

Building bridges - Sustainable business and personal development in the North

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Key words: Kolarctic, Barents Euro-Arctic Region, networking, cross-border cooperation, higher educational institutes, interconnectedness.

Due to digitalization, networking cross the borders is easier than before, compared for instance with the 1990's when the Barents cooperation between the higher educational institutions (HEI's) started. The aim of this article is to increase awareness of the importance of the sustainable cross-border cooperation in the Arctic Europe. In this process, the HEI's have an essential role of virtual bridge building.

The overall objective of the Kolarctic Cross-Border Cooperation is to promote a viable economy and the attractiveness of the region, where inhabitants and visitors are able to enjoy the arctic nature and where the natural resources are used in a sustainable way (<https://kolarctic.info>). Kolarctic BRIDGE project's objective is to facilitate youth employment and economic growth by building a joint education platform (HEI-SME) for the Barents Euro-Arctic Region of Russia, Norway and Finland (<https://kolarcticbridge.com>). International groups of students conduct research for firms, solve tasks in product and service innovation, customer development, and market entry.

Connecting regions, students and firms

In networks and service ecosystems interconnectedness is an important feature. They are characterized by a large number of loosely interconnected participants who depend on each other for their mutual effectiveness and survival (Peltoniemi 2006). In our Northern operating

environment, the interplay between the enterprises, universities and coordinating organization such as Regional Council of Lapland, is an important element in the sustainable development of the Arctic Europe, not to forget other factors such as culture and environment.

The purpose of the Kolarctic BRIDGE project is to connect regions in the Barents area, small and medium-sized enterprises, universities and students in the Barents region. The key success factor is that the young generation, the students learn to know the regional and business cultures in neighbouring countries, they can build networks which can be valuable also after graduation. In transnational teams they need to solve problems given by the commissioners and give creative solutions to help the case organization to develop their services and business model.

People-to-people cooperation is an essential value in the Kolarctic area which is a flourishing, environmentally friendly and diverse area with viable economy, fluent mobility of people, ideas and technologies. There are five higher educational institutes participating the project: the Arctic University of Norway (UiT, Alta), Murmansk State Humanities University (MASU), Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU), ITMO University from St.Petersburg and Lapland UAS. They all have an important task to develop the region, the Northern operational environment, not only in their own country but especially cross the borders. In this collaboration, the coaching teachers play a central role. They innovated and planned the project together, induced SME's in their own regions to join the project and give real-life assignments to the student teams. More than 20 professors and teachers are coaching the transnational student teams. ICT and project specialists are taking care of the smooth progress of the communication.

Six workshops with 300 students

The project started in spring 2019 in Tornio Finland with 50 students and 10 case companies. In mixed teams the students analyzed the case companies, and innovated development ideas based on the given tasks. Already before the workshop they had met online to plan questions to the managers they met in Tornio. By the end of the week they presented their preliminary ideas and after the face-to-face workshop continued finalizing the reports online. The final online presentations took place some weeks later, and the commissioners gave feedback to each team.

In the autumn 2019 the second workshop was organized in Vardö, Norway. The third and fourth workshop were organized online due to the Covid-19 in spring and autumn 2020. The case enterprises were from Murmansk respective Petrozavodsk. The fifth workshop will take place in Alta, Norway in spring 2021, and the final one in St.Petersburg in autumn 2021. All in all, about 300 students and 60 case companies are taking part in the project.

Lapland UAS has long experience in using online tools, and despite the pandemic, the shift from a face-to-face workshop to a virtual solution went smoothly. Lapland UAS specialists also trained coaches and students in using the Creative Steps method in project implementation.

Weaving a network

Lapland UAS (earlier Kemi-Tornio UAS and Rovaniemi UAS) started partnerships with the Barents HEI's already in the 1990's. The network was built in the project called Barents Cooperation Network with firms, students and teachers from Sweden, Norway, Russia and Finland. The idea was further developed in Barents Specialists project coordinated by Lapland University. Teachers developed in international teams online courses in business, tourism and social and health care, which were offered to students and firms in the Barents area. In addition, some teachers had the possibility to conduct research for their doctoral dissertation. Already in 2004 Moodle and ILinc were used as platforms. Based on this partnership, Travel and Tourism management (60 ECTS) training started in 2009 and was successfully run online and in summer schools in 12 years.

The predecessor of the Kolarctic Bridge, Practice Future, which started in 2013 and ended in 2015, was innovated, planned and implemented based in this network built during the 15 years of partnership. Once again, the key players were the students learning about Arctic cooperation, and firms developing thesis business models and networking. Universities were the hub and builders of the network.

Constructing a sustainable bridge

All the above-mentioned projects are wonderful examples of partnerships, where young people from the European Arctic develop their expertise and learn about the Barents region business environment. The projects develop competences needed in working life such as internationalization, networking, teamwork, communication, and innovation. Also, the case companies get creative ideas on how to develop their business models.

The Kolarctic Bridge shows that not only students and individual firms are the beneficiaries of this kind of collaboration. Especially in Vardö and Petrozavodsk it was clearly seen that the case firms started to cooperate with each other. In Vardö, the entrepreneur's association is coordinating the network knitting, and in Petrozavodsk, the participating hotel is weaving a local business ecosystem to serve tourists and to offer better services, also for locals. The goal is that the as many SME's as possible, will be interconnected.

Interconnectedness is an important feature in ecosystems. They are characterized by a number of loosely interconnected participants who depend on each other. According to Peltoniemi (2009), the benefits of being a member of an ecosystem include the opportunity to form alliance and thrive in a network, protected from potential invaders. In an ecosystem, the firms, universities and other organizations are interconnected in the sense that they have an effect on each other. Peltoniemi (2009) states that interconnectedness enables various interactions between the members. Together with interconnectedness they lead a shared fate among the organizations. The members are dependent on each other, and the failures of firms can result in failures of other firms.

Conclusion

In each of the five regions of Kolarctic Bridge, the universities are the hub of the local and regional networks. The wider ecosystem, covering the Barents Euro-Arctic region has officially existed in almost 30 years.

Digitalization has developed with big steps in all regions during Covid-19, but in many firms, it is still not well-developed. In this process the University network could join the forces and become bridge builders, constructors of a sustainable digital ecosystem.

To conclude, the Kolarctic Bridge project builds bridges on different levels, between universities, teachers and other employees, firms, students and regions. My suggestion is that Lapland UAS will take the role of a hub coordinator of this wider ecosystem, and take care that it will continue developing also in the future, and to become sustainable.

References:

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