

MAKING EUROPEAN COLLABORATION GREENER: THE ONE MEETING APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Meeting face to face, delving into different cultural contexts and thereby gaining both a better understanding of each other as well as fostering new partnerships and new ideas is at the heart of European projects. Over the last two years, we have experienced a significant shift in these collaborative experiences, with face-to-face meetings in different cultural settings being postponed or cancelled and uncertainty over whether these meetings could ever take place alternatively. In every crisis, however, there is an opportunity – this is also true for European collaboration that must instead manage virtually. In this innovative practice paper, we would like to outline our experiences from a project that aimed to conduct European collaboration within an EU project with ONE meeting only: the ONE Meeting Project (The ONE Meeting Project, 2021). To this end, we have developed a specific approach for going almost exclusively online that is based on sustainability, accessibility and agile project management (Cendon, Kananen, Uotinen, & López-Forés, 2022), using ourselves as the direct actors performing, experiencing and experimenting with it. Making international collaboration greener ranges from less traveling to sustainable travelling, to using technologies efficiently and to strengthening local partnerships. We would like to share what was important for us when following such an approach, what we have learned from our experiences, and what this means for the sustainability of our environment as well as for future methods of employing digital technologies for collaboration and learning.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The climate crisis has reached Europe and the European Agenda, with the adoption of the European Green Deal as a strategy and commitment to make Europe a climate-neutral continent by 2050 and to transform the EU economic model into a sustainable one (European Commission, 2019). The aims of the Green Deal are ambitious: they encompass clean, affordable and secure energy; a clean and circular economy; energy and resource efficient building and renovating; sustainable and smart mobility; a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system; preserved and restored ecosystems and biodiversity; and a toxic-free environment (ibid.). While the road map for the Green Deal was being launched, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe and the whole world. This has slowed the ambitious goals not only of the Green Deal but also of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, 2021). In 2021,

the United Nations stated that “the climate crisis continues, largely unabated” (2021, p. 20) and claimed that due to the rising greenhouse gas emissions, economies need to shift towards carbon neutrality (ibid.).

But what does this mean for European mobility and the role of Erasmus+ projects? The Erasmus+ programme promotes learning mobility of individuals, groups and organisations across Europe, “thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship” (European Commission, 2022, p. 6). As face-to-face transnational partner meetings and cross-border travelling are key components of Erasmus+ projects and of EU project collaboration in higher education, the role of mobility needs to be scrutinised in view of a green(er) and climate-neutral Europe. This issue has also been taken into consideration by the latest Erasmus+ programme guide covering the period from 2021-2027, with environment and the fight against climate change being one central priority besides inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement. The European Commission states: “Erasmus+, with mobility at its core, should strive for carbon-neutrality by promoting sustainable transport modes and more environmentally responsible behavior.” (European Commission, 2022, p. 9)

Almost two years earlier, during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, this aim was the starting point for an Erasmus+ project with a total of seven partners across Europe: the ONE Meeting Project (ONE) connects sustainability with virtual collaboration within European projects by having only ONE on-site meeting. Thus, ONE aims at strengthening productive, virtual collaboration within strategic and structured international projects, both in order to reduce travel-induced and associated environmental impacts and to be able to act efficiently when faced with unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participation is a central element of the ONE project. Everything that we have developed as part of the ONE project was done in a participatory process including partners from the outset. It was important to consider all partners’ needs and experiences in order to specify and design our approach and the project results. Decisions were based on discussions within the partnership; products were shaped and fine-tuned based on partners’ feedback and insights. Inclusivity is a central feature of the project’s agile approach. Participation also reached beyond our consortium by involving relevant stakeholders and future users of the project.

In this paper, we will first outline the ONE approach by describing its cornerstones that were developed within our partnership: sustainability, accessibility and agility. We thereby show how we have addressed the possible contribution of Erasmus+ projects to carbon-neutrality. Then, we discuss our achievements and practices, critically reflecting on what it means to follow such an approach. We share what we have learned from our experiences and what this means for the sustainability of our environments, as well as for future means of employing digital technologies for collaboration and learning.

THE ONE APPROACH

The ONE approach builds a case for environmental issues and sustainability within EU projects (Duart, Febrer, Lopez, & Roche, 2022) and the mindful deployment of virtual tools for communication and collaboration (Uotinen, Kananen, Hamill, & Kelly, 2022). It has been developed within our partnership and is based on three cornerstones: Sustainability, accessibility, and agility (Cendon, Mörth, Royo, Wietrich, & Mangiatordi, 2022). In the following, we describe their central features and show how they are interconnected.

SUSTAINABILITY

The ONE approach addresses sustainability on three levels: the project itself, the products of the project, and the partners on an institutional level.

Having 'ONE meeting only' during the lifetime of a project ensures reduced frequency of travel, which is the most direct strategy for reducing CO₂ emissions. Yet, the ONE approach goes beyond this in several regards: with regard to the ONE meeting, it includes guidelines to keep the number of travelling persons at a minimum and to use green means of transport. In addition, necessary supplies for the meeting such as catering should be purchased at local businesses that subscribe to sustainability. With respect to compensatory strategies for holding meetings online as an alternative to face-to-face meetings, the approach addresses CO₂ emissions that are generated by working and meeting online, a factor that is often overlooked (Obringer *et al.*, 2021). In doing so, the approach goes far beyond what has been addressed by criteria for green travel as part of a green ERASMUS+ programme (DAAD, n.d.) so far. To this end, the ONE approach encourages limiting the transfer of huge data quantities, including video streaming in online meetings, as well as using green tools such as the ecological search engine Ecosia that offsets the energy used for online search processes by planting trees.

On a second level, the approach facilitates the sustainability of the project results, a goal that should be inherent in every step and action of the project, by ensuring that resources of all kinds have not been spent in vain. For example, project results should a) be created in close exchange with the target groups, i.e., the representatives of future users of the products and should b) be produced in a way that others can adapt and reuse easily. This includes online publishing with the use of open licensing. Furthermore, the results need to be widely communicated in networks at hand and used in one's own sphere of influence, specifically one's own organisation.

Thirdly, the ONE approach promotes the transposition of sustainability awareness from project level to the organisational level of the involved partner institutions. We developed, for example, an online survey (FernUniversität in Hagen, 2021a) that partners had to fill out at the beginning of the project in order to identify how they could contribute to the sustainability of the project results according to their respective organisations' capabilities. This helps partners to think outside the "project box" and to link project results to their organisations' existing sustainability measures. Combining this initial impulse with regular check ins on the status of achievement of objectives in meetings helps to ensure each partner's contributions to sustainability.

Partners were also asked to describe their organisations' environmental measures and define new goals in order to increase the organisation's contribution to sustainability in general (FernUniversität in Hagen, 2021b). Such a procedure allows partners to set measures according to their individual situations and capabilities. Sharing the results can be inspiring for all partners, regularly addressing them helps partners achieve the defined goals, and in-depth discussions facilitate creative exploration of further paths, critical reflection on work done so far, and the eventual adaptation of sustainability approaches. On this organisational level, the ONE approach helps to address central topics of the Green Deal, such as energy efficient buildings, cleaner energy and clean technological innovations, or use of longer lasting, re-useable and repairable products (European Commission, n.d.).

To make all this binding and institutionalised, the ONE Meeting project laid down these issues in a Sustainability and Exploitation Strategy (FernUniversität in Hagen, 2021a). Its central parts have been published as Environmental Policy (FernUniversität in Hagen, 2021b).

ACCESSIBILITY

To be fully sustainable, a transnational, collaborative project should also consider and foster inclusiveness at its core: making participants comfortable and avoiding commonly experienced barriers means being able to provide a better user experience – and better overall quality – for everybody. Accessibility is, as a matter of fact, a very difficult goal to reach: it requires continuous effort, constant checking and extensive knowledge. The ONE project considered different conceptualisations of accessibility that are relevant to collaborative projects, potentially in any context.

By considering accessibility as a complex problem, the ONE approach presents a collection of practical suggestions that address three different areas of intervention:

1. the *specific needs of specific people* that can be addressed by allowing and facilitating the use of Assistive Technology (i.e., the need for tagged PDF documents for Screen Reader users);
2. the *common needs of specific groups of people* that require barrier removal interventions to avoid common issues (i.e., the application of dyslexia-friendly typography and pagination, or the systematic use of automated transcription during meetings);
3. the *varied needs of a varied audience* that can be tackled through the application of Universal Design principles, to improve user experience and success chances for all. At this level, theories of inclusive design can help in envisioning spaces that are more accessible, meetings that are more welcoming, and documents that are better perceivable, for all.

The ONE approach, and especially the ONE Guide, points to resources that are already available online in order to act as a unifying gateway for accessibility approaches and practices. The overall suggestion is to start from accessibility interventions in smaller contexts to scale up at the proposal level, to make accessibility *a requirement*, rather than a feature.

AGILITY

When it comes to managing and steering European transnational projects with the aim to reduce the carbon footprint, and with a claim for accessibility, agility is an important cornerstone. Hence, the ONE approach embraces agile project management as part of its methodology to navigate projects safely, to deal with unforeseen moments and disruptive situations, and to achieve goals even in changing circumstances.

One central feature is *agility in steering the project* to meet changing requirements. This pertains to external changes such as a pandemic, a climate catastrophe or unstable geopolitical circumstances, as well as to internal changes like partners' issues regarding time and capacities or unforeseen events. Agility needs to be paired with constant reflection on the ongoing processes, asking: what do the team or the partners need? What does the project need? And what do external circumstances require from us? While the ONE approach does not favour any special method or process of agility, the following features are of relevance: (1) open-mindedness: acceptance of changing requirements and joint search for new solutions and alternative routes; (2) reflection and retrospective moments on a regular basis to make necessary adjustments and promote efficiency; and (3) an open atmosphere and good support for the partnership from the coordinator to keep the team motivated.

Regular interaction and communication are another key to agility and agile project management. Questions that need to be tackled are: how do we encourage quick feedback and quick responses? How much synchronous communication is necessary when collaborating almost exclusively virtually? Within ONE we maintained frequent communication via short weekly internal team meetings and virtual one-hour monthly partner meetings to keep everybody on track and keep things going, even remotely. For the meetings, we selected tools that require low bandwidth and facilitate easy access. These regular short and well-structured meetings help to stay on course even if things need to be changed 'on the go'.

Finally, when adopting agility in EU projects, some principles of change management as well as a sensitive approach with regard to culture, geographical distance, communication and (geo)political differences are crucial. As the ONE approach is about dealing with change, it is necessary to get everybody on board and to make the project team, the partnership and their organisations co-creators of change. We have learned how crucial it is to create shared understanding not only about the project and its targets, but also for one another, one's specific cultural backgrounds, and how they shape one's working and communication habits. This is one reason why we have developed and gathered methods and tools for creating social moments in online meetings. (The ONE Meeting Project, 2022). Furthermore, it is important to create possibilities to involve colleagues, leadership and other stakeholders in each step of the project – and take their feedback into account for further development, e. g., through consultation (Cendon, Royo, & Wietrich, 2022) or user testing and user participation (The ONE Meeting Project, n.d.).

DISCUSSION

When developing and implementing the ONE approach in our project, we were quite successful in building our case with regard to the carbon footprint. During the life-time of a two-year Erasmus+ project, the partnership would normally have three face-to-face transnational partner meetings, whereas in our project we only met face to face once during the lifetime of the project. This helped us to reduce our carbon footprint from 13,778 tons to 3,749 tons within our project (Duart *et al.*, 2022, p. 23). Nevertheless, as already mentioned before, online collaboration also produces CO₂ emissions: 15 one-hour online meetings with cameras off produce 0,377 kg CO₂ emissions which is around 9 kg less than online meeting with cameras on (Obringer *et al.*, 2021, p. 3).

Having said that, our experiences during the project also showed us some limits as well as some challenges when it comes to prioritising climate efficiency.

Reducing the carbon footprint via online collaboration

To meet or not meet face to face only once still poses a challenge with regard to building trust and bonds. Then, in such an exacerbated situation, turning off the camera in order to avoid huge data transfers is an even bigger challenge. We have tried to deal with this in two ways: First, we left our cameras on more often and second, we budgeted additional time for social experiences in virtual rooms that else come along with real meetings automatically.

Dealing with barriers and ensuring facilitators, online and offline

Diverse teams need varied strategies to fully answer to all accessibility needs. Mixing online and offline interactions adds an extra layer of complexity. It is therefore important to consolidate strategies that allow for minimizing and optimizing the accessibility interventions. With that in mind, the adoption of an agile framework should also consider continuous checks of barriers and facilitators that the development of a project can present or needs.

Reducing the carbon footprint by travelling less

Travelling, even for just ONE on-site meeting, requires in some instances travel by plane instead of by train. Our partners from Ireland, Northern Ireland and Finland would not have made it to our transnational partner meeting in Hagen (Germany) without going by plane within a reasonable amount of time. In the end, the partners from Italy and Spain also travelled by plane. Despite our best intentions, various reasons (time constraints, long travel time) made greener travel options challenging.

ONE Meeting during the project lifetime

ONE Meeting in a two-year Erasmus+ project is possible – we proved our case. However, although we did not meet face to face until almost the end of our project lifetime, we had two longer online meetings that took place in addition to our regular monthly one-hour online meetings: a kick-off meeting at the beginning of the project and a two-day midterm meeting. They were very important to keep our partnership vital and motivated. Furthermore, we have learned that we need to dedicate as much time as possible for socialising, exchange and informal get togethers in this ONE meeting. Timelines, project management issues, and reports about deliverables can take place online, but social aspects require at least one face-to-face meeting during the lifetime of a project.

CONCLUSION

This paper addressed an EU project that aimed at finding ways to make EU projects more sustainable by conducting European collaboration with ONE meeting only. The so called *ONE approach* adopted by the project consortium consists of three cornerstones – sustainability, accessibility and agility – contributing to making Erasmus+ projects greener. We described our approach, analysed our experiences, proved our case, and presented critical reflections of our experiences and challenges.

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