LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT
Laying the foundations for a successful project

In this section you can find advice and information for the preparation phase. Various issues need to be kept in mind, wishes and aims need to be reflected and further steps planned.

Clarifying goals and needs

Once the decision is taken to submit a project proposal together with one or more partner school(s), it is important to reflect on one’s own desires and ideas as regards the project itself and the cooperation. This should be done before actively looking for a partner. The following questions may be helpful to clarify one’s aims and wishes:

Do we want to work with one or more partner school(s)? Planning the project and coordinating tasks and responsibilities might be easier if only two schools are involved. On the other hand, a larger partnership can contribute additional perspectives and approaches to the cooperation. In aces, a partnership can consist of a maximum of three schools from different countries.

What country should the partner school(s) be in? Why not be adventurous and choose a school (or two) in a country/countries which you have not worked with until now or which you do not know so much about? The potential for learning is higher, and it can be particularly interesting to discover differences and similarities. If schools from countries work together which had or still have a relationship prone to conflicts, such a cooperation can have a unifying effect and can help to break down prejudices and animosities.

In which language(s) do we want to or can we communicate? The improvement of language skills can, as mentioned above, be achieved through partnerships with countries with other languages, provided that a common project language is agreed. Understanding can be
established even with imperfect language skills; however, advanced language skills on the part of teachers are important for joint planning and organisation.

What type of school is suitable? Mostly project partnerships between schools of a similar type are sought, although particularly in the vocational education sector there are significant differences between countries. However, a contextual discussion on a specific subject can also occur between students from different school types. Example: A business school is working with a technical institute on “climate change”. From the different approach and preparatory training this can result in a more complex contextual debate.

What age should the students be? It is important that the age difference between the students working on a common project is not more than one year either way because interests, levels of language ability and knowledge vary considerably in these age groups. In certain grant programmes, there might be age limits for the participating students. In aces, the age range for students is 12-17 years.

In what form should the students communicate and collaborate? There are various communication forms and channels which can be used. It is important to exchange on the accessible means of communication and available media/materials of all partners to plan accordingly.

Which aspects of the overall project theme are especially relevant to us? It is helpful to reflect on this (also with students) in order to set priorities and to communicate it to partners who might want to choose different aspects.

Which educational objectives is our school pursuing with this project partnership? The project is especially relevant for the school and its development if the educational goals correspond to the school’s needs and orientation. Interdisciplinary educational goals might appeal to teachers of various subjects and could raise their interest in the project.
Finding partner schools

As soon as one’s own ideas and wishes regarding the project and potential partner schools have been determined, the search for potential cooperation partners can begin.

**Partner Finder.** Many programmes promoting international school projects offer online partner finders on their websites. In the “aces Partner Finder”, for instance, you can register your school, enter your fields of interest and the countries you would like to work with during the application phase. Schools that would like to cooperate with you can also register and contact you via e-mail. You have of course the possibility to contact other schools as well.

**Online research.** Many schools have their own websites. You can also use search portals to find schools in a certain region and make direct contact.

**School Network(s).** The “School Network” on the aces website includes all schools that have implemented aces projects. The network is linked to the project documentation which offers you the possibility to learn more about the various aces projects. You might want to contact one of these experienced schools in order to start a project cooperation. Like aces, other programmes/networks also display their member schools.

**Private search.** Contacts can be made quickly and efficiently if there is a personal connection to the desired country. In many cases, a school has its own relations abroad, though they may have been dormant for some time.

**Contact is possible through**
- teachers or students who have private or family contacts abroad
- colleagues who are participating in an international conference or training
- local associations, the community, an already existing town twinning project, etc.
Project development: From the idea to the strategy

The origin of ideas for an international school project can come from different sources: people, situations, encounters, reading, conversations, etc. Some of the grant programmes, like aces, define specific overall themes which have to be addressed.

Communicate your idea to as many diverse people as possible. In this way you can check out the interest of others as well as the feasibility of the idea. In order to understand the idea, colleagues, friends, etc. will ask questions that help to make it more clear and grounded.

In case you feel your enthusiasm is shrinking, talk to somebody who has experience in international projects and can advise you. If your enthusiasm is then finally destroyed, the idea was probably not worth to be put into practice, at least not at the moment and not with the people you have been talking with. Try something else or a different approach!

Once you have gathered an interested and motivated group of students and teachers (including your partners), it is time to sit down with a large piece of paper and to start writing down why you all would like to undergo this specific international project. Think of your personal motivation and the learning that you and the other people involved expect to gain during the project, describe how and where you see yourself as a result of the project activities, even though these are not yet clear.

As soon as the future scenario is clear and the intended achievements are listed you can go into project planning.
Project preparation in class

Preparing, reflecting on and planning the project together with your students (and colleagues) is crucial to build ownership and can be done in the following three stages:

**Initial preparation phase**

This phase should be given some attention and time. Various forms and methods should

- raise awareness of the idea
- awake interest, curiosity and enjoyment in the building of an intercultural relationship
- create a good group atmosphere in preparation for the subsequent phases
- improve the success chances of an initial discussion in which expectations, attitudes, recommendations, moods, fears, prejudices and uncertainties can be verbalised and made visible

In this phase, team building exercises, country quizzes, drawings about expectations and fears, the collection of potential problems which could arise during the project and a subsequent discussion of possible solutions etc. are useful methods.

Further information and activities for raising awareness and preparing students for intercultural cooperation.

**Ideas phase**

In this phase, the opportunity to fantasise about and to play with ideas, suggestions and wishes in a spontaneous, flexible way should be provided. In a brainstorming session ideas and proposals should be collected in a stress-free format. At this point no criticism of the ideas should be expressed. Some key questions:

- What interests us about this project theme?
- Which activities and products would we like to have?
- What possibilities for meeting our partners exist?
- What might the project cooperation look like?
- What do we want to learn about the other country, the people or the school?
- What do we not want?
The entire process can be conducted in the whole class, but also in small groups and then presented afterwards. This summary can be used for further planning and communication with the prospective partner school(s).

**Planning phase**

The suggestions collected are subjected to a detailed examination and analysed as to their feasibility:

- What do our first steps in the partnership look like?
- What do we have to do to be able to start working on the project?
- How should the partnership be structured?
- What concrete activities do we recommend?
- Which activities are feasible for international cooperation, e.g. work in cross-border teams?
- Who else do we want to include? Who do we want to/should we inform?

It makes sense to write a summary of the outcomes of this phase and to use it for potential partners as an “Invitation for Cooperation” and for finding additional supporters.
Project coordination

Each project has its own life that follows a certain cycle. Techniques to support the planning and management of projects have been created in order to stay in control of it. To follow the project cycle helps to coordinate the project with the partners and to set up an agreed work plan.

Different approaches stress different aspects of the project life and have their corresponding techniques. For example, future-based planning is based on the idea that you need to define the final goal or result very clearly and that you determine in advance by when it should be achieved. Then you plan the necessary actions starting from the future and going back in time.

The project cycle represented on the left starts from an analysis of the needs of the community (which can be the city/town where you live, parents, teachers, the school as a whole or the students) and tries to combine the different types of needs. A correct analysis of the needs will help you to identify what you would like to change through the project and why. So a project is a means to transform a situation into a new desired situation. The activities are the means that you can plan in order to reach the desired situation, a realistic one in the timeframe you have. The results are the clear indicators that your activities have an impact and contribute to change the situation you started out with. It is important to identify the objectives and expected results at the beginning in order to monitor whether the project is going according to plan and to evaluate its success.

The project coordinator or a group of coordinators (these can also be teachers and students) is responsible for the smooth running of the project. It is the person or unit steering the whole process, the hub where all threads come together and information is distributed again.

Methods for project coordination include, among others, setting down quality specifications with your partners, compiling activity plans, time management techniques (e.g. to-do-lists – see below) and writing protocols of meetings and calls in order to be able to look up the outcomes.
Furthermore, an ongoing monitoring and project controlling allows to verify the status and development of the project and to prepare changes or adjustments, if necessary. The project monitoring is based on the workplan including intermediate achievement goals (milestones), work packages assigned to specific persons or groups, the timetable of activities, a plan of resources and costs, agreements and rules set up together with the partners and structured feedback.

**Time management**

Time management techniques can help you to avoid stress and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the tasks and activities related to the project. They should already be kept in mind when planning the project and sharing the tasks and responsibilities among project partners.

Here are some recommendations for using your (working) time efficiently:

- Set realistic, achievable goals.
- Break the project work down into small tasks and allocate work in manageable chunks.
- Make a to-do-list and set priorities.
- Identify your “time thieves” through self-monitoring to be able to plan your time and priorities efficiently.
- Learn to say no, to involve your students and to delegate work to other people.
- Set deadlines and write down reminders.
- Don’t invite interruptions! Work on one task continuously and with concentration. Turn off your mobile phone, don’t check your text messages and e-mails constantly etc.
- Overcome procrastination and putting off things.
- Make an agenda and set goals as well as a time frame for meetings.
- Avoid disorganisation and messy documents. Try to keep an order so you don’t waste time looking for things.
- Don’t let perfectionism get in the way.
- Do the “unpleasant” part of a task first.
- Reward yourself or your students for completing a task.
Anchoring the project in the school

Putting down foundations within the school guarantees continuity and commitment and ensures the sustainability of the project cooperation. By anchoring the project in school, the partnership becomes independent of the commitment of individuals, and can have an impact over a longer time.

Core team

To anchor the project in the school, the formation of a core team or a working group that may consist of teachers, students, parents, the parents’ association or the headmaster, is recommended. This core team is responsible for the organisation of the project.

The most important tasks of the core team include

- clarifying issues of competence of a financial, technical and pedagogical nature
- determining the topic areas of the partnership and ensuring its integration into the classroom as part of e.g. project weeks, project days, working groups, and elective courses in individual subjects
- regular evaluation and further development of the project
- information and advice to other members of staff about the proposed or ongoing project, involving other colleagues and obtaining acceptance among the staff
- involving the school community (school board, parents and pupils’ representation) and the local community outside the school
- anchoring the partnership in the school programme
- training of teachers on topics such as intercultural learning
- Public Relations work (like presenting the project in public, in the media, etc.)
Teamwork

Organising a school project even halfway successfully can hardly be achieved alone. Working in a team not only reduces the time and effort of the individual but can also contribute to inspiration and enjoyment at work and is extremely helpful in dealing with frustration.

CHALLENGE: Bear in mind that in some countries or schools there is virtually no tradition of teamwork among teachers. In addition, the school structures often make project-based work in a team difficult. One should, therefore, agree from the outset not to allow nascent conflicts to grow, to speak about problems openly, to arrange for a clear division of labour and for regular project meetings/communication.

A school project is of course also an ideal setting for teamwork among students. In the framework of the project they work together towards a common goal. In contrast to this, regular school work is often focussed on the achievements of the individual student. Project work promotes teamwork skills such as respect for individual contributions, consensus building, clear communication, persuasive speech, giving feedback and the ability to negotiate compromises.

Last but not least, working on an international school project is an opportunity to promote teamwork between teachers and students. In the project setting students can be given the chance to work alongside their teachers, to have their say in decision-making and thus to be valuable members of the project team with their own rights and responsibilities. This can be a great source of motivation for the students and can have a positive effect on the relationship between teachers and students. Joint project work is the ideal setting to put the traditional and rather rigid roles of teacher and student aside by combining efforts to reach a common goal.
CHALLENGE: Lack of support from headmasters, other teachers, parents, etc. This can be a source of frustration. Keeping colleagues and parents informed on what is happening in the project, involving them in activities, inviting them to presentations and the like might help to make them understand what the project is all about, that it involves a lot of work and that international project work has many benefits. Especially if headmasters and parents are concerned, direct contact with the respective person/group from the partner school (e.g. letters from parents to parents, phone calls between headmasters) can help to overcome misgivings and potential problems.

Integrating the environment outside school

When planning an international school project, it is possible and desirable to involve the environment outside the school.

The inclusion of out-of-school partners facilitates

- an exchange of experiences
- support for the implementation and organisation of the school partnership
- help and advice from experts or people who know the partner country or project topic well
- financial assistance, for example sponsorship by banks, companies, local authorities
- involvement of the school project in local activities such as the town festival
- a heightened awareness of the school, school activities and priorities in the public eye
- a raised awareness among the local population of the issues and objectives of the school partnership/project
- a strengthening of the relationship between the school partners (teachers, parents and students) as well as between school and local community
Key partners who can be asked to support the school partnership are:

- parents and the parents’ association
- the community, local/regional authorities
- experts (e.g. members of organisations, representatives of development policy initiatives, representatives of schools with a school partnership, foreign students, members of the community with a particular interest, etc.)
- other schools, educational institutions, universities
- local companies
- local/regional media
- interested individuals

A stakeholder analysis can be employed to identify and assess the roles of stakeholders (key people, groups of people, or institutions) that may significantly influence the success of your project.

GOOD PRACTICE

aces project “Children like us 2013”

The two partner schools involved parents (who hosted children and therefore also experienced intercultural encounters and benefitted from the project), another school (School “Korálek”, Kladno, CZ — for children with special needs) as well as “Wild Flower Chance Club” (Orosháza, HU), an organisation which promotes equal opportunities. The local community was informed about the project via articles in local print and online newspapers as well as via the school’s website.

Základní Škola, Praha 3, Prague, CZ and Táncsics Mihály Közoktatási Intézmény És Tehetségközpont Vörösmarty Mihály Tagintézménye, Orosháza, HU
Funding possibilities

Depending on the possibility of receiving a project grant as well as on the planned project activities and results, the project partners might be interested in generating additional funds. Fundraising for a project is similar to publicising it: You need to sell it. As potential funders are more likely to give money to projects which stand out from the crowd, be sure to present your project as something special and different. If you are excited and enthusiastic about your project, others will be, too.

Some fundraising tips:

• Be able to give a so called “elevator speech”. This means that you are able to present your project, its key aims, actors, activities and benefits concisely, clearly and convincingly in just a few seconds – similar to a commercial. Imagine the time you would have when happening to be in an elevator with a potential sponsor.

• Communicate what the requested funds are for specifically, e.g. for travel costs for a school visit, certain materials, for a publication of the project results.

• Set yourself SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound ones). Be careful not to set your targets too high at first.

• Be strategic: Think through a financing strategy keeping in mind contextual reality and financial sustainability and also know for which part of the project or activity you need (additional) funds most urgently.
Think about the resource implications in terms of time, people, experience and enthusiasm. Which fundraising method will be least demanding on these resources?

There are various strategies for generating additional funds, such as:

- **subsidies from parent associations** and local/regional authorities
- **sponsorship by companies**: Many businesses, especially local ones, are happy to support schools. Try to select companies which have some kind of connection to the theme of your project or whose business branch provides services which are helpful for your project, e.g. a print shop for your project documentation or copies, a bus company for travel, a restaurant for catering. Support by businesses often comes as donated goods rather than money. Stress that the company will get PR by supporting your project.
- **activities planned by teachers and students**: In order to raise funds for the project, activities such as flea markets, Christmas markets etc. can be organised or built into existing school events. Everyone in the school can get involved, resulting in greater project ownership. The school is in control and can see tangible results.
- **crowdfunding**: This increasingly popular method of raising funds works by presenting the project on a crowdfunding website. Individuals from all over the world who like the project can support it by donating money which, ideally, adds up to reach the set funding target. When a funding campaign is complete, the crowdfunding company charges a certain fee on the total amount of money that has been raised. This model can also be tried out on a local/regional level, possibly with the support of local media to promote the call.

Examples of crowdfunding websites:

>>> www.incited.org – Crowdfunding community for education

>>> www.indiegogo.com

see also: Financial planning, p. 43

Find a local company which supports you with donated goods and services!
Your international partnership has been formed, a framework for cooperation has been set, you have identified an inspiring project topic and activities have been determined. Now the most exciting part begins:

You are about to realize your project together with your partners!
Dos and don’ts

To be well prepared for joint project implementation with your partners, make sure to consider the following tips:

**Do**

- involve various people in the planning and implementation of the partnership and project
- form a working group
- select (a) suitable partner school(s) (school type, age of pupils, ...)
- collect information about the partner country, the on-site conditions, possible cultural hurdles etc.
- prepare students for the international and intercultural collaboration
- determine nature and frequency of communication together with your partners
- use various means of communication for making contact and project work
- plan precisely for the school project and clearly define who does what in the partnership
- come to a joint decision on activities and implementation steps, taking into account school holidays, festivals etc.
- build a personal relationship with the partners
- clarify the financial conditions of all partners

- look for additional financial support (only if necessary)
- be open to other opinions, new perspectives and insights
- develop creative forms of collaboration
- organise mutual school visits
- use interdisciplinary teaching as well as inclusive and innovative educational approaches
- inform the school community and the local environment about the school project, activities and learning experiences
- make sure that the evaluation of the project is an ongoing process
- stay flexible: reflect, rethink and re-vise if necessary
- see problems as challenges that facilitate the learning processes
- assume the role of a mediator in conflicts
- document the project and disseminate the results
- see the project partnership as a goal in itself
Don’t

• start a partnership project without personal preparation (teachers and students)
• begin a project without direct consultation with project partners
• center on your own ideas and wishes in the planning and organisation of the project instead of focussing on the principle of partnership and cooperation
• assume that school life, hierarchies, creative opportunities, etc. in the partner country are “somehow similar” to your own
• compromise the theme of the project by concentrating mainly on the exchange of traditions, folklore, etc.
• organise a face-to-face meeting only as a tourist event
• make rash judgements about the project partners as there is a risk of prejudice and stereotypes
• rely on the strong personal commitment of individual teachers which can lead to an excessive demand on individual people