HUMAN CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRUCTURED UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN ALGERIA

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ABSTRACT. Capacity building is the main objective of the Strategicom project (2010-2013), an EU-funded project under the TEMPUS programme, which, specifically, aims at enhancing the university officials’ competences, so as to enhance the quality of a structured university communication strategy in Algeria. After analysing successful communication models in 12 leading European universities, the identified best practices will be adapted and transferred to Algerian Universities. The project will culminate in a policy recommendation paper to be presented to the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education for its approval, that will become a tool for the reform of the Algerian higher education structure.

The transfer of European Best Practices to Algerian Universities relies on a proposal of highly qualified on-line and in-country courses. This is intended to increase the technical skills and knowledge, in the area of communication strategy and ICT, of the staff selected to be part of the newly formed communication department in Algerian universities.

The Project, led by Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi, benefits from the support and involvement of the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and of the Research Center in Applied Economics and Development (CREAD), and relies on the international cooperation of five European and six Algerian higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS: Capacity building, Communication, Governance, Strategy

The Strategicom project, coordinated by Università degli Studi “Guglielmo Marconi”, originates from the perceived key role of universities in the knowledge-based economy. This project, thereby responding to the second core area of EU funded TEMPUS Programme on Governance Reform, has been conceived in order to contribute to the fulfillment of Algeria’s
national priorities, concerning University Management and Services for Students and Development of International Relations. Strategicom has recently been presented at the 24th World Conference of ICDE (International Council for Open and Distance Education), held in Indonesia in October 2011, which is a leading global organization for the open and distance education community. The conference, which was significantly titled “Expanding Horizons - New Approaches to Open and Distance Learning”, contributed in providing a prominent forum for sharing ideas on the redefinition of roles and strategies of ODL in promoting cross-nation human capacity building. Capacity building is the general objective of Strategicom, which, specifically, aims at enhancing the university officials' competences, so as to enhance the quality of a structured university communication strategy in Algeria. As a logic consequence, Strategicom assures a positive response to the non-European partner institutions for an increased capacity of positively tackling the pressures of globalization. Which, concretely, means promoting competitiveness, forging transnational collaboration and accumulating international prestige. In order to achieve Strategicom objectives, after identifying successful communication models in European universities, an Algerian model of structured communications has been drawn up. The model has served as the base for a blended course on strategic communications, which Algerian university partners will deliver through in-country workshops and e-learning sessions targeted to the strategic professional profiles. The project will then culminate in a policy recommendation paper, which, once approved by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education, will serve as a tool for the reform of the Algerian higher education structure and will become the model to follow for the implementation of the communication strategy in that country. This paper will give a thorough overview of the Strategicom project. In the following sections the various aspects of the project will be described. At first, the project’s background will be presented, explaining how the project idea was developed. Subsequently the adopted methodology will be showed, i.e. the analysis carried out on the state of communication in Algeria universities and on the European leading universities’ best practices, bringing to the production and implementation of a communication strategy
fitting Algerian local need, to be presented for Ministry’s approval. Other important aspects of the project will be then covered. Those meant to ensure its success throughout and beyond the project life: specifically the project dissemination strategy, the sustainability actions and the quality control and monitoring.

**Background**

Local partners’ in-depth assessment of higher education in Algeria revealed that universities’ communication structures in that country need to increase their effectiveness in all their different aspects: between university and students, within departments, between Algerian universities and between Algerian and European universities.

Consequently, in order to keep pace with the continual global changes facing higher education, and with the purpose of more effectively respond to external collaboration requests, Algerian universities need to increase those tools and competences capable of allowing them to take decisive action, effectively and efficiently. Therefore, a structured communications strategy at the university level is crucial to not only increase visibility, but also to:

- adapt the higher education system to ICT progresses;
- create a networking system for the continuous monitoring and improvement of links between national universities;
- promote the use of ICT for spreading scientific and technical information;
- provide Algerian students with a dynamic learning environment, capable of evolving together with international changes;
- tap into the scientific and technological university potential, as a driver for economic, social and cultural development;
- implement or strengthen the universities’ international relations with universities or other institutions, with the aim of establishing positive cultural and academic exchanges.

Algeria’s 5-year Development Plan for Higher Education calls for a new approach in management through the promotion of new methods. The Direction des Réseaux et Systèmes d’Information
et de Communication Universitaires (DRSICU), created under the Development Plan, specifically aims to set up an information system within the higher education sector, and the launch of a distance learning national project. Accordingly, the DRSICU promotes the implementation of a communication system, able to make use of ICT tools for improving university management. It is within this framework that Strategicom calls for a concretely different approach to communications, through the establishment of a university structure acting as a support to the communication services.

While previous TEMPUS projects in Algeria had mainly focused on training and curricular reform, Strategicom is designed to create lasting change in the way communications are handled, through the implementation of a cohesive and strategic communications structure.

Effective internal and external university communications must be planned, organized, and developed within a university communications strategy. Thanks to Strategicom, Algerian universities will develop more effective communication, so as to raise their visibility, implement their activities, develop cooperation with partners, mobilize resources and create more effective links among university staff and national and international institutions. Furthermore, Algerian universities will benefit from the defined communication strategy and (in order to) to better address the targeted audience, ensure limited resources to be effectively used, define the priorities, establish a clear direction for daily activities and methods to measure future success.

**Partnerships**

Strategicom may be carried out thanks to a strong and highly qualified partnership, including six Algerian higher education institutions, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education, the Research Center in Applied Economics and Development (CREAD) and five European members. All the Algerian partners have a public status and already have an established attitude in collaborating with foreign universities. Furthermore, due to their strong interest in participating to the qualitative enhancement of the Algerian University
communication system, and its subsequent opening to the rest of the world, they are aware that the development of an effective communication system through this TEMPUS project represents exactly the type of structural reform that Algerian higher education institutions require.

**Description and methodology**

This section will provide a brief description of the methodology followed throughout the project activities.

**Analysis**

This phase, now concluded, consisted in the Algerian higher education needs assessment analysis, together with the concurrent analysis of the European best practices on university communication. This phase has culminated with the formulation of an Algerian model, based on European best practices and adapted to local needs.

**Algerian higher education needs assessment analysis**

This analysis was meant to investigate on the current state of communications. Hence, a selected sample group of Algerian universities, composed by managers and senior staff, was surveyed. The research has revealed that the majority of Algeria universities have similar equipment and human potential, thus meeting the organizational and operational charts established by the Ministry of Higher Education. Yet, due to a full “Communications Boom”, a need for structural measures is felt, which has increased the need to create a communication structure based on best practices identified in leading European universities.

**Analysis of the European best practices on university communication**

At this stage, 12 European universities with successful communications models, according to the Bologna Process parameters, were identified and had their best practices in communications analyzed. This analysis took the form of an on-line survey. The survey being considered as one of the best ways for an organization to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of its existing communication approaches, and the general state of communications. The
highest possible number of rectors, general and communication managers were chosen as survey participants, so as to acquire a fairly representatives sample of how communication is handled in European universities. The survey was focused on six key areas: 1) Effective internal communication; 2) External and internal publications; 3) Web development; 4) Media liaison; 5) Stakeholder liaison and Branding enhancement; 6) Intelligent CRM (Customer Relationship Management). The European project partners collected the trends and strategies in the European Universities through online questionnaires, interviews and desk research.

The communication practices in the identified leading universities were then analyzed and generalized into best practices, whose characteristics could be applied to a larger number of higher education institutions.

Subsequently, the Algerian partners participated at a study tour that allowed them to meet with the European partner universities. This activity played an essential role in understanding the real needs and priorities of Algeria universities and in discussing the transferability of the European selected best practices. This allowed the Project Working Group to have all data and knowledge in hand to work on the identification of a structured communications model adapted to Algerian higher education institutions.

Formulation of an Algerian model based on European best practices and adapted to local needs

A report was drafted including the European universities' communications models, reviewed in order to fit the Algerian universities' needs, with the identification of the appropriate professional profiles and required skills to implement these new roles. The report suggested that the best practices be classified in three levels, all covered by Strategicom.

The basic model, which comprises the most urgent and easy transferable best practices (e.g. minimum resources and skills required, equipment and/or service already available). This basic model includes the following areas:

- a proposal for an organization structure based on up to 5 resources;
- set-up of communication services such as Multimedia and the creation of a corporate video;
• consistency order numbers and data on the website’s front page of the university web site;
• production of electronic newsletters (between departments and towards the students) to energize internal communications;
• External Communication Model.

The intermediate and advance models have been presented as recommendations for the future.

The intermediate model includes:

• a more advanced organizational structure;
• a website strategy;
• a press and media model, which, depending on the current state of the university, can include a WebTV channel programme, with input from the user-generated content (UGC) and freeware (You Tube - Vimeo);
• a plan for a structured relationships with employers.

The advanced model will include all the items from the basic and intermediate model. In specific:

• an alumni Association programme
• the set-up of an International Project Office.

Once finalized, the final report has been submitted to the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education for its approval, thereby making it the model to follow, in order to implement the communication strategy.

**Communication strategy implementation**

To ensure a successful and efficient implementation of the Communication Strategy, it is essential to focus on two aspects. One is the training of the staff that will be supporting the structure and that might not already have the skills required to perform his work effectively. The other is the testing in the partner universities, to ensure that all aspects and impacts of the changes be analyzed and optimized before rolling out the plan to all universities nationwide.
**The training phase**

The training phase will include online and in-country training, provided to five professional profiles per university, which, according to the previous surveys in Algeria and Europe, have been identified as necessary to build up the future communication structure. In specific:

- a director of communication
- a communication manager responsible for internal communication
- a communication manager responsible for external communication
- a graphic designer
- a webmaster.

The training path will combine individual study, on-line and offline learning, workshops and online cooperative moments with the tutors and the other students.

The production of the online learning material deserves a specific mention in this context, as only a part of it will be produced by the European partners as multimedia lessons. Indeed, whenever it may prove possible, the training modules will be delivered through already existing Open Educational Resources (OER), available in French (brought by such repositories as the UniversitySurf, ParisTech or MIT OpenCourseWare) or to be translated into this language.

Today a great number of OER are available on web repositories, and the Strategicom partners rely on the innovative thrust present in this kind of knowledge dissemination.

As underlined by the Hewlett's Foundation, at the heart of the movement toward Open Educational Resources is the simple and powerful idea that the world's knowledge is a public good and that technology in general and the Worldwide Web in particular provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use, and reuse knowledge. OER are the parts of that knowledge that comprise the fundamental components of education - content and tools for teaching, learning and research.

**The testing phase**

The testing phase will consist in the implementation of the Strategic Communication Plan, by establishing a pilot communication
structure within the six Algerian partner universities. Its objective is to test the Communication Plan applicability within the Algerian university environment, in order to facilitate its smooth implementation nationwide upon the previous approval by the Ministry of Higher Education. During this phase, a preliminary evaluation of the pilot launch is planned to determine what obstacles would be encountered, how they would be overcome, and respond to any other identified problems, before continuing with the pilot testing phase.

**Consultation**

The consultation is being carried out all along the project life. It ensures the project to get ongoing support from the Algerian authorities, by updating them regularly on the evolution of the project phases. Consultation involves the joint analysis of the Strategic Communication Plan and the drafting of a Policy Recommendation Paper to be submitted for approval to the Ministry of Higher Education. The final Policy Recommendation Paper will provide an-in-depth analysis of the state of communication, the options available, and the specific actions to be implemented within the Algerian higher education institutions.

**Strategicom effectiveness and future developments**

In order to ensure the project’s effectiveness and enhance its potential for future development, a series of integrated activities, comprising sustainability, quality control and dissemination, are taken into account by the project management.

**Sustainability**

The sustainability strategy relies on the execution of different actions at different levels of the project life, with the purpose of enhancing the project results impact. Sustainability is guaranteed by the continuous maintenance relationship and support of the universities rector's and top management, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education, and the project consortium intention to continually involve all governance actors. Sustainability is promoted at two different levels: the project and the context level. The actions carried out at project level are designed to improve
partners’ sense of responsibility, motivation as well as their ongoing involvement throughout the project life. To this purpose, an in-depth assessment has been performed to gather the project target group needs and future requirements, in order to make sure that the different aspects of the project match the real needs of universities managers.

In addition, each Algerian partner university will set up focus groups engaged in the communication structure launch, through a shared definition of the communication model, the implementation of the communication strategy, the planning of roundtable with the Ministry of Higher Education and the drafting of the Policy Recommendation.

At context level, the partners are implementing promotional activities tailored to improve the awareness of governance actors, and to encourage their interest and involvement in the project implementation during the whole duration of the project. To this purpose, the following activities have been carried out since Strategicom’s start-up:

- the production of promotional materials such as institutional newsletters and brochures;
- a mobilization conference aiming at national actors is planned in Algiers just before the launch of the pilot communication structure within partner universities. The conference is focused on the promotion of an active dialogue about the governance decision making process, the role of all actors in developing reforms and in particular the role of Algerian universities.

Quality control and monitoring

A Quality Control and Monitoring Plan has been drawn up by the partners. The Plan is designed to evaluate the quality of the strategy, the processes and the tools used in the context of the project. Such evaluation is carried out at 3 levels:

1) External Quality Control and Monitoring. This activity is carried out by an external Quality Expert, focusing on project management, whose aims is assuring the overall project quality and success by identifying project risks related to key activities and by working out the properly corrective
actions. Following each audit, the quality auditor will draft management recommendations to improve the management process and put in place eventually corrective actions.

2) Internal Quality Control and Monitoring. This activity aims at assessing and monitoring the project outputs and deliverables related to the main project activities to guarantee the achievement of the objectives of each activity, according to the quality indicators for efficaciousness and efficiency of the mid-term results.

3) Internal Quality Control and Monitoring of the Pilot Communication Structure. This activity will monitor and assess the pilot application effectiveness and impact through the use of questionnaires, checklists and grids to monitor the structure activity progress.

**Dissemination strategy**

The dissemination strategy will help promote the activities and results during the entire project life. All project partners are pro-actively involved in the fulfillment of the dissemination activities, in order to reach the greatest possible amount of final users at local, national and European level.

The project direct beneficiaries of dissemination activities consist primarily of Algerian university managers and professional staff in charge of communication activities, together with other relevant Algerian actors, such as, in particular, the Ministry of Higher Education and interested economic stakeholders. Further relevant beneficiaries outside Algeria will be the European universities' communication managers and international affairs staff.

The dissemination plan is meant to guide the partners with the purpose of spreading as wide as possible the project's outcomes and outputs achieved during the entire project life. The dissemination activity includes different strategies.

One is the Internet Strategy, which consists in the set-up and upgrading of a project website by partners, in order to achieve a web presence that serves to promote the Strategicom’s project objective and the production of a periodic e-newsletter.

The Event Strategy, instead, includes a conference organized at the end of the project at the University of Tizi Ouzou, to present the communication plan, the results from the pilot structure, and the Policy Recommendations approved by the
Ministry of Higher Education. Finally, the Publication Strategy aims at creating brochures and posters produced in order to illustrate the project objectives and activities and the way they will help strengthening the Algerian university communication structure. Newsletters in electronic format will be printed out and distributed in occasion of events or other formal/informal meetings in order to reach a wider audience not very familiar with PC and internet.

Conclusion

The Strategicom Project has a planned duration of three years. Whilst the Policy Recommendations approved by the Ministry will represent the end of the project, as a matter of fact they represent the beginning of a new communications structure for Algerian universities. Indeed, Strategicom’s goal is to establish the strong basis that will allow Algerian universities to build a sustainable communication structure and strategy. Besides, they will acquire all the skills to develop effective communications with the outside world so as to raise its visibility, implements its activities, develop cooperation with partners, mobilize resources, and more effectively link university staff with national and international institutions.

Strategicom is also providing some recommendations on future directions, as mentioned in the recommended intermediary and advanced model of the plan. This will give Algerian universities some directions on how to ensure a smooth evolution of their structure and strategy, thus getting closer and closer to the European best practices models.

The strong relationship developed throughout the project should also allow Algerian partner universities to remain in close contacts with the European partner universities, benefiting from strong network of contacts among which ideas, experience and knowledge will be shared.

Moreover, and beyond the scope of Strategicom, the ideas developed and implemented in this project may be of interest to stakeholders in other Maghreb countries. The model brought up by this project could arouse their interest and be adapted to the specific needs of the local higher education institutions.
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References


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