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Integration & Sustainability in European Projects: Strategies, Business Models, and Management Model

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Abstract: European Commission funded research is driven by the objective of integrating excellent research in Europe by using public funding to gain momentum and sustainability. This paper presents the results of an analysis of the management patterns of 20 Networks of Excellence. Our analysis indicates an absence of business management competences in the project consortia and unclear criteria for sustainability. Sustainability strategies appear to be ad hoc driven and orchestrated by the project monitoring events, rather than built in the consortia management structure. The paper advocates for bringing onboard conventional management models along with strategic positioning, business models, and business plans.

1. Introduction

European Commission funded research is driven by the objective of integrating excellent research in Europe and using public funding to gain momentum and sustainability. The thinking on business models and business plans of EU projects is often guided by imaginary markets and business models advocated in the e-business field [1], [2], [3]. Despite the appealing elements in the normative business models literature, there is a need to understand the nature and the dynamics of EU funded projects [4] and how to evaluate the outcome [5]. We advocate that we in our networks cast the mask and face the fundamental challenges up front, use the solid knowledge on management of networks a lot more actively, and put such competence more actively in place by focusing on how means and ends are managed and evaluated.

Drawing on a qualitative and quantitative review of 20 EU funded projects and on a literature review on business models and business plans, this paper investigates strategies followed by EU projects for gaining sustainability. In specific, we map the management activities, dissemination, transfer, integration, mobility, and collaboration efforts made by NoEs. The paper was developed as part of the work undertaken in the DEMO_net project (FP6-2004-IST-4-027219, thematic priority 2: Information Society Technologies). Also, the paper serve as input to the ongoing work in the eGovMoNet Thematic Network (CIP project number 224998 IST-PSP, funded from May 1 2008 till May 1st 2010) helping define and sustain the network.

2. Collection of Data

We have conducted an explorative search with Networks of Excellence within the 6th framework of IST programme. The mapping and analysis was carried out during the period 2006-2008 and aimed at giving input to the development of the business plan for the DEMO_net project, funded as a Network of Excellence by the European Commission. The

objective of this exercise was to present how other NoEs carry out their activities and to identify possible patterns of implementation of business models or elements of business models. The search was made through the project websites and other online published material. The initial screening showed that some had very specific research task, such as developing fixed software, while some had a small and more integrated group of partners or were in an early stage of their development of online activities.

We gathered information about five key themes of managing a NoE:

- How they define their internal and external stakeholders, and the important contributions to the Network of Excellence from these stakeholders.
- The use of the website in their Network of Excellence – e.g. the amount of visitors, the tasks they are carrying out on the website and how they get attention on the website.
- Experiences on how to finance and secure resources in the Network of Excellence, also after the funding period, and categories of expenses in the NoE.
- Information sharing and collaboration in their Network of Excellence.
- The results and impact of the Network of Excellence during the period they have joined the network, and lessons learned to pass on.

Moreover, we have analysed the mission statements of NoEs funded by the Commission in order to map:

- The desired public image
- The key strategic influence for the business
- A description of the target market
- A description of the products/services
- The geographic domain
- Expectations of growth and profitability

3. Findings

The analysis of the qualitative and quantitative information gathered indicates that:

- NoEs view researchers as the key stakeholders.
- Activities are organized around researcher tasks.
- NoEs are working for establishing a community.
- The website is central in the process of forming the network.
- Large parts of collaboration and information activities are physical meetings.
- Funding is perceived as a one-time settlement.

To get attention on their websites, NoEs are working with elements like news in the field, profile of the day/ week, segmentation of information in the field, and making major search engines aware of the website. The amount of visitors on the different NoE websites varies from 250 visitors per month to 3,800 visitors per month. The most common tasks visitors are carrying out on the website can be characterized along two purposes: information and collaboration.

Experiences on how to finance and secure resources in the Network of Excellence shows that during the funding period only few of the NoEs have revenue sources other than the EU, e.g. minor amounts of funding from involved partners. The NoEs in the survey are all still in the funding period. Their major categories of expenses are PhD students and Post-doc grants. In addition to this, some also have expenses on virtual doctoral schools, workshops with industry and secretariat functions. After the EU funding period, the networks are mainly working with the solution of major partners who can continue the funding of the network – e.g. universities, industry, cross-European organizations like the European Space Agency, ESA.

The NoEs have several different tools for collaboration on their websites, e.g. mailman, a common FTP area, a publication database, a forum for common tools and test beds (for advertising own free tools to the outside world). An important part of the information sharing and collaboration in the networks is separated from the website. They have tutorial presentations, summer schools, meetings on administrative themes, advanced information on deliverables, conferences, and workshops.

Although a major part of the activities in the virtual part of the NoEs is related to information seeking and providing, the networks do perceive themselves as communities equally supporting information retrieval and collaboration in the network. Asking the NoEs to tell about important results and successes in the network, the following activities have been stressed:

- Scientific archive;
- PhD school;
- Common tools for sharing information, results, products;
- Summer school;
- Integration of partners;
- Peer-reviewed papers (5 per researcher per year);
- Improved coordination between research units;
- Satellite-based video conference system;
- Shared research program;
- Sharing research results;
- Shared research policy.

All these activities and results are key activities in the research community. Conversely, concerning their perception of important stakeholders in the network, it is becoming clear that the main mission of these NoEs is to be a research community, and that the main stakeholders are the researchers.

Table 2: Summary of Findings: Management Activities, Dissemination, Transfer, Integration, Mobility & Collaboration

<i>1. Management activities</i>	<i>2. Dissemination of research knowledge</i>	<i>3. Technology transfer</i>	<i>4. Integrating and rationalizing research efforts</i>	<i>5. Facilitating mobility of PhD students & researchers</i>	<i>6. Consolidate collaboration with public/private sector</i>
Advisory Board	Summer school	Awareness events as demonstrations, courses, tutorials, etc.	Establishing and updating a knowledge roadmap	Focus on medium and long term mobility	Implement a durable partnership program with public/private sector
Steering Board	Web seminars	National/regional technology transfer workshops	Establishing a map of all topics that cover the domain of the network	Creation of European graduate courses program for PhD students within the domain	
Integrating Activities Committee	Conferences		Establishing a map of the topics that are covered in Europe/world	Design and implement a common program of post-graduate courses	
Spreading of Excellence and Training activities Committee	Network website		Database of research projects within the NoE topic	Joint development of lectures between university members of the consortium	
Joint Executed Research Committee	Electronic newsletter		Internal workshops for a thorough exchange of ideas and knowledge		

<i>1. Management activities</i>	<i>2. Dissemination of research knowledge</i>	<i>3. Technology transfer</i>	<i>4. Integrating and rationalizing research efforts</i>	<i>5. Facilitating mobility of PhD students & researchers</i>	<i>6. Consolidate collaboration with public/private sector</i>
Workpackage groups	Database of the networks publications		A series of brainstorming workshops to define "future research direction"		
Specific taskforces	Publication of books and white papers in established journals/books Tutorials for transferring knowledge with companies/organizations				

4. Conclusions

European Commission funded research is driven by the objective of integrating excellent research in Europe by using public funding to gain momentum and sustainability. On the contrary, our analysis has revealed a clear absence of business management competences in the project consortia and unclear criteria for sustainability. As a consequence, rational, planned strategy is close to absent in most of the projects analysed. Instead, sustainability strategies appear to be ad hoc driven, orchestrated by the project monitoring events (reviewers and project officers), rather than built in the consortia management structure.

There is great diversity in the kind of management, dissemination, transfer, integration, mobility, and collaboration activities undertaken in the reviewed NoEs. Our interpretation is that there is a lack of marketing and business skills in the top management of the networks. It appears that the standard answer to integration and sustainability demands is to build yet another website or another digital portal. Clearly such means are necessary to use in order to make the activities visible, but the dynamics and the nature of integration of research appears to be in need of rethinking.

Although the NoE projects are no longer a way to coordinate and integrate research in the upcoming projects funded by European Commission, the lessons learned from the mapping done in this paper can be beneficial for other types of project by asking not only what is your business model and business plan, but also what is your management model. Inspired by the work of Birkinshaw & Goddard [6], we need to focus not only on positioning the research and arguing which research is being closed by the efforts in the projects, and what short and long term value this brings. We also need to start focusing more on the means and ends used in our management of the networks and projects.

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