Exploring the effects of Covid-19 pandemic on European project's design and management: the analysis of the University of Bologna and the KU Leuven's experiences

Esplorare gli effetti della pandemia da Covid-19 sulla progettazione e sulla gestione dei progetti europei: l'analisi delle esperienze dell'Università di Bologna e della Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced higher education systems in most parts of the world to quickly adapt to face the emergency. While a certain amount of research has focused on analysing the

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influence of the pandemic on teaching and learning practices or on international mobility, less interest has been dedicated to the design and implementation of EU funding Programmes (i.e. Erasmus Plus). Through a qualitative exploratory research, the paper aims to analyse how the pandemic has affected the processes of Erasmus Plus programs (KA2 Strategic Partnerships), providing critical mass through the experiences of UNIBO and KUL, recognised excellences in this domain. The research was carried out through preliminary interviews and focus groups and involved 17 key observers and projects members. The conceptual framework that emerged suggests that different levels of adaptation based on Project Cycle Management phases (design vs implementation) and pandemic conditions (before vs during) to cope with collaboration and dissemination seemed required.

Keywords: Covid-19; exploratory research; qualitative analysis; higher education; European project design.

Abstract:
La pandemia da Covid-19 ha costretto i sistemi universitari di gran parte del mondo ad affrontare rapidamente l'emergenza. Mentre buona parte della ricerca si è concentrata sull'analisi dell'influenza della pandemia sulle pratiche di insegnamento e apprendimento e sulla mobilità internazionale, minor interesse è stato dedicato alla progettazione e alla gestione dei progetti nell'ambito di Programmi europei (es. Erasmus Plus). Attraverso una ricerca esplorativa qualitativa, il paper si propone di analizzare come la pandemia abbia influenzato i processi dei progetti Erasmus Plus (Partenariati Strategici KA2), facendo massa critica attraverso le esperienze di UNIBO e KUL, eccellenze europee in questo ambito. La ricerca è stata condotta attraverso interviste preliminari e focus group coinvolgendo 17 osservatori chiave e membri di progetti. Il quadro concettuale emersa suggerisce che sembravano necessari diversi livelli di adattamento in base alle fasi del Project Cycle Management (progettazione vs. implementazione) e alle condizioni pandemiche (prima vs. durante) per far fronte alla collaborazione e alla disseminazione dei risultati.

Keywords: Covid-19; ricerca esplorativa; analisi qualitativa; istruzione superiore; progettazione europea.

1. Introduction

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the emergency crisis effects have also impacted the education and higher education system. In particular, while a certain amount of research (EC, 2020a, 2020b; De Wit & Altbach, 2022) has focused on analysing the influence of the pandemic on teaching and learning practices or international mobility, less interest has been dedicated to the design and implementation of EU funding Programmes (e.g., Erasmus Plus). When the pandemic outbreak occurred, the European Commission was significantly investing in the specific Action "KA2: Strategic Partnerships". Indeed, in the period 2014-2020, 1.668 Strategic Partnerships have been funded (European Commission, 2021). Finally, according to a recent study on transnational collaborative projects in the period 2014 – 2018, the University of Bologna (IT) and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE) are among the Higher Education Institutions participating in the highest number of these projects (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021).

This study presents the first findings of a wider work; in particular, it represents the exploratory stage of a broader study involving a mixed methods approach, aiming to investigate the effect of the pandemic on the processes of Erasmus Plus (E+) Actions (KA2 Strategic Partnerships), through the

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experiences of UNIBO and KUL. In particular, the collaboration between two universities from different countries appeared useful not in comparative terms but in providing critical mass about the project design and management process. In fact, a direct link between the two institutions, including the co-participation in some common KA2 Strategic Partnerships projects and the consequent opportunity to access a significant set of data and privileged observers and practitioners, led to the decision to involve both institutions in this preliminary research.

The article starts with the contextual and conceptual framework of the research, and it presents the Project Cycle Management approach that has been used as a reference for the data collection. It introduces the context of the E+ Programme and the peculiarities of the focus area of the research, namely the KA2 Strategic Partnerships projects. Before the description of the methodological framework and results, the theoretical part is concluded with a short reference to the literature on the impact of the Covid-19on the E+ Programme and distance collaboration.

2. Project Design and Management of Erasmus Plus

In order to understand the contextual and conceptual framework of this research it is necessary to introduce (1) the *Project Cycle Management* (PCM) methodology, (2) the E+ Programme and (3) the management aspects of the E+ KA2 Strategic Partnerships projects.

1) The PCM methodology was adopted by the European Commission (EC) in 1992 as the main tool for project design and management (EC, 2005) for cooperation and development Programmes and it is now widely adopted for most of the European funding Programmes. It introduces the concepts of *relevance, efficiency and efficacy,* which have been adopted in most of the funding Programmes as the main award criteria to allocate funding (e.g., Erasmus+).

Five phases of the PCM are defined (Figure 1). The first phase is the "*Programming*", which consists of the definition of the problems, needs, and opportunities for the start-up of a new Programme. The second and the third phases of "*Identification*" and "*Formulation*" involve stakeholders in the initial definition of ideas in response to identified needs and in the development of projects in response to Call for Proposals. The "*Implementation*" phase represents the operational realization of the projects. Finally, the last phase is the "*Evaluation*", which refers to monitoring and verifying the project's progress during the life cycle (EC, 2005; Cappetta, 2014; D'Amico, 2014).

With regard to this research, the 3 phases of *Identification*, *Formulation* and *Implementation* have been at the core of the methodology. In fact, these phases represent the matching point between the "*donor*" (the EC) and the stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of the projects selected for funding.
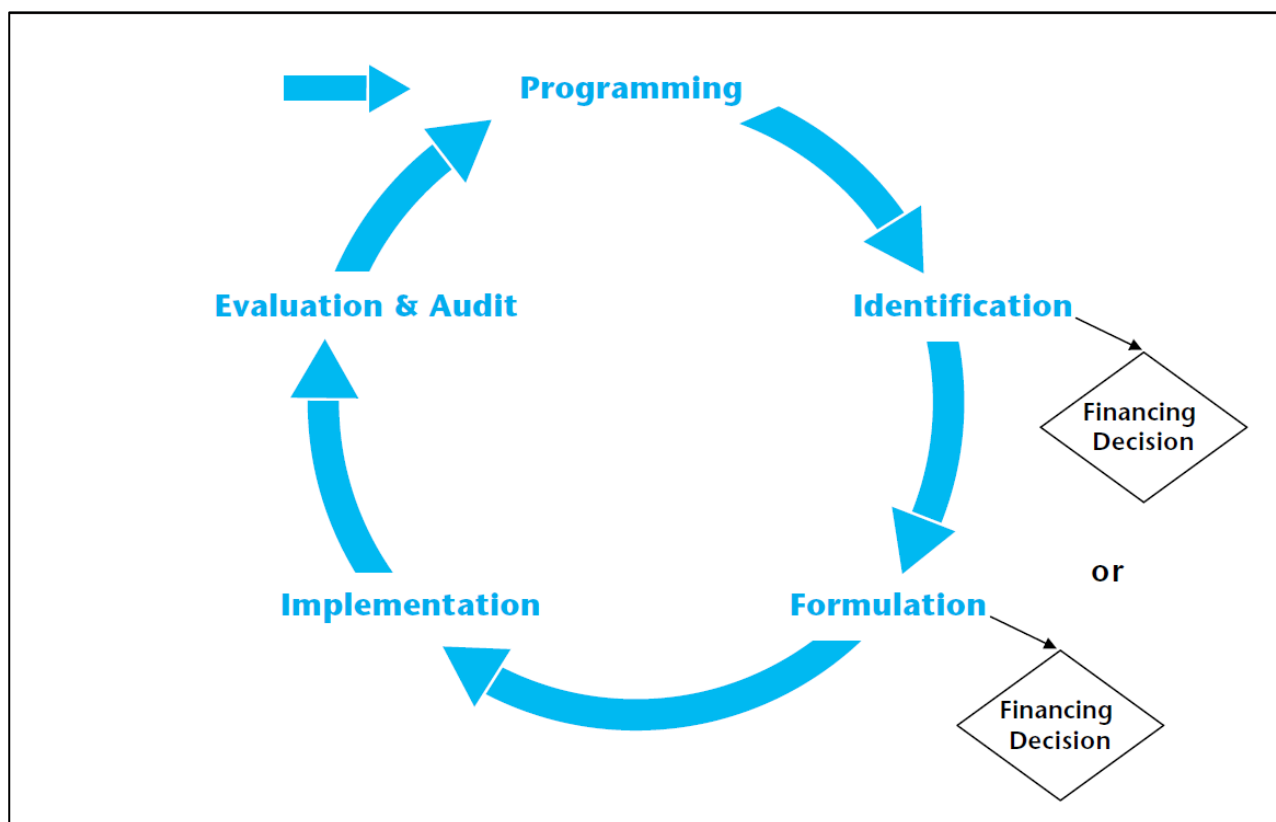
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Figure 1. PCM phases (Source: European Commission, 2005)

2) The *Erasmus+ Programme* (E+) is a "direct management" funding Programme, developed and directly managed by the EC without the intermediation of decentralized authorities (Ferrando, 2021). Despite being renowned worldwide for the mobility of HE students and staff, since 1987 it evolved from a pure mobility action to the current E+ "integrated" Programme. (Pepin, 2007; Girotti & Filippini, 2015). Moreover, it incorporates all the education sectors such as Higher Education, VET, School Education and Adult Education and it also integrates the objectives and the actions of the predecessors EU Programmes for Education and Training (Girotti & Filippini, 2015, Zygierewicz, 2016).

Although the majority of the resources of the E+ 2014-2020 Programme were dedicated to people mobility, a significant part of the budget was also allocated to "cooperation" activities among educational providers and other organisations. Consequently, one of the three Key Actions of the E+, the KA2, was entirely dedicated to cooperation and exchange of good practices (European Parliament, 2013). In particular, the focus of this research has been on the KA2 "*Strategic Partnerships*"; the Action aimed to the development of innovative projects in any educational sector (HE, VET, School, Adult, Youth, Sport), allowing the participating organization to gain international experience and promoting social inclusion, training of educators, recognition of qualifications and skills development (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021).

3) *Strategic Partnerships* are output-oriented educational projects developed by a transnational partnership. The funding scheme provides resources for the development of tangible outputs in a limited life spam (2 or 3 years). Innovative outputs can be tested through the organization of transnational learning and teaching activities gathering teachers and learners together in transnational

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events. Furthermore, quality assurance, monitoring, management, and dissemination are mandatory activities in support to the implementation of the actions.

The coordination of such projects requires a careful reflection on the project management approach and tools to allow smooth collaboration among the partners in a transnational context (Jørs, 2020). Thus, the assignment of roles and responsibilities to partners, including the organization of the transnational meetings and the coordination of the task forces, are essential elements of project management, as well as time and risk management and internal and external communication (Girotti & Sartor, 2013; Makrides, 2017; Jørs, 2020). Finally, Strategic Partnerships require a continuous remote, blended, and physical collaboration among partners, funding institutions, beneficiaries and stakeholders.

3. Covid-19 pandemic and EU Programme

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted many social, economic, and political areas. However, the pandemic also seems to influence the E+, affecting the fields of education and training, youth, and sport. Consequently, the EC provided a degree of flexibility in the management of European funding, including multilateral projects. In particular, KA2 Strategic Partnerships consortia, founding themselves in the uncomfortable zone to re-think the implementation plans for their projects, were allowed to extend the project duration and to report expenses for events realized in a virtual format. Considering the entity of the phenomenon, European Institutions and scholars have started to investigate the effects of the Pandemic in the Internationalization of Higher Education (IoHE).
On the one hand, studies on both the mobility of students and the teaching and learning practices are available. The EC published results of two surveys on Learning Mobility Activities (EC, 2020a) and on the recently funded European Universities Alliances (EC, 2020b). Furthermore, Associations and Networks of HEIs published studies and reports on the impact of the Covid-19 on mobility. In particular, IAU recently published a report on the impact of Covid-19 in Higher Education governance, teaching and learning, research and third mission (Marinoni et al., 2020). Additionally, scholars engaged in IoHE are contributing to the debate on the future of Internationalization after Covid-19 (Tasci, 2021; De Wit & Altbach, 2022; Ferencz & Rumbley, 2022), without a specific focus on multilateral collaborative projects, which remains a rather unexplored field.
On the other hand, two studies explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on E+ KA2 projects. Firstly, the contribution by Gogacz and Kędzia (2020) focused on the impact of the pandemic breakdown on Strategic Partnerships projects' virtual meetings and the required competencies for project management. Secondly, the research of Poszytek (2021) aimed to detect to what extent the relational and networking characteristics of E+ projects facilitate the sustainability of European transnational cooperation projects in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both studies support the theoretical framework of the current research.

4. The Covid-19 pandemic's impact on distance collaboration

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic breakdown and consequent closing of national borders, face-to-face collaboration was replaced by new strategies of distance collaboration. Several researchers (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Nagel, 2020; McKinsey Global Institute, 2021) tend to be positive about teleworking; in particular, they support the workers' view concerning the revision of pre-pandemic working conditions (i.e., in terms of working hours and performance) fostering the digital transition and investing in a hybrid and balanced model of work.

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Before the pandemic, virtual meetings represented one of the main distance collaboration strategies. According to Turmel (2018), a well-managed virtual session, especially during the first kick-off meeting, could impact the project quality in terms of 1) communication, 2) mutual understanding, and 3) a positive climate among participants – always considering an adequate use of technological tools. During the pandemic, planning and management of virtual meetings became part of professionals' everyday work lives. On the one hand, six elements have been highlighted as crucial for the virtual meeting: 1) camera on/off, which can impact communication and relationships, 2) management of the meeting (i.e., delays), 3) camera problems (i.e., the position or the lack of lighting), 4) eating, 5) microphone problems and 6) homeworking-related issues (Karl et al., 2022). On the other hand, it seems important to emphasize how the correct use of technological devices could support the social connection between project team members (Logemann et al., 2022). For instance, the loss of face-to-face communication because of the pandemic required workers some extra effort. According to this, virtual meetings and video conferencing devices could support maintaining social connection among professionals, reducing the feeling of isolation and enhancing the project team collaboration (Shamim, 2022a). Furthermore, it has to be considered that project management processes – which include virtual meetings – can be promoted if there is a cooperation between the project manager and team members (Shamim, 2022b). Finally, as indicated by literature (Zappalà, 2017; Albano et al., 2019), a not adequately managed online collaboration could increase: 1) the risk of overwork connected to health-related issues, 2) the overlay between personal life and work, as well as, 3) the high risk of (self) social isolation.

Distance collaboration was essential for managing transnational partnership projects. As mentioned before (Gogacz & Kędzia, 2020), pandemic likely seemed to affect the E+ regarding the planning of virtual meetings. In particular, properly managing an online session means being able to make more compromises and deal with many adjustments. Furthermore, it is suggested to rethink virtual meetings on the bases on 1) time, 2) frequency, 3) geographical coverage, 4) logistics, 5) way of conduct, 6) duration, 7) social aspect, 8) cultural aspects, 9) focus on participants, 10) quality of communication, 11) innovation, 12) personal visits to local organizations and 13) social activities. However, due to its crucial role in producing many risks for the project's success (e.g., social relationships or lack of skills), face-to-face collaboration appear should not be underestimated. In parallel, Caldeira et al. (2022) assume that workers and organizations could learn a lot from the Covid-19 pandemic by being more prepared in handling future interruptions due to a crisis and by improving their abilities to readjustment and adapt to new situations.

5. Methodology

The research arose from a question related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on European design. According to this, the present paper aims to analyse how the pandemic has affected the processes of E+ programmes (KA2 Strategic Partnerships), through the experiences of UNIBO and KUL, recognised excellence in this domain.

In this study, an exploratory research design was set up as preparatory to quantitative research (Lankshear, 1993; Morgan, 1996; Lumbelli, 2006). In particular, the choice of exploratory research becomes useful in defining variables to be controlled or observation categories to be selected (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 1999; Creswell, 2003); in fact, the present work represents the first step of wider research involving a *mixed methods* approach. Furthermore, the present research design has an exploratory-descriptive character since it aims to detect and identify the features of an issue about

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which little information is available (Nassar-McMillian & Borders, 2002). The study was divided into three stages: 1) a preliminary stage (May 2022) concerning two in-depth online interviews with key observers from UNIBO and KUL, employed within the International Relations Divisions of their University; 2) a second stage (June-July 2022) concerning three online focus group with researchers/professors who play the role of Coordinators or Partners in KA2 Strategic Partnerships projects (E+) for UNIBO and KUL; 3) a third stage (September 2022) concerning a final online focus group with key observers from UNIBO and KUL.

5.1 Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected in consultant with UNIBO and KUL international projects' office and two criteria were previously defined: the project features and the role into the E+ Project. First, the project features-related criteria were: a) projects started both in 2019 and 2020 and designed before or during the pandemic. According to this, some projects were preparing the submission during the pandemic outbreak, while some others were in the implementation stage; b) all the projects were KA2 Strategic Partnerships projects in the field of Higher Education (HE) or Vocational Educational and Training (VET). Secondly, the target held the role of a) Coordinator or Partner in E+ project before or during the pandemic; or b) university officer in an international projects' office (Key Observers) before or during the pandemic.

Although some authors state that no general rules occur as to the optimal number of focus groups (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) or sample size (Masadeh, 2012), some others (Krueger, 1994) suggested a minimum of three and a maximum of 12 focus group, as long as homogeneity between types of participants was maintained. Thus, four focus groups were conducted with two groups of UNIBO Partners/Coordinators (n=3; n=5), one group of KUL Partners/Coordinators (n=4) and one group of Key Observers from UNIBO and KUL (n=5). In particular, 29 researchers/professors from the two universities were contacted by e-mail and 12 of them agreed to participate (response rate 41.4%), whose 9 (75%) were involved in an E+ Project as Partner members and 3 (25%) as Coordinator. Finally, 5 university officers from UNIBO (n=2) and KUL (n=3) were contacted by e-mail and they all agreed to participate. In total, the sample consisted of 17 participants (10 from UNIBO and 7 from KUL) who were predominantly female (70.6%).

5.2 Instrument and Procedure

Due to the exploratory-descriptive nature of the research design and the aim to gather information on a specific predefined topic (Zammuner, 2003) through the purposeful use of interaction (Merton et al., 1990), it was considered suitable to use an online focus group (by using Microsoft Teams) lasting one and a half hours as a data collection instrument. Although traditional focus groups are usually conducted in groups of 6-12 participants, in virtual focus groups participants talk at a distance, simultaneously and therefore different modalities (Bloor et al., 2001) and smaller groups are accepted (Corbetta, 2003). Furthermore, as mentioned before, two in-depth interviews with university officers have been implemented in the first research stage aiming: on the one hand, to gather more extensive information on the specific topic through the point of view of who has the role of an observer on the whole process, and, on the other hand, to support the creation and evaluation of the outline with the list of focus group questions and topic.

Regarding the online focus group with project Partners and Coordinators, participants were asked to reflect on the PCM phases about the pandemic; in particular, the three central stimuli were the

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following: 1) The main difference during the identification and formulation phases between pre-pandemic and pandemic phase projects (i.e., about needs analysis, problem definition and detailed design of the intellectual outputs together with the partnership); 2) the main difference during the implementation phase between the projects of the pre-pandemic phase and those of the pandemic phase (i.e. regarding the actual implementation of the intellectual outputs, their dissemination, participation in international meetings, etc.); 3) the most critical issue concerning teamwork.

Finally, since the focus group is considered appropriate to provide evaluations and opinions by professionals or experts and to gather their different points of view on a topic, a process, a result, or a product (Bertin, 1989), a final focus group with five key observers (from UNIBO and KUL) has been implemented to comment the matrix structure originated from the previous 3 focus group.

5.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using an inductive approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) involving a data-driven coding process, as well as not attempting to fit the data into a pre-existing coding framework or into the researcher's analytical preconceptions (Semeraro, 2010). Otherwise, focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis in a bottom-up way and according to a rigorous procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006), through a "continuous, flexible and iterative process in which the researcher frequently moves up and down between the different stages of analysis, and backwards and forwards across the data to identify emerging themes" (Hackett & Strickland, 2018, p.9). An extract of the process output is presented in Figure 2. In particular, we used the "Framework approach" (Spencer et al, 2003) that consents a matrix-based systematic structure to manage, analyse and identify themes through to five interconnected stages (Spencer et al, 2014), suitable to novice researchers (Smith & Firth, 2011).

After a familiarisation phase with the data in which the video-recorded focus groups were transcribed and anonymize (stage 1), an initial thematic framework has been identified by two independent researchers of the research team by generating an initial set of themes and sub-themes in a coding index (stage 2). In addition, the transcription was divided into portions and coded with themes and sub-themes developed previously (stage 3). Findings were summarized and charted in a matrix (stage 4), to provide a mapping and an explanation of the data (stage 5). Finally, additional stages (Figure 3) to corroborate rigor were encompassed (Leal et al., 2015) and data qualitative analysis without data analysis software was carried out according to the literature (Hackett & Strickland, 2018).

QUOTE	CATEGORIES	SUBTHEMES	THEMES
"Maybe what made it easier for us was that we knew all the partners as well as coordinators and some of the partners knew each other, so that facilitated the shared writing regardless of the lockdown." [F1.1]	1.2.1 Facilitators linked to previous collaboration	2. Facilitators of online collaboration	1. Collaborative process during pandemic

Figure 2. Extract of development of theme "Collaborative process" during pandemic in Identification/Formulation Phases

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1. Transparency	Analysis progressed through systematic, visible, and interlinked analytical stages providing transparency in data analysis.
2. Researcher triangulation	After the third author's familiarization, identification of a thematic framework, and indexing of the data, the first author independently reviewed codes and thematic framework, and indexing of the data for fittingness, arriving at congruence between researchers.
3. Discussion, refinement of thematic framework, and interrelatedness	All authors discussed themes to assure consistency and accuracy between integration of data and interpretations. First author worked on the analysis, refining the thematic framework and discerning the relationships between themes.
4. Credibility	Findings were presented and discussed among all members of the research team to assure assertions were supported by the data and the interpretive framework encompassed the majority of the data.
5. Comparison with research literature	Results of analyses were compared with existing literature to confirm and expand study findings.

Figure 3. Strategy to corroborate rigor (Adapted from: Leal et al., 2015)

6. Main findings

In order to show the main findings of qualitative data analysis, it appeared useful to present them by incorporating the categories relating to the question on critical aspects of teamwork to the previous ones; in fact, these answers appeared to be a deepening of the previous questions focused on PCM. As indicated by Figure 4, five main themes and seventeen subthemes emerged. In particular, although the themes may seem to be repetitive (e.g., themes n.1 and n.3, n.2 and n.5), the fact of referring to different phases of the PCM likewise gives rise to differences in the structure of the sub-themes and the corresponding descriptive categories that emerged. For this reason, it was considered useful to keep them separate according to the timeline of the PCM. In the following paragraphs, the categorical structure for each stage of the PCM under consideration will be described and explored.

	The Identification and Formulation phases		**The Implementation phase**	
	Themes	Subthemes	Themes	Subthemes
During pandemic	*1.Collaborative process during pandemic*	1.Barriers to online collaboration 2.Facilitators of online collaboration 3.Needs linked to online collaboration	*3.Collaborative process during pandemic*	1. Barriers to online collaboration 2. Facilitators of online collaboration 3. Needs linked to online collaboration 4. Advantages linked to online collaboration 5. Disadvantages linked to online collaboration
			4.Dissemination products during pandemic	1. Barriers to online dissemination 2. Disadvantages linked to online dissemination 3. Advantages linked to online dissemination
Before pandemic	*2.Collaborative process before pandemic*	1. Barriers to online collaboration 2. Facilitators of face to face collaboration 3. Advantages linked to face to face collaboration	*5.Collaborative process before pandemic*	1. Barriers to face to face collaboration 2. Facilitators of face to face collaboration 3. Advantages linked to face to face collaboration

Figure 4. Conceptual Framework with main themes and subthemes

6.1 Identification and Formulation phases

According to the Figure 5, concerning the *Identification and Formulation phases* two main themes, seven subthemes, and twelve descriptive categories emerged. As mentioned before the Identification phase concerns the definition of project objectives and actions to be undertaken, and the Formulation represents the phase of the project idea elaboration and writing.

The first thematic core concerning the *Collaborative process during the pandemic* appears to be described by three characteristics: 1) *barriers to online collaboration*, concerning technical, relational or communicative aspects; 2) *facilitators of online collaboration*, represented by the presence of a previous collaboration, namely the level of the project team members' knowledge within the partnership, and the introduction of collaboration tools that promote reflexivity; 3) *needs to be linked to online collaboration*, concerning the need to adjustment and the need to learning about the online collaboration.

In parallel, the second thematic core representing the *Collaborative process before the pandemic* seemed to be described by three characteristics: 1) *barriers to online collaboration*, concerning criticism related to online communication; 2) *facilitators of to face to face collaboration*, concerning technical and relational aspects; finally, 3) *advantages linked to face to face collaboration*, represented by the goals' achievement and the teambuilding process.

The Identification and Formulation phases	
1. Collaborative process during pandemic	
2. Barriers to online collaboration	1.1.1 Barriers linked to technical aspects
	1.1.2 Barriers linked to relational aspects
	1.1.3 Barriers linked to communicative aspects
3. Facilitators of online collaboration	1.2.1 Facilitators linked to previous collaboration
	1.2.2 Facilitators linked to reflective practices
4. Needs linked to online collaboration	1.3.1 Need to adjustment
	1.3.2 Need to learning
2. Collaborative process before pandemic	
1. Barriers to online collaboration	2.1.1 Criticism related to online communication
2. Facilitators of face to face collaboration	2.2.1 Facilitators linked to technical aspects
	2.2.2 Facilitators linked to relational aspects
3. Advantages linked to face to face collaboration	2.3.1 Advantages linked to goals achievement
	2.3.2 Advantages linked to teambuilding process

Figure 5. Themes, subthemes and descriptive categories of the Identification and Formulation phases

6.2 Implementation phase

According to the Figure 6, concerning the *Implementation phase* three main themes, eleven subthemes, and thirty-seven descriptive categories emerged. As mentioned before, the Identification phase represents the project's operational realisation through the implementation of work packages. The first thematic core concerning the *Collaborative process during the pandemic* appears to be described by five characteristics: 1) *barriers to online collaboration*, concerning technical barriers, communication in general, communication with new partners, methods of interaction, digital fatigue, organizational issues, misunderstanding, the lack of human relations, the lack of previous collaboration, the lack of depth and the lack of UE Commission support; 2) *facilitators of online collaboration*, concerning technical aspects and previous collaboration; 3) *needs to be linked to online*

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collaboration, represented by the need to adjustment and need to learning; 4) *advantages linked to online collaboration*, concerning in particular advantages linked to economic aspects, simplification, administrative stuff and flexibility; finally, 5) *disadvantages linked to online collaboration*, regarding disadvantages linked to extra efforts, goals achievement and the loss of enthusiasm.

Furthermore, the second thematic core representing the *Dissemination products during the pandemic* seems to be described by three characteristics: 1) *barriers to online dissemination,* concerning mostly digital fatigue; 2) *disadvantages linked to online dissemination,* regarding mostly the lack of depth; finally, 3) *advantages linked to online dissemination*, concerning advantages linked to the availability of contents over time, the possibility to reach a larger number of people and a transnational audience, and the decision making process.

Finally, the third thematic core concerning the *Collaborative process before the pandemic* appears to be described by three characteristics: 1) *barriers to face-to-face collaboration,* regarding barriers related to the territory and linked to the communication; 2) *facilitators to face-to-face collaboration,* concerning technical aspects, previous collaboration, communication and relational issues; 3) *advantages linked to face to face collaboration,* regarding both the teambuilding and decision making processes.

The Implementation phase	
3. Collaborative process during pandemic	
1. Barriers to online collaboration	3.1.1 Technical barriers
	3.1.2 Barriers linked to lack of human relations
	3.1.3 Barriers linked to lack of previous collaboration
	3.1.4 Barriers linked to communication with new partners
	3.1.5 Barriers linked to communication
	3.1.6 Barriers linked to lack of depth
	3.1.7 Barriers linked to methods for interaction
	3.1.8 Barriers linked to digital fatigue
	3.1.9 Barriers linked to misunderstanding
	3.1.10 Barriers linked to organizational issues
	3.1.11 Barriers linked to lack of UE Commission support
2. Facilitators of online collaboration	3.2.1 Facilitators linked to technical aspects
	3.2.2 Facilitators linked to previous collaboration
3. Needs linked to online collaboration	3.3.1 Need to adjustment
	3.3.2 Need to learning
4. Advantages linked to online collaboration	3.4.1 Advantages linked to economic aspects
	3.4.2 Advantages linked to simplification
	3.4.3 Advantages linked to administrative stuff
	3.4.4 Advantages linked to flexibility
5. Disadvantages linked to online collaboration	3.5.1 Disadvantages linked to extra efforts
	3.5.2 Disadvantages linked to goals achievement
	3.5.3 Disadvantages linked to loss of enthusiasm
4. Dissemination products during pandemic	
1. Barriers to online dissemination	4.1.1 Barriers to dissemination linked to digital fatigue
2. Disadvantages of online dissemination	4.2.1 Disadvantages linked to lack of depth
3. Advantages of online dissemination	4.3.1 Advantages linked to the availability of contents over time
	4.3.2 Advantages linked to reaching a large number of people
	4.3.3 Advantages linked to the decision-making process
	4.3.4 Advantages linked to reaching transnational audience
5. Collaborative process before pandemic	
1. Barriers to face to face collaboration	5.1.1 Barriers related to the territory
	5.1.2 Barriers linked to communication
	5.1.3 Barriers linked to administrative aspects
2. Facilitators of face to face collaboration	5.2.1 Facilitators linked to technical aspects
	5.2.2 Facilitators linked to previous collaboration
	5.2.3 Facilitators linked to communication
	5.2.4 Facilitators linked to relational aspects
3. Advantages linked to face to face collaboration	5.3.1 Advantages linked to teambuilding process
	5.3.2 Advantages linked to the decision-making process

Figure 6. Themes, subthemes and descriptive categories of the Implementation phase

6.3 The Key Observers' critical view

The Key Observers were asked to comment on the categorical structure that emerged from data analysis by assuming the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, due to the implementation phase showing mostly categories, the Key Observers were asked to imagine the post-pandemic project implementation phase and to purpose features to be maintained.

The key observers positively evaluated the virtual collaboration also for sustainability reasons, although the dimension of face-to-face meetings remains essential for the relational and social aspects. Indeed, the need to promote balanced contexts that allow collaboration through a mixed mode has emerged. Furthermore, the social dimension is recognized to be crucial also for the impact on the quality of work and its valorisation could be useful for the project's success. In parallel, key observers considered the value of the technical equipment. In fact, it seemed important to ensure equal opportunities in the partnerships, especially for technological devices. Furthermore, Key Observers focused their attention on the European Commission's role, the perceived need to be more flexible in the future, and the importance of certain values strongly emphasized by the pandemic and linked to project management activities. In conclusion, Key Observers pointed out that what remains after this crisis period is a change of perspective; in particular, it increased the awareness that the process is a crucial stage in European projects as well as the final results.

6.4 Collaboration and Dissemination before and during the pandemic

Findings seem to be in line with previous studies. In particular, the analysis of focus groups with E+ projects' Partners and Coordinators from UNIBO and KUL may suggest that, when the collaborative process before the pandemic is compared with the same process during the pandemic, the barriers to collaboration increase. This trend seems to appear in *the Identification/Formulation phases* as well as in *the Implementation phase*. On the one hand, within the PCM phases, the barriers tend to increase and reach for technical and relational aspects (*Identification/Formulation phases*) or multidimensionality (*Implementation phase*). On the other hand, between PCM phases, barriers related to the difficulties in coping with organisational and communication failures because of pandemic, as well as the large time spent in a virtual interaction, were observed in the implementation phase; the latter does not necessarily guarantee the same level of depth as face-to-face communication. Finally, the lack of support from the EU Commission perceived by participants should be mentioned.

In both the *Identification/Formulation* and *Implementation phases*, the need for adjustment and the need for learning seemed to emerge only during the pandemic condition of collaboration. Likewise, into the *Implementation phase,* the "disadvantage" subtheme tended to emerge only during the pandemic condition for collaboration and dissemination; in particular, collaboration appears to be affected by disadvantages concerning motivational aspects ("goals achievement" and "loss of enthusiasm") and workload aspects ("extra-efforts"), whereas dissemination seems to be affected by disadvantages concerning the quality of work ("lack of depth"). Despite the limited qualitative data available, it appears to be in line with the literature (Logemann et al., 2022; Shamim, 2022).

Therefore, face-to-face collaboration develops motivation, focus, learning skills, and human relationships, especially during the pandemic period, among professionals who work on European transnational projects (Gogacz & Kędzia, 2020). Furthermore, according to Albano and coll. (2019),

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telework tends to increase the risk of social isolation since the difficulty of actively maintaining social relationships among the project team members forced to work online; in addition, the loss of enthusiasm and motivation could negatively impact the project quality. In addition, in line with the literature (Zappalà, 2017; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Nagel, 2020), where there was a habit of working virtually before the pandemic, no significant distinction seems found between the pandemic and pre-pandemic periods, since it promotes new forms of autonomy.

The conceptual framework may suggest that different levels of adaptation required of E+ Coordinators and Partners: (1) when they were simultaneously in the Implementation phase and in the absence of pandemic condition, a low level of adaptation seemed to be required and difficulties and facilitators were the typical ones of project management; (2) when they were simultaneously in the design phases (Identification/Formulation) and in presence or absence of pandemic condition, a medium level of adaptation seemed to be required; in fact, probably the fact that distance collaboration was being practiced even before the pandemic, may have mitigated the negative impact of the emergency on collaboration; finally, 3) when they were in the Implementation phase and in the presence of pandemic, a high level of adaptation seemed required in order to rethink the process (collaboration) and the products (dissemination) of E+ and to cope with the adverse effects of the pandemic on the personal and work contexts and the work content itself.

7. Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyse how the pandemic affected the processes of E+ programs (KA2 Strategic Partnerships), through the experiences of UNIBO and KUL. The conceptual framework through this qualitative research was analysed seemed to well-adapt to the dataset. In particular, the structure seemed to show how, when the health condition worsened and the PCM phases progressed, the number of sub-themes increased. Thus, there seemed to be more perceived barriers and disadvantages on the one hand, and a greater ability to identify new strategies and opportunities on the other hand. Despite the limited qualitative data available, findings received interesting comments from Key Observers and appeared to be in line with the literature about strengths and risks of distance collaboration (Zappalà, 2017; Albano et al., 2019) during pandemic (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Karl et al., 2022; Logemann et al., 2022; Shamim, 2022), likely the first results concerning virtual meeting of Strategic partnership (Gogacz & Kędzia, 2020; Poszytek, 2021).

Our findings suggest the importance of deepening the shared experience of professionals who design and implement international educational projects. Future research should focus on lessons learnt to avoid being found unprepared in any future emergency scenarios.

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