

LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN UNICOM PROJECT

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Abstract

The author describes lifelong learning opportunities of both short and long term courses and seminars offered to employees of the University of Pardubice within a 3-year long EU-funded project. The author also presents advantages and disadvantages of such learning, practical insights of both tutors and participants and suggestions for improvement of similar courses and seminars in the future.

1. Introduction

The project named UNICOM (Innovative and Integrated Concept of Language Training towards Quality Assurance, Excellence and Internationalization) runs from January 2012 to December 2014 and is divided into six key project activities: Language Teaching Innovations, Excellence and Individuality Sustainment, Creation of a Bilingual University Environment, E-Learning Implementation, ICT Utilization and Professional Development. The target groups include university students (both undergraduates and postgraduates) as well as university academic and administrative staff.

2. Professional development

The key activity focusing on professional development deals with lifelong learning provided to academic and administrative staff of the University of Pardubice including the Language Centre staff in form of language courses (both general and field-specific), seminars and modules (intercultural communication, presenting skills, testing and standardization, academic skills). The general language courses are outsourced and delivered by the language agency while field-specific courses are provided by the Language Centre employees. Both international and Czech experts cover the topics of these seminars and modules. Two project conferences take place during the project period.

2.1 General language courses

Long-term courses in the UNICOM project offered to the academic and administrative staff of the University of Pardubice included 15 general English, German and Russian courses at different levels of CEFR scale (starting at A1 up to B2 level and moving one level up in the course of the project). General English courses were outsourced and the selected language agency provided both Czech teachers and native speakers as course tutors. The initial placement tests were designed by the Language Centre staff and the test results assisted in the course level allocation. The 90-minute courses took place once a week. The number of course participants was limited to 13, and all courses run on the university premises in language teaching friendly classrooms both during and outside of working hours. In June 2013 the progress of course participants was tested and new courses were offered to the participants at the appropriate higher CEFR level based on their test results. The long-term courses will finish in September 2014 and all participants will receive certificates with their achieved level of language competence according to the CEFR scale.

2.2 Field-related courses

There were 8 field-related courses in English and Russian starting at B1+ level taught by the Language Centre staff from October to May 2013. Covered topics related to economics, engineering and natural science,



INVESTICE DO ROZVOJE VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ

especially chemistry. Participants had higher initial language competency. The 90-minute courses took place once a week with a limited number of 13 participants. They copied the regular university winter and summer term periods.

2.3 Seminars, modules and project conferences

The UNICOM project seminars and modules focused on academic writing and speaking, presenting in English, intercultural communication, testing and standardization. They were delivered by both Czech and foreign experts. The involvement of foreign experts was especially important in order to increase international openness at the University of Pardubice. The first project conference took place in January 2013 and focused on sharing good practices gained during the completion of project, the second three-day project conference was organized in June 2014 and focused on sharing good practices in tertiary language education.

3. Lifelong learning opportunities

Lifelong learning has been recognised as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area since 2001. Lifelong learning strategies mentioned in EHEA documents [1] are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies. Lifelong learning is considered a recognised mission of all higher education institutions. Adults in employment belong to the three most significant groups of intended users of lifelong learning services offered by higher institutions. The vision of Lifelong Learning in the Czech Republic issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [2] emphasizes support for personal development, social cohesion and active citizenship and employability.

3.1 Personal development opportunities

The author believes that the character of courses, seminars and modules offered in the UNICOM project meets the personal development criteria in the lifelong learning process and offers the participants the opportunity to gain additional high-quality information directly in their workplaces without time-consuming transfers. The participants appreciated the chance to learn skills that are either very closely connected with their academic field or that are necessary to master in order to present their research results. They recognized the importance of intercultural skills for conferences and international meetings.

3.2 Employability

The project certificates clearly stating the topic of the course, seminar or module issued by the organizers enabled the participants to build their own portfolio which can be used as a valuable reference tool for the current employer or increase the participants' employability in the future.

3.3 Practical insights

The author interviewed three colleagues from the Language Centre of the University of Pardubice who were able to critically reflect back on their experience as both the course or seminar tutors or participants. All of them appreciated the highly practical focus and the opportunity to self-reflection in the student's role. They also valued the chance to practice methods like team teaching. They considered the time constraints as the main negative aspect.

4. Project improvement suggestions

The project organizers suggest the following changes to improve similarly focused projects in the future based on nearly three-year long experience. The initial tender conditions have to be carefully specified in order to achieve the required quality of the tutors. It appears to be better not to outsource a language agency but preferably use own highly qualified Language Centre teaching staff. There needs to be a financial reward system put in place for the university staff willing to educate themselves. The participants' initiative to achieve higher qualification should be directly connected with promotion opportunities. Based on the attendance problems in the long-term courses the project organizers believe that the participants should financially



