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The Central European Regional Network for Education Transfer (CERNET) Project - a focal point between east and west

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Introduction

The Central European region Vienna (A), Bratislava (SK), Brno (CZ) and Győr/Moson/Sopron (HU) – CENTROPE – has a population of approximately six million inhabitants from a range of ethnical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. From today's point of view, and in the light of the European Enlargement of the 25, a current common denominator, in the CENTROPE region, is the programmed unification and joint economic progress prophesied for the region. In 1976, (when our cooperation began) this was perhaps not quite so clear: the contours were still fuzzy and the reality of Enlargement was still for many - a dream.

But, educationalists like to dream.

When planning for a year, plant corn.

When planning for a decade, plant trees.

When planning for life, train and educate people.

(Chinese Proverb, Guanzi c.645 BC)

So, the educationalists in CENTROPE, wanting to plan for life, began to dream and think about training and educating in the region.

The four elements of cross-border (education) cooperation

The four elements of any cross-border cooperation, and in particular, in the area of education can be summed up as:

Element 1 The Idea

Element 2 The Partners

Element 3 The Projects

Element 4 The Finances

As already mentioned, (Element 1) the Idea was clear: training and educating people in the region of Central Europe - now called 'CENTROPE'.

The next task was to search for (Element 2) Partners, who shared the same European dream.

The European Office of the Vienna Board of Education, the regional School Board for the City and Province of Vienna, began searching (via e-mail, letters, personal links, etc.) for partners in the neighbouring regions of Bratislava (SK), Brno (CZ) and

Győr/Moson/Sopron (HU). Based on the political and management infrastructure of the regions, varying types of partners were eventually found:

- Bratislava (SK) – the Bratislava Board of Education, responsible for schooling in the City of Bratislava
- Brno (CZ) – the South Moravian Board of Education, responsible for schooling in the region of South Moravia
- Győr/Moson/Sopron (HU) – the Regional (Komitat) Pedagogic Institute, responsible for in-service training for Hungarian teachers in the Komitat.

At preliminary meetings in 1996 with these partners, the following Projects (Element 3) were identified:

1. the exchange of experience
2. the mobility of experts, teachers and students
3. the development and implementation of new forms of trans-regional schooling at primary and secondary level
4. the promotion of the economic, social and cultural cooperation through appropriate pre- and in-service training measures
5. research work on these educational initiatives.

But these types of projects are only possible when there is appropriate funding. So the next search was to find the kind of financial backing needed to implement these projects. This was (Element 4) the Finances. The European Union, itself, offered solutions in the form of the Structural Funds Project INTERREG.

European union structural fund project - INTERREG

INTERREG has three strands: A, B, and C (<http://europa.eu.int/inforegion>).

For the CENTROPE region strand A was appropriate: ‘Cross-border cooperation between adjacent regions aims to develop cross-border social and economic centres through common development strategies’ and in particular the educationalists in the CENTROPE region found a platform for cooperation: ‘Initiatives for encouraging shared use of human resources, and facilities for research and development, education, culture, communication, health and civil protection.’

The development of the INTERREG programme documents the genesis of the principle of cohesion:

‘1957 The countries signing the Treaty of Rome refer in its preamble to the need "to strengthen the unity of their economies and to ensure their harmonious development by reducing the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions".

1958 Setting-up of two sector-based Funds: the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF).

- 1975 Creation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to redistribute part of the Member States' budget contributions to the poorest regions.
- 1986 The Single European Act lays the basis for a genuine cohesion policy designed to offset the burden of the single market for southern countries and other less favoured regions.
- 1989-93 The European Council in Brussels in February 1988 overhauls the operation of the solidarity Funds (now referred to as the Structural Funds) and allocates ECU 68 billion to them (at 1997 prices).
- 1992 The Treaty on European Union, which came into force in 1993, designates cohesion as one of the main objectives of the Union, alongside economic and monetary union and the single market. It also provides for the creation of the Cohesion Fund to support projects in the fields of the environment and transport in the least prosperous Member States.
- 1994-99 The Edinburgh European Council (December 1993) decides to allocate almost ECU 177 billion (at 1999 prices), one third of the Community budget, to cohesion policy. Alongside the Structural Funds, a new Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) is created.
- 1997 The Treaty of Amsterdam confirms the importance of cohesion and also includes a Title on Employment which stresses the need to work together to reduce unemployment.
- 2000-2006 The Berlin European Council (March 1999) reforms the Structural Funds and adjusts the operation of the Cohesion Fund. These Funds will receive over €30 billion per year between 2000 and 2006, i.e. €13 billion over seven years. The Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-accession (ISPA) and the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD) complements the PHARE programme to promote the economic and social development of applicant countries in Central and Eastern Europe.'

In the context of INTERREG IIIA, the CENTROPE partners formulated a project called the CENTRAL EUROPEAN REGIONAL NETWORK FOR EDUCATION TRANSFER (CERNET) <http://www.cernet.at> and applied for funding to the European Union.

Cross-border (education) cooperation (also) means learning the rules

Based on the premise that long-term cultural, social and economic cohesion can only be based on long-term educational development, the CERNET partners had to make themselves familiar with aspects of European Union financial and structural funds policy; an area that could be identified, at least in 1976, as uncharted territory.

As can be seen, the European Union offers considerable financial backing for regional development and cohesion – but there is a price to be paid: namely the willingness and ability to conform to the rules and legislation that govern the funding of such projects. The CERNET partners from the various regional institutions had to learn these rules and regulations the hard way. There is no other way! This means that educationalists have to employ financial and accounting experts, who have to control the finance flow and monitor the budget. It also means understanding the principles of European Funding – the Co-financing principle i.e. for every EU EUR given an equivalent National EUR has to be offered – quoting the CiCe Funding Explanation: ‘What member institutions contribute is the ‘cost’ of the time their staff put into CiCe activities. This is NOT ‘real’ money: it is the monetary equivalent of staff time which the member institutions are held to contribute.’

This is relatively easy for smaller amounts but when larger projects are involved, as was the case with CERNET (CERNET I, 1996 - 2001 – ESF funding EUR 624.295,- and CERNET II, 2001 – 2004 ERDF funding EUR 892.860,-) it becomes increasingly difficult. But, this is something that has to be learned if educational dreams are to come true.

Cross-border education cooperation in more detail

One of the topics of cooperation, already mentioned, is: ‘the development and implementation of new forms of trans-regional schooling at primary and secondary level’.

The idea was to develop a concept for plurilingual primary, lower and upper secondary schools. The trans-national school development group decided to initially work on a model for the lower secondary sector (age group 10-14). The idea was to initiate a school where students from the four partner regions could study together. A site was chosen in Vienna and in 1998 the European Middle School (EMS) www.emsneustiftgasse.at opened its doors to 24 Austrian, 12 Czech, 12 Slovak and 12 Hungarian 10 year-olds.

Some of the key elements of the school are:

1. core national curricula taught in the mother tongue by national teachers
2. special teaching field called European Studies, involving elements of history, geography, biology, environmental studies, culture and art specific to the Central European Region, to Europe and, in context, to the world
3. school report cards in five languages, accepted in all the four partner regions and countries.
4. opportunities to learn the languages of the partners – (German) Czech, Slovak and Hungarian.

Quoting from an evaluation of the European Middle School carried out by Prof. Dr. Carol Morgan, University of Bath, England – the ‘success story’ of the EMS can be summed up in the following way:

... Pupils from all 4 countries have benefited in many ways, not only linguistically because of the varied languages in use in the school but also in terms of developing interactive and autonomous skills. Parents and teachers both within the school and in partner schools in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have also benefited ...

... The EMS offers a unique configuration of multilingual and multicultural schooling in action, revealing social benefits of such interfacing and the possibilities of harmonising qualifications.

... The European Studies curriculum offers the unique opportunity for the EMS pupils to become European in their thinking.

Another area of cooperation, as mentioned, is to support and implement 'the mobility of experts, teachers and students'. In this context CERNET developed a Central European School Network. Primary and secondary schools in the partner regions were offered the opportunity to link together and develop projects of joint interest – ranging from field trips, sports days, cultural visits, reciprocal questionnaires, and the development of educational materials. The networked schools were given a grant of €1600 for their individual projects. A key factor was that 60% of this grant had to be used for student mobility i.e. the lion share of the money had to be invested in activities where the students would meet face to face. The programme has been highly successful – more than 160 networks have been funded in the last few years.

Another programme was developed to promote social cohesion and mobility of experts and teachers: the CERNET Academy. In this programme, experts and teachers have the possibility to attend in-service training workshops at different venues throughout the CENTROPE region covering a wide range of topics. In particular, an important element of the programme has been and still is the language training workshops, where Viennese teachers have the opportunity to learn the languages of the neighbours – Czech, Hungarian and Slovak and reach Levels A1 and A2 of the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio. There is a similar workshop in Brno (CZ) for Czech teachers who want to learn German. This approach – 'intercomprehension' i.e. gaining an understanding of as many languages as possible, and not concentrating only on perfection in one – is the way ahead for the Central European region with its heterogeneous population.

For all these and many other activities, CERNET was awarded the European Union's Label for Innovative Modern Language Projects in 2003.

Despite all the difficulties and the difficult learning curve that we have experienced in the last years, it can be said from today's point of view, it was worth every minute of the effort and it always will be because: 'When planning for life, train and educate people'.

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