courses, conducting lessons has changed a bit. Due to the fact that we have learned new methods, we have brought various other skills and we introduce them when working with students.

First, we noticed that it was us, the teachers, who were changing. At the moment, there are probably no teachers at the school who would not be able to communicate in a foreign language, at least at a communicative level. Every teacher is able to speak English, some can speak German as well.

When we started to develop our competencies, we noticed that the students who participate in the projects were also developing and acquiring new skills.

I think that nowadays it would be difficult for general secondary schools to function without international cooperation. There are not many schools anymore that are operating strictly within their close environment, where not much is happening. International cooperation is also a factor which is motivating students to learn.

The interviewees also pointed out that teachers are more willing to carry out subsequent projects if they themselves experience the benefits resulting from such activities. Acquisition of new competencies resulting from participation in an international project can inspire them to undertake further work, which is necessary to obtain funding for the continuation of such activities. In the coordinators' opinion, this is an added value, which significantly increases the effectiveness of project work and motivates teachers to work in project teams. In this context, the coordinators especially pointed towards teachers with less experience, who are just starting out in their profession. According to the respondents, in their case, the involvement in the project often has a positive impact on their motivation to continue working at the school and allows them to test themselves in other areas not directly related to teaching.

The projects primarily attract creative, passionate people who are able to encourage and mobilise young people. [...] If a new member of the school staff, or a young teacher who is a newcomer to this profession, has the opportunity to join a circle of people who are involved in something, it will help them to develop.

It never the case that suddenly all of us have the right predispositions and want to get involved. This is an opportunity to see how such projects are written, what the logistical aspects look like, what to pay attention to, how to deal with finances, how many people should be involved. [...] Nowadays, these paths are already known in many schools, and we are expanding the circle of collaborators, countries, and schools that want to get involved.

A noteworthy benefit, which was declared by the vast majority of the respondents, was also the opportunity to get to know different cultures and ways of living in other countries. Teachers often emphasised that an increase in intercultural competencies broadens their view of the world and makes them more open-minded, which in turn becomes reflected in the way they teach. Some interviewees emphasised, however, that the benefits of implementing projects in other countries should not be confused with those that are gained through regular tourist excursions.

The benefits were substantial. We do not see this as a holiday or vacation. [...] If I would like to go to Milan for some sightseeing, I would do so – I can afford to buy a ticket myself. But that is not what this is all about. It is about learning a culture from the inside out, it is about establishing contact with a foreign teacher, about learning something new. That is exactly what the development is. If someone treats it like a tourist trip, it will not work. You must get something more out of it.

These mobilities are not tourist excursions; they really open people up to the world. This applies to both students and teachers. It is not just “a trip”. It is learning about a culture from an insider’s perspective. Only then teachers can observe how different schools work, which solutions are implemented there. Everyone is happy to learn something new. These projects are actually an opportunity to talk to other teachers from other countries, practice language skills, learn about their culture and open up to the world. Thanks to the projects, we have become more open. If it was not for them, the teachers’ environment would be terribly parochial.

It all depends It may seem to some people that it is pure pleasure, and yet every trip with students means that family arrangements need to be made, such as organising childcare. [...] Travelling with students is not a holiday.

The institutional dimension of cooperation

The information gathered during the interviews also concerned the institutional benefits of international cooperation of schools. In the teachers’ opinion, the main goals of this cooperation were to enable students to travel abroad and to increase contacts with educational institutions in other countries. Both of these goals result from the underlying need to improve the quality of teaching and improve the image of schools. The direct motivation to undertake international cooperation was often inspired by the examples shown by other institutions that had successfully implemented similar activities.

In such situation, the impulse to undertake project activities frequently came not only from the teachers, but also from students who had learned about the possibilities of foreign trips from their colleagues from other schools.

Other schools implemented international projects and our students began to ask if we would also organise mobilities abroad. A neighbouring school carried out a student exchange programme with schools in France and Germany. The school head wanted us to start carrying out similar activities, but we could not find a partner institution. We did not know where to begin.

We noticed less interest in taking the vocational exams and obtaining good result in secondary school leaving exams, so we looked for ways to encourage students to learn. We started by offering foreign internships and work placements. Subsequent to that, we decided that teachers should also take part in various projects.

The study showed that even if the teachers did not implement all the projects themselves, the vast majority of them had a fairly wide knowledge of the institutional context of activities aimed at internationalisation of their schools. They knew why the school was implementing projects, what problems it had to deal with during its daily didactic work and what institutional needs were met by the implemented initiatives. They were also able to indicate to what extent their projects fitted into the wider developmental strategy of their home educational institutions. In this context, they most often emphasised the need for teachers to enhance their competences and enrich their methods of education with new forms of teaching.

We are a large school, and it goes without saying that a school of this type must prove itself at various levels. Besides, we aspire to be the best school in the region, so the EU projects are always noticed by us straight away. On the one hand, we are obliged to talk about those projects, and on the other hand, anyone who reads articles about our undertakings can see that we are active. [...] We want pupils to be educated in different fields, and these projects allow us to supplement what we are not able to cover in the curriculum.

We started off almost by accident, but those first projects gave us a big push to move forward. We simply saw what education looks like in different European countries, as the first project we were involved in was with partners from Belgium, Italy and Greece. Let us just say that schools in Greece and Italy operate quite similarly to our own, although there is perhaps a little more emphasis on practical training. But Belgium... that was a big "wow".

Their education system, their equipment... we were blown away. We started to learn from them and with each project we brought something new into our school and we saw new benefits resulting from our participation in the project.

Many respondents declared that their schools stand out from other educational institutions in their local environment.

In this context, it was emphasised that an internationally cooperating school has the opportunity to use the knowledge and experience gained abroad, which largely contributes to the implementation of interesting solutions and good practices in the scope of teaching and management. In the opinion of those teachers, such institutions are a rare phenomenon in the Polish education system. There were voices postulating that schools cooperating at the international level should be treated as models for other schools. Therefore, it is important to share those experiences with teachers from other schools.

We have adopted a few elements in terms of school management. Naturally, I cannot say for certain whether we always picked the best ones, but we rely on different experiences and I can say with certainty that we, the teachers, are acting with more and more confidence. Our projects have been going on for such a long time that they became so much more than just trips for young people. During our latest projects, we sent a larger group of teachers abroad. These are professionals. I think it is nice that they can compare what work is like in other schools, what is done in day-to-day classes, what is the subject matter of the lessons. They are also asked to help with tasks concerning the organisation of the project, and that really works well.

The parents and grandparents of our students are pleased and respect us as a school for what we do for our students. We also have a strong position in the municipality – we are being valued for trying to reach out to the community. Our presence is becoming increasingly visible; we appear at events or write articles. We are everywhere!

Apart from the benefits that the implementation of projects brings to schools directly involved in international cooperation, the teachers also described how activities aimed at internationalisation affect other educational institutions cooperating with their schools. The increase in the prestige of a school that is involved in international cooperation means that other schools which would also like to start implementing foreign projects turn to it for guidance. In addition, as a part of the dissemination of the results of foreign projects, teachers take part in events organised by other institutions, which allows them to share the project results.

We exchange experiences from the implementation of projects, and several schools have benefited from our experience in the scope of dissemination or writing reports. [...] We also exchange contact details of foreign partners with schools from our district and beyond. This broadens our base of regular partners.

Above all, we focus on multimedia. We have the school website and Facebook group, where we invite teachers from Poland as well as the foreign teachers we meet during the courses abroad. We share everything we learn during our mobility. In addition, we took part in a radio broadcast and we wrote several articles for local newspapers. [...] We also organised a conference for teachers and school heads to familiarise themselves with what we do. These are often people who have not participated in such projects but would like to take part.

What we learn in one country can then be passed on to the others. [...] The knowledge gained does not only stay with the project partners, but we disseminate it among other schools.

The process of involving other institutions in the school's activities often takes place at the project implementation stage. This applies, for example, to vocational schools that actively cooperate with employers. As a part of such cooperation, schools can share information and good practices with regards to modern solutions used in vocational education and training institutions abroad. It also gives an opportunity to promote Polish students on local labour markets.

First and foremost, we work very intensively with the employers. We also have good relations with employees of the regional teacher training centre and have been invited to give presentations at various conferences for teachers.

Thanks to our new contacts, we have managed to exchange information with teachers from different regions of Poland.

The biggest challenge for employers in the local market is to appreciate the professional skills of students which were acquired abroad. Sometimes, when we meet with the employers that we befriended, we hear them saying: "Why do you send them abroad, after all, they can learn everything there is to know here, locally. This is just a waste of time". Sometimes we lack appreciation from employers, because they often look at it from

the perspective of their own interests and needs, not thinking about the development opportunities for the students. Yes, I guess students can learn many things as well in Poland as they would abroad, but they will not necessarily have the same opportunities to develop their personalities.

Some interviewees also mentioned changes that have occurred in their schools as a result of international projects. These include the acquisition of fixed assets, such as new hardware, software or other teaching aids. Purchases most often resulted directly from the subject of project activities, although sometimes the implementation of the project itself required the purchase of equipment that would facilitate the work of coordinators (e.g. notebook, tablet) or help in conducting project activities (e.g. a camera to document various activities). In this context, it has been stressed that the new devices and teaching aids can also be used by other teachers after the project's completion, and that this directly translates into the quality of teaching. Some respondents admitted that the use of modern equipment and other technological innovations during lessons significantly increases the motivation of students to participate in classes and to learn.

After returning from the project trip, we bought a tablet and a digital camera to be able to document the next steps. Subsequently, interactive whiteboards, printers and a projector were purchased.

We only purchase things that are necessary for the given project. Then we use them for the benefit of the entire school. [...] An interactive whiteboard was placed in my classroom. The visualiser is used by all the teachers and the digital camera has been used to take pictures in subsequent projects.

It was stressed that although such changes are a very important effect of the projects, they should be seen as an added value of international efforts, rather than as their direct objective. These beliefs seem to be dictated by an awareness of the limitations of international projects' budgets, which only sporadically allows for the purchase of large amounts of teaching aids. There have also been opinions which state that while international cooperation can provide additional stimulus to the purchase of teaching materials, especially when required by a particular project, it is difficult to expect foreign projects to finance the basic needs of a school in terms of equipment and aids for working with students. The reason being that, in most cases, these needs

are significantly higher than the value of the additional funds allocated and should therefore be financed from other sources.

For the school, the equipment that remains after the completion of the given project is an important resource. For example, laptops and other equipment that is necessary for the project will not become obsolete upon the completion of the project. It will remain at the school and will be used for many years to come. This is important in the context of the budget. The students leave with benefits, while we stay and teach. Since this equipment stays as well, it also becomes a motivation to implement further projects.

We had to buy mobile phones to test the applications because the simulation hardware did not work properly. Some needs can be financed from project funds, but certainly not things like painting the classrooms or purchasing school benches – the basic equipment should be provided by the school. However, if the subject of the project is, for example, in the field of physics or chemistry, sometimes we need to buy certain things, which are not available at school, that will be needed to conduct experiments. I think that, in such instances, financing from the project funds makes sense.

According to the declarations of project coordinators, students also experience tangible benefits of the implementation of international activities at their schools. Teachers have also stated that the participation of students in the projects increase their motivation to learn and can often have a positive impact on their grades.

In this context, teachers at vocational schools paid particular attention to the opportunities offered to students by participation in international projects.

They stressed that involvement in such projects can be an important factor in building future CVs, which in turn translates into students' chances on the labour market, building a positive image in the eyes of future employers. This makes students not only willing to participate, but also to expect schools to provide them with such opportunities in the subsequent years of their education.

Such projects are a great opportunity for young people. Without them, our youth would not be able to establish international contacts. Our school could function without the project; however, international activities have a positive impact on the development of the students and give them satisfaction. We do it primarily for them.

We are very fortunate, as over the last couple of years we have received a significant amount of funds for project implementation. I think it is safe to say that a large number of young people are satisfied, and we are doing our best to meet their expectations. I think that this is also due to the diagnosis of our needs. On the one hand, young people choose a technical secondary school or a general secondary school because the secondary school-leaving exams and external exams are important for them, on the other, there is also a large group of students that places great emphasis on acquiring skills and building up their CVs. They really want to participate in all these projects. If there is an opportunity to participate in training, in an additional placement or to obtain some kind of certificate, it then allows them to build up their CV and makes them feel that they are leaving the school with something specific: with a document they can submit to a potential employer.

When asked about the level of their involvement in the projects, the teachers most often indicated that – apart from participating in trips and tasks within the projects – students are unlikely to help in organisational activities.

However, they are willing to participate in the promotion of the projects, and this is often a part of the broader strategy of a given school when it comes to disseminating the effects of international cooperation. It was often emphasised during the interviews that if a given group of students feels attached to the project and is satisfied with the results, they are also more willing to disseminate the acquired knowledge, both during lessons with students from other classes, and outside the school.

We mainly engage students in the dissemination of project results. They report on their trips, provide information about the results of the project, prepare material for a display board devoted to EU projects and write articles for our school newspaper, in order to promote the projects among their colleagues.

Pupils are primarily involved in the dissemination of results. They give presentations not only at school but also outside of it, showcasing their skills.

The teachers particularly appreciated the involvement of students in the dissemination of the results of these projects, which were based on the development of interesting results by students from different countries. In this context, many people emphasised that students are often better advocates of the idea of internationalisation of schools, especially if they are able to share the acquired knowledge and the results of implemented projects in an interesting way. Moreover, it may also prove to be an effective form of promotion of the school, especially if the presentations of the projects reach young people who are potentially interested in applying to the given school.

Dissemination is essentially the role of our students. We guide them, arrange things – for example transport, if we need to travel somewhere. Sometimes, our students visit other schools, for example lower secondary schools, where they show what they have learned during their mobility, while promoting our school to potential candidates.

When it comes to dissemination of the project outcomes, it is easier for us to organise a project exhibition, during which our students speak to their peers, both from and outside of our school, about what they have learned. This way, we have a chance to reach more people, including those not directly associated with the school.

Some respondents also reflected on how the future of their school could have transpired, had they not been implementing international projects. In this context, attention was paid primarily to the opportunities which stemmed from carrying out projects with international partners. It was stressed that a school without similar projects would be a less attractive workplace, especially for more ambitious teachers. Some respondents admitted, however, that their schools are such active institutions that the lack of international cooperation opportunities would not weaken their motivation for undertaking other activities, which could also make their teaching offer more attractive.

The absence of these projects would not be beneficial to the school. We would certainly have less work, but parents are demanding – I think they cannot imagine a school without the projects now. Even students are asking me about them. At present, the projects involve students from primary 7 and primary 8, but the younger children keep asking: “When will we have our turn?”. It is therefore clear to see that the pupils also have expectations that our participation in the projects will not end abruptly. They are already so used to the fact that there are international projects taking place that they cannot imagine a school without them.

It is hard to speculate, but it seems that without the EU projects it would be empty, different. And yet, God forbid, if it was a case of other schools participating in such projects, but not us – that would be really difficult to swallow. I suspect, in all probability, that we would not have 70 employees within the group of schools, maybe only as little as 15, because these two issues would certainly be connected.

If there were no such projects, the school might have developed in a different direction, but it would certainly not be the same.

This chapter focuses on identifying the support that project coordinators receive from their home educational institutions. When speaking about project outcomes, the interviewees often stressed that they bring many benefits to their schools, especially when both students and teachers are involved in the projects. It is also worth adding that within the local environment, international cooperation of schools is most often perceived as an endeavour of the whole institution, and the success achieved through the implementation of projects not only has a positive impact on the image and prestige of a given institution, but also translates into its increased attractiveness among potential candidates. This way, the school gains a reputation of an active institution, constantly working towards improving the quality of education, and thanks to introducing new solutions observed abroad, it is also seen to be modernising its educational offer. Therefore, one could assume that international cooperation of schools should involve most of the teachers in a given school, as they are already aware of the benefits of the projects. However, the results of the study show that international cooperation often requires much more support than that provided to the coordinators by their home educational institution. It often turns out that the vast majority of project related responsibilities lie with just one person, or only a handful of people.

Support from the teaching staff

The teachers were asked to define the tasks that result from their daily project work. Their statements show that most often people in charge of projects have many responsibilities related to planning the subject matter and objectives of the project, raising funds, as well as implementing activities in accordance with the adopted schedule. Some of the respondents admitted that a large number of tasks related to different types of project activities require a very high level of commitment from them. Therefore, in a situation where they already lack the time for all of the implemented projects, help from other people who can support the process of managing project activities turns out to be necessary.

First, we fill in the application form, then we prepare the contract documentation.

Next, we become responsible for activities related to the project implementation. [...]

We carry out evaluation at different stages of the project, starting with the evaluation of the selection process, and coordinate all the activities aimed at preparing students for the project – including the organisational, pedagogical and linguistic aspects of it.

Then we carry out meetings with parents and deal with all sorts of contracts and

agreements. Finally, there is the mobility itself, followed by the dissemination

of outcomes, reporting, etc... There is plenty to do, but we share the responsibilities.

As far as the EU projects are concerned, I coordinate all of the Erasmus projects; both for teachers and learners. However, for a short period of time I was also the coordinator of a project related to infrastructure, though currently that particular role has been taken on by another individual. There was simply not enough time during the day.

The information obtained from the respondents shows that the scope of support received from other employees most often concerns not so much the substantive activities as the issues of financial settlement, provided by the people responsible for school accounting who also join the project. Such a solution, however, does not derive from the initiative of other school staff, but it is a result of teachers' unfamiliarity with the financial regulations and difficulties in interpreting the guidelines of the EU programmes for the disposal of the budget.

The research participants admitted that they are not proficient enough in these issues, which is why the help of those responsible for accounting is often vital in order to implement the projects correctly.

As coordinators, we do not deal with finances, this is what the accountant does.

We, on the other hand, deal with all the other issues related to the organisation of the stay and the functioning of the young people we take with us. This involves arranging clean and safe guest houses, taking out insurance, preparing materials before and after the visit, as well as all the reporting duties.

Yes, our accountant is involved in the project. She deals with the budget [...] and is also aware of all of our activities.

The teachers also raised issues related to the involvement of other school administrative staff. In this context, many respondents declared that greater support from their respective school heads could be helpful in the implementation of subsequent projects, which would definitely relieve the project coordinators of matters particularly related to current documentation or handling correspondence concerning the project matters.

It has also often been emphasised that the people working in the school head's office have different sets of skills that could be put to good use in some aspects of the day-to-day management of the projects. In some cases, they could also become participants of the projects too.

In addition, school administrative staff could also support such projects beyond the handling of correspondence and documents, especially if they possess an adequate level of foreign language skills. They could help not only with the project activities, but they could also benefit from foreign expertise by taking part in exchanges or study visits to schools abroad. Such exposure could help those members of staff to introduce organisational and administrative changes, and this in turn could contribute to the better functioning of their home institution.

We carry out projects for teachers and students, therefore administrative staff does not take part in the mobilities and the acquisition of competencies. Occasionally, the school head's office is involved in the project, but this happens very rarely. If I cannot keep up with all of the responsibilities anymore, then the school head's office will step in, but only after several requests. Above all, it is on my shoulders.

A colleague of mine, who works in the school head's office, has also been taking part in foreign mobilities as an accompanying person for many years, but this is an exception as she is a person with great potential and linguistic competence.

I think that if we were to take part in a project focusing on the functioning of the educational institutions, our colleague could also find out how the school head's offices work in other countries. She is a bright and driven person; she would be able to push through some changes. At the moment, each successive secretary is working in the same way as their predecessors, but perhaps it would be possible to organise this work in a completely different way. All it takes is to see some examples of how things are done in the educational institutions abroad.

Many respondents admitted that the difficulties in reconciling project work and teaching do not only relate to administrative duties, but also to content-related tasks. This is especially true when the school is running many different projects at the same time. In schools where more than one person is responsible for international cooperation, it is easier to ensure a more balanced division of tasks. Conversely, in schools where projects are handled by one teacher, the only way to really relieve the coordinator is to seek support from other teaching staff. However, the interviewees indicated that such assistance should be supervised by the project coordinator, who is responsible for the overall implementation of activities carried out within a given project.

The coordinator writes the project, manages it, organises the team, and cooperates with students. This is a big responsibility. I choose my team for a given project. I am currently running a science-based project, so I have chosen teachers of chemistry, physics and vocational subjects.

I am responsible for new projects from start to finish. But since it involves a lot of work, I have always tried to select one teacher for each project to help me, by stepping in as a "vice-coordinator". This mainly involves assisting with organisational matters, but also watching over the implementation process, to ensure that everything gets done. This makes work easier.

Each of those teachers who went abroad this year was responsible for something in connection with the project they participated in. The teachers would prepare presentations, write reports, etc.

We involve the art teacher and the English teacher in our projects. The PE teacher participates too, because every year we include sports games into the project. I think that approximately six out of ten teachers employed in the school will participate in the activities this year. We also receive the help of the IT teacher, who conducts photography workshops.

Schools where the support of teachers coordinating activities is of a more systemic nature, establish teams implementing projects. In some institutions, the composition of these teams is variable and depends on the characteristics of the specific project duties to be taken on by the given teacher. In other cases, project activities are continuously carried out by the same people, who are then included in the tasks depending on project requirements. In the case of some of the examined institutions, the project teams were also supported by other people; however, those individuals were not responsible for all of the activities undertaken for the internationalisation of a given school. Such responsibility rested solely with the leaders designated for the overall coordination of international activities in respective institutions.

Yes, we have an appointed team dedicated to writing projects. It has about eight people. In addition, there are people who join us for specific projects.

We certainly have much more work to do now, but we have developed such a system that almost every teacher in the school is actually involved in our projects. It is not the case that only the coordinator takes care of everything, the work is divided. The projects are run a bit like in a factory.

This group is permanent on the one hand, and on the other hand we are also trying to involve young trainee teachers and those newly recruited, so that they too can increase their competencies. It is an obvious thing to do – after all, we will not be working in this school forever. [...] Those projects entail a lot of additional responsibilities for teachers over and above our daily teaching work, but it is a shared effort. One of my colleagues prepares documents at the application stage, the English teacher translates things when necessary, while two other people are involved in dissemination. [...] It is difficult to mobilise and involve people to take on this additional work. If we had a specific amount of money set aside for this, I think it would be completely different.

When asked about the support they expect from other members of the teaching staff, the teachers often emphasised the importance of the language competences, which effectively determine their cooperation with people and institutions from abroad. The respondents stressed that a lack of fluency in using foreign language significantly hinders active participation in international partnerships, and in particular prevents an individual from providing significant support within the project framework. Such opinions were characteristic of language teachers, especially those who began their adventure with projects primarily on account of their knowledge of foreign languages.

Only staff members who can communicate in a foreign language can take part in mobilities abroad, so that they are able to help students if necessary. This is not a trip for teachers. We can only use the help of individuals who have the appropriate knowledge of the English language, as we need to be sure that they will cope abroad well.

The team is permanent. We are responsible for all of the projects at our school, however if some members of the team cannot attend the mobility abroad, we look for a replacement. When it comes to our teaching staff, the biggest barrier is language. Unfortunately, only a few staff members are able to communicate in a foreign language.

In the statements of the interviewees, there were numerous opinions that the support provided by school heads is an important factor determining the quality of the implemented projects. The support provided by school

management in this respect mainly relates to contacts with superior institutions, especially where the hierarchy of positions proves to be important, making it impossible for cases to be handled quickly. Often, the assistance of school heads also includes the secondment of other teachers to work on a project, which is particularly important in those schools where there are not enough active teachers who would be willing to get involved in project work.

I do not want to take all of the credit for myself. I think that the school head also plays an important role. She motivates us, because sometimes we have moments of doubt. I feel that I am not alone, and I coordinate the project together with her.

The school management has been very supportive. They were pleased with the work done.

Difficulties with obtaining support from other teachers

Among the respondents, there were also voices stating that those involved in projects do not receive sufficient support at school, and that in extreme cases, project coordinators are left on their own device and do not receive any help regarding problems with the implementation of project activities. Participants of the interviews admitted that the lack of support from their colleagues reduces the motivation to continue striving at school (especially for those individuals who were trying to use project work as a remedy for professional burnout). At the same time, they admitted that it is difficult to find a way to increase the motivation of other teachers to participate in project work.

I kept getting more projects. There were moments when I did not want to deal with them any more, because it requires a lot of work, commitment, reporting and documentation.

It is just me and another lady who works as an accountant. We practically take care of everything between us; we perform all of the functions. [...] We receive no support from the school, we do everything ourselves: we are accountants, lawyers, translators, organisers, and facilitators.

To take part in the project, to go abroad, to learn something and transfer it to your own educational and methodical skill set – absolutely, everybody is up for that. However, when it comes to issues related to administrative and preparatory activities, I do not see much commitment from teachers... But how could I motivate them? [...]. Any person who

participates gets a free trip out of it. [...] The issues related to organisation, however, remain the coordinator's responsibility.

In some cases, the lack of support mainly concerned the teaching staff who looked at the attempts made to expand the school's activities through international cooperation with mistrust. They viewed it as additional work, which would certainly burden the teaching staff with additional responsibilities, while it would not necessarily bring benefits to the entire school. In this context, the teachers also pointed to the strong reluctance of some teachers to any degree of involvement in the projects. The respondents were mostly surprised by the unwillingness displayed by foreign language teachers, whose involvement should have seemed obvious due to their language competencies.

I remember the reluctance of some of our teachers when we started implementing projects. They entailed additional tasks, additional responsibilities, so they provoked disinclination, and perhaps even a little bit of jealousy because some of the teachers were going abroad while others were not.

I do not understand why no one else from among the English and German language teachers wants to get involved; why no one else wants to write these projects. Everyone has a thousand excuses. Due to the fact that I have already had experience, it all sort of fell into place. That is how I started writing projects for the whole school.

Some of the interviewees admitted that a demotivating factor in the context of their efforts to internationalise the school was not only the lack of support from other teachers in terms of project activities, but also the lack of interest in any participation in such initiatives in general. The project coordinators were disappointed to discover that some teachers not only saw no point in submitting project applications, but they also overlooked the potential benefits of joining projects that had already received funding. For such teachers, the possibility of taking part in trips abroad that are free of charge was not considered as an additional motivation, even though these trips would only entail passive participation and would not involve any additional work.

In the opinion of project coordinators, the lack of interest in travelling abroad among teachers was often caused by a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of participating in the project.

We have submitted a proposal that has been positively evaluated. Of the four German teachers at the school who work on a permanent basis, two people did not express any

interest in the mobility, even though they did not need to be involved in other activities in the project. One of the ladies is younger than me, the other one has a few years left until retirement.

I have written several mobility projects for teachers. The advert was always hanging in the teaching room, but hardly anyone came forward. Last year, I encouraged my English teacher colleague to participate [...]. When she started talking about the benefits, other people also became interested in the mobility. As a result, we will be writing a larger project next year. Being a teacher is a job which requires ongoing professional development [...].

Other people used to be reluctant, but now they are very much involved in the projects and are helping me with the project work. [...] They did not feel it at first, but with time they have changed their point of view. Now they can see that their commitment makes sense.

Some of the respondents pointed out that the mere willingness to volunteer to take part in a mobility abroad does not mean that a given teacher will be equally willing to engage in other tasks related to the project. In the opinion of interviewees, this is most often caused by an incorrect perception of the goals of the international projects, which are often associated primarily with the possibility of visiting another country.

The hardest part comes after teachers return from their mobility – it is difficult to get them to participate in the dissemination and evaluation side of things. Before the mobility commences, they are still willing to put some work in, but when they return, they consider the project to be finished.

Sometimes, the problem comes from the lack of understanding of what this work is all about. Someone will join the project thinking “I will go abroad and that is all there is to it.” But the point here is to actively participate in the mobility, not to just go and come back. You must simply get deeply involved.

Two of us are involved in the project, so we have full control over it. If this work was spread over more people, it may have been more difficult to manage the process.

It should be added, however, that not all interviewees declared the need for constant support from others. Sometimes, such expected help would

be of a temporary nature. In the opinion of these individuals, the constant involvement of a larger number of teachers would be logistically difficult, as sometimes it could cause unnecessary chaos and could even make the project implementation more difficult.

Support from external institutions

When asked about other possible forms of systemic support that could guarantee a better quality of projects and facilitate international activities in schools, interviewees also mentioned help from supervisory institutions. In this context, the most frequently mentioned issue concerned school supervisory authority, with focus on the inadequate support received from the supervisory institutions staff, especially in the areas which – in the opinion of the interviewees – go far beyond the competencies of teachers. Financial aspects of the international projects turned out to be a significant issue, especially regarding project guarantees. The respondents admitted that issues related to the settlement of grants are one of the most difficult aspects of cooperation with school supervisory bodies. In this context, there were teachers demanding a greater degree of involvement in the administration of projects from employees responsible for supervision over education in local governments.

The organisation of the projects actually falls on the shoulders of those who are involved.

[...] I think that part of the activities should be carried out by the supervisory body of a given school – there should be an office dedicated towards dealing with administrative matters. Meanwhile, teachers should not be submitting applications and processing financial settlements, but they should be implementing specific project activities instead.

The greatest difficulties arise during cooperation with the school supervisory authority.

It is probably a similar story with each local authority. The money goes into the account of the local authority, and before I can access it, it has to be approved in session. The project is already under way, and I cannot administer the budget. [...] In addition, because of the annual financial plans, it is extremely uncomfortable for me to plan expenses in such a way.

Among the participants of the interviews, there were also opinions stating that an important factor supporting the implementation of international school projects could be the professionalisation of staff in the field of educational project management in supervisory institutions. Such opinions were related primarily to the demands of employing people who would take over the duties related to project administration in the supervisory authority. Some respondents

also proposed the creation of entire project teams, which, acting at the level of local governments, could take over the responsibilities of schools in the field of project management and thus significantly relieve teachers of ongoing administrative and accounting matters.

Surely I could use a professional. Otherwise, we face various problems later, for example, with currency conversion and exchange rate losses.

Support from parents

Another interesting topic raised in the interviews was the role of parents in supporting international cooperation activities in schools. The respondents emphasised that the mere fact of receiving support for the idea of international activities is important. If the teaching staff feels that the effort put into the implementation of projects with foreign partners is appreciated not only by students, but also by their parents, then the teachers are more willing to join subsequent projects. During the interviews, it was often pointed out that building a positive image of the projects is primarily facilitated by regularly informing parents not only about the project activities as such, but also about the specific effects of the projects. This allows parents to better understand that student mobility is more than just a trip, and that staff training abroad increases teachers' professional competences and allows them to conduct more interesting classes. The fact that these benefits are finally being noticed is, more than ever, causing teachers to feel the pressure to internationalise their schools, as parents see the implementation of the projects in schools as one of the mandatory elements of a school's work, not just an extra-curricular activity. It should be emphasised, however, that declarations regarding specific forms of support provided by parents appeared much less frequently; mainly in the context of the projects which concerned pupils themselves. In the opinion of interviewees, practical support of project activities by parents usually concerns the provision of accommodation for young people visiting schools as a part of foreign student exchanges.

Parents are keen to participate in our activities. Sometimes I get the impression that they are more spontaneous and enthusiastic than the children. They are happy to provide hospitality. When the need arises, they organise leisure programmes for our foreign guests and prepare their own children ahead of the foreign mobilities. When hosting the guests from abroad they are happy to invite them to some family celebrations, such as communion services, weddings and so on, which is perhaps the best opportunity for foreigners to learn about our culture.

When we organised a project in which the families of children from our school hosted foreign students for the first time, we were wondering whether everything would go according to plan. There were various concerns: different religions, different cultures, some parents were not sure if their language skills were sufficient. Fortunately, we were able to find 20 families who decided to host foreign pupils. These experiences are extremely valuable, and after everything was done and dusted, practically all of the families were ready to welcome students from other countries again. This grants the opportunity to learn about different cultures – not only for children, but also for parents.

On the other hand, there were also voices stating that not all parents support the projects, which in extreme cases may significantly hinder or even prevent the implementation of planned project activities. Such situations, however, occurred much less frequently and – in the opinion of teachers – resulted mainly from the fear of contact with foreigners. Similar doubts also accompanied the decisions made in connection with the participation of students in mobility organised as a part of the projects. In this context, the significant changes in attitudes that have taken place in Poland in recent years have also been highlighted, which means that parents more and more often see the international projects as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Parents withdrew from hosting foreign students in their homes, even though their children stayed in the homes of those families. [...] I think the problem was partly due to a lack of openness, experience and familiarity with travelling. Probably only a few people have experienced such things, and if they did, they were mainly tourist trips.

Society is changing – students go abroad and that is a big plus. Imagine that not so long ago, one of my pupils could not go abroad because his parents did not allow him to – they needed him to help on their farm.

Parents are very often terrified because they cannot imagine what their children's mobility will be like. We always conduct a meeting with parents before departure and inform them in detail: where their children will stay and what exactly the trip will involve. But when they part, you can still see the tears in their eyes.



1. The results of the research show that teachers treat international cooperation as an additional area of competence, going far beyond their daily duties related to teaching. Many interviewees admitted that they initially lacked sufficient knowledge and skills required to manage projects, which generated stress and difficulties during the implementation of international activities. It seems reasonable to say that involvement in such projects means not only taking on additional duties (often voluntarily), but also undertaking work which is carried out without prior additional professional training. The participation of coordinators in professional development training in the field of project management, expenditure planning, budget management, or soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, time management, assertiveness and skills to work in a multicultural environment, could prove helpful in this respect. Such training offers are generally accessible on the education market and appear to be broad enough to meet the needs of this research target group.
2. Many respondents admitted that the difficulties in reconciling project work with teaching mainly concern administrative duties, including issues concerning finances and handling of the documents related to financial settlements within the projects. This appears to be caused not only by a lack of knowledge of the legal regulations in this regard, but also by a significant differences between everyday teaching duties and office work. For this reason, Polish teachers are not used to working with administrative and financial documents. The experiences of the respondents show that a good practice related to facilitating the work of the coordinators is to involve more people responsible for the financial and administrative management of the school in the projects. This helps to relieve teachers of the responsibilities which often turn out to be the most difficult project tasks for them. Such a solution also enables a greater involvement of teachers in project substantive activities, which has a positive impact on the quality of project outcomes.
3. The participants of the interviews also admitted that the majority of difficulties in international cooperation arises when a given school is implementing multiple projects simultaneously. In institutions where more than one person is responsible for international cooperation, it is easier to ensure a more balanced division of work. However, in cases where all of the projects are handled by a single teacher, it seems that the primary way to effectively relieve the coordinator is to seek help from other teachers. However, the interviewees pointed out that such support should

be supervised by the project coordinator, as he or she is responsible for the projects. Usually, it is the coordinator who is the author of the project and therefore should have control over the implementation of all activities described in the application documents.

4. In many cases, the selection of teachers participating in project implementation was determined by individual competencies facilitating cooperation with international partner groups. In most cases, these competencies involved language skills, which, in the opinion of the vast majority of teachers, turned out to be a crucial element in cooperation with foreign partners. At the same time, the respondents often emphasised that a lack of fluency in foreign languages is the main barrier for teachers, not only in getting more involved in project work, but also in applying for projects as participants. Therefore, it seems appropriate to place a greater emphasis on training the education staff in terms of increasing their linguistic competencies. At this point, it is worth pointing out that every school which employs language teachers has adequate human resources necessary to implement such training. The importance of language competencies for teachers can be evidenced by the fact that teachers' greater motivation to learn languages was often indicated by the respondents as an important outcome of international school projects. The interviewees emphasised that the development of language competencies of the staff not only benefits the school, but above all gives great satisfaction to the teachers themselves.

5. The project coordinators stressed that an important element of the projects is sharing their outcomes with the widest possible audience. Large-scale dissemination of project outcomes has a positive impact on the image of the school, and the increase in institutional prestige resulting from international cooperation often motivates the coordinators to undertake further project initiatives. During the interviews, it was often pointed out that the projects also had an impact on the institutions that the school cooperated with. The participation of teachers and students in events organised by other institutions proves to be particularly important in this respect, as it enables the results to be disseminated at many levels and among different target groups. Therefore, it seems appropriate to support the participation of the entire school community in the dissemination of the knowledge and experience gained during international cooperation. Such support could definitely help not only to reduce the responsibilities of coordinators in this area, but also to contribute to increasing the quality

of the project and strengthening the position of the school on the local educational market.

6. The research participants also touched upon the topic of support from other people and cooperating institutions. In this context, the students' parents were mentioned, as well as employees of supervisory bodies (mainly the supervisory authority). In the opinion of the respondents, support provided by institutions and people from outside the school community has a significant impact on the projects, although it does not always prove to be sufficient. It seems that such support could be increased by not only disseminating the results achieved, but also by issuing updates on current activities within the implemented projects. This would allow outsiders who are not involved in projects on a daily basis and who are not directly affected by the results of international cooperation in a given school to better understand the scope of the tasks involved and the character of project work.



The report presents the results of a research conducted with the participation of coordinators of international cooperation projects carried out at schools. Its aim was to define the role of the leaders in the process of school internationalisation and to identify the problems they face in their daily work.

The results of the research show that the responsibilities of project coordinators often go beyond these related to teaching and their scope is not always within the generally accepted competence framework of the teaching profession. When talking about the outcomes of their projects, the respondents often stressed that they brought many benefits to the schools they work in. They also admitted, however, that international cooperation requires much more support from other teachers and institutions cooperating with their home education institutions.

The Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE) was established in 1993. It is the National Agency for the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) and the National Agency of the European Solidarity Corps. It also leads European information and communication initiatives, such as: eTwinning, Eurodesk Poland, Eurydice, Europass, ECVET and EPALE. It supports cooperation with eastern countries through the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund, Polish-Ukrainian Youth Exchange Council and the SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre. From 2014, FRSE has contributed to the implementation of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development.