



ADAPTATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ERASMUS+ KA2 PROJECT UNDER EMERGENCY HEALTH CONDITIONS

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Abstract:

This article presents the management of a European Erasmus+ KA2 project entitled “*Art Journeys in Europe*”, implemented under the challenging conditions of the COVID-19 health crisis. The project was coordinated by the Special Vocational High School–Gymnasium of Messolonghi, in collaboration with partner schools from Italy, Spain, and Poland. The outbreak of the pandemic significantly disrupted mobility activities and required careful re-planning, as well as targeted management strategies, in order to maintain the engagement of all participating stakeholders. The article highlights the adaptations that were implemented and the tools that were employed to ensure the successful completion of the project. Reflecting on the overall process, it becomes evident that these interventions not only facilitated the smooth implementation of the project but also contributed substantially to its pedagogical value, despite the challenging circumstances.

Keywords: Erasmus, European educational programmes, COVID-19, distance collaboration, pedagogical innovation

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1. Introduction

Even before distance education became an integral part of the daily practice of the educational community, strong needs for the digital transformation of education had already been identified. As early as 2017, the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu) defined the core digital competences required of teachers in the contemporary school environment (Redecker & Punie, 2017).

However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital transformation occurred in a sudden and compulsory manner, leaving the educational community largely unprepared (UNESCO, 2020). This digital transition did not emerge through dialogue, informed decision-making, and systematic preparation, but rather as an urgent response to widespread lockdowns (Sysoieva, 2022).

Similar confusion was also observed in approved European educational programmes such as Erasmus+, which constitute a fundamental pillar of innovation, collaboration, and the exchange of good practices among educational institutions at the European level. These programmes are traditionally based on face-to-face cooperation, the mobility of students and educators, and experiential learning. During the pandemic period, however, the abrupt suspension of physical mobility and the forced shift to distance communication created serious challenges for their implementation, rendering the achievement of their initial objectives particularly demanding, if not seemingly unfeasible (European Commission, 2020).

The challenges were even more pronounced in the case of European educational programmes. The sudden transition to distance education exposed significant inequalities and organisational difficulties within educational systems worldwide (OECD, 2021). Unlike formal educational processes, where operational frameworks are predefined, Erasmus+ programmes rely heavily on voluntary participation, personal commitment, and the active collaboration of all stakeholders. Distance implementation hindered meaningful communication, guidance, and coordination among participants, weakening the experiential nature of the activities. This situation corresponds to what the international literature describes as *emergency remote teaching*, namely a temporary and compulsory form of distance education that differs substantially from systematically designed and pedagogically structured online learning (Hodges *et al.*, 2020; Bozkurt *et al.*, 2020). As a result, core objectives of the programmes—such as intercultural interaction, the exchange of good practices, and the development of social and cultural competences—were at risk of being significantly limited or altered in relation to their original intent.

Recent post-pandemic studies indicate that, despite the return to face-to-face education, the experiences of the pandemic have substantially influenced the perceptions of both learners and educators regarding modes of learning. A case study conducted at a higher education institution in the United Kingdom revealed that participants recognise the added value of hybrid and digital practices, provided that these complement rather

than replace face-to-face teaching, while issues related to digital inequality, social interaction, and learner engagement were also highlighted (Crick *et al.*, 2023).

The present study aims to highlight the ways in which a European Erasmus+ KA2 programme was adapted and implemented under conditions of a public health crisis. Through the case study of the programme “*Art Journeys in Europe*”, the role of adaptability, collaboration, and pedagogical innovation in maintaining educational continuity is explored.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework is presented; this is followed by an analysis of the challenges and adaptation strategies, the presentation of the implementation experience, and finally, the concluding remarks.

2. Programme Overview

The European Erasmus+ KA2 programme was entitled *Art Journeys in Europe* and was implemented under Action KA229 – School Exchange Partnerships of the 2019 call for proposals (European Commission / EACEA, 2019), with a planned duration of 24 months. The aim of the programme was the exchange of good practices and the enhancement of educational inclusion for students with special educational needs, as well as students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). To achieve this objective, the use of art and cultural heritage was selected as the main pedagogical tools.

The coordinating school of the programme was the Unified Special Vocational Lower and Upper Secondary School of Messolonghi from Greece, in partnership with school units from Italy, Spain, and Poland. All participating schools were active in primary or secondary education and had experience in educating students with special educational needs, as well as in participating in European collaborative programmes.

The programme involved four schools, with approximately three teachers per school and a total of around twelve students, including learners with special educational needs and students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The implementation period extended over 24 months, during which a series of collaborative pedagogical, artistic, and intercultural activities were planned and gradually implemented.

The programme was designed with an emphasis on social inclusion, equality in education, and the exploitation of European cultural heritage. At the same time, it was directly linked to addressing early school leaving and enhancing student well-being. In order to develop basic skills, social interaction, and students’ active participation in the learning process, various fields of art were utilized, such as visual arts, printmaking, music, and theatre (UNESCO, 2017).

According to the initial planning, the project included five transnational mobilities of students and teachers, hosted by the partner countries, as well as short-term joint staff training activities and collaborative artistic workshops. These mobilities were intended to promote experiential learning, intercultural dialogue, and direct interaction among

participants through face-to-face engagement in authentic cultural and educational settings.

In parallel, the use of digital tools and the eTwinning platform was foreseen to support communication, collaboration, documentation, and the dissemination of the programme's results at national and European levels. Digital environments were planned as complementary spaces for cooperation, enabling continuous interaction between schools beyond physical meetings.

The structure and overall design of the programme reflected the principles of inclusive education and experiential learning, setting as a key objective not only the development of cognitive skills, but also the strengthening of self-confidence, social inclusion, and the European identity of the participating students.

3. Adaptation to Emergency Public Health Conditions

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in the educational process, as well as in the implementation of European educational programmes, were sudden and radical. The original design of the *Art Journeys in Europe* programme was directly affected, as travel restrictions, universal lockdowns, and the suspension of face-to-face operation of school units made it impossible to carry out the planned transnational mobilities and joint activities with physical presence, thus requiring immediate redesign.

The abrupt closure of schools and the rapid shift from face-to-face to online teaching disrupted educational systems worldwide, affecting students, teachers, and families, and highlighting structural inequalities and challenges in ensuring learning continuity during the pandemic (Tarkar, 2020).

Taking into account the new circumstances, the programme's pedagogical team did not remain passive in the face of the emerging difficulties, but acted promptly and adaptively. From the early stages of the public health crisis, communication was established with the competent national authority (IKY), aiming at obtaining clear information regarding possibilities for extension, flexibility, and rescheduling of the implementation timeline, in accordance with the Erasmus+ programme guidelines.

The need to revise the initial design highlighted distance collaboration as the dominant means of maintaining the programme's coherence. This transition falls within what the international literature describes as a temporary and compulsory form of distance educational practice, which differs substantially from the systematic and pedagogically designed nature of online education (Dhawan, 2020).

Flexibility, continuous coordination, and the maintenance of communication among the partners were key factors in adapting the programme to the new conditions. The decisions taken during this period did not merely concern the completion of the programme's procedures but primarily focused on preserving its pedagogical value and ensuring student participation, even under particularly demanding circumstances. Recent research on education in emergency situations highlights that blended and distance learning approaches can effectively support teaching and learning continuity;

however, their successful implementation largely depends on educators' digital readiness, access to technological resources, and institutional support structures (Brenya, 2024).

4. Actions & Activities

Although the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the original design of the *Art Journeys in Europe* programme, the pedagogical team decided to continue implementing its activities. An immediate adaptation was undertaken, transferring the planned actions to forms of distance collaboration. The main objective was to maintain students' active participation and to support the intercultural dimension of the programme. In essence, an effort was made to organize virtual mobility among the participating countries.

Digital tools for direct communication among the participating teachers were systematically, regularly, and dynamically developed in order to support the coordination of activities, the exchange of material, joint decision-making, and other collaborative processes. Synchronous distance meetings on a monthly basis, involving students and teachers from all partner countries, contributed to ensuring continuity and strengthening uninterrupted collaboration and a shared course of action, alongside the individual national implementations of the programme.

Within the framework of these meetings, alternative pedagogical activities of an artistic and experiential nature were designed and implemented. For example, a student competition was organized for the creative design of the project logo, through which students actively participated by creatively expressing the identity and objectives of the project. This activity can be considered as enhancing cooperation, creativity, and a sense of "belonging" to a European learning community.

Particular emphasis was placed on the development of intercultural communication activities that would involve students becoming familiar with the languages and cultural elements of the partner countries. In this context, participants exchanged basic words and greetings from their native languages, thereby strengthening mutual respect, acceptance of diversity, and intercultural awareness.

At the same time, digital media were used for the artistic representation of creations and cultural elements and traditions of their local contexts, thus sharing aspects of their cultural heritage with the project partners. These activities helped to maintain an experiential dimension of the programme despite the lack of physical presence and transnational travel. Overall, during the pandemic period, alternative pedagogical approaches ensured continuity in the implementation of the programme while preserving its core objectives. Student participation was achieved through flexibility in design, arising from the creative use of digital tools, where, despite evident difficulties, meaningful collaboration among the participating school units was sustained.

5. Pedagogical Outcomes & Benefits

The pedagogical outcomes achieved under the exceptional conditions of the pandemic—for both students and teachers—during the implementation of the *Art Journeys in Europe* programme were particularly encouraging. Despite the prolonged absence of face-to-face collaboration and transnational mobilities, the maintenance of learning continuity and participant engagement through alternative activities proved to be genuinely effective.

Active participation and creative expression among students were primarily observed through artistic activities and intercultural exchanges. The programme significantly supported teachers working with students with special educational needs, as the use of art as a pedagogical tool provided alternative forms of expression and communication. These approaches proved to be highly effective in building self-confidence, especially when students experienced success.

Meanwhile, regular participation in remote meetings and collaborative work helped students develop their digital and communication skills. Basic digital collaboration practices were introduced among students, such as online presentations, material sharing, and joint participation with peers from other countries—fostering and strengthening a sense of belonging to a broader European learning community.

Research findings indicate that participation in the Erasmus Programme enhances not only employability prospects but also the development of transversal skills such as adaptability, intercultural competence, and openness to mobility, benefits that are observed even among less advantaged student groups (Croce & Ghignoni, 2024). The benefits in the field of intercultural education were also particularly significant.

Through simple, structured activities such as the exchange of words, greetings, and cultural elements, students developed attitudes of respect toward the diversity of other cultures. Exposure to different languages and cultural contexts contributed to the development of positive attitudes toward collaboration and a stronger sense of European identity.

For teachers, the programme became a space for professional development and reflective practice. The rapid adaptation to new formats strengthened further collaboration between partners, encouraged the exchange of good practices, and supported the implementation of innovative pedagogical approaches. Educators demonstrated and improved their flexibility in using digital tools with a clear pedagogical focus in the design and implementation of learning activities.

Even under crisis conditions, the intentional use of art, intercultural approaches, and collaborative methods can significantly enhance the learning experience—especially when multiple approaches are systematically employed through student-centered activities proposed by teachers. This was clearly evidenced by the pedagogical outcomes emerging from the programme.

6. Conclusions

The Erasmus Programme has evolved into a key mechanism for international academic mobility and educational cooperation, fostering knowledge exchange, innovation, and solidarity among participating countries, while contributing to the formation of a shared European educational space (De Martino *et al.*, 2024). The present paper highlights the potential for redesigning and meaningfully implementing a European Erasmus+ KA2 programme under conditions of an emergency public health crisis. Despite the unexpected difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to the initial planning, the *Art Journeys in Europe* programme managed to maintain its pedagogical orientation and core objectives. Through alternative strategies and the targeted use of digital tools, the implementation of the programme followed an uninterrupted course.

The experience of distance implementation demonstrated that timely communication, effective coordination among partners, and the proactive stance of educators can mitigate the impact of a crisis and ensure the continuity of the educational process. Art and cultural heritage functioned as stable pedagogical pillars, offering students opportunities for creative expression, collaboration, and intercultural learning, even in the absence of physical presence.

A particularly significant aspect of the programme's implementation was the fact that, when transnational mobilities were eventually carried out at a later stage, participating students and teachers were already substantially prepared and familiar with the thematic focus and objectives of the programme. Systematic distance collaboration, joint activities, and continuous communication during the pandemic period contributed to maintaining and strengthening interest, creating a cohesive and well-connected group. At this point, it is worth noting that the mobilities ultimately functioned not as a starting point, but as the culmination of an already mature pedagogical process, further enhancing the learning experience and intercultural interaction.

Especially for students with special educational needs, the programme contributed to strengthening self-confidence, social interaction, and a sense of "belonging," confirming the importance of inclusive pedagogical approaches. At the same time, for educators, this experience served as a field of professional development and reflection, enhancing skills related to flexibility, collaboration, and pedagogical innovation.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that European educational programmes can preserve their pedagogical character even during periods of crisis. When implementation is guided by clear objectives, a spirit of cooperation, and flexibility in design and execution, the achievement of goals becomes more attainable. The experience gained from the implementation of the *Art Journeys in Europe* programme highlights practices that can be creatively applied in similar future initiatives, both under normal conditions and in emergency situations.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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