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Analysis of changes in the barriers to cross-border educational projects – the COVID-19 pandemic effect

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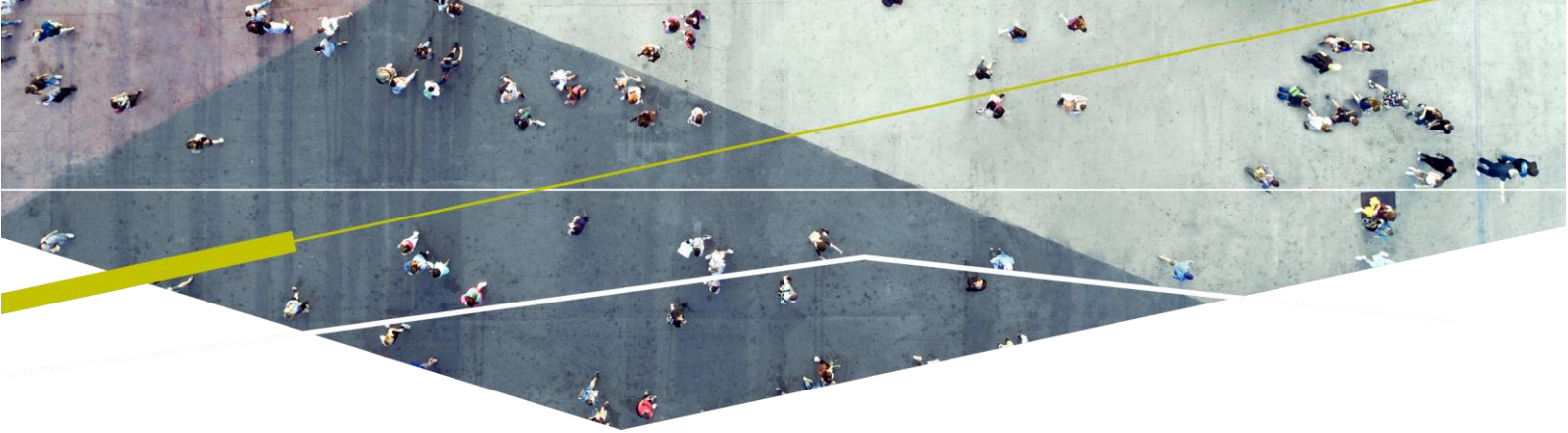
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UniGR-Center for Border Studies

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR BORDER STUDIES

EN The UniGR-CBS is a thematic cross-border network of approximately 80 researchers within the university grouping University of the Greater Region (UniGR) conducting research on borders, their meanings, and challenges. Due to its geographical position in the “heart of Europe”, its expertise, and disciplinary diversity, the UniGR-CBS has the best prerequisites for becoming a European network of excellence. For the creation of a “European Center for Competence and Knowledge in Border Studies”, the Interreg VA Greater Region program provides the UniGR-CBS network with approximately EUR 2.6 million in ERDF funding between 2018 and 2022. Within this project, the UniGR-CBS aims at developing harmonized research tools, embed Border Studies in teaching, promote the dialogue on cross-border challenges between academia and institutional actors, and supporting the spatial development strategy of the Greater Region.

FR L’UniGR-CBS un réseau transfrontalier et thématique qui réunit environ 80 chercheuses et chercheurs des universités membres de l’Université de la Grande Région (UniGR) spécialistes des études sur les frontières, leurs significations et enjeux. Grâce à sa position géographique au « cœur de l’Europe », à sa capacité d’expertise et à la diversité des disciplines participantes, l’UniGR-CBS revêt tous les atouts d’un réseau d’excellence européen. L’UniGR-CBS bénéficie d’un financement d’environ 2,6 M € FEDER dans le cadre du programme INTERREG VA Grande Région de 2018-2022 pour mettre en place le Centre européen de ressources et de compétences en études sur les frontières. Via ce projet transfrontalier, le réseau scientifique UniGR-CBS créera des outils de recherche harmonisés. Il œuvre en outre à l’ancrage des Border Studies dans l’enseignement, développe le dialogue entre le monde scientifique et les acteurs institutionnels autour d’enjeux transfrontaliers et apporte son expertise à la stratégie de développement territorial de la Grande Région.

DE Das UniGR-CBS ist ein grenzüberschreitendes thematisches Netzwerk von rund 80 Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern der Mitgliedsuniversitäten des Verbunds Universität der Großregion (UniGR), die über Grenzen und ihre Bedeutungen sowie Grenzraumfragen forschen. Dank seiner geographischen Lage „im Herzen Europas“, hoher Fachkompetenz und disziplinärer Vielfalt verfügt das UniGR-CBS über alle Voraussetzungen für ein europäisches Exzellenz-Netzwerk. Für den Aufbau des Europäischen Kompetenz- und Wissenszentrums für Grenzraumforschung wird das Netzwerk UniGR-CBS von 2018-2022 mit knapp 2,6 Mio. Euro EFRE-Mitteln im Rahmen des INTERREG VA Großregion Programms gefördert. Im Laufe des Projekts stellt das UniGR-Netzwerk abgestimmte Forschungswerkzeuge bereit, verankert die Border Studies in der Lehre, entwickelt den Dialog zu grenzüberschreitenden Themen zwischen wissenschaftlichen und institutionellen Akteuren und trägt mit seiner Expertise zur Raumentwicklungsstrategie der Großregion bei.





Analysis of changes in the barriers to cross-border educational projects – the COVID-19 pandemic effect

Joanna Kurowska-Pysz

The paper aims to recognize the changes in the barriers to cross-border educational projects, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on the European borderlands, where the level of maturity of cross-border cooperation is diverse (the Franco-German and Polish-Czech borderlands). The author utilised qualitative research methods (desk research, in-depth interview, case study). An exploratory study covered the barriers existing before the pandemic that stayed stable or have changed during the pandemic, and the new types of barriers that have appeared then. Within both borderlands, the identified barriers were similar in general; however, their intensity was varied. The key difference was the approach to these barriers within each borderland. On the Franco-German border, cross-border cooperation is more complex and deeper, and on the Polish-Czech border, it is more superficial and focused on specific issues only. These differences reveal the solutions that should be implemented to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on those projects within each borderland.

Cross-border cooperation project, education, barriers, COVID-19 pandemic

Analyse de l'évolution des obstacles aux projets d'enseignement transfrontaliers - l'effet de la pandémie COVID-19

L'article met en lumière les obstacles aux projets d'enseignement transfrontaliers qui ont changé dans le contexte de la pandémie COVID-19. La recherche s'est concentrée sur des zones frontalières européennes présentant des maturités assez diverse en termes de coopération transfrontalière (zones frontalières franco-allemande et polonois-tchèque). L'auteur a mobilisé des méthodes de recherche qualitatives (recherche documentaire, entretien approfondi, étude de cas). L'exploration a porté, d'une part, sur les obstacles existant avant la pandémie et qui sont restés stables ou ont changé pendant la pandémie et, d'autre part, sur les obstacles qui sont apparus a posteriori. Dans les deux régions frontalières étudiées, la nature des barrières à la coopération était en général similaire, mais leur intensité était variable. Des différences ont néanmoins été identifiées dans l'approche de coopération mise en place dans chaque territoire. À la frontière franco-allemande, la coopération transfrontalière est plus complexe et plus approfondie, tandis qu'à la frontière polono-tchèque, elle est plus superficielle et se concentre uniquement sur des questions spécifiques. Ces différences révèlent les solutions à mettre en œuvre pour atténuer l'impact de la pandémie sur ces projets éducatifs au sein de chaque zone frontalière.

Projet de coopération transfrontalière, enseignement, obstacles, barrières, pandémie de COVID-19

Analyse der Veränderungen bei den Hindernissen im Zusammenhang mit grenzüberschreitenden Bildungsprojekten - der COVID-19-Pandemie-Effekt

Der Artikel zielt darauf ab, die Veränderungen bei den Hindernissen im Zusammenhang mit grenzüberschreitenden Bildungsprojekten aufzuzeigen, insbesondere vor dem Hintergrund der COVID-19-Pandemie. Untersucht wurden europäische Grenzregionen mit unterschiedlich starker Ausprägung der grenzüberschreitenden Zusammenarbeit (die deutsch-französische und die polnisch-tschechische Grenzregion). Die Autorin setzte hierbei qualitative Forschungsmethoden ein (Desk Research, Tiefeninterview, Fallstudie). Eine Untersuchung befasste sich mit den vor der Pandemie bestehenden Hindernissen, die während der Pandemie unverändert blieben oder sich veränderten sowie mit den Barrieren, die erst mit der Pandemie auftraten. In beiden Grenzregionen waren die identifizierten Hindernisse im Allgemeinen ähnlich, allerdings in unterschiedlicher Intensität. Der Hauptunterschied lag dagegen in der Herangehensweise an diese Hindernisse in jeder Region. An der deutsch-französischen Grenze ist die grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit komplexer und tiefgreifender, während sie an der polnisch-tschechischen Grenze eher oberflächlicher ist und sich nur auf bestimmte Themen beschränkt. Die ermittelten Unterschiede machen deutlich, welche Lösungen umgesetzt werden sollten, um die Auswirkungen der Pandemie auf die Projekte in den einzelnen Grenzregionen abzumildern.

Projekt zur grenzüberschreitenden Zusammenarbeit, Bildung, Hindernisse, COVID-19-Pandemie

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Introduction

The development of cross-border cooperation (CBC) should be based primarily on short-term relations (Medeiros, 2017) and then on long-term relationships (Jakubowski et al., 2016). Strong foundations for CBC are common identity, proximity, or the mutual interests of partners operating within the borderland (Boman and Berg, 2007). The essence of CBC is the establishment and expansion of social and economic relations within borderlands between various stakeholders, organisations, and communities through a series of actions that allow for the achievement of common goals (Kurowska-Pysz, 2015).

CBC is developed through cross-border projects. These are very useful mechanisms of cross-border cooperation from either the short-term or long-term perspective. A cross-border project is implemented with the participation of entities operating within the border areas of two or more countries, whose aims are normally associated with the development needs of border areas (Perkmann, 2003). For many entities within borderlands, cross-border projects are key mechanisms to start and develop CBC (Hooper and Kramsch, 2004). A significant number of such projects are implemented with the active use of European Union funds, especially INTERREG Programmes, which impose certain restrictions but also create opportunities to carry out actions on a scale impossible to finance from the partners' resources (Harguindeguy and Bray, 2009). These projects are focused on one or more areas eligible to be supported by the INTERREG Programme to accomplish the goals of European Territorial Cooperation, aligned with the cohesion policy of the European Union (Scott, 2012).

A very popular direction of CBC is education. This is a common topic of many cross-border projects developed by schools, universities, non-governmental organisations, as well as other entities that operate within borderlands. One can say that this specific area of CBC is related to two very important subjects. The first of them is socio-economic development of the borderland, for example: boosting the social and intellectual capital, strengthening the educational offer, and creating good conditions for future life, especially for young people who potentially could migrate from the borderland to better-developed areas. The second is creating cross-border ties and relations between people, as well as strengthening the sense of togetherness and shaping the competencies to develop cross-border linkages on many levels, both professional and private. A cross-border project, like many other undertakings developed in partnerships, is much more complicated than the projects realised by one entity within a homogeneous territory. When analysing the specialty of cross-border projects, one should highlight that their realisation on two sides of the border, funding the activities from two separate budgets, and directing the activities to different target groups in two parts of the borderland can be a challenge. People who manage such projects struggle with many specific problems coming out of the nature of the projects, as well as from the rules of settlement subsidies from the INTERREG Programme. At each stage of a cross-border project, many various barriers can hinder CBC to a certain extent or can even make it impossible. The usual barriers in CBC projects had been recognised well before the COVID-19 pandemic. This unexpected crisis that hit CBC had many implications, even for cross-border projects, especially in terms of analysing the conditions of their realisation, management, and impact on the goals of the projects and target groups.

Thus, one of the issues which should be recognised is the influence of the pandemic on cross-border projects. In this study, the author focused mostly on the CBC barriers which had impacted those projects before the pandemic and stayed stable or have changed during the pandemic, and the new types of barriers that have appeared then. The author analysed their impact on cross-border educational projects, especially in the context of the level of maturity of cross-border cooperation. Taking this into account, the author focused on two European borderlands strongly affected by the pandemic, where the level of maturity of cross-border cooperation is diverse. These were the Franco-German and Polish-Czech borderlands.

The study presents the research and conclusions concerning changes in the barriers to cross-border educational projects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It consists of the following parts: theoretical background, research procedure, key findings, discussion and conclusions, and summary.

The research was conducted within the Franco-German and Polish-Czech borderlands in the period 2021-2022 utilising qualitative research methods (desk research, in-depth interview, case study).

Theoretical Background

Organizations interested in developing cross-border cooperation are free to choose the scope of cooperation; however, if they intend to apply for INTERREG funding, their field of activity must be in line with the objectives of this fund, and the manner of preparing and implementing cross-border projects must meet

strict criteria. It is critical to ensure the principle of partnership. Cross-border partnerships are specific relationships between entities, institutions, and organizations operating on two sides of a border. They are used for joint implementation of cross-border projects to achieve the objectives and results expected by the partners and to deepen the CBC and cross-border integration. It is not possible to implement a cross-border project without responsible partners on each side of the border. Another important issue is the compliance of the key elements of the project with the guidelines of the INTERREG programme, i.e., eligibility of project promoters, project implementation time, tasks to be carried out, expenses to be incurred, and the project implementation area. The last element describing this type of project is the cross-border effect, i.e., ensuring that the project will bring benefits to the entire project area – on both sides of the border. These benefits are measured by the outputs and outcomes of the project, with the added importance of being able to sustain the cross-border cooperation of the partners for at least 5 years after the completion of the project. According to the Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006 of the European Parliament and the Council of 05.07.2006 on the European Regional Development Fund – the cooperation of partners in cross-border projects should meet at least two of the following four criteria:

1. joint project development – as a result of cooperation and agreement of all partners; cooperation from the idea to joint application for funds from the INTERREG Programme,
2. joint project implementation – the partners participate jointly in the implementation of the activities planned within the project, contributing to the achievement of its objectives and the cross-border effect,
3. joint staffing – a joint project management team working for the implementation of the project on both sides of the border;
4. joint financing – the project has a single joint budget, in which expenses incurred by all partners are included; the financial obligations of the partners result from the activities they carry out within the project; the lead partner is responsible for managing and transferring the grant funds to the partners and for monitoring their use; the lead partner is the project leader and represents the other partners, for instance, before INTERREG Authorities.

One of the popular areas of cross-border cooperation is education, which can be developed on both sides of the border for preschools as well as for schools of different types and universities, and even as non-formal education e.g. in the form of universities of the third age (Wróblewski, 2015). The development of cross-border cooperation in the sphere of education always encounters certain limitations, the reasons include differences in partners' educational systems, differences in the ways education is financed but also differences resulting from different expectations and needs of the beneficiaries of such projects, which are usually organizations engaged in education, educators and people benefiting from education (Wróblewski, 2017). Adamczuk (2004) indicates the following motives for academic education in cross-border cooperation in his research:

- desire to obtain a foreign degree;
- geographical proximity to a good academic center,
- favorable financial conditions, e.g. a high scholarship grant covering the costs of studies,
- strengthening own predispositions in applying for an attractive job and rapid career advancement,
- a desire to learn about culture, science, and other cultural elements, including language,
- a desire to test one's intellectual and linguistic abilities within an international student community.

As emphasized by Szafrńska (2017), the practical dimension of cross-border cooperation in the sphere of education is based on the implemented projects, which provide opportunities to become closer to each other, learn about each other, to build intercultural awareness. While the so-called 'hard' projects allow for the achievement of lasting effects in the physical and material sense, such as improving the equipment base of educational facilities, 'soft' projects, whose beneficiaries are most often students and teachers, allow for the actual filling of these new physical, common spaces with residents from both sides of the border. This is an effect as important as the development of the knowledge and skills of individuals benefiting from cross-border education. To conclude, cross-border education itself serves to eliminate barriers to cooperation through initiatives aimed at eliminating stereotypes, and prejudices that foster the construction of mental boundaries that do not allow for actual rapprochement.

The aforementioned possibility of co-financing cross-border projects from the INTERREG programme also has several implications for the way such projects are managed. Improving the management of such projects requires particular attention in terms of ensuring the effectiveness of cross-border partnerships, the correct formation of relationships between partners and target groups of the project, both during the imple-

mentation of the project and in the period of ensuring its sustainability, but also full awareness of the barriers hindering the implementation of cross-border projects, which has a direct impact on the quantity and quality of the achieved results.

The aims and dynamics of cross-border projects can be affected by cultural, social, and economic barriers, which may concern the partners to a certain extent (Bufon et al., 2014). Moreover, a crucial role is played by the scope of cooperation (Sousa, 2013). The source of barriers can also be the surroundings (Prokkola, 2008; Svensson, 2015). Barriers can be classified in many ways, among others with respect to type, area, and nature of the impact. There are several groups of negative factors influencing CBC in projects: economical, geographical, institutional, political and international, socio-cultural, and linguistic factors (Szul, 2014). A separate classification of barriers was defined by Kurowska-Pysz et al. (2018). The authors analysed different factors affecting CBC in cross-border projects in a negative way and divided them into two groups:

- 'internal' barriers resulting from the specific and individual CBC circumstances connected with the processes of cooperation (e.g. communication) and the partners as organisations (e.g. the skill to develop CBC);
- 'external' barriers, generally independent of partners, related to the cross-border environment (e.g. legal regulations, the rules of functioning of the administration, the economic and social situation, the development directions of the European Union's cohesion policy, the availability of European funds for the needs of the CBC development, etc.).

Without any doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon that can be recognised as an 'external' barrier, strongly negatively influencing both CBC and cross-border projects.

So far, the problem of education in cross-border projects has been recognized only insofar as current observations in ongoing projects (such as the projects covered by this publication) and studies that were carried out under conditions of epidemic restrictions that are still in effect. The key problems that emerge in this regard are mainly the effectiveness of education, which cannot benefit from the basic value of cross-border mobility, as well as temporary and permanent changes in the relationships of individuals and organizations involved in the implementation of educational cross-border projects in various ways.

Research Procedure

The research problem of the paper concerns the differences in CBC barriers, especially those related to the pandemic, in cross-border educational projects realised within borderlands which are at different levels of CBC development:

- the Polish-Czech borderland (a lower level of CBC development),
- the Franco-German borderland (a higher level of CBC development).

To solve the research problem, the following research questions were asked:

1. What were the barriers that hindered or limited the realisation of the cross-border educational projects before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the changes in the dynamics of these barriers during the pandemic?
3. What new barriers have appeared during the pandemic and have negatively impacted the realisation of the project or the usefulness of its results?

Considering the results of the literature review and the recognised gap concerning the impact of the pandemic on cross-border educational projects, especially in terms of barriers influencing the realization of these projects, as well as other circumstances related to the pandemic as a new phenomenon, the author defined the research goal of the study, which is the recognition of changes in CBC barriers in cross-border educational projects and an analysis of them, especially in the context of the pandemic, within European borderlands where the level of CBC development is diverse.

The research process has been based on the assumptions of the grounded theory. The incomplete induction method has been utilised (Lisiński, 2016). This consists of inductive reasoning, though only on the grounds of observation of only some processes, facilities, and phenomena. In empirical sciences, this method serves to make generalisations on the grounds of experiments and facts. The certainty of inductive reasoning occurs when it is possible to study all elements; however, in the case of the research problem defined above, this was not possible. Thus, induction by the incomplete enumeration method was used in the paper, in which a general rule is deduced from the limited number of details. Considering the selection

of the research sample, results from the research conducted utilising this method have been deemed highly probable for cross-border educational projects.

To solve the research problem and to obtain the research goal, the author applied quantitative research methods: desk research, case study, and individual in-depth interviews.

The research period was 2021-2022.

The target groups of the individual in-depth interviews were as follows:

- representatives of the team responsible for one or another cross-border educational project (project staff: managers and lecturers),
- students participating in one or another cross-border educational project.

The selection of the research sample was planned. The target groups were represented by four students participating in each of the projects and four project staff representatives (managers or teachers) participating in each of the projects.

In total, sixteen in-depth interviews were completed.

The key findings resulting from in-depth interviews are based on their transcription and analysis.

The subjects of the case study were:

- the project: *Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland – part I and part II*, financially supported by the INTERREG Programme Czech Republic – Poland 2014-2020, realised within the Polish-Czech borderland in the period 2016-2023.
- the project *The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS)*, financially supported by INTERREG Programme Greater Region 2014-2020, realised within the Franco-German borderland in the period 2018-2022.

The above-mentioned cross-border educational projects are implemented in areas varied in terms of the level of maturity of cross-border cooperation. A comparative analysis of these projects allowed for distinguishing the crucial differences between them (Fig. 1).

| Criteria | The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) | Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland |
|--|---|--|
| location | Kaiserslautern, Saarbrücken (Germany) Metz (France), as well as Luxembourg and Belgium | Cieszyn (Poland), Ostrava (Czech Republic), as well as Dąbrowa Górnicza (Poland) |
| type of course | Master's programme for international students | Additional courses for interested students (Poles, Czechs) |
| course content | The interdisciplinary study programme, including special educational tracks | Combining two sub-disciplines – energy management and public governance within the borderlands |
| confirmation of education | Joint Diploma of master's degree | Certificate, credit points |
| the dominant form of conducting classes | Students commute between universities for courses conducted at these universities, learning in three languages (French, German, English) | Lecturers commuting between universities to conduct courses in the national languages of the students (Polish, Czech) |
| the group characteristic | One international group studying at two German universities: TU Kaiserslautern and Saarland University, as well as at one French university – the University of Lorraine | Two separate groups: the Polish group studying at WSB University in Poland and the Czech group studying at VSB TU Ostrava in the Czech Republic |
| kind of activities | Balanced educational theoretical and practical activities (lectures, workshops, labs, internships for each student), obligatory cross-border activities (mobilities), cross-border research as an important part of the project, and tangible research results (publications) | Mainly educational activities (lectures, workshops, labs) conducted locally at the university, a small number of cross-border internships and other activities, cross-border research only for the designing of the cross-border educational programme (recognition of the educational gaps) |
| joint activities | One international group of students participated in the entire process of learning | The majority of lectures and workshops were conducted separately for the Polish and the Czech group; only some workshops and lectures were conducted for the joint group |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| educational environment | Multicultural and multilingual | Activities are organised mainly on one or the other side of the border and are based on their culture and language, with cross-border relations only to a certain extent |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|

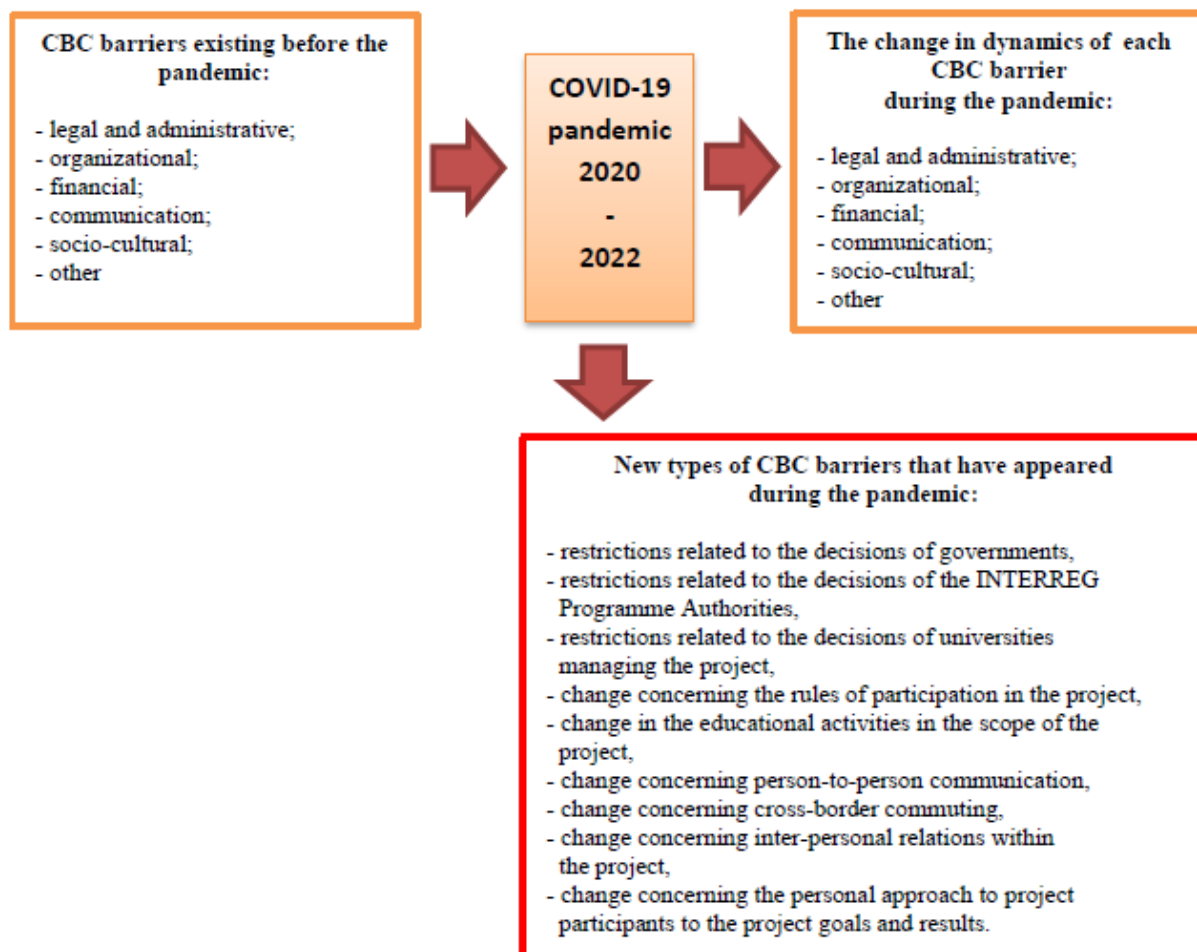
Characteristics of the analysed projects, fig.1
Source: own elaboration

Using the desk research method focused on available literature and previous research, the author recognised potential types of barriers that had existed in cross-border educational projects before the pandemic and those which appeared during the pandemic (Fig. 2). All the barriers which are presented below were mentioned in the in-depth interview scenarios to provide their assessment by the subjects.

The author based on the individual typology of the barriers which was defined during the study visit to universities conducted educational cross-border projects within the Franco-German and Polish-Czech borderlands. This reveals the dynamism of changing CBC barriers in cross-border projects, especially the new groups of barriers that have appeared during the pandemic. The analysed types of barriers were divided into three groups:

- the barriers caused by various formal restrictions,
- the barriers caused by changes in the way of conducting cross-border projects,
- the barriers caused by changes in the behaviours of the target groups involved in CBC, especially project staff and students.

Additionally, the authors analysed changes in the CBC barriers existing before the pandemic and tried to capture the dynamics of their changes.



The types of CBC barriers were analysed in the research, fig.2
Source: own elaboration

Key Findings

In the first part of the interview, the subjects were asked to assess the CBC barriers influencing the realisation of cross-border educational projects before the pandemic (Fig. 3).

Considering that both projects were co-financed by the INTERREG Programme when analysing the barriers existing before the pandemic, most obstacles typical for this type of project were taken into account. Generally, the same kinds of barriers were identified in both projects to a certain extent, except for the financial barrier, which was identified only in the Polish-Czech project.

Qualitative research allowed for an analysis of the detailed barriers recognised separately by students and project staff. The conclusions were different in many cases. This shows that identification of the barriers is strongly related to the attitude of the assessor to the project and the expectations towards the project. The differences in barrier assessments indicate that project staff and students have diverse and subjective approaches to factors that hinder project realisation. Generally, in both cases, the project staff identified more barriers than students.

Barriers recognised as factors negatively influencing cross-border projects before the pandemic come from both the project environment (borderland and external factors, such as legal and administrative rules, etc.), organisations that are partners in the project (barriers related to internal organisational rules), as well as the target group of the project (some communication barriers experienced by the project staff and students participating in the project).

Many barriers identified are 'artificial barriers', which are easy to mitigate or counteract when partners are aware of their existence (e.g. different academic calendars, varied pace of work in the partners' organisations), but there are also barriers existing continuously, e.g. differences in linguistic-cultural background. These kinds of barriers influence each cross-border project to a certain extent, and they should be taken rather as a cross-border project specificity than a real barrier.

| The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) | | Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland – part I and part II | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Project Staff | Students | Project Staff | Students |
| <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. rules of the INTERREG Programme do not match well with internal regulations and procedures in many organisations; 2. time-consuming actions to complete project documentation; 3. circulation of documents processed in different languages; 4. differences in internal administrative regulations in cooperating universities from both sides of the border. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. misunderstandings between project partners concerning responsibilities and costs; 2. limitation to use of universities resources for the external project staff; 3. diversified competencies of the project staff | <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. different structures of universities; 2. different procedures for application and participation in courses, as well as registration for exams. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. time-consuming travel between universities; 2. diverse distribution of ECTS in France and Germany. <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. language barrier. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. diverse methods of teaching (inclusive teaching methods versus lectures with very limited participation of students); 2. differences in prior educational experience and background; 3. lack of a student council. | <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. rules of the INTERREG Programme do not match well with internal regulations and procedures in many organisations; 2. bureaucracy related to both the INTERREG Programme and universities' requirements; 3. lack of digitalisation of the documentation; 4. obstacles in adapting university processes to the project requirements; 5. limited criteria of recruitment to the project (only borderland inhabitants). <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. complicated organisational arrangements and non-comparable administrative structures requiring a specific approach to each procedure within collaborating universities; | <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. complicated evidence of educational activities; 2. challenging recruitment criteria. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. problems with combining studies and fellowships with work (if relevant); 2. time-consuming travel between universities; 3. demanding project reporting requirements. <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. language barrier. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. differences in prior educational experience and background. |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>affecting the pace of their work.</p> <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. necessity of translations; 2. misunderstandings because of language problems. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. different academic calendars, especially concerning the period July – August, and different university approaches to work during this period; 2. different teaching methods, especially in terms of student involvement in the classes; 3. differences in the linguistic-cultural background. | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. differences in public procurements; 3. reconciliation of responsibilities at the university and within the project; 4. varied levels of IT competencies of project staff and students, increasing the risk of the project failure; 5. varied pace of work. <p>financial barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. financial contribution from the university; 2. lack of funds to support the project staff at the stage of project application development; 3. imbalanced implementation of the project caused by assigning the budget only on one side of the border; 4. settlement of the project as reimbursement of funds and the necessity of involvement of own funds in the budget; 5. delays in receiving funds. <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. misunderstandings because of language problems; 2. difficulties in communicating in Polish/Czech and switching to English, not acceptable by Grant Authority. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. differences in national educational systems; 2. differences in academic calendars and academic daily life (e.g. breaks). | |
|--|--|--|--|

Barriers existing before the pandemic, fig.3
Source: own elaboration

It should be highlighted that even before the pandemic, students identified some barriers hindering educational processes in CBC. These were differences in academic requirements, structures, and procedures related to study, as well as differences in prior educational experiences. Together with the language barrier, these issues increased during the pandemic, unlike another barrier: time-consuming travel between universities, which disappeared during the pandemic.

The second part of the interview was devoted to a deeper analysis of the changes in dynamics of these barriers during the pandemic (Fig. 4).

| The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) | | Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland – part I and part II | |
|--|--|---|---|
| Project Staff | Students | Project Staff | Students |
| <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. lack of legal and administrative rules adapted to working conditions during the pandemic (e.g. working/teaching online, etc.); 2. differences in approach to work/education online; 3. fast-changing regulations at universities; 4. varied restrictions in traveling. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. technical problems in remote communication; 2. lack of the skills to conduct digital procedures (signing and transfer of documents); 3. increase in organisational efforts to run projects and conduct education online or in the hybrid formula; 4. increase of unknown threats and uncertainty. <p>financial barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. changes in project budget (parallel savings and need to finance tasks not eligible in the budget, e.g. testing); 2. changes in rules of public tenders and the necessity to learn new procedures. <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. misunderstandings in online communication; 2. decline in interest in informal and social contacts; 3. lack of soft skills for using digital tools and effective online communication. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. new ways of running an online and hybrid project (e.g. new rule of speaking). | <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. more time-consuming procedures online (e.g. re-registration for the next semester, course enrolment); 2. problems with students' ID cards; 3. bigger pressure for accurate reporting of individual activities. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. traveling between universities and countries with different restrictions (testing, wearing masks, public transportation regulations); 2. postponed communication between project staff and students. <p>financial barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. necessity to pay for accommodation at the place of study while staying at home with family (lockdown). <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. reducing social contacts and losing the opportunity to practice languages; 2. team breakup; 3. misunderstandings in online communication. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a sense of isolation; 2. difficulties with becoming familiar with the everyday life and culture of the country of study. | <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. increase of bureaucracy in terms of project documentation; 2. more time-consuming procedures to contact project staff working online; 3. difficulties in planning (people on sick leave or in quarantine); 4. various obstacles limiting cooperation and traveling; 5. problems with switching costs from local actions into online actions; 6. diverse approaches to the pandemic (restrictions, limitations) in national educational systems. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. limited number of participants at meetings; 2. poor quality of Internet connection for online communication/education; 3. difficulties in achieving project outputs because of: participants' infections, sick leave, quarantines, etc.; 4. varied levels of IT competencies of project staff and students, increasing the risk of the project failure; 5. the necessity to involve IT communication specialists. <p>financial barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. changes in project budget (parallel savings, e.g. accommodation, catering, traveling, and need to finance tasks not eligible in the budget, e.g. technical equipment, licenses for platforms, other IT costs); 2. necessity to optionally schedule appointments: onsite or online. <p>communication barriers</p> | <p>legal and administrative barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. very detailed and time-consuming reporting of all activities in the project. <p>organisational barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. problems with combining classes onsite and online during one day; 2. difficulties with accommodation; 3. difficulties with online procedures and logistics (online courses). <p>financial barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. lack of funds for testing while crossing the border. <p>communication barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. online anonymous communication (camera switched off) is more formal than oral communication; 2. difficulties in online communication for people with special needs (e.g. ADHD, Asperger's); 3. poor Internet connection or lack of Internet network; 4. delay in answering emails; 5. sending emails to the wrong people. <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a sense of isolation. |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. less networking and informal interactions, difficulties in building relationships and deepening collaboration in the online/hybrid formula; 2. disconnections during online meetings; 3. decrease of interest of people present online than those who are on-site (in hybrid communication). <p>socio-cultural barriers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. new ways of running an online and hybrid project (e.g. new rule of speaking). | |
|--|--|--|--|

Change in the dynamics of CBC barriers during the pandemic, fig.4
Source: own elaboration

The pandemic has caused an increase in the legal, administrative and organisational barriers in CBC, especially in educational cross-border projects, when commuting is one of the basic activities.

The most visible are the changes in the financial barriers, resulting from the unforeseen impact of the pandemic on the budgets of the projects. It was difficult to find resources to provide efficient, reliable online communication, education, and administrative work for the projects. On the other hand, some savings that appeared were not easy to move to other types of costs because of long decision processes and uncertainty.

Similarly, even though during lockdown they had the option of staying with families, students still had to meet the costs of room and board at the locations where courses should have been conducted or they risked losing their accommodation. They also had to adapt to a new way of participating in the project, where most of the communication and education took place online.

Co-funding projects from the INTERREG Programme have resulted in the necessity to fulfill many new procedures and requirements which appeared during the pandemic. This was a time-consuming process, and the key focus of projects staff, in many cases, was more on project indicators than on educational results and the development of CBC. Such behaviours did not meet students' expectations. They were disappointed with the quality of online education (at the beginning at least), and they suffered due to the lack of inclusive teaching methods.

Communication barriers have extended, and their nature has changed: formal group discussions online and online correspondence have been dominant, misunderstandings have grown, interest in informal and social relations has declined, and opportunities to practice languages during courses have decreased. In addition, poor Internet connections, a lack of IT skills, and technical problems with different online platforms can also be seen as barriers.

Socio-cultural barriers have also deepened in terms of isolation, anonymous online communication, and difficulties in conducting projects in a hybrid formula. In cross-border projects, experiencing daily borderland life is an important part of studying, and thus students suffered greatly because of the closure of the borders and during the lockdowns.

The last part of the interview concerned the assessment of the new types of CBC barriers that might have influenced cross-border educational projects and which were strongly connected with the pandemic. The subjects were asked to assess whether such barriers have appeared in the projects in which they have participated and how they have materialised in these projects. Many new CBC barriers appeared during the pandemic, directly resulting from the decisions of governments concerning the closure of borders, limitations on personal meetings and public transport, quarantines, etc. (Fig. 5).

| The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) | | Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland – part I and part II | |
|---|---|--|---|
| Project Staff | Students | Project Staff | Students |
| <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the government</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. fast-changing restrictions in individual countries and different rules of vaccination, quarantine, meetings, and testing. <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the INTERREG Authorities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the necessity to conduct actions online, while they had been planned onsite; 2. longer time for implementation of the decisions and changes. <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the universities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. difficulties in recognition of regulations applied in a particular country or university, especially concerning events, education, traveling, etc.; 2. continuously changing rules; 3. working online generates isolation, less access to information, and difficulties in keeping colleagues up-to-date; 4. delays in administrative works; 5. decrease in project team communication efficiency. | <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the government</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. varied formal restrictions in individual countries and poor compliance with them in practice; 2. limitation of the type of educational activities, mainly online teaching; 3. need to stay in the country of study during the lockdown. <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the universities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. differences in pandemic restrictions at individual universities and their diverse implementation; 2. varied educational online platforms; 3. difficulties in mastering the use of online education. | <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the government</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. difficulties in both short-term and long-term planning (e.g. events) caused by lockdown, closure of the border, etc.; 2. necessity of wearing masks, hindering communication, discussion, and building relations; 3. fast-changing restrictions in individual countries. <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the INTERREG Authorities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. rescheduling the project plan and changes in the budget of the project; 2. changes informal procedures (including public tender rules); 3. lack of funds for the technical support of online actions. <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the universities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. changes in building relations and cooperation between universities and among project participants; 2. limitations concerning cooperation within the project team; 3. inefficient remote work (isolation, a lot of delays in information transfer, lack of a unified communication platform). | <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the government</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. negative impact of border closure on daily life at the border; 2. obstacles in meetings with the project group due to the closure of the border and lockdown; 3. varied formal restrictions in individual countries. <p>restrictions related to the decisions of the universities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. differences in pandemic restrictions at individual universities and their implementation at varied times, 2. difficulties in mastering the use of online education. |

Barriers caused by various formal restrictions, fig.5

Source: own elaboration

These external conditions influenced both the way of implementing cross-border projects (decisions of the INTERREG Authorities) and the way of implementing educational activities (decisions of universities). It can therefore be said that they had a double negative impact on cross-border educational projects. The impact of all these barriers was additionally multiplied in cross-border projects, as each country imposed restrictions individually and at different times. It was the most burdensome for people commuting between countries. They felt the information chaos to the greatest extent and suffered the most from the closing of borders and restrictions on crossing them. Many students saw closed boundaries for the first time in their lives. The consequences of these issues were further barriers related to the organisation of the work and education in the cross-border projects (Fig. 6).

| The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) | | Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland – part I and part II | |
|---|--|---|---|
| Project Staff | Students | Project Staff | Students |
| <p>change of rules concerning participation in the project</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. limited interest in traveling within borderlands (e.g. travel restrictions, testing, vaccination, masks, etc.); 2. reduced involvement in the project to counter-balance the workload due to the pandemic. <p>change in educational activities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. difficulties to obtain results of the project due to online learning; 2. lack of innovative inclusive teaching methods; 3. increased number of asynchronous teaching activities to be completed by the students individually or in groups (even more complicated); 4. diverse pace of learning within the group. <p>change in person-to-person communication</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The time-consuming process of development of online cooperation instead of direct people-to-people cooperation; 2. difficulties in switching on online communication when being used to personal and local communication; 3. increased workload and stress due to 24/7 availability. | <p>change of rules concerning participation in the project</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. switching from studying onsite to studying online requires a different process of documentation and assessment; 2. changes in the project agenda, negatively impacting the project goals. <p>change in educational activities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. lack of possibility to implement many types of activities effectively (e.g. online tours are not the same as study tours, hybrid classes generate many problems and are less efficient than education onsite). <p>change in person-to-person communication</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. limitations in communication between teachers and students, as well as among students; 2. dominance of project-related communication and poor private communication; 3. difficulties in maintaining interpersonal ties in online communication. | <p>change of rules concerning participation in the project</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. limited interest in traveling within borderlands (e.g. travel restrictions, testing, vaccination, masks, etc.); 2. changes in priorities and withdrawal of some of the participants from the project. <p>change in educational activities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. fast implementation of new technologies in education resulting in acceleration of some activities and implementation of new educational methods and tools, as well as in the acquisition of IT skills not expected before the pandemic (not easy for some people); 2. hybrid education - more demanding than onsite and online. <p>change in person-to-person communication</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. communication onsite, online, and hybrid requires various communication skills, especially new IT and digital skills; 2. turning the communication mainly towards project issues, and much less to personal and private communication; 3. communication noise, connection disruptions, accompanying persons (especially if someone works at home); 4. the necessity to strictly adhere to the limit of connection time due to other online obligations. | <p>change of rules concerning participation in the project</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. more focus of project staff on the implementation of the project itself than on the quality of education. <p>change in educational activities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. lack of possibility to adapt many things to online education because of shortage of funds and lack of competencies; 2. inability to adequately adapt teaching methods and content to the online environment. <p>change in person-to-person communication</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. poor IT skills blocking online communication with teachers and other students; 2. reluctance of students/teachers for social media, limiting relations in the project; 3. decrease in oral communication and increase in more formal written correspondence. |

Barriers caused by changes in the way of conducting cross-border projects, fig.6

Source: own elaboration

The most serious barrier was the inability to carry out educational activities within various parts of the borderlands, although commuting and learning the culture and language of the neighbouring country were very important parts of the project.

Another problem was the way of implementing online classes. Neither students nor teachers were prepared for this. Teachers lacked the skills to apply inclusive teaching methods online. For students, the most challenging aspects were asynchronous teaching activities that had to be completed individually or in groups. They required both IT skills and self-discipline and the students suffered due to a lack of these.

Isolation and gradual loosening of interpersonal relationships decreased students' interest in participating in cross-border projects. On the one hand, the requirements concerning e.g. reporting were higher and higher, on the other hand - the subjectively assessed benefits were smaller and smaller. Delays in the performance of tasks negatively affected the goals and results of the project.

Crucial barriers in cross-border projects have been related to changes in personal relations, people-to-people communication, and the change in personal approaches to the project (Fig. 7).

| The UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) | | Practical and training programme for specialists developing a low-carbon economy within the borderland – part I and part II | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Project Staff | Students | Project Staff | Students |
| <p>change in cross-border commuting within the project</p> <p>1. decrease in the level of attractiveness of the project because of limitation of travel.</p> <p>change in cross-border inter-personal relations</p> <p>1. difficulties in building relations in the project team because of online collaboration and communication;</p> <p>2. lack of social relations among project participants, contact mainly reduced to work-related content and more distance in interpersonal relations.</p> <p>change in a personal approach to the project goals and results</p> <p>1. necessity of digital infrastructure when conducting cross-border projects during the pandemic;</p> <p>2. necessity to develop IT skills to actively participate in online activities.</p> | <p>change in cross-border commuting within the project</p> <p>1. satisfaction with saving time changed into sadness for not being able to travel;</p> <p>2. restrictions discouraging travel (masks, tests, vaccinations, differences in regulations on public transportation).</p> <p>change in cross-border inter-personal relations</p> <p>1. lack of skills in teamwork online;</p> <p>2. technical difficulties in working online during courses;</p> <p>3. dominance of social media and group discussions in communication, less focus on bilateral discussion.</p> <p>change in a personal approach to the project goals and results</p> <p>1. less effective online education;</p> <p>2. difficulties and many distractions;</p> <p>3. strong demotivation;</p> <p>4. demotivation: protection against the pandemic as a priority, learning coming second.</p> | <p>change in cross-border commuting within the project</p> <p>1. decrease in project efficiency because of limited traveling and meetings in person (moved the core of project relations to ill-prepared remote activities).</p> <p>change in cross-border inter-personal relations</p> <p>1. focus on work-related issues, limitation of personal relations, and informal chats;</p> <p>2. online communication is useful mainly to build long-term institutional cooperation and more official relations, not deep person-to-person relations.</p> <p>change in a personal approach to the project goals and results</p> <p>1. the focus is mainly on making things possible online than on achieving the project goals and outputs;</p> <p>2. the focus is rather on short-term than long-term planning;</p> <p>3. less productive project actions;</p> <p>4. the need to adapt quickly to new conditions is frustrating.</p> | <p>change in cross-border commuting within the project</p> <p>1. restrictions discouraging travel (masks, tests, vaccinations, different regulations on public transportation);</p> <p>2. problems with accommodation on the other side of the border.</p> <p>change in cross-border inter-personal relations</p> <p>1. little spontaneity and impersonal participation;</p> <p>2. group dominance over individuals;</p> <p>3. work automatism and more focus on procedures;</p> <p>4. impersonal communication, lack of willingness towards interpersonal contacts;</p> <p>5. lack of conditions for the transfer of knowledge and experiences;</p> <p>6. online communication is not suitable for everyone;</p> <p>7. disappearance of some people in the online space when meeting.</p> <p>change in a personal approach to the project goals and results</p> <p>1. demotivation: protection against the pandemic as a priority, learning coming second;</p> |

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| | | | <p>2. concerns about whether online education is effective and allows one to achieve the expected result;</p> <p>3. big psychological pressure to complete tasks on time.</p> |
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Barriers caused by changes in the behaviours of the target groups involved in CBC, fig.7
Source: own elaboration

The obstacles in commuting (closing of the borders and lockdowns) and keeping physical distance caused a decrease in cross-border integration. Communication diversity (onsite, online, hybrid) became much more challenging for building the relations between people, especially in cross-border relations. One of the most visible barriers that appeared during the pandemic was the very diverse level of IT and digital skills of both students and teachers. It ultimately determined who communicated in the project and how, how effectively the teachers conducted classes and how effectively the students learned during online education. Additionally, both communication and learning efficiency have lowered dramatically because of: increased workflow, the stress due to 24/7 availability, communication noise and disruptions, limited personal and private communication, and differences in the approach to these issues at cooperating universities. It caused a diverse pace of work, teaching, and learning in projects.

The pandemic unbalanced both onsite and online activities within cross-border projects, as well as both formal and social relations, especially bilateral relations since group discussions online became dominant. It negatively impacted long-term cross-border relations, as it is not possible to deepen relations in this manner.

Students and teachers have demonstrated their fears about health, public safety, future careers, and, related to this, the doubts about whether they should deal with borderland issues.

Therefore, another barrier that appeared in cross-border projects is the strong demotivation of students and project staff, caused by the sense of re-bordering.

The easing or elimination of the above-described barriers, as well as the introduction of new solutions to educational cross-border projects that will transform problems into new opportunities, is one of the learning challenges in future cross-border projects.

Discussion and Conclusion

The author found only a few publications and reports concerning the issues related to the research problem presented in this paper. Most of these concerned CBC in general, while cross-border projects and education as an area of CBC were analysed less often. It should be highlighted that the results of the research presented in this paper are only a first brief review of the issue, and it will take much more time to gather more complex and representative data concerning educational cross-border projects conducted during the pandemic, as this crisis still exists on European borders. Simultaneously, comprehensive conclusions and recommendations from this research should be developed when the pandemic disappears. The author is going to participate in further research on this topic.

When analysing the barriers in educational cross-border projects during the pandemic, even in the context of maturity of CBC, the key points are the consequences of border closures on the daily life within the borderlands, including education. This has been much more visible within borderlands where cross-border linkages and flows are stronger than within borderlands where they are weaker. Considering this, the general overview of the closure of the border in terms of educational cross-border projects is varied, depending on the borderland.

The main impacts of border closures ('the covid fencing process' (borders closure effect) in European cross-border areas have been analysed by Medeiros et al. (2021). They concluded that more integration and deterritorialism are required everywhere and, simultaneously, at the social, economic, physical, and institutional levels. Crucially, the effect of border closures has highlighted the need for improving CBC to mitigate persistent CBC barriers and European integration processes. They analysed the territorial impact of the EU CBC process in five barrier-effect dimensions, i.e. institutional cooperation. In terms of institutional cooperation, the contrast between North and North-West Europe and other European territories is clear about the degree of institutional CBC. This is a result not only of the older (since the mid-1950s) formal cross-border

arrangements in some areas but also of the gradual implementation of the INTERREG-A Community Initiative + European Territorial Cooperation programmes since 2007. This is aligned with the thesis presented in this paper that the level of development of CBC is crucial when discussing CBC barriers relevant to a given borderland. Although the research presented in this paper did not reveal large differences in CBC barriers in educational cross-border projects, the level of CBC development strongly impacts the ways how such barriers can be mitigated in both borderlands.

Considering boundaries as social constructions, scholars emphasised the stubborn persistence of mental and language barriers, cultural differences, and trauma due to historical events, which impacted many cross-border practices, such as commuting or using services on both sides of a border (Opiłowska, 2021). They existed before the pandemic, but this phenomenon has changed their nature. Many new barriers appeared during the pandemic, and some of them will stay with us longer than we expect. To counteract and mitigate their impact on CBC, it is first necessary to recognise their nature.

When discussing the possibility to uphold online or hybrid education in a cross-border project to a certain extent, it is necessary to provide solutions that mitigate their negative effect on cross-border integration, relationships, and the efficiency of both teaching and learning. Another issue is to provide a sufficient level of both IT and digital skills, as well as IT equipment and software (online education platforms), to maintain educational activities utilising the online or hybrid formula.

Stoklosa and Wassenberg (2021) partially reported on the educational process during the pandemic, as seen through the eyes of students. They emphasised how much students suffered because of a lack of opportunities to participate in academic life in person. No one was prepared for such a long period of isolation, which was extended several times. This required a change of approach to the impact of the pandemic on education and getting used to the new situation over a longer period. Certainly, one of the effects of the pandemic has been online education, which, however, generated many barriers to interpersonal communication, cooperation among teachers and students, and building interpersonal relationships. Many people needed not only professional but also mental support in this area. Online communication, especially in social media, also extended beyond the hours of official classes, and the students tried to use the time saved on commuting differently. Thus, the pandemic period also influenced the organisation of academic life, especially where daily border crossing was previously the norm. The students felt very limited. Some teachers and students lacked physical lessons. They demonstrated fatigue and frustration because of this, but some people were already discovering the benefits of online education. Stoklosa and Wassenberg emphasise that in some cases, very good results of online education were visible, but much more noticeable were the lack of personal interpersonal relationships, which are so important in academic life. Even the highest-grade technology that provides digital learning will not provide sufficient benefits.

Böhm (2020) tries to summarise how the scholars researching Border Studies and cross-border cooperation practitioners reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic during the period from the 16th of March to the 21st of June 2020. He reviews several resources:

- The BorderObs blog, run by the universities that cooperate in the field of Border Studies in the Greater Region (Klatt, 2020; Berrod et al., 2020; Unfried, 2020),
- The blog of the European University Viadrina B/ORDERS IN MOTION research centre focuses (mainly, but not exclusively) on the context of the German-Polish border (Cyrus and Ulrich, 2020).
- The content of the Association of Borderlands' Studies Summer Webinars (AEBR, 2020, presentation of Frederic Siebenhaar).

He synthesises the main messages and identifies possible future trends in Border Studies. He assumes that the scholars will focus on studying the impacts of re-bordering, and he expects a lower engagement of local and regional actors in cross-border cooperation, which might be considered an unnecessary luxury in some border contexts. This could mean that CBC in education is no longer seen as important to border development, such as crisis management, for example. In the face of changes caused by the pandemic in the education system (e.g. hybrid learning, replacing cross-border mobility with online communication), CBC in education is also facing new challenges that not every school or university will be able to meet. It may also turn out that the partial replacement of traveling with online activities will significantly reduce the interest of students in cross-border education. The above-presented research (fig. 4, fig. 5, and fig. 6) shows that it was one of the most severe barriers to studying on both sides of the border during the pandemic. Considering new issues related to hybrid education in general (fig. 5), combining it with CBC in educational projects can be an even bigger challenge both for teachers and students. Not everyone can cope with this, and the intensity of CBC in education may decrease.

In 2021, Böhm analysed the changes to social behaviours in Europe caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of its major consequences was the temporary closure of borders, which has had a major impact on how

cross-border cooperation has been conducted in Europe, including the Czech-Polish borderlands. This research revealed the principal impacts and consequences of border closures on Czech-Polish CBC. Considering the research problem of this paper, the most important are:

- the advent of unilateralism – the central state returned as a key (and only) actor (i.e. less focus on CBC in general);
- the limitations of cross-border flows damaging local economies of the Czech-Polish borderlands (i.e. less demand on CBC in education because of the changes in the labour market and others);
- the lower possibility of mutual cross-border contacts and events (loosening interpersonal relationships and a sense of togetherness within borderlands);
- decreasing the revenues of local actors and limiting their ability to conduct CBC, especially in terms of financial input into INTERREG projects;
- the implementation of INTERREG-funded projects has become substantially complicated, which decreases the willingness to continue CBC in terms of education.

Considering the barriers of CBC in terms of cross-border educational projects, one can imagine that some of them will permanently stay in cross-border projects (e.g. online communication or hybrid events), and this will affect the map of entities that will be interested in continuing education in this formula. The following factors must be taken into account: the tendency to switch from stationary education to online or hybrid education, preparation of a university infrastructure for such education, and appropriate training of project managers, teachers, and students in this field. Only some schools and universities will be ready for the change of the approach to education in terms of CBC.

When analysing the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on educational cross-border projects, the most important seems to be to use this form of cooperation among different target groups within borderlands to re-build cross-border relations and a sense of togetherness, which are the key factors to developing cross-border ties in a short-term and long-term perspective.

Some barriers which have appeared during the pandemic (restrictions, especially) have decreased gradually, but one can say that some changes in cross-border projects will be maintained (online communication and switching from onsite activities to online activities).

Taking into account the barriers pointed out in the research it is necessary to counteract demotivation towards cooperation and the inability to cooperate because of a lack of competencies. Thus, CBC in education is crucial not only in terms of the increase of social capital and human resources within the borderlands but also as an activity building the awareness of strengths and opportunities related to CBC. It is strongly related to learning of issues crucial for the borderland development in terms of education and cooperation at all necessary levels, both teachers and students at least.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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