Integrated Project Management Approach in Secondary Education

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Abstract: After 1990's and the European integration, Romania faced major changes in the structure and finance of education. There are many decisions regarding the education reform, the decentralization of the public schools, and the curriculum. The education needs to evolve from an abstracted way to a practice way, it most avoids telling and learning things out of the context. The aim of this article is to review international projects current state in public secondary education and to analyze the premises of an integrated project management model, in the decentralized education system. Project management is common for all industries and areas, in different ways, dealing with complex projects or small one. Searching the best practices for the modern education development is an important objective for every government. So, from this perspective, the current study aims at reviewing the integration of the international projects in the schools agenda, evaluating the consolidation of the defining project management elements. The methodology involved a questionnaire-based research among school managers from Constanta County. The main beneficiary of the research study are the school managers and the local public administration institutions too.

Keywords: project management; education; research; questionnaire; decentralization.

JEL: E60; I21; I25.

Introduction

In order to modernize the Romanian educational system, to better accommodate it to the current requirements of the knowledge-based society and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the Romanian Government needs to continue the reforms and to encourage alternative solutions for long term school development (National Reform Programme, 2011). Scholars, government experts and international organizations are searching for the best alternatives to improve the education system in terms of financing, curriculum and stakeholders implication. (Androniceanu, 2010a)

After European integration, complex projects contributed to improve teacher's qualifications and skills, encourage private sector participation in

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education, increase educational and professional mobility of students and teachers, foster cooperation and dialogue of young people, engage in intercultural exchange, in mutual learning and innovation. Today projects prove to be an important tool for schools managers interested to increase training and improve the skills of young people and also an important tool for the Government and other local authorities in the process of reform and decentralization implementation (Rondinelli, 1990).

Lifelong learning is considered the key of the social and individual development in nowadays, which determines the reconsideration of the goals, contents, methods and all procedures which govern the activity of the systems of education and formation. The EU member states but also the other countries included lifelong learning as goal in their political agenda. The European Commission undertook the task to strengthen the European cooperation in this field through Lifelong learning Programmes: Comenius, Leonardo, Erasmus, Grundtvig, etc.

Using projects in the Lifelong Learning Programme or another international programme, Romanian schools managers and staff may support their ideas and attain their institutional goals. (Androniceanu, 2010b). Although projects development in our country, in the part years, can not be disregarded, we find important to present the evolution of Romania budget allocation for Lifelong Learning Programme. It was chosen this programme for analysis because the LLP is the successor to the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci and ICT/Open & Distance Learning (2000-2006). LLP supports learning opportunities from childhood to old age and contributes to policy cooperation, innovation, students and adults mobility and social and work integration. (Androniceanu, 2012a) The evolution of the budget allocation for international projects in the LLP is presented in *Table 1*:

**Table 1. The evolution of the Budget allocation
for Lifelong Learning Programs**

Year	*Budget value (euro)*	*Evolution*
2007	16.960.722	-
2008	21.487.080	+26.68%
2009	25.030.000	+16.48%
2010	25.876.000	+3.38%
2011	27.473.000	+6.17%
2012	30.714.000	+11.79%
2013	35.449.000	+15.41%

(*Source:* Research on ANPCDEFP database: www.llp-ro.ro)

Every year the budget granted by the European Commission increased with more than 10%, and since the beginning of the programme until the last year, the budget increased with more than 100%. The total value of the LLP projects financed by the European Commission, in Romania, is estimated to 183 thousands euro, from a total of nearly 7 billion euro, representing the LLP budget for 2007-2013 in Europe.

**Figure 1. The evolution of the Budget allocation
for Lifelong Learning Programs**
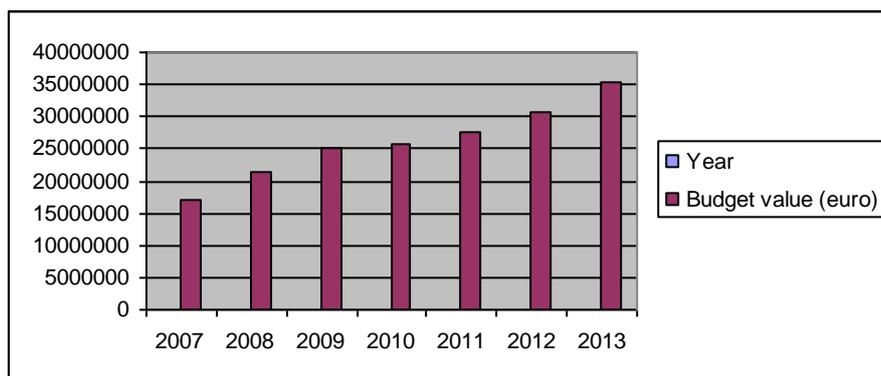
The key words in an education policy should be the quality, efficiency, equity and internationalization (Androniceanu, 2010a). Education is a factor for competitiveness in our modern world. The current priorities in educational development are to raise the level of education and upgrade competencies among the population and the work force, to improve the efficiency of the education system, to prevent exclusion among children and young people, and to enlarge adult learning opportunities.

Searching the best practices for the modern education development is an important objective for every government agenda. So, from this perspective, the current study aims at reviewing the integration of the international projects in the schools agenda, evaluating the consolidation of the defining project management elements. (Androniceanu, Drăgulănescu, 2012). Finally, the last aim is to evaluate the opportunity of establishing a project based school management.

1. Literature review

Over the years, the scholar's researches and studies contributed to a wide understanding of the project management approach. Projects are developed through multidisciplinary efforts, so specialists from different fields like economics, engineering, IT, architecture contributed to the project and project management theoretical database.

1.1. Project and Project Management theoretical approach

The specialized literature is generous in project and project management theoretical and practical approach. In Project Management Book of Knowledge, The Project Management Institute offers perhaps the easiest definition "A project

is temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service" (PMBoK, 2000).

In every organization there are daily activities, some of them singular and other interrelated. So analyzing projects we shall not mistake it with program and operations. A program as mentioned by the European Commission is related to a project because: "the project is the first subdivision of the program". The program is a set of activities and projects brought together in order to achieve certain strategic benefits and an operation is an ongoing and repetitive set of tasks. (Androniceanu et al, 2010b)

A project is an effort in which human, financial, and material resources are organized in a novel way to undertake a unique scope of work, of given specification, within constraints of cost and time, so as to achieve beneficial change defined by quantitative and qualitative objectives (Turner, 2009).

The European Commission, an institution highly oriented in projects development describe the project as a series of activities aimed at bringing about clearly specified objectives within a defined time-period and with a defined budget (European Commission, 2004).

Regarding the project management, the Project Management Institute states that it represents an application of knowledge, skills and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently. (Ciobanu, Androniceanu, 2012).

Project management has evolved from a management philosophy restricted to some areas and types of enterprise to an organization project management system affecting every functional unit of an organization. Project management has evolved into a business process rather than merely a project management process. More and more institutions are now regarding project management as being mandatory for their survival and all the organizations that were opponents of project management are now advocates (Kerzner, 2013).

1.2 Project and Project Management in the education system

Many countries are now looking for new ways to improve their education system and the success of their students. First, projects were mainly carried out in the business sector, but today, the private sector and the NGOs are highly involved in projects and the project management. The necessity of improving the structural and management abilities of an organization in the public sector is really important considering the current trends (Mihaescu, 2013). The project is not a new concept in the education system, teachers and tutors were always involved in the all types of activities, with an objective and using limited resources for a specific period of time. So, considering the general definition mentioned in the section above, schools representatives are familiar with project and project management concept. However, school managers need to implement modern tools and techniques specific to project management, need to improve their abilities in order to achieve

the objectives because they play a vital role in setting the direction for successful schools.(Androniceanu, Ivan, 2012).

Implementing project management tools and techniques in public education management is not unchallenging because school management itself has some specific issues. It refers to some particularities like: human resources different professional background, the schools financing system, schools general and specific objectives, the special laws governing the system. (Ciobanu, Androniceanu, 2012)

In the educational system we may encounter different projects categories: the curriculum project for designing curricula and materials, the educational project for the development of student's specific competence and the institutional development project as a strategic tool for manager's educational policy. Other distinctive categories of projects are the international projects in cooperation with an international organization and the public-private partnership projects for schools infrastructure. School and the local administration may use the public-private partnership projects for infrastructure development. The public-private partnership projects are developed, in every country in sectors like transports, public health, education, national security, waste management, water and energy distribution (Ivan, Androniceanu, 2012). In every European country, the object of a public-private partnership is to design, build, finance and operate social and public projects (Androniceanu & Ristea, 2012).

Is noticeable that school projects came in a wide variety and every school carries out many projects besides routine tasks.

1.3 Project Based School Management

With the development of different types of projects, continuously and simultaneously, the specialists developed a new type of organization called Project-oriented organization. For those organizations the managers considers the project a strategic option for the organizational design of the institution (Gareis and Huemann, 2000)

A project-based organization is an organization, which defines "Management by Projects" as an organizational strategy, applies temporary organizations for the performance of complex processes, manages a project portfolio of different project types, has specific permanent organizations to provide integrative functions, has an explicit project management culture, and perceives itself as project-based (Gareis and Huemann, 2000).

Project Based School Management is characterized by the existence of an explicit project management-culture, i.e. by a set of project management-related values and norms. In the school, the project management is considered as a process, for which there are specific procedures and a common understanding of the performance of this process (Gareis and Huemann, 2000).

The Project-based School Management approach uses project portfolio management within the schools in order to coordinate and successfully complete various complex tasks (projects). The social, economic and technological developments have affected in many sectors as well as education. Since project-based management enables school managers to achieve more effective resource, time, quality, and risk management in schools, all the persons involved in the school management should support the management by projects (Pro-school, 2008).

Project based management is arrangement of activities within an organization to achieve its goals. Project based management promotes distributed and project-specific responsibilities in the organization (Pro-school, 2008). The increasing number of projects transformed most of the organization of the private sector and the private sector into project based organizations. The need to work simultaneously with an increasing number of projects created the circumstances of a new management system, adopting the techniques, using new tolls, organize the activities in a specific way.

2. Research methodology

The methodology proposed for this research, is based on the analysis of the specialized literature, relevant for the field approached, and the results obtained following the application of a questionnaire at the public schools located in the Constant County.

2.1 Research objectives and hypothesis

The objectives of the research are:
O1: To confirm the existence of an integrate project management system in Romanian school – Constanta region;
O2: To establish the specific phase of the integrated Project Management for every institution;
O3: To analyze the effect of the decentralization and the main causes that can diminish the interest of school representatives in the development of international projects;
Related to the objectives of the research, were established the following hypothesis
H1: In the high schools that are managing a large number of projects we can talk about the presence of an integrated project management system.
H2: Considering the increasing number of projects and the valuable grants offered by the European Commission, would be the right time to adopt a project based school management in every school.
H3: Considering the decentralization of the educational system, school managers can decide to implement a project based school management.

The research is based on a statistical sampling procedure and use a questionnaire that was structured on three main topics:

- the type of projects conducted in the school;
- project management in the decentralization of the public education;
- the opportunity of implementing a project based school management.

2.2 Sample

The research involved 46 high schools from Constanta town. In Constanta County there are 59 high schools, 5 special schools and 7 clubs. In Constanta town there are 24 high schools, 13 high schools in the other cities of the county (e.g. Mangalia, Navodari, Medgidia, Cernavoda, Harsova), and 22 high schools in county's villages.

From a total of 59 schools were selected 46 high schools. So the statistically representative sample size was 46 and it was chosen a 95% confidence in the result and a representatively error of +/- 5% (http://www.surveysystem.com). The sample includes schools units from urban area but also from rural area, schools with a wide experience in project management and schools learning to implement their first projects.

2.3 Research instruments

Regarding the identification of an integrated project management system in the development of high schools, the analysis method consists in the results obtained following the application of a questionnaire at some high schools in Constanta County.

The questionnaire has a set of questions addressing issues related to the type and number of projects developed in the schools, the persons responsible for the initiation of a project, the coordination of the project and the persons involved in the implementation of projects idea.

Another category of questions are related to the current status of the decentralized educational system and the changes connected to this process, whether the decentralization contributed to a new management strategy or will offer the chance to school managers to increase their personal contribution in the leading process. Another point of interest is how local administration can contribute to schools development.

The third category of questions is related to the presence of an integrated project management system in every analyzed institution and the opportunity for transforming the present school management into a project based school management.

The structure of the questionnaire and the questions defined for the area of research are summarized in the following *Table 2*.

Table 2. Questionnaire structure

No.	Area of research	Number of questions
1	General data and school identification data	2
2	General aspects of school project management	4
3	Changes in the management system occurred after the decentralization and the local administration involvement in schools projects	2
4	The capacity of funds absorption	2
5	The analysis of the present integrated project management system	3
6	The necessity of transforming the school management into a project based school management	2

3. The analysis of the results and main findings

`   The main results of the descriptive statistic analysis at the sample level are presented below. Were collected the most relevant variables that characterize the project management system in the education area.

       The first question and the second one are trying to identify the number and the type of international projects developed by every school in the last 5 years.
Is important to mention that the international projects are related to the Lifelong   Learning Programmes (LLP), and the most important examples are Comenius projects and Leonardo da Vinci projects. In 5 years, in Constanta County, Comenius projects summarized 672.000 euro and Leonardo da Vinci projects 636.638 euro.

       The financial impact of a grant, in the school budget, is significant considering that the value of the grant may represent up to 5% of one year Government budget allocation. For the institutions that are highly involved in international projects the financial impact is not negligible.

**Table 3. Number of international projects developed in the high schools
in the past 5 years**

Number of projects	Number of schools
0 projects	12
1-2 projects	8
3-5 projects	11
5-10 projects	8
more than 10	7

       26% of the questioned schools were not involved in any international projects. Most of these schools came from countryside area, so all the questioned schools managers mentioned that in their institution the absenteeism and the school abandon constitute their major problems, so their efforts are driven to reduce the early school leaving rate.

24% of the sample was involved in maximum 5 projects and only 15% of the sample was involved in more than 10 projects.

The second question was "*How do you appreciate the following aspects of the decentralization process in the education system?*" The results, as percentages from the total number of respondents are presented in the *Table 4:*

Table 4. Effects of decentralization system in high schools

	Very weak	**Weak**	**Satisfactory**	**Good**	**Very good**
1. Improvements in financing the schools	28.26	34.78	23.91	13.05	0
2. Decrease of political interferences in school management	26.09	21.74	30.43	8.69	13.05
3. Decreased bureaucracy	69.56	17.39	13.05	0	0
4. Stakeholders implication in school problems	13.04	23.91	39.13	15.23	8.69
5. Decisions taking by schools board	17.39	13.04	19.56	23.91	26.08
6. Human resources management	17.39	19.56	45.65	13.04	4.34
7. International Projects development	23.91	15.22	19.56	21.74	19.56
8. Human resources motivation in school activities	58.69	17.39	13.04	10.87	0

The answers to each point were given on a scale from 1 (very weak) to 5 (very good) and for every variable was calculated the weighted average, in order to present the specific score for every topic related to the decentralization process.

For every variable was calculated the weighted (scaled) average using the following example:

$$\text{W.A. } 1 = \frac{1*13+2*16+3*11+4*6+5*0}{46} = 2.21$$

So for the first variable, the improvements in financing the schools, the scaled average suggests that in general schools financial situation remains a sensitive subject reaching only a satisfactory level. For the second variable, minimize political interference in schools management, the scaled average is 2.60 suggesting the presence of political influence in schools management. For the third variable, decreased bureaucracy, the average score is 1.43, the lowest of the series, representing that the managers are highly affected by the bureaucratic system and are thinking that the decentralization brought insignificant chances in this matter. Regarding the stakeholders implication in school problems, the average opinion is

that there is not enough implication of local administration, parents and NGOs in schools problems, this indicator reaching only and average of 2.82.

The highest score, of 3.28, is obtained by the indicator related to the school board decisions. School managers agreed that, currently, the school board decide what is best for the institution and manager's vision can be put into practice more rapidly. Regarding the human resources management, the decentralization brought satisfactory changes, the average score is 2.84. Managers are implicated in the recruitment process but they do not have the possibility to motivate the personnel or to gratify the best employee.

Analyzing the responses of schools managers related to international projects development, after the decentralization process, we can affirm that in many cases the schools managers do not see projects as a priority. There are many issues unsolved by the national framework or by the decentralization process and the manager do not feel the international projects as a priority. Generally, the decentralization contributed in a satisfactory way to manager's involvement in the international projects, the average score for this issue being 2.95. Regarding the human resources motivation in school activities, the average score was 1.76, so the personal is still unmotivated to engage in school activities. The managers do not dispose of sufficient resources to highly motivate their employees.

The third question is related to the implication of local administration in school's project management: *"How do you appreciate the contribution of local administration into schools international projects?"* The results, as percentages from the total number of respondents are presented in *Table 5*:

Table 5. Local administration contribution to international projects

	1	2	3	4	5
Financing projects for school's infrastructure	54.35	19.56	13.05	10.87	2.17
Implication in co-financing educational school projects	36.96	28.26	26.09	8.69	0
Supporting the school managers and their initiative to start new projects	63.04	26.09	8.7	2.17	0
Supporting the implementation of international projects	47.83	30.43	13.05	6.52	2.17

The local's administration contribution to international projects is unsatisfactory for the majority of school managers. Their contribution in co-finance some project is limited and the support in the initiation of new projects is rare. Although every school council includes a representative from the City hall and every important decision is taken with their approval, the implication in schools projects is insignificant.

The fourth question is related to the phase of the integrated project management system: *How do you appreciate the project management system in your school?* The results, as school numbers from the sample are presented in the table 6:

Table 6. Integrated Project Management lifecycle by phase

Title	Description	Respondents Answers
Awakening phase	• awareness of need of project management	19
Implementing phase	• focus on key projects (PM staffing, PM training)	16
Professionalizing phase	• widespread Project Management	3
Enterprising phase	• connecting the various projects and programs	4
Integrating phase	• unification and focus of all parties on achieving the project goal	4

Source: adaptation after David I. Cleland and Lewis I. Ireland

Using the phase description, every manager evaluated the stage of the integrated project management lifecycle in his institution. 41.30% of the sample appreciated that the school is in the awakening phase and they are aware of need of project management, almost 35% of schools are in the implementing phase and are focus on key projects, only 8.7% are located in the superior phases: enterprising and integrating.

The fifth question: "*How do you appreciate the following restraints affecting the projects initiation*" The answers to each point were given considering the following Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree) and the results, as percentages from the total number of respondents are presented in the *Table 7:*

Table 7. Restraints for international projects development

	1	2	3	4	5
Limited information about international/European projects	23.91	19.56	26.09	13.05	17.39
Limited time considering the school priorities	30.43	26.08	15.22	13.05	15.22
Human resources experience in project management	10.87	26.09	19.56	30.43	13.05
Financial restraints	4.35	8.69	23.92	21.74	41.3
Technical difficulties in project management development	8.69	15.23	26.08	30.44	19.56

For a profound analysis we proceeded to the calculation of the average score for each of the statements to determine the positive or negative response. So, for the first two statements the average score indicated a disagreement towards the statement, meaning that the managers do have access to the information related to international projects and the time is not a barrier for project development. With an average score of 3.87, the financial restraints are representing an impediment for projects development. However, manager's answers may be affected by the general opinion that the education system is underfunded. The grant value for a project can reach up to 40.000 euro, so financially, the projects activities are covered by the grand and the school contribution is minim.

The sixth question: *"How do you appreciate the following restraints affecting the implementation of international projects?"* The answers to each point were given on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree) and the results, as percentages from the total number of respondents are presented in the table 8:

Table 8. Restraints for project management implementation

|	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Bureaucracy and the periodical reports	17.39	28.26	32.61	13.04	8.70
Delays in grants transfer and financial difficulties	19.56	28.27	30.43	10.87	10.87
Project team commitment during the entire duration of the project	23.91	28.26	30.43	10.87	6.52
Legal issues and changing environment	19.56	23.92	28.26	15.22	13.04
Insufficient time to attain the project's objectives	17.39	26.09	32.61	13.04	10.87

The answers of all school managers revealed that the legal issues and the changing environment may cause restraints in projects implementation, the weighted average calculated for this statement being 2.78. However, the small value of this indicator suggests that it do not represent a major barrier for projects. Most of the managers answered that the project team commitment remains constant during the project implementation, the third statement reaching a weighted average of 2.47, representing that school managers disagreed with it. Is noticeable that a great number of answer were neutral, this answer being offered mostly by the school managers that are not involved in international projects.

The seventh question: *"Do you consider useful the implementation of a Project Based Management in your school ?* The answers are presented in table 9 and figure 2 as percentages.

Table 9. The need of an Project Based School Management

	Yes	No	Probably
No. of schools	26	11	9
Percentages	56.52	23.91	19.57

Figure 2. Schools needs to implement Project Based School Management
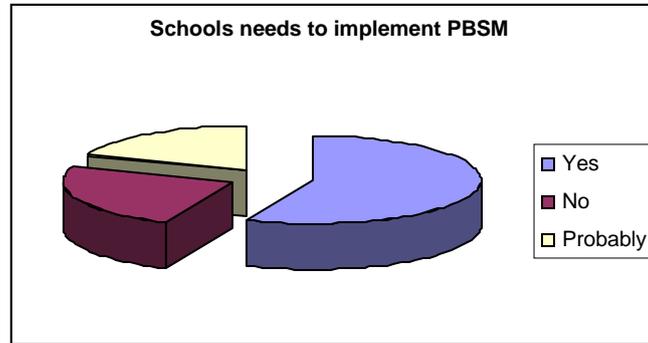
For this question, the managers needed to establish whether their institution needs to implement a Project Based School Management. Most of them answered that in their organization this system is necessary, 11 of them stated that the need is not urgent, they have other priorities and 9 of the questioned managers mentioned that they probably may need to adopt a Project Based School Management for a long term school development and to improve teachers and students skills.

Conclusions

Regarding the attraction of external investments and financing, from the state budget, or from international organizations, those institutions which have established a project based management system, reached a high degree of funds absorption, compared to those that haven't developed management abilities and project implementation. Project management discipline keeps conquering new sectors and proves to be an important tool for institutions and products development. So, for many organizations, project management represents a modern tool which needs organizational changes.

Schools that will elect, as a strategy, the development of projects may improve the decentralization of management responsibility and may become goal oriented. The only barrier can be that every organization has limited resources and, therefore, a limit to the number of projects it can initiate or control.

The research conducted to the confirmation of some hypothesis established at the beginning. So, for the first hypothesis related to the existence of an integrated

projects management system in the secondary education, the answer is positive, because there are some schools that are highly involved in projects and the presence of projects management tools is obvious.

For the second hypothesis regarding the implementation of a Project Based School Management in every school the answer is negative because many units are not prepared for this change process and their current issues make difficult the change.

For the third hypothesis regarding the decision of school managers to implement a project based school management, the answer is positive because they have the leverage to choose their objectives and to focus on the development of a project management system.

The project based school management as a new management can improve team work among different qualified personnel, can offer the possibility to quickly adapt to the changing environment, can transform a school in an student-centered education, empower the employees.

In Romanian schools, the projects and the project management are new tools for the managers. Some institutions reacted rapidly to the international tendencies and adapted themselves to the change, but others failed to start the implementation of projects and the development as a project based organization.

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