

MAKING IT WORK



GEMSTONE Project's
Better Practices for
Horizon Europe Newcomers



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MAKING IT WORK: GEMSTONE Project's Better Practices for Horizon Europe Newcomers

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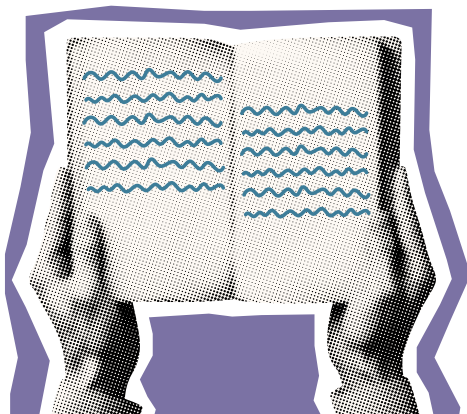


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INTRODUCTION: GETTING STARTED, GROWING STRONGER

Since its inception in October 2022, the Horizon Europe-funded GEMSTONE Project (Genetically engineering Experimental Models: enhancement of Scientific and Technological excellence and innOvation potential to study NEurodevelopmental diseases) has marked an important step in advancing Acibadem University's scientific excellence and global competitiveness in health sciences. With its strategic focus on gene engineering and neuroscience – particularly the neurodevelopmental aspects of brain disorders such as Parkinson's disease and epilepsy – GEMSTONE represented a new chapter for Acibadem University as it took on, for the first time, the role of coordinator in an EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

By fostering dynamic collaboration with Lund University from Sweden and ICONS from Italy, GEMSTONE has provided a meaningful example of cross-border scientific cooperation. The project has facilitated bilateral exchanges of knowledge, built robust training programmes, and created shared platforms for hard and soft skill development. But its ambition went further: GEMSTONE also addressed the often-overlooked dimension of institutional readiness – investing in research support services, empowering the Research Projects Office, and enabling researchers to successfully compete for national and international funding.

By doing so, the project has worked toward narrowing the performance gap between institutions in Widening countries and their counterparts across Europe.

Horizon Europe's WIDERA Work Programme aims to address disparities in research and innovation capacity across Europe by supporting countries with lower R&I performance to enhance their excellence and competitiveness. In relation to the GEMSTONE Project, the Work Programme's Twinning scheme plays a crucial role in empowering Acibadem University in Turkey to strengthen its capacity. The project not only supports high-quality scientific exchange and training but also contributes to improving the University's research management and administrative structures, ensuring sustainable growth and greater integration into the European Research Area.



This publication, *MAKING IT WORK: GEMSTONE Project's Better Practices for Horizon Europe Newcomers*, emerges from the rich experiences, lessons learned, and innovative strategies cultivated throughout the project's journey. Drawing from the outcomes of respective Work Packages, this collection of "better practices" in scientific implementation,

research management, and administrative coordination, is designed with one purpose in mind: to share what we have learned, so others may build upon it. Each of the 12 practices documented here was born out of real challenges and refined through trial, adaptation, and commitment.

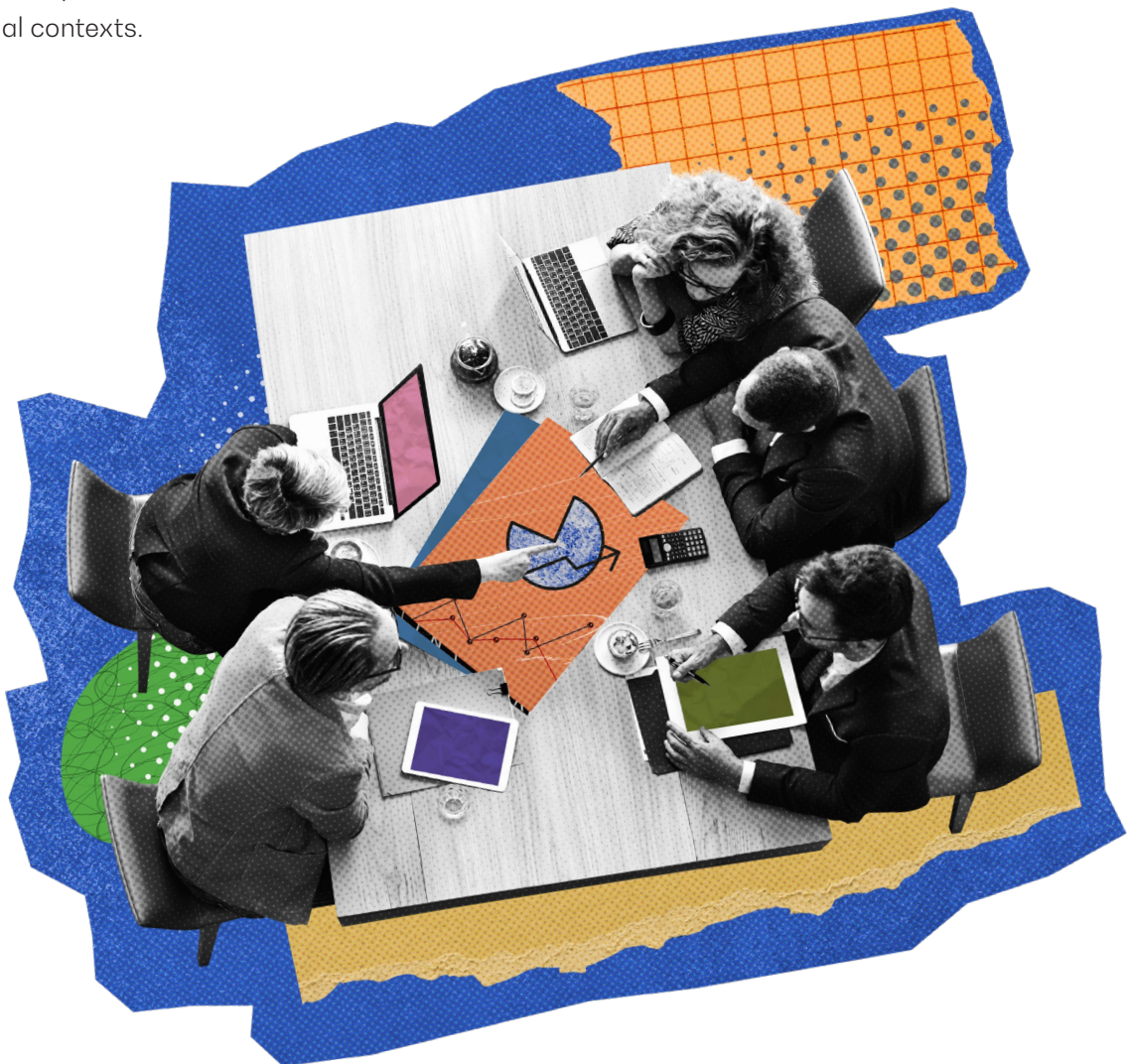


KEY MESSAGE FROM THE PRIMARY PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

"If I could speak to myself three years ago, I'd say this: take things seriously from day one – because three years go by faster than you think. Especially in a project as multi-layered as GEMSTONE, where research and capacity building are so deeply intertwined, there's no room for delay. Everything must be approached with rigor from the start. The most dangerous pitfall is the illusion of having plenty of time. Don't fall into the trap of thinking 'we have three whole years to go' – in reality, the clock is already ticking. But here's the reassuring part: it's absolutely doable. You don't need to be perfect, you just need to stay committed and proactive. Progress will come step by step, and you'll grow with the project. Mistakes will happen, and that's okay – what matters is how you respond, adapt, and keep moving forward. And most importantly, remember this: no matter how well-designed a project may be, its success ultimately comes down to your own sense of ownership, urgency, and leadership. Everything begins with you – but you are not alone. With the right mindset and a supportive team, you'll be surprised by how far you can go."

From enhancing internal communication and budget monitoring, to proactively engaging with the European Commission, managing international mobility, and embracing flexible project planning, these practices demonstrate that success in Horizon Europe is not solely about scientific merit. Rather, it is equally about how institutions organize, empower, and support the people behind the science. Importantly, many of these lessons extend beyond the boundaries of GEMSTONE and can be adapted to different institutional and national contexts.

We believe these practices are particularly valuable for universities and research organizations in Widening countries – institutions that often face structural and operational barriers to full participation in European research programmes. By sharing our experiences openly, we aim to contribute to a growing ecosystem of mutual learning, solidarity, and progress among newcomers to Horizon Europe.





KEY MESSAGE FROM THE PROJECT MANAGER

“What I’ve learned from managing GEMSTONE is that a Horizon Europe project is never just about delivering tasks – it’s about building systems, relationships, and resilience. You can’t treat research management as background work. It must be embedded in the project’s core from the very beginning. The Research Projects Office should not be a support unit watching from the side-lines, but an active engine that drives clarity, trust, and momentum. Of course, this reflection comes from the particular nature of GEMSTONE, where scientific implementation and institutional capacity building go hand in hand. Not every Horizon Europe project will require the same level of integration. But in projects that involve coordination, multiple stakeholders, or long-term structural goals, early and visible involvement of research management can make all the difference. The earlier you build that engine, the smoother the road becomes.”

Above all, the GEMSTONE experience proves that when researchers, administrators, and leadership come together with a shared vision, transformation is not only possible – it is inevitable. We encourage our peers in other institutions to take these practices as a starting point, adapt them to local realities, and develop their own roadmap to excellence.

As the GEMSTONE Project approaches its conclusion in December 2025, our hope is that the insights captured here will support other universities and research organizations in strengthening their institutional ecosystems, leveraging international partnerships, and elevating their presence on the European research stage.



Part I

COMMUNICATION & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Effective coordination, transparency,
and building trust within and beyond
the consortium



PRACTICE 1:

Keep in touch with your partners

Bringing together partners from different countries, different institutional cultures and diverse areas of expertise in European Union projects creates great potential for project success. However, this diversity also brings with it significant challenges in terms of communication and coordination.



With teams working in different time zones, busy work schedules, language barriers, and cultural differences, information sharing between partners may be hampered, slowing down project progress. Some partners may come together only for formal meetings, focusing on their own work in the interim periods and proceeding in isolation. This may lead to duplication of work, inefficient use of resources, delayed deadlines, and ultimately failure to achieve the project's objectives.

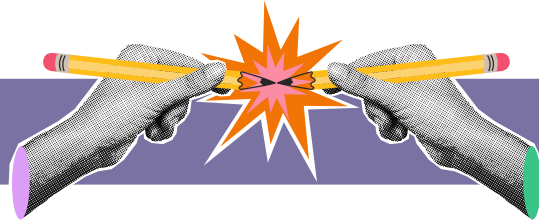
Especially for the multi-partner and interdisciplinary GEMSTONE Project, lack of communication is not only a waste of time, but also a serious risk that threatens the integrity and success of the project. The project partners immediately realized the need to establish a rhythm to walk towards a common goal and took action to develop a systematic approach to overcome this challenge.

APPLIED METHOD:

The GEMSTONE Project has developed a multi-layered internal communication strategy to ensure continuous and effective communication between partners. This strategy includes various communication channels at different levels, serving different purposes:

1. **Regular online meetings:** On a designated day of each month, online meetings are organized with the participation of all project partners. Availability of each partner is checked with digital tools in advance. In these meetings, each partner shares its progress and challenges, and receives feedback from other partners. The meetings are conducted in a structured manner in line with a pre-prepared agenda. Decisions taken, task allocations, responsibilities and deadlines are captured in official meeting minutes and shared with all partners.
2. **Work Package-focused subgroup meetings:** Partners working on different Work Packages of the project organize more frequent meetings among themselves (usually every two weeks) to focus on specific issues. These meetings allow for more technical and detailed discussions than the main meetings.
3. **Six-monthly meetings:** In addition to digital communication, six-monthly meetings are organized twice a year where all partners come together in person. These meetings allow for deeper discussions, strengthen personal bonds, and reinforce team spirit.
4. **Social media group:** In addition to formal communication channels, a social media group has been established for a more relaxed and informal communication between project team members. This group enables team members to get to know each other better and maintain daily interactions.

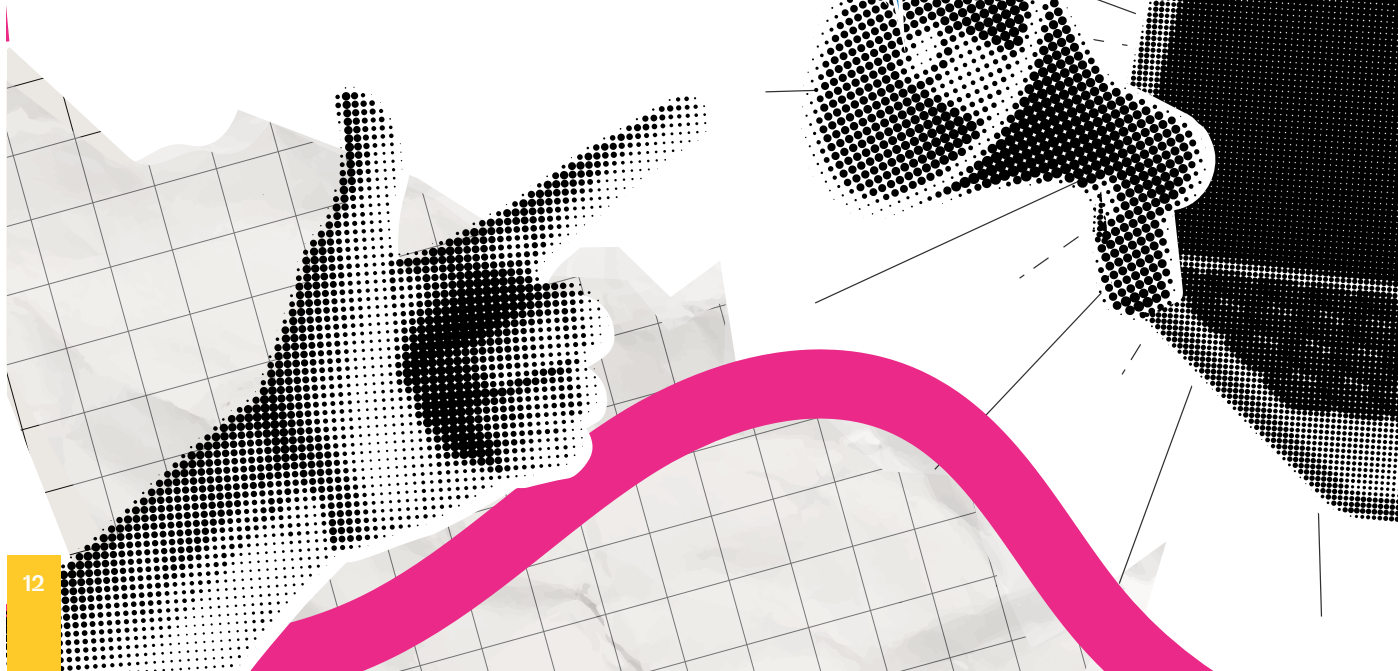
IMPACT:



The multi-layered internal communication strategy implemented in the GEMSTONE Project had a significant positive impact on the project's progress and results:

1. **More effective decision-making processes:** Decision-making processes were made more transparent and participatory. By incorporating the views of all partners, more inclusive and accepted decisions were made.
2. **Rapid problem solving:** Problems that arose during the project's progress were quickly identified and resolved. Partners were able to share their challenges and benefit from the experience and knowledge of others.

3. **Better risk management:** Potential risks were identified at an early stage and necessary measures were taken in a timely manner. This proactive approach ensured that the project progressed according to the planned timeline.
4. **Increased efficiency and synergy:** Each partner was aware of the others' work, which avoided duplication of efforts and allowed for more efficient use of resources. Integration of information from different areas of expertise ensured a holistic approach to the project.



5. Strengthened trust and cooperation:

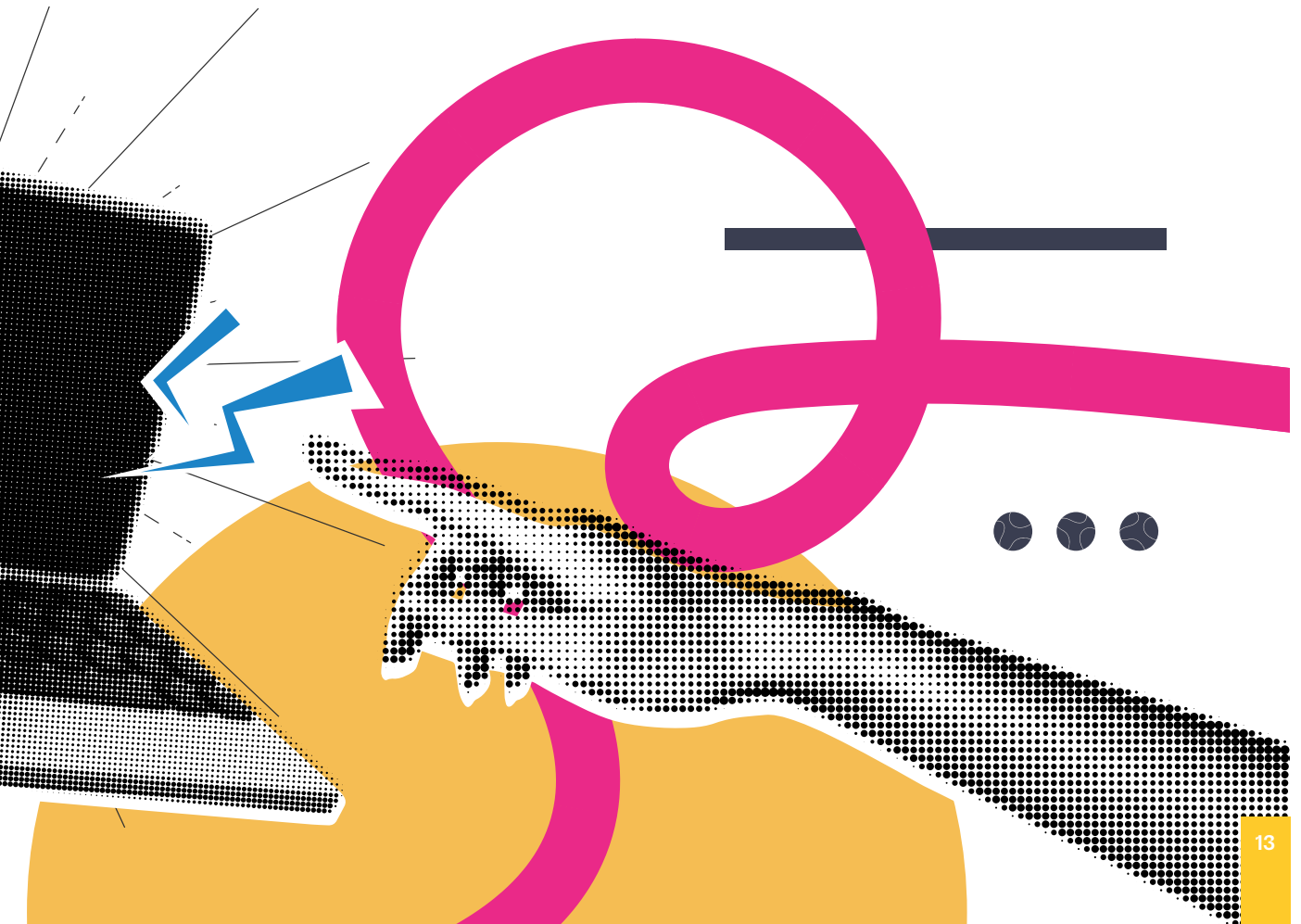
Regular meetings contributed to the development of trust between partners. This trust laid the foundation for deeper and more productive cooperation.

6. Knowledge and experience sharing:

The regular interaction of partners from different countries and institutions has created a rich environment of knowledge and experience sharing. This not only improved the quality of the project outputs, but also contributed to the development of the partners' institutional capacities.

7. Project identity and belonging:

Regular interactions created a strong sense of identity and belonging among the project team. This shared identity increased motivation and reinforced commitment to achieving the project's objectives.



PRACTICE 2:

Get all stakeholders in the game

Large-scale European Union projects can be difficult to manage due to their complexity and the large number of stakeholders involved.



In extensive research initiatives such as the GEMSTONE Project, the project team may become so immersed in its intensive workload that it inadvertently isolates other components of the institution and external stakeholders from the process. Researchers often concentrate on the technical and scientific dimensions of the project, overlooking the importance of broad institutional ownership and a wide support network.

Over time, this situation can transform a project into an “island” within the institution – known and owned only by those directly working on it.

In academic environments like Acibadem University, such isolation is particularly common. Researchers retreat to their laboratories and focus solely on their own fields, sharing project details only during mandatory reporting periods.

Additionally, institutional units that are not officially part of the project but could contribute indirectly (such as administrative staff, other research groups, and upper management) are unable to provide sufficient support due to a lack of information. This scenario can lead to inefficient use of resources, missed opportunities, and threats to the project’s sustainability.

APPLIED METHOD:



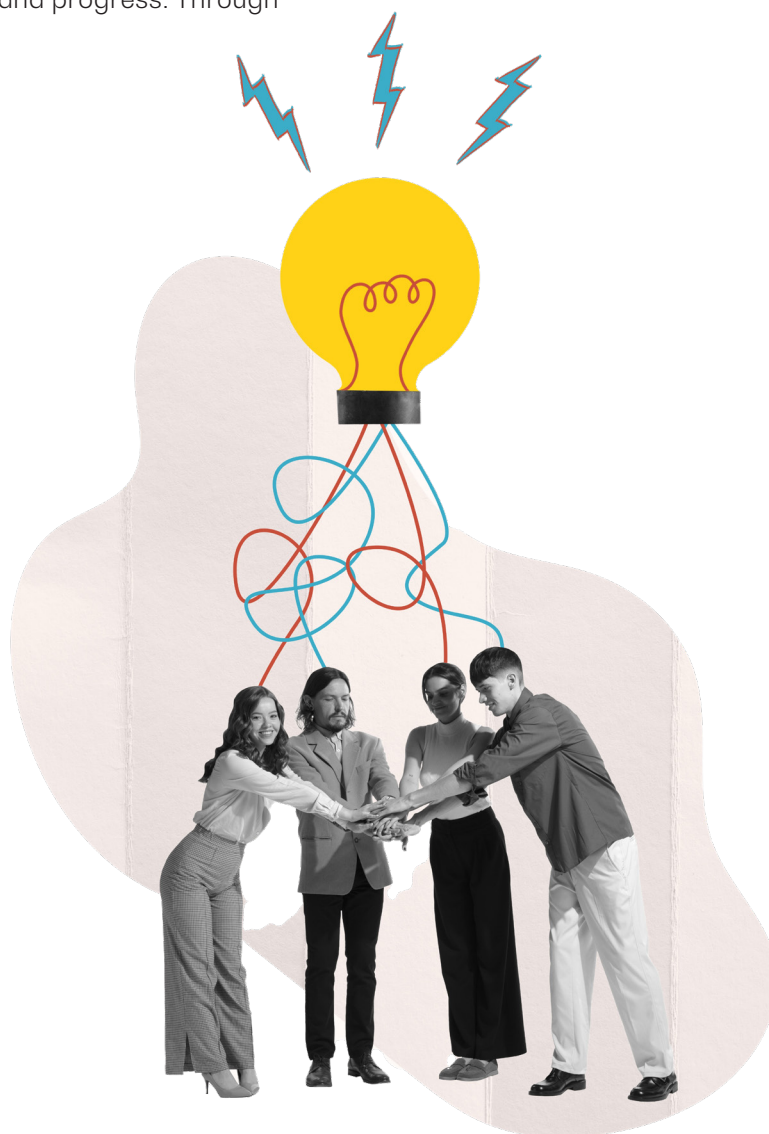
Within the GEMSTONE Project, a systematic and multi-layered communication strategy was adopted to ensure that “all stakeholders are brought into the game”:

1. **Regular information meetings:** The project team organized monthly information sessions for internal stakeholders. These sessions were not limited to technical progress updates but also included transparent discussions about challenges, successes, and future plans. Work Package-focused subgroup meetings: Partners working on different
2. **Cross-departmental collaboration platform:** The team held regular collaborative sessions with departments that were not formally involved in the project but could still provide support. This included units such as information technology, public relations, and the innovation office, enabling them to contribute their expertise to the project.
3. **Briefings for upper management:** Every three months, a detailed briefing was presented to the university’s upper management (rector, deans, department heads). These briefings highlighted how the project contributed to the institution’s strategic goals, thereby encouraging upper management to take ownership of the project.

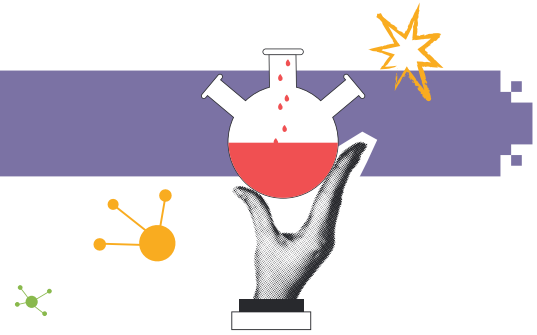
- 4. Integration of administrative personnel:** In addition to project-specific administrative staff, representatives from other relevant administrative units at the university were brought into project processes. This strengthened integration between project management and administrative procedures.
- 5. Digital communication tools:** Internal digital platforms were utilized effectively to share project updates and progress. Through

these platforms, regular newsletters were published, success stories were shared, and potential collaboration opportunities were announced.

- 6. Open-lab opportunities:** The project team organized open-lab events, allowing other researchers and students to observe project activities first-hand. These events enhanced transparency and planted seeds for potential collaborations.



IMPACT:



Adopting the “get all stakeholders in the game” approach had a far-reaching and transformative effect on the GEMSTONE Project:

1. **Rise in institutional ownership:** The project came to be viewed as a collaborative initiative across the entire university rather than just a single research team’s endeavour. With support from diverse units within Acibadem University, the project gained a broader institutional identity. Senior management began referring to the project as “our project,” a clear sign of this expanded ownership.
2. **Access to and optimization of resources:** Engaging all stakeholders facilitated the redirection of institutional resources that had previously gone untapped. For instance, the university’s Technology Transfer Office provided valuable contributions to the project’s intellectual property strategy, while the Corporate Communications Department offered professional support to enhance the project’s visibility.
3. **Effective crisis management:** When inevitable challenges and crises arose during the project, the extensive stakeholder network proved vital. For example, when procurement delays occurred, proactive administrative support enabled the team to quickly implement alternative solutions.
4. **Sustainability and scalability:** The stakeholder engagement approach gave the project a sustainability perspective beyond its official timeframe. Certain elements of the project were integrated into the university’s educational programmes, broadening the project’s overall impact
5. **Enrichment of the innovation ecosystem:** Including stakeholders with diverse areas of expertise gave rise to unexpected partnerships and innovative ideas. For example, dialogue sparked by the project between the medical and engineering faculties laid the groundwork for new transdisciplinary research projects.
6. **Institutional learning and capacity building:** Sharing the project experience with a broad group of stakeholders accelerated institutional learning and strengthened Acibadem University’s capacity to manage EU projects. This expertise offers a significant competitive advantage for future project proposals.
7. **Increased motivation and sense of belonging:** The team’s sense of isolation diminished, leading to greater motivation and a stronger feeling of belonging. With support from various levels of the institution, team members felt more valued and secure.

PRACTICE 3:

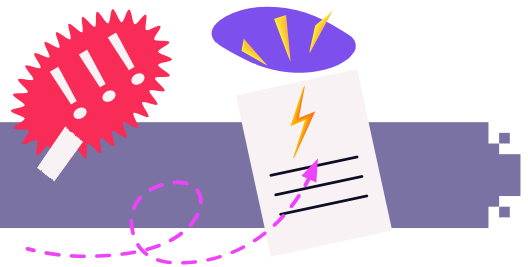
Do not hesitate to contact your Project Officer

In European Union projects, many consortia and project managers have unnecessary reservations about communicating with the Project Officers appointed by the European Commission. Misconceptions are widespread, such as that asking simple questions could call into question their competence to run the project, or that over-communication could increase oversight of the project.

Underlying these perceptions are misunderstandings about the role and function of the Project Officer. It is common to consider the Project Officer as an authority figure who merely supervises the project, looking for mistakes, and evaluating performance. This perspective makes communication with the Project Officer a formality that takes place only on mandatory occasions and during formal reporting processes.

This timid approach may result in problems arising during project progress not being resolved in a timely manner, continued uncertainty about EU funding rules and procedures, and missed potential areas of flexibility or opportunities. Furthermore, the lack of feedback and guidance from the Project Officer may risk the project not being fully aligned with the EU's expectations.

APPLIED METHOD:



The GEMSTONE Project has adopted a proactive and transparent communication strategy to develop effective cooperation with the project authority. The key components of this strategy are:

1. **Kick-off meeting:** At the beginning of the project, an introductory meeting with the Project Officer was organized with the participation of all consortium members. During this meeting, mutual expectations, communication preferences, and cooperation models were openly discussed.
2. **Question-and-answer mechanism:** Principal investigators and project managers are encouraged to openly ask questions to the Project Officer when in doubt about issues such as EU funding rules, reporting requirements, changes of plans, or Grant Agreement amendments. In particular, the Project Officer's opinion is sought prior to critical decisions.

3. **Problem reporting:** When unexpected difficulties or delays occur in the project, they are immediately reported to the Project Officer and counselled on possible solutions. Problems are framed as challenges to be addressed together, not as daunting issues to be solved.
4. **Transparency principle:** The principle of full transparency is adopted in communication with the Project Officer.



IMPACT:



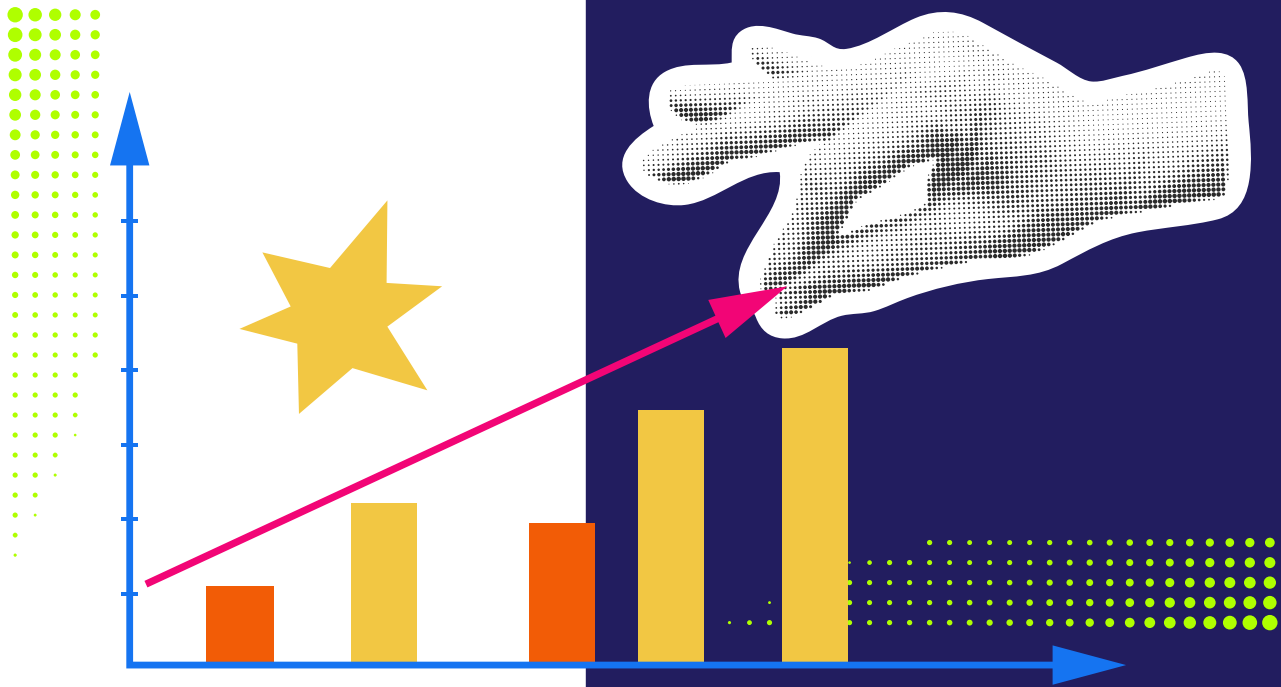
In the GEMSTONE Project, the proactive and transparent communication strategy with the Project Officer had a significant positive impact on project execution and results:

- 1. Rapid problem resolution:** Open communication with the Project Officer ensured that issues that arose during the project progress were resolved quickly and effectively. For example, a delay in a Work Package was resolved with early intervention and guidance from the Project Officer, which did not affect the overall project timeline.
- 2. Streamlining bureaucratic processes:** The Project Officer's guidance facilitated a better understanding and management of the complex bureaucratic processes of EU funding mechanisms. This contributed to more efficient completion of reporting processes and avoidance of potential non-compliances.
- 3. Increased project flexibility:** Regular consultations with the project authority increased the project's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and requirements. Changes in project objectives or methodology were smoothly implemented with the support of the Project Officer.
- 4. Establishment of a trust relationship:** Over time, a strong relationship of trust developed between the project team and the Project Officer. This trust enabled more open and honest communication, which increased the transparency and accountability of the project.



5. **Improved quality of reporting:** The Project Officer's feedback contributed to the continuous improvement of the quality of the project's reporting and documentation. Errors or omissions in the initial reports were not repeated in subsequent reports thanks to the guidance of the Project Officer.
6. **Strengthened alignment with EU priorities:** Regular communication with the Project Officer ensured that the project remained aligned with the changing priorities and policies of the EU. This has increased the impact potential and sustainability of the project.
7. **Better risk management:** The Project Officer's expertise and experience contributed to early identification of potential risks and development of appropriate risk management strategies.
8. **Better dissemination of project results:** The network and knowledge of the Project Officer helped the project results to be disseminated to a wider audience and recognized at EU level.





Part II

FINANCIAL & RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

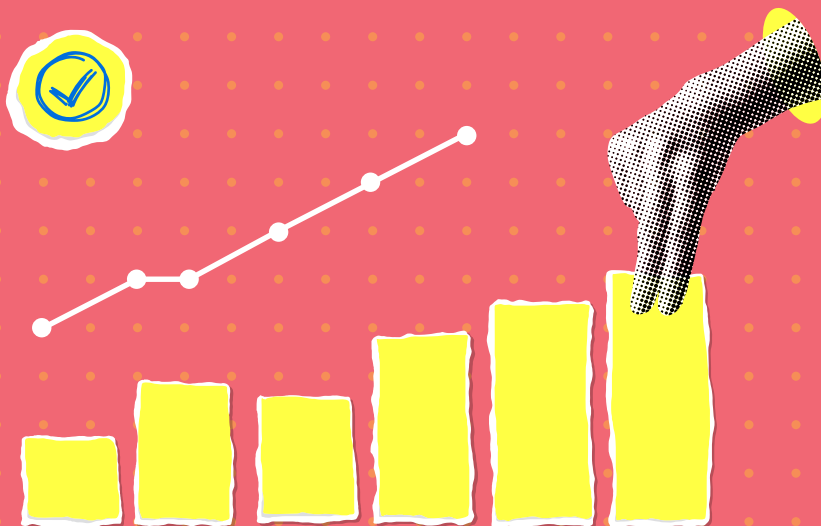
Ensuring sustainable and compliant financial practices in complex funding environments



PRACTICE 4:

Continuously monitor the budget balance

One of the most challenging aspects of implementing EU projects is undoubtedly budget management. This was also the greatest difficulty we faced at Acibadem University as part of the GEMSTONE Project. Compared to national projects, the budget structure and rules of EU projects are much more complex and stricter.



In Twinning projects such as GEMSTONE, the situation becomes even more complicated. Although Twinning projects are Coordination and Support Actions, the specific call allowed for a maximum of 30% of the total budget to be spent on research activities. These constraints require extra effort to maintain budget balance while achieving the project's main objectives.

At the beginning of the project, we realized our budget monitoring system was inadequate.

Expenditures were often made as the need arose, which could result in unexpected budget deviations. Furthermore, there was a lack of awareness regarding budget requirements, which could increase the risk of non-eligible expenses. This situation posed a risk to the project's financial sustainability and could potentially lead to inefficient use of resources, which may limit the project's capacity to achieve its scientific and strategic objectives.

APPLIED METHOD:



Within the GEMSTONE Project, we developed a comprehensive approach to continuously monitor the budget balance:

1. **Regular budget monitoring meetings:** We began holding monthly budget monitoring meetings attended by the Principal Investigator, the Project Manager, who is responsible for financial affairs, and relevant research team members. During these meetings:

- Actual expenditures were analysed
- Planned expenditures were reviewed
- Budget deviations were identified
- Corrective measures were determined

2. **Development of a real-time budget monitoring tool:** We created a custom Excel-based monitoring tool to track the project's financial status instantly. This tool:

- Showed planned, committed, and actual expenditures for each budget item

- Calculated utilization rates and remaining amounts of budget items
- Monitored compliance with twinning project restrictions (e.g., the 30% limit for research activities)
- Provided an easy-to-understand overview of the budget status through visual charts and alert systems

3. **Forward-looking budget planning:** Besides monitoring the current situation, we also carried out forward-looking budget planning for the entire duration of the project:

- We prepared three-month, six-month, and annual expenditure projections
- Reserved budgets for major expenditures
- Factored in seasonal fluctuations and exchange rate changes
- Created alternative budget plans for various scenarios

4. **Budget management trainings:** We organized training sessions for all project team members on EU budget rules and procedures:
- Eligible and non-eligible costs
 - Procurement procedures
 - Expenditure documentation requirements
 - Budget revision processes

5. **Procurement and expenditure approval process:** We instituted a structured procurement and expenditure approval process to strengthen budget control:
- A budget eligibility check for each expenditure request
 - A double-approval mechanism for expenditures above a certain threshold
 - Exceptional reviews for unplanned expenditures
 - Document control and archiving after expenditures

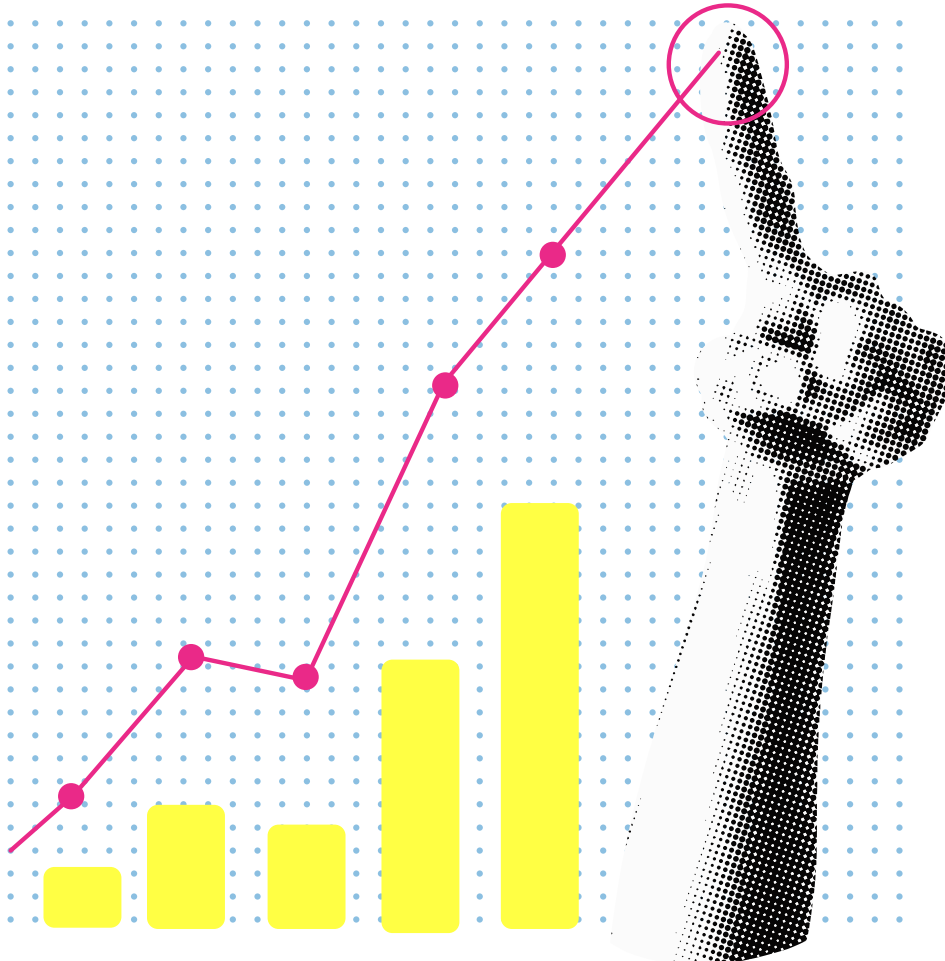


IMPACT:

The continuous budget monitoring approach had multi-faceted positive effects on the GEMSTONE Project:

1. **Financial compliance and risk reduction:** Regular budget monitoring significantly reduced the risk of non-compliance with EU rules. Potential non-eligible expenses were detected early on, and corrective measures were taken. This minimized the likelihood of audit findings and ensured project funds were used securely.
2. **Optimal use of resources:** Ongoing budget monitoring ensured that resources were allocated in alignment with project objectives. By identifying unused or inefficiently utilized budget items, we redirected those resources to more value-generating activities.
3. **Improvement in strategic decision making:** A clear and updated overview of the financial situation provided a solid basis for strategic decisions in project management. Once constraints and opportunities were better understood, it became easier to prioritize and schedule project activities effectively.
4. **Compliance with Twinning project constraints:** We effectively managed the specific budget constraints arising from the Twinning nature of the GEMSTONE Project (such as the 30% limit on research activities). Through regular monitoring, we received early warnings when these limits were approached, ensuring expenditures were distributed among the correct categories.

5. **Increased project sustainability:** Improved financial management strengthened the project's long-term sustainability. By distributing spending more evenly across different project stages, we reduced the risk of resource shortages near the end of the project and ensured all planned activities could be completed.
6. **Heightened team awareness and accountability:** Including all project team members in budget processes promoted a culture of financial responsibility. Team members began to understand the financial implications of their activities better, developed cost-effective solutions, and took an active role in budget planning.
7. **Improvement in reporting quality:** Regular and detailed budget monitoring enhanced the accuracy and quality of the financial report to be submitted to the EU. By the time the reporting period arrives, all necessary information will be already organized and verified, making the reporting process more efficient and less stressful.
8. **Capacity development for future projects:** The budget monitoring strategies and tools we developed became a valuable institutional resource and built capacity for future EU projects. This experience permanently bolstered Acibadem University's capabilities in project financial management.



PRACTICE 5:

Anticipate the needs

The challenges of a months-long procurement process for experimental materials and its impact on the project timeline



One of the most common challenges in European Union projects is the procurement process for experimental materials. While many researchers focus on the scientific processes and experimental design, they often overlook how complex and time-consuming material procurement can be. This is particularly true in international projects, where specialized materials may need to be sourced from different countries. Customs procedures, communication difficulties with suppliers, and unexpected delays can seriously impact the project's schedule.

EU projects adhere to strict timelines and specific milestones. Each work package provides the basis for the next, so a delay in one phase can affect the entire project. In particular, failing to procure materials on time for experimental work can stall not just a specific experiment, but the project as a whole.

Several factors can cause procurement delays:

- Special materials that are not produced domestically and must be imported
- Limited stock or production capacity of the manufacturer
- Delays and bureaucratic hurdles in customs processes
- Problems or damages during shipping
- Suppliers failing to meet delivery deadlines
- Extended purchasing procedures within universities or other institutions
- Delays in budget approvals
- Unforeseen global events (pandemics, natural disasters, political crises)

For researchers, these challenges mean not only lost time but also lowered motivation, increased stress, and concerns about project success. In time-limited EU projects, such delays could have serious consequences, including project non-completion or failure to achieve the intended outputs.

APPLIED METHOD:



To tackle these difficulties, Acıbadem University developed a proactive material management strategy as part of the GEMSTONE Project. This strategy aims to anticipate potential delays in the procurement process and ensure the continuous progress of the project:

1. **Detailed needs assessment:** At the start of the project, a comprehensive list of required materials for all experiments is compiled. This list includes not just the main items but also auxiliary equipment, consumables, and potential spare parts.

2. **Experiment plans according to different timeframes:** The research team develops separate experimental plans for 1-, 3-, 6-, and 12-month periods. This approach clearly identifies which materials are needed urgently in the short term and what will be required in the medium and long term.

3. **Alternative material lists:** At least one, ideally more, alternatives are identified for each material. This ensures that if the primary material cannot be sourced, the experiments can proceed without interruption.
4. **Weekly monitoring meetings:** The project team holds regular weekly meetings to monitor the material procurement process. During these meetings:
 - The status of ordered materials is checked
 - New orders needed for upcoming experiments are determined
 - Issues encountered in the procurement process are discussed
 - Decisions are made on whether to switch to alternative materials or modify experimental plans if necessary
5. **Monthly experiment programme updates:** Based on the status of procurement, experiment programmes are updated monthly. This approach prioritizes experiments that can be conducted with available materials, and postpones or reschedules those dependent on materials not yet procured.
6. **Early ordering strategy:** For materials with long lead times, orders are placed well in advance – sometimes 6-12 months before the materials are actually needed. This provides a buffer against potential delays.
7. **Strong communication with suppliers:** The team stays in regular contact with suppliers, receives updates on order statuses, and obtains early warnings about possible delays.
8. **Optimizing institutional purchasing processes:** By working closely with the university's procurement department, the project team develops strategies to speed up bureaucratic procedures.





IMPACT:

Implementing a proactive material management strategy had several positive outcomes for the GEMSTONE Project:

1. **Improved time management:** Procuring materials ahead of schedule ensured that experiments could begin as planned, which helped maintain the overall project timeline. This is crucial given the strict schedules characteristic of EU projects.
2. **Uninterrupted research:** Having alternative materials and flexible experiment plans allowed research to continue seamlessly despite delays in procurement. In the event of a delay in sourcing a certain material, the team could quickly switch to alternative materials or focus on other experiments.
3. **Resource optimization:** Securing materials before they were urgently needed helped avoid last-minute orders or express shipments that incur additional costs, making more efficient use of the project budget.
4. **Reduced stress and uncertainty:** With fewer uncertainties surrounding material procurement, the research team experienced lower stress levels, thereby contributing to higher motivation and productivity.
5. **Improved collaboration and communication:** Weekly material management meetings strengthened communication among team members, ensuring everyone stayed updated on the project status.
6. **Enhanced risk management:** Identifying potential procurement issues in advance and preparing alternative plans increased the project's capacity to manage risks.
7. **Higher quality reporting:** Regular monitoring and documentation of the material procurement process allowed for more detailed and evidence-based progress reports to be submitted to the EU.
8. **Learning for future projects:** The experiences gained from applying this strategy provided valuable insights for future EU projects at the institution.



PRACTICE 6:

Project management outside the Eurozone

*Prepare for currency fluctuations and
the uncertainty caused by exchange rate
volatility*



In European Union projects, funding is provided in euros. However, in projects carried out in countries outside the Eurozone (such as Turkey), exchange rate fluctuations can pose a significant risk factor. This challenge creates difficulties at every stage of the project, from financial planning to implementation.

In countries with high inflation, like Turkey, there can be substantial differences between the budget calculated at the time of project application and the actual costs incurred during project implementation. For instance, the Euro-to-Lira exchange rate was 1 Euro to 18 Turkish Liras at the time of beginning of the GEMSTONE Project, but rose to 28 TRY a year later and eventually to 46 TRY in the last year. Meanwhile, calculating the Euro-equivalent of these local costs using average exchange rates adds another layer of complexity given the fact that the project has only one reporting period lasting the entire duration of the project.

The budget planning carried out at the beginning of the project had to be revised due to the Turkish Lira's depreciation against the Euro. Unforeseen imbalances emerged in spending categories such as personnel costs, equipment purchases, and other expenses. As a result, the project team had to make continual budget revisions, re-evaluate spending priorities, and work on various financial scenarios. The uncertainty caused by exchange rate fluctuations became one of the most stressful aspects of project management.

Every EU project coordinator, especially those working outside the Eurozone, should be prepared for risks that may arise from currency fluctuations and develop proactive strategies to manage them. It is essential to remember that a successful project management approach must include not only the fulfilment of technical objectives but also the effective management of financial resources.

APPLIED METHOD:

To minimize risks stemming from currency fluctuations, the GEMSTONE Project adopted a systematic approach consisting of the following key components:

1. **Regular budget meetings:** The project team holds periodic (usually monthly) budget meetings to evaluate the current financial situation. These meetings review actual expenditures, analyse the impact of exchange rate changes, and plan necessary measures.
2. **Multi-scenario planning:** Alternative budget plans are prepared for different exchange rate scenarios.
3. **Prioritization strategy:** All spending categories are classified according to their criticality in achieving project objectives. This classification allows for quick decisions on which expenditures can be postponed or reduced if currency fluctuations force budget constraints.



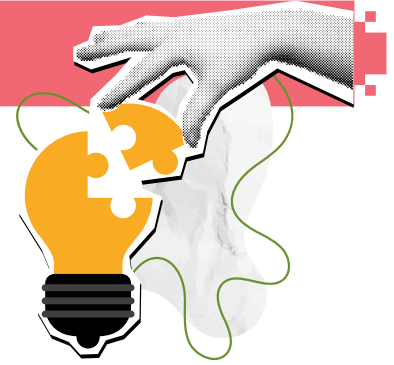
4. **Flexible procurement scheduling:** Large-scale equipment or service procurements are planned for periods when the exchange rate is more favourable, if possible. The project team monitors foreign exchange markets to make strategic purchasing decisions.
5. **Cash flow management:** Project funds are held in euros, and the timing of converting them into Turkish lira is strategically planned. Instead of converting the entire project budget into TRY at once, funds are converted as needed.
6. **Institutional support mechanisms:** Working in close collaboration with Acibadem University's Finance Department, the project team leverages institutional financial expertise and experience in managing exchange rate risks.



IMPACT:

Adopting a strategy for dealing with exchange rate fluctuations produced several positive outcomes for the GEMSTONE Project:

1. **Financial predictability:** Regular budget meetings and multi-scenario planning reduced the uncertainty caused by currency fluctuations, providing the project team with a more predictable financial environment. This helped avert unexpected budget shortfalls or sudden financial crises.
2. **Optimal resource use:** Making strategic purchases when the exchange rate was advantageous allowed project funds to be used more efficiently. As a result, the same budget yielded greater value.
3. **Uninterrupted project activities:** Effective management of financial risks ensured that project activities continued without interruption, despite exchange rate fluctuations. Alternative financial plans allowed tasks to proceed on time and as planned.
4. **Institutional capacity building:** The strategies developed and experiences gained in managing currency risks contributed significantly to Acibadem University's institutional capacity. This knowledge base will prove valuable for future international projects.
5. **A flexible project management culture:** The adaptation strategies used to handle external factors such as exchange rate volatility helped foster a more flexible and solution-oriented management culture within the project team. This culture has been effective in tackling other challenges as well.
6. **Sustainable financial planning:** A long-term financial planning and risk management approach increased the project's sustainability and contributed to its successful completion.

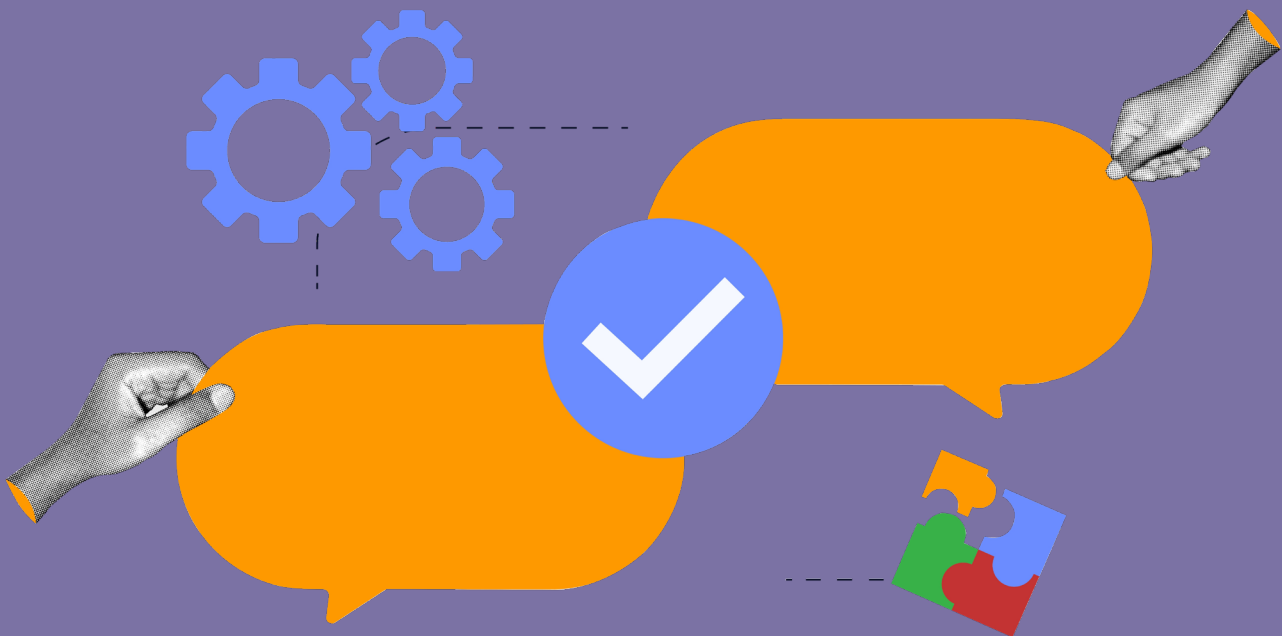




Part III

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY & TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Strengthening internal structures and empowering the entire institution to support EU projects



PRACTICE 7:

Involve the administrative personnel at your institution in the project

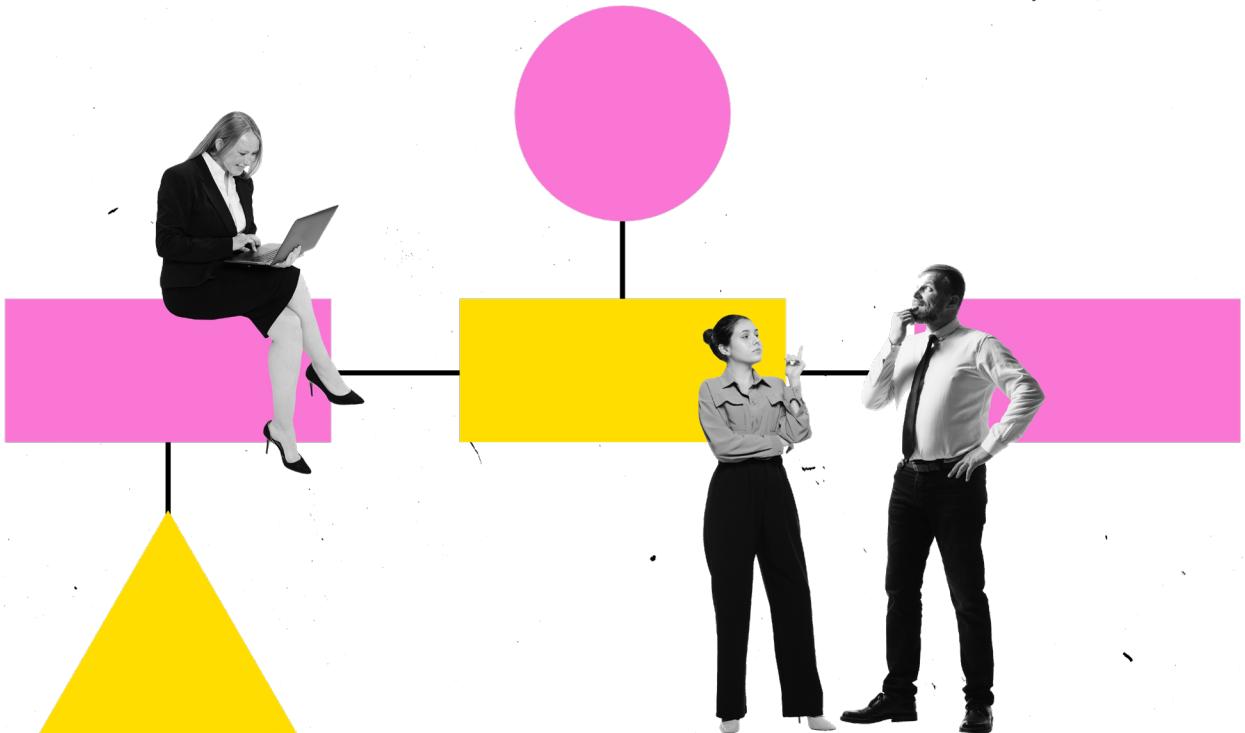
European Union projects are comprehensive processes that affect not only your research team but also your entire institution in various ways. Many institutions, when they begin applying for EU projects, fall under the mistaken assumption that the project will be carried out solely by the research team. However, the truth is that an EU project requires coordinated collaboration among different departments of the institution.



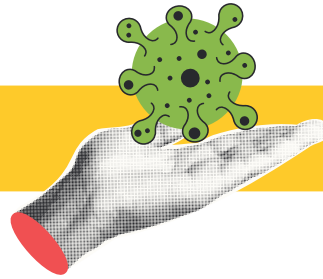
Departments such as Human Resources, Finance, Communications, and Procurement are usually familiar with national legislation and practices but may lack sufficient knowledge about EU legislation and project management. This is precisely the situation we encountered at Acibadem University within the scope of the GEMSTONE Project. When the project started, our administrative staff had experience with national research projects but had a knowledge gap regarding the unique requirements, reporting standards, and financial management

principles of EU projects. This gap risked causing delays, misunderstandings, and potential non-compliance issues during project implementation.

A lack of knowledge is not an excuse, and the responsibility for complying with EU rules rests directly with the institution implementing the project. Therefore, involving administrative personnel in the project is not merely an option but an absolute necessity for successful project management.



APPLIED METHOD:



Within the GEMSTONE Project, we adopted a systematic approach to effectively involve administrative staff:

1. *Creating awareness at an early stage:*

At the beginning of the project, we organized meetings with all relevant departments to provide information on the general framework of EU projects, their requirements, and each department's role in the project. This helped administrative staff feel that they were part of the project.

2. *Ongoing training programmes:* The GEMSTONE Project managers regularly held training sessions, which included both general EU project management principles and content tailored to each department:

- Finances: Financial provisions in EU grant agreements, eligible costs, budget revisions
- Human Resources: Calculating personnel costs, time sheets, contract requirements
- Procurement: EU tender rules, supplier selection, and documentation requirements
- Communications: EU visibility rules, dissemination strategies

3. *Leveraging international expertise:* We organized specialized training sessions for our administrative departments by tapping into the expertise of our Italian project partner, Serena Cogoni of ICONS. This enabled departments to learn about international best practices and gain different perspectives.

4. *Documentation and guidelines:* We prepared guide documents containing basic information on EU projects, frequently asked questions, and department-specific guidelines. These documents served as resources to which staff could refer in their daily work.

5. *Establishing mentor-mentee relationships:* We set up mentor-mentee relationships between more experienced personnel and newcomers. This sped up knowledge transfer and contributed to building institutional memory.

6. *Regular information meetings:* As the project progressed, we held regular information meetings with all administrative departments to share updates on the project's current status, upcoming activities, and potential challenges.



IMPACT:



The involvement of administrative personnel in the GEMSTONE Project led to numerous positive outcomes:

1. **Increased efficiency in project management:** Administrative bottlenecks were reduced; document workflows were expedited. With the Finance Department better understanding EU financial regulations, expense reports were prepared more accurately and on time.
2. **Institutional capacity building:** Administrative staff gained valuable knowledge and experience not only for the GEMSTONE Project but also for future EU projects. This permanently enhanced the institution's capacity to manage international projects.
3. **Improved communication and collaboration:** Communication between the research team and administrative departments was strengthened, and a common language and understanding were developed. This significantly reduced disagreements and misunderstandings in the project process.
4. **Advances in risk management:** The increased awareness of EU rules among administrative personnel allowed for early detection and prevention of potential non-compliance risks. This reduced the likelihood of financial corrections and audit findings.
5. **Cross-learning opportunities:** Knowledge and experience sharing among different departments brought new perspectives and innovative solutions. For instance, collaboration between the HR and Finances departments facilitated more effective management of personnel costs.
6. **Enhanced sense of ownership:** As administrative staff felt they were important contributors to the project, their motivation and commitment to the project grew. This led them to develop proactive approaches and take initiative in problem-solving.



PRACTICE 8:

Disseminate knowledge within the organization

European Union projects – especially those as complex and multi-disciplinary as the GEMSTONE initiative – generate and accumulate a huge amount of new knowledge during their course. This knowledge often remains concentrated within the project team, running the risk of getting lost once the project ends or when team members leave the institution.



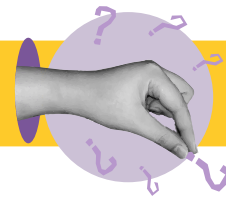
In academic institutions like Acibadem University, research projects frequently create “knowledge islands,” in which valuable data, methodologies, international connections, and project management experiences are retained only within the minds and files of the individuals directly involved in the project.

Such a situation weakens institutional memory, leads to the repetition of mistakes, wastes resources, and results in missed opportunities for synergy. Researchers facing similar problems in their own work may have to start from scratch to develop solutions. Project managers miss the opportunity to learn from colleagues who have already overcome similar challenges.

New researchers and students may not have access to the technical knowledge and expertise already present within the institution.

Moreover, if newly acquired methodologies, techniques, and research tools are not shared throughout the institution, overall research capacity growth is limited. Opportunities for international collaboration remain visible only to those directly involved in the project, while other departments remain unaware of potential partnerships.

APPLIED METHOD:



Within the GEMSTONE Project, a systematic and multi-layered approach to “disseminating knowledge within the organization” was adopted:

1. **Knowledge-sharing seminars:** The project team held “knowledge-sharing seminars,” during which project researchers shared newly acquired methodologies, technical skills, and research findings with other researchers at the institution. Attendance was open to all university staff, and interdisciplinary participation was encouraged.
2. **Digital knowledge repository:** An online repository was created to store all the knowledge generated and gathered by the project (methodological guides, protocols, data sets, analysis tools, and contacts).
3. **Experience-sharing workshops:** The project team regularly organized “experience-sharing workshops,” particularly to convey what they had learned in project management, international collaboration, and EU funding mechanisms. These workshops offered practical guidance to researchers planning to apply for EU projects in the future.

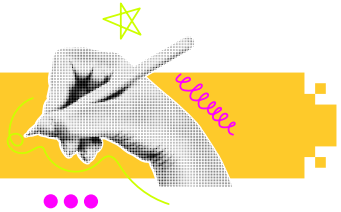
- 4. Mentorship programme:** Researchers who gained experience in the project served as mentors for early-career researchers and graduate students within the institution. Through this mechanism, the knowledge and skills acquired were transferred directly, fostering the development of emerging researchers.
- 5. Research techniques training:** For specific research techniques and methodologies developed or learned during the project, practical training programmes were

organized. These training sessions offered hands-on learning opportunities in areas such as laboratory methods, data analysis approaches, and the use of specialized equipment.

- 6. Interdisciplinary roundtable meetings:** Roundtable events were convened for researchers from various disciplines to discuss how the knowledge acquired through the project could be applied in different fields, and to explore new ideas for collaboration.



IMPACT:



This approach to “disseminating knowledge within the organization” had multi-faceted and transformative effects on both Acibadem University and the GEMSTONE Project:

1. Strengthened institutional memory:

Systematic documentation and sharing of acquired knowledge reinforced the institution’s memory. Even after the project concluded, the information and experiences gained will remain within the institution and form the basis for future research. The digital knowledge repository has evolved into a valuable asset and point of reference for researchers.

2. Enhanced research capacity: Sharing newly acquired methodologies and techniques across the institution contributed to the development of overall research capacity. For instance, a novel data analysis method developed within the GEMSTONE Project was subsequently adopted by other research groups in entirely different disciplines, leading to cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer and unexpected research breakthroughs.

3. Expanded collaboration network: Knowledge-sharing activities fostered new connections among research groups that had not previously interacted. These interactions led to interdisciplinary partnerships and the initiation of new research projects.

4. Increased resource efficiency: By disseminating knowledge, the university used its resources more effectively. Researchers avoided “reinventing the wheel” by leveraging existing methodologies and protocols, thereby saving both time and resources.

For example, a research protocol developed under the GEMSTONE Project saved another research group from what would have otherwise been months of methodology development.

5. Development of early-career researchers:

The mentorship programme and training events supported the rapid professional development of graduate students and early-career researchers, who thereby gained research skills meeting international standards and prepared for future leadership in research. Participants in the mentorship programme demonstrated a noticeable increase in both the quantity and quality of their publications.

6. Higher project proposal success rates:

The experience-sharing workshops improved the quality and success rate of EU project proposals across the university. New proposals, informed by GEMSTONE’s insights, were crafted more strategically and competitively. During proposal preparation, experienced GEMSTONE researchers provided advice that proved crucial in securing funding for numerous new projects.

7. Strengthened culture of innovation:

Knowledge-sharing activities contributed to a more open, collaborative culture of innovation across the institution. Researchers began sharing ideas and findings more transparently, spurring creative thinking and the development of novel approaches. As a result, new research initiatives based on open innovation principles emerged institution-wide.

PRACTICE 9:

Obsessively read the regulations

*Consciously managing legal responsibilities,
navigating legislative complexity, and
addressing information gaps*



European Union projects, in addition to their scientific and technical challenges, operate within an extensive legal framework. This framework is a complex amalgamation of national and international legislation (the *acquis*) and includes rules, regulations, and standards that must be meticulously followed at every stage of the project. When the GEMSTONE Project at Acibadem University began, the team suddenly found itself in this intricate regulatory environment, facing serious challenges.

Like many academic institutions, Acibadem University's core expertise lies in scientific research and education. However, while carrying out EU projects, the team encountered a variety of legal and regulatory challenges:

- **Abundance of regulations:** EU projects are governed by a multi-tiered regulatory structure ranging from general EU regulations to specific programme guidelines, national laws, and international standards. For an inexperienced team, this vast body of legislation can be quite intimidating.
- **Constantly evolving rules:** EU legislation and programme rules are updated regularly. New rules and interpretations can emerge even during a project's implementation, meaning staying current requires continuous effort.
- **Sector-specific requirements:** As a health-focused project, GEMSTONE was subject not only to general regulations but also to sector-specific legal requirements such as ethical rules and clinical research standards.
- **Cross-compliance needs:** Different legal frameworks can sometimes conflict or present grey areas. For example, there may be subtle differences between the EU's General Data Protection Regulation and national data protection laws.
- **Reporting and documentation obligations:** EU projects are subject to strict reporting and documentation requirements. Failure to be aware of or correctly interpret these requirements can result in financial penalties or payment delays.

APPLIED METHOD:

To overcome these challenges, the GEMSTONE Project team at Acibadem University developed a systematic and comprehensive strategy for examining and applying the legislation. Dubbed "obsessively reading the legislation," this strategy consisted of the following core steps:

1. **Comprehensive regulatory mapping:** The first step was creating a complete inventory of all legislation the project was subject to, including:

- EU-level regulations and directives
- Horizon Europe programme rules and guidelines
- National laws and regulations
- Institutional policies and procedures
- Healthcare-specific regulations and standards
- Ethical rules and data protection regulations



2. **Forming a regulatory review team:**

A dedicated team was set up to examine and interpret the legislation, composed of the Project Manager and the project's Primary Principal Investigator. Where necessary, they consulted representatives from relevant departments for additional input.

3. **Systematic reading and analysis programme:**

The team created a programme for systematically reading and analysing all relevant legislation. This programme included:

- Detailed reading of the legislation
- Highlighting key sections and taking notes
- Linking regulations to specific project activities
- Identifying potential compliance issues
- Developing implementation strategies

4. **Collaboration with external experts:**

The team worked with external experts to understand and interpret complex aspects of the legislation. These included:

- Representatives of the National Contact Point
- Consultants experienced in EU project management
- The Project Officer

5. **Legislative information management system:**

All the information gathered was organized and made accessible through a legislative information management system, which included:

- A digital library of legislative texts

- Comments, notes, and implementation guides

- Frequently asked questions and answers

- Audit checklists and compliance templates

6. **Training and knowledge sharing:** The knowledge acquired by the regulatory review team was shared with the wider project team through:

- Regular training sessions

- Project meetings that included legislative updates

7. **Proactive compliance strategy:** Instead of a reactive approach, the team adopted a proactive compliance strategy – identifying and preventing potential compliance problems before they arose. This involved:

- Creating compliance checklists for project activities

- Conducting compliance assessments before launching new activities

8. **Continuous improvement and updates:**

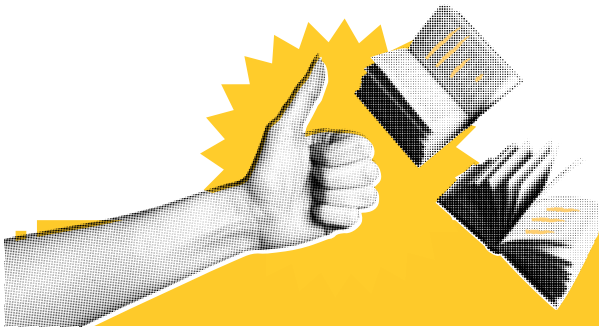
Because legislation is a dynamic, ever-changing resource, the team took a continuous improvement approach:

- Regularly reviewing legislative sources

- Following relevant EU websites, newsletters, and forums

- Evaluating lessons learned from other projects

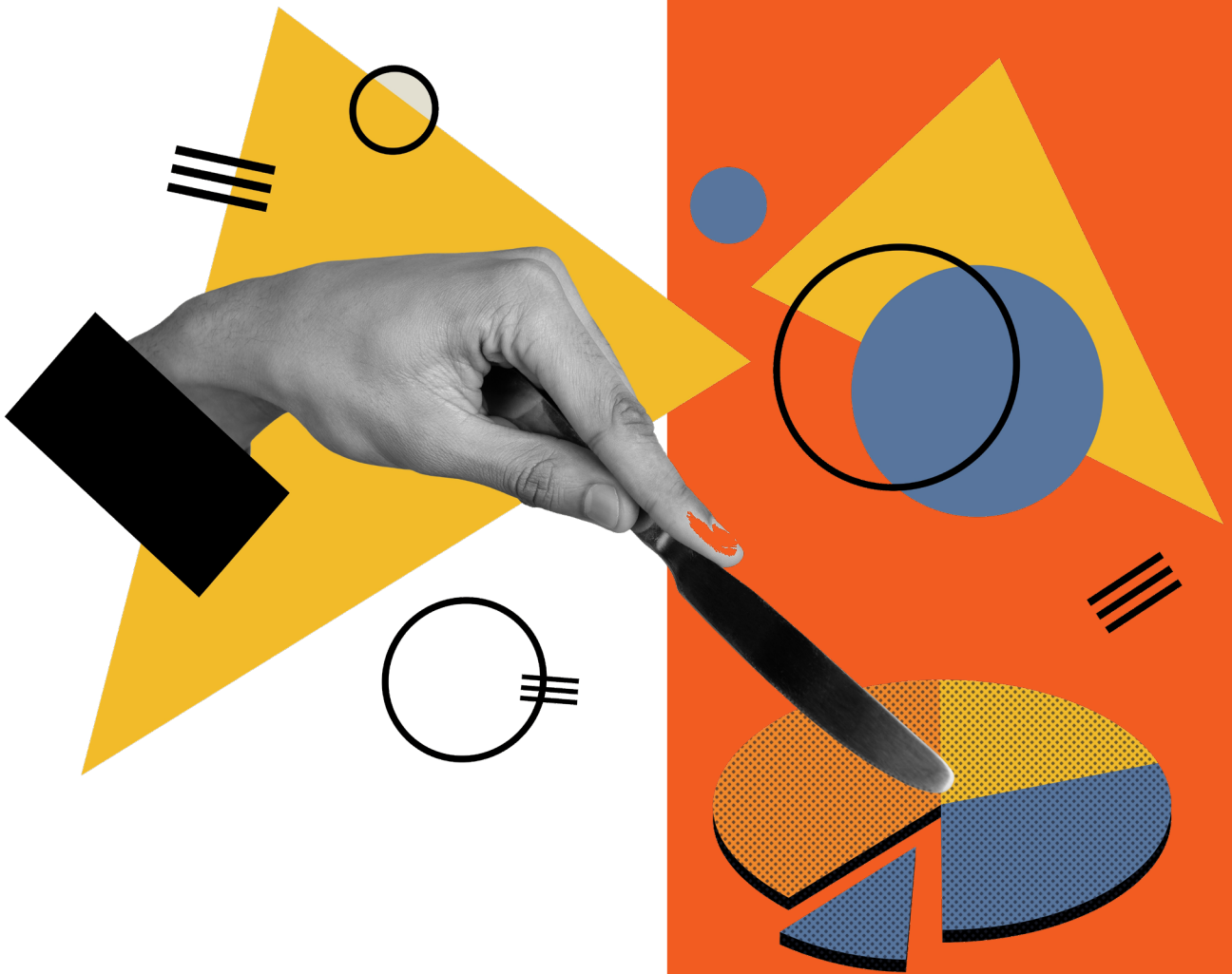
- Periodically assessing the effectiveness of compliance strategies



IMPACT:

The “obsessively reading and applying regulations” strategy produced outcomes for the GEMSTONE Project that went well beyond expectations. These benefits included:

1. **Faster, more confident decision making:** In-depth knowledge of the regulations allowed the project team to make decisions far more quickly and with greater certainty. Before, each decision was clouded by the concern, “Are we sure this follows the rules?” Now, they knew exactly what was permissible and how to implement it. This clarity was especially valuable at critical project milestones and in resource allocation decisions. In addition to fully complying with the regulations, the team was able to leverage every possibility the legislation offered for achieving project goals.
2. **Quick adaptation to project changes:** When unexpected changes arose, the team understood precisely what degree of flexibility was allowed by the legislation, making it quick and efficient to adapt. This ability to pivot ensured the project could continue uninterrupted in unforeseeable circumstances, without deviating significantly from its objectives.
3. **Enhanced institutional reputation and credibility:** Acibadem University’s obsessive commitment to compliance significantly boosted its reputation and credibility with the European Commission, project partners, and other stakeholders. This benefit wasn’t limited to the success of the current project; it also opened doors to future collaborations and funding opportunities.
4. **Improved efficiency and resource utilization:** Knowing the details of the legislation enabled the team to use project resources more effectively. They fully understood which expenses were eligible, which activities could be funded, and how to document them. As a result, they could steer resources toward maximum impact.
5. **Increased team morale and confidence:** Perhaps the most under-recognized yet crucial benefit was the boost to the team’s morale and self-assurance. By understanding and applying the regulations fully, team members shed their earlier anxiety and uncertainty. They became professionals who carried out their responsibilities with confidence and clarity. This newfound confidence fostered greater creativity and innovation. Knowing the regulatory boundaries also enabled them to focus on making the most impact within those limits.
6. **Expanded institutional knowledge base and capacity:** The approach of obsessively reading regulations generated lasting organizational knowledge and increased capacity. The processes and documentation developed became a valuable resource not only for the GEMSTONE Project but for all future EU projects at the institution.
7. **Ability to predict and prevent problems:** In-depth knowledge of the regulations helped the team foresee potential issues and address them before they arose. This proactive stance smoothed the project’s progress and prevented unexpected disruptions.



Part IV

OPERATIONAL FLEXIBILITY & RISK MANAGEMENT

Building resilience through proactive
planning and adaptability



PRACTICE 10:

International travels

Overcome visa barriers and facilitate international mobility



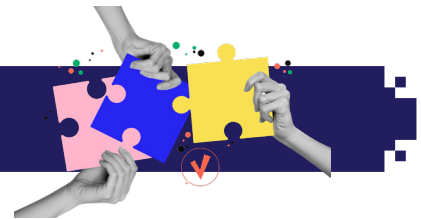
One of the most valuable aspects of European Union projects is the opportunity for researchers from different countries to come together and share their knowledge and experiences. However, for researchers living outside the Schengen Area and who are not EU citizens, these international collaborations can become a significant challenge due to visa procedures. International political dynamics and changing visa regulations, in particular, can seriously restrict travel freedom for researchers from certain countries.

Visa application processes are often complex, time-consuming, and stressful. The documents requested from applicants are quite extensive: invitation letters, accommodation details, travel insurance, bank statements, pay slips, employment contracts, and much more. Each country has its own unique visa requirements and procedures, which can frequently change.

A visa rejection not only disrupts travel plans but also negatively affects the project timeline. Inability to attend conferences, workshops, training sessions, or project meetings can weaken the project's international collaboration objectives and reduce the quality of its outcomes. Additionally, limited availability of visa appointments and the long wait times (sometimes months) to secure one in certain countries make planning even more difficult. During periods of high application volume, merely getting a visa appointment can be a significant hurdle in itself.

These challenges can complicate the participation of researchers from countries outside the Schengen Area (e.g., Turkey) and, in some cases, reduce the willingness of qualified researchers to take part in EU projects.

APPLIED METHOD:



To address the difficulties posed by visa processes, Acibadem University developed a proactive visa strategy as part of the GEMSTONE Project:

1. **Long-term travel planning:** At the start of the project, we identify the international meetings, conferences, and workshops to be held throughout the entire project period and schedule them in a calendar. This planning ensures that the visa application process can begin at least 3–6 months before travel dates.
2. **Institutional support mechanism:** Within the university, a project manager assists with visa applications. This person/unit helps prepare invitation letters and verify application documents.
3. **Alternative participation plans:** For every meeting or event, we develop a backup plan in case visas cannot be obtained. These strategies include online participation options, assigning an on-site representative, or changing the date/location of the event.

IMPACT:



Implementing a proactive visa strategy yielded several positive outcomes for the GEMSTONE Project:

1. **Successful implementation of travel plans:** By initiating visa applications well in advance and managing them meticulously, the vast majority of planned trips were successfully carried out, significantly contributing to the project's international collaboration goals.
2. **Reduced stress and uncertainty:** Early initiation of the visa process and its systematic management minimized the uncertainty and stress researchers face, allowing them to focus more on their primary work – scientific research.
3. **Time and resource savings:** Standardized documents and institutional support mechanisms eliminated the need to start visa preparations from scratch each time, thereby saving both time and resources.
4. **Flexibility and adaptability:** Having ready-made alternative participation plans ensured that even if a visa could not be obtained, the project's progress remained uninterrupted. This flexibility contributed to meeting project objectives on schedule.
5. **Accumulation of knowledge and experience:** The knowledge and experience gained in managing visa procedures provided a valuable resource not only for the current project but also for future international projects.
6. **Enhanced inclusivity:** Overcoming visa hurdles enabled researchers from different countries – and subject to different visa requirements – to participate equally in the project, thereby increasing overall inclusivity.
7. **Trust and predictability:** Successful management of visa processes boosted trust among project partners and increased predictability regarding travel plans.

PRACTICE 11:

Have a plan B in project management

Accept the inevitability of problems and learn to adapt to changes

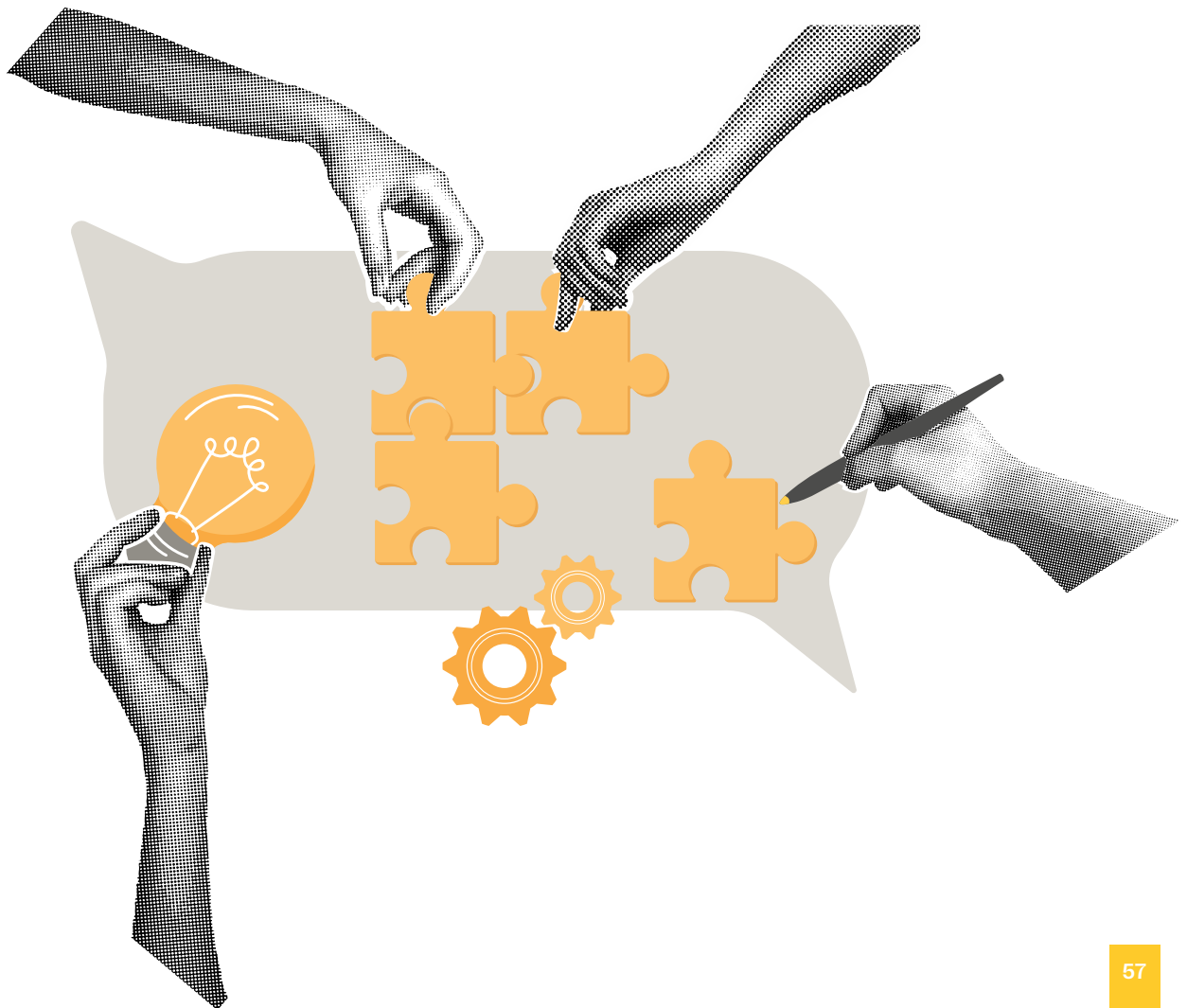


While project management is often envisioned as a linear process that unfolds exactly as planned, reality is quite different. In complex, multi-stakeholder endeavours such as European Union projects, it is almost impossible to implement every detail of the initial plan. This is a reality every project manager must eventually face.

During Acibadem University's GEMSTONE Project, we had a similar experience. The meticulously prepared timelines, task distributions, and methodologies developed at the outset encountered various obstacles during implementation.

For example, factors such as the data collection process taking longer than anticipated, delays in communication with international partners, unexpected budget constraints, or personnel changes can cause deviations from the original plan.

These deviations can lead to anxiety and a drop in motivation within the project team. In particular, there is a strong expectation that an EU project will be implemented exactly as presented during the application stage. However, adaptability lies at the heart of project management. Accepting that problems will arise and learning to work with them is the first step to successful project management.



APPLIED METHOD:



The “plan B” methodology refers to a project team’s ability to generate alternative solutions to problems without diverging from the project’s main objectives. This methodology encompasses the following steps:

1. **Risk analysis and forecasting:** At the start of the project, analyse potential risks and obstacles in detail. Assess their probability and potential impact. Doing so prepares you for possible complications.
2. **Principle of flexibility:** Build in some flexibility when creating your project plan. For instance, allow time buffers for critical tasks, or set aside a budget contingency for unforeseen expenses.
3. **Developing alternative scenarios:** For each critical task or phase, prepare backup implementation scenarios. Ask yourself, “What if this doesn’t work?” and determine alternative solutions to follow in that event.
4. **Regular monitoring and evaluation:** Continuously track and review project progress. Spotting deviations early gives you more time and options for corrective measures.
5. **Communication strategy:** Develop a clear and transparent communication strategy with your project team and stakeholders. Sharing problems and changes in a timely manner makes it easier to come up with collective solutions.
6. **Collaboration with the Project Officer:** In EU projects, your Project Officer is one of your most valuable resources. Discuss issues and possible solutions, and seek their guidance.
7. **Adaptability:** Be mentally prepared to adapt quickly when plans need to change. See necessary changes not as a failure but as a natural part of the project.



IMPACT:



Implementing the “plan B” methodology has several positive impacts on projects:

1. **Resilience and sustainability:** The ability to manage problems increases the project’s resilience. Even when faced with unexpected conditions, the project remains sustainable.
2. **Stress management and motivation:** Having a plan B reduces pressure on the team and helps maintain motivation. When problems arise, rather than panicking (“What do we do now?”), you can immediately switch to alternative solutions. This boosts the team’s confidence and problem-solving capacity.
3. **Innovative solutions:** Interestingly, plan B solutions sometimes turn out to be more innovative and effective than the original plan. The creativity sparked by necessity can bring unexpected value to the project.
4. **Stakeholder confidence:** The ability to quickly and effectively resolve issues enhances the confidence of project stakeholders. Institutions like the EU evaluate not just the problems encountered but also how teams respond to and manage those problems.
5. **Learning and institutional memory:** Every time a plan B is put into practice, it becomes a valuable learning opportunity for future projects. Documenting these experiences builds institutional memory that can be applied to similar projects later on.
6. **Achievement of core project goals:** Most importantly, the plan B methodology enables the project to continue striving toward its main objectives, despite all obstacles. Methods and tools may change, but it is still possible to stay focused on the ultimate goal.



PRACTICE 12:

Put everything in writing

Preventing lost information and communication gaps as the foundation of successful project management



European Union projects are inherently complex, multi-stakeholder, and often long-term initiatives. One of the most common issues faced in such projects is that critical information remains confined to individuals' minds rather than being captured in a shared institutional memory.

As was the case at Acibadem University, many institutions start without a unified system for documenting and archiving project activities. This lack of formal documentation can lead to a range of serious problems:

- **Loss or distortion of verbal information:** Information passed along verbally is inevitably prone to being lost or altered over time. Decisions made during meetings, details in email threads that go missing, or telephone agreements not recorded in writing can all become murky – and sometimes forgotten – shortly after they occur. Team members begin disputing one another with statements like, “I never said that,” or “That’s not how we decided it.”
- **Restricted information sharing and accessibility:** When crucial information remains with just one team member, it becomes inaccessible if that person is on leave, falls ill, or leaves the project. As a result, progress becomes dependent on a single individual’s presence – an unsustainable and risky arrangement.
- **Compromised project integrity and consistency:** Without a formally documented plan and ongoing records, project goals can easily slip off track. Different teams or individuals might develop divergent interpretations of the same project. Over time, these inconsistencies can evolve into parallel work streams that threaten the project’s overall integrity.

APPLIED METHOD:



To overcome these challenges, Acibadem University adopted an approach centred on systematic documentation of every project phase and detail, combined with the use of cloud-based technology. Several key steps were involved:

1. **Establishing a cloud-based collaboration platform:** The first step was selecting a platform that all team members could access, edit, and contribute to. Platforms like Google Drive or Microsoft Teams are ideal for sharing documents and enabling real-time collaboration. Acibadem University chose Microsoft Teams in alignment with their existing IT infrastructure and institutional needs.
2. **Creating documentation standards:** With the platform in place, the next step was establishing standards for documentation, including:
 - Keeping detailed notes of every meeting
 - Recording and sharing all decisions in writing with relevant stakeholders
 - Maintaining an accessible, up-to-date master project plan
 - Logging summaries of all email exchanges, significant phone calls, and other communications
 - Clearly specifying tasks, responsible parties, and deadlines

3. **Defining roles and responsibilities:** The documentation process was assigned to specific roles within the team. It was explicitly determined who would take meeting notes, who would update documents, and who would coordinate information sharing.
4. **Regular updates and review routines:** The project team created routines to keep documentation current. In weekly meetings, team members reviewed the status of each document and made any necessary updates.
5. **Access control and security:** Appropriate access controls and security measures were established to protect sensitive information. This included determining who could view, edit, or only read each document.



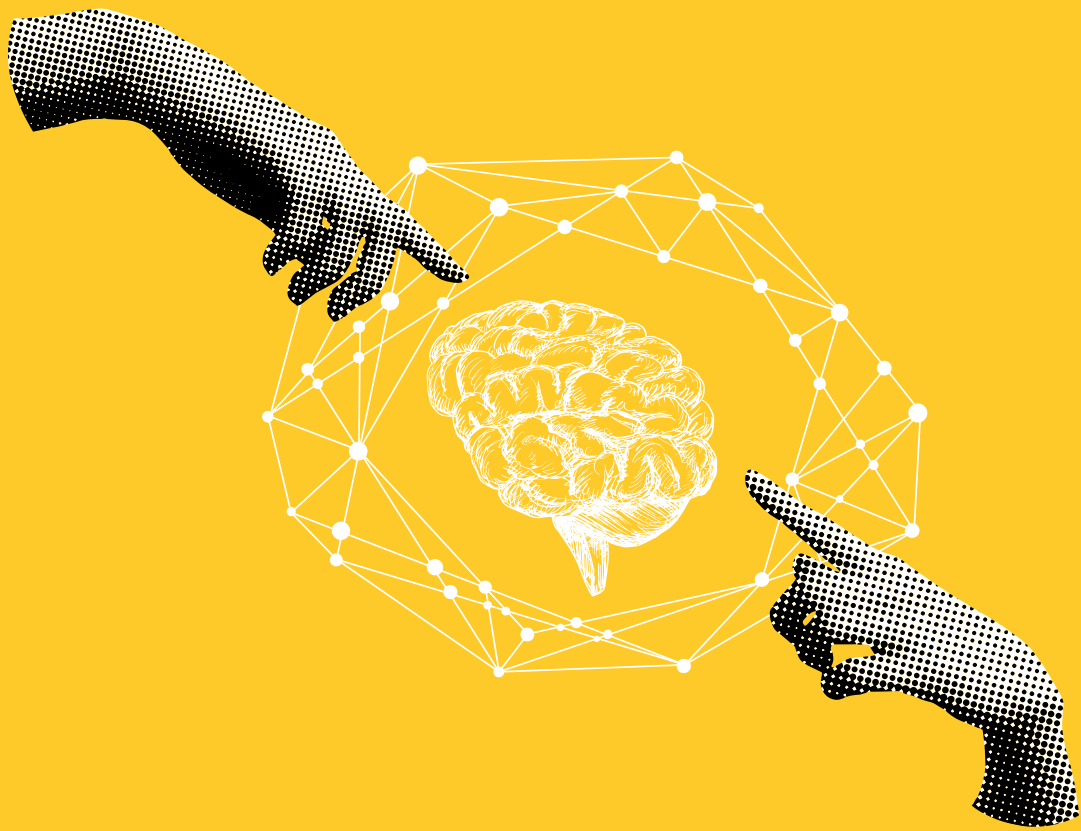
IMPACT:



The effect of Acibadem University's "write everything down" practice in EU projects was far more comprehensive and positive than initially expected. Key benefits included:

1. **Strengthened institutional memory:** Perhaps the most evident impact was the creation and enhancement of institutional memory. Now, instead of being lost when staff left or forgot details, important decisions and information were preserved in documents accessible to all. This meant projects could continue seamlessly even through personnel changes.
2. **Improved communication quality:** Written communication led to clearer, more precise statements. Many misunderstandings and ambiguities common in verbal exchanges were dramatically reduced. Team members began expressing their ideas more carefully and systematically.
3. **Greater accountability:** Documenting tasks, responsibilities, and deadlines boosted accountability. Because everyone could see exactly who was responsible for what, team members took their assignments more seriously and completed them on time.
4. **More productive meetings:** Sharing agendas and relevant documents beforehand helped participants come better prepared to meetings. This focus reduced repetitive discussions and allowed meetings to run more efficiently.
5. **Less time wasted:** Instead of spending time hunting for or reconstructing information, team members could access what they needed quickly and easily, improving overall productivity.
6. **A stronger collaboration culture:** Working together on shared documents fostered a sense of unity and teamwork. People felt more connected, seeing each other's contributions and building on them.
7. **Loyalty to project goals:** Having a written, readily accessible master plan helped ensure the project stayed aligned with its original objectives and scope. Deviations were identified and corrected more quickly.
8. **Reduced stress and conflict:** With fewer misunderstandings and clearer role definitions, stress levels and internal conflicts significantly decreased. The team worked together more cohesively toward common goals.
9. **Faster onboarding for new team members:** Thanks to extensive project documentation, new members could rapidly get up to speed and start contributing almost immediately.

**(IN LIEU OF A)
CONCLUSION:
WHAT DID
WE LEARN ON
GOVERNANCE?**



While the previous chapters focused on specific practices across various fields, one cross-cutting theme emerged time and again: the importance of governance. Behind every well-managed meeting, adaptive decision, or institutional breakthrough was a structure that enabled coordination, accountability, and trust. To close this guide, we reflect on how our governance model helped turn those practices into a coherent, resilient, and mission-driven project.

The GEMSTONE Project has been a valuable case study in evolving effective governance structures within a Horizon Europe Twinning scheme. Through collaborative planning, continuous evaluation, and adaptive management, we have gained several insights that can inform future research capacity-building projects, especially in Widening countries.

First and foremost, clear and transparent governance is essential from the outset. Establishing defined roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes among the three partners – Acibadem University, Lund University, and ICONS – ensured that expectations were aligned and that workflows remained efficient even when navigating institutional and cultural differences.

Second, the introduction of participatory and inclusive governance practices helped foster ownership and trust among all stakeholders. Regular meetings, shared planning documents, and the co-creation of activities allowed each partner to contribute their expertise meaningfully. This was especially critical in building a sense of shared purpose and accountability, and in encouraging knowledge exchange across disciplines and institutions.

Third, governance in research collaborations must remain adaptive. As the project evolved, new challenges and opportunities emerged – such as the need for more tailored capacity-building activities, unanticipated administrative hurdles, or an unforeseen technical equipment malfunction. The governance structure needed to be flexible enough to accommodate these changes without compromising the project's integrity or goals.

Fourth, integrating research management and support services into the governance structure helped bridge the gap between scientific ambition and institutional readiness. Strengthening Acibadem University's internal coordination and support mechanisms not only benefited the project's implementation but also laid the groundwork for longer-term institutional resilience in managing future international projects.

Finally, we learned that effective governance is not only about control and oversight, but also about enabling collaboration, learning, and institutional transformation. By embedding governance within a broader strategy for sustainability and impact, GEMSTONE has shown how coordinated research partnerships can catalyse meaningful change beyond the lifespan of a single project.

Project identity and visibility: Building recognition, value, and legacy

The GEMSTONE Project made deliberate efforts to cultivate a strong, coherent brand identity that resonated both within Acibadem University and across the broader neuroscience community. The visual identity was consistently applied in all dissemination materials, ensuring recognition and professionalism. Moreover, branding was approached as more than just logos and colour schemes – it was about shaping the project’s identity, reputation, and long-term value.

Internally, the project intentionally positioned itself not as a stand-alone initiative, but as a flagship driver of institutional growth and excellence in neuroscience. GEMSTONE’s visibility was elevated through university-wide engagement activities, consistent internal communication, and alignment with the University’s strategic goals and its vision for internationalization. These efforts made the project more accessible and increased the sense of belonging among both scientific and administrative personnel.

Externally, GEMSTONE cultivated visibility and trust by establishing a credible presence in the European research landscape and actively engaging with the neuroscience ecosystem through its participation in global conferences, strategic use of social media, and consistent visibility in public materials. Partnerships with leading European institutions and presentations at national and international events helped the project become a recognized player in neurodevelopmental disease research.

Importantly, the brand value of GEMSTONE extended to what it represented: a credible, inclusive, and high-impact model for research excellence emerging from a Widening country. Its commitment to capacity building, responsible science, and collaborative innovation became part of its brand narrative.

By treating brand building as a strategic function – not an afterthought – GEMSTONE amplified its influence, strengthened stakeholder buy-in, and laid the foundations for future collaborations and spin-off initiatives. This effort was not just aesthetic – it served as a strategic tool for credibility, outreach, and sustainability.

Recommendations for Horizon Europe newcomers

For institutions and consortia engaging in Horizon Europe projects for the first time – particularly those in Widening countries – the following recommendations can help shape an effective and sustainable governance structure:



1. **Start with a governance plan:** Design a governance structure early in the proposal phase. Define roles (e.g., board members, work package leaders, administrative contact points), communication flows, and decision-making processes.
2. **Build a core coordination team:** Establish a dedicated team that includes both scientific and administrative representatives. Ensure this team meets regularly and is empowered to take day-to-day decisions while escalating strategic issues to a Steering Board.
3. **Prioritize inclusiveness and trust-building:** Create mechanisms that ensure all partners, regardless of size or capacity, have a voice. Shared planning tools, open agendas, and collaborative decision-making build long-term trust.
4. **Be adaptive and iterative:** Design governance mechanisms that can evolve. Periodically assess what is working and what isn't, and don't hesitate to adjust procedures to respond to emerging needs or partner feedback.
5. **Embed research support structures:** Strengthen internal capacities in project management, legal/financial support, and grant administration. Link these units directly to governance bodies to streamline implementation and reporting.
6. **Document and communicate clearly:** Keep all decisions, responsibilities, and meeting outcomes well-documented. Use simple, transparent communication channels that make coordination across partners smooth and consistent.
7. **Plan for long-term impact:** Governance is not just a tool for project delivery – it's a mechanism for institutional learning and transformation. Design your governance with sustainability, capacity building, and post-project impact in mind.

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