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Organizational Learning as a Critical Factor in Accessing the Erasmus+ Sport Program

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ABSTRACT

From a comparative perspective, this article analyzes which organizational factors favored the number of projects with European funds in Romania and Italy in sport. Italy ranks first in the EU in accessing Erasmus + grants on the sports component, followed by Spain, Croatia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Slovenia, and Romania. While in Italy, more organizations are applying for funding, with an average of 0-5 projects per program period/organization, in Romania, fewer organizations apply for projects, but more projects/organization. An online questionnaire was addressed to a sample of 234 sports organizations from Italy and 49 sports organizations in Romania, followed by online interviews that were interpreted through the NVIVO platform. This research showed that in terms of performance, the organization's number of employees impacts the revenues obtained and, implicitly, the financial result of the organization. Also, the number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organizations in 2014-2020 as leaders or partners correlates with the organization's total income and financial result. On the other hand, there are no significant differences between the two countries on the factors that contributed the most to the success of organizations in Romania and Italy in obtaining funding through the Erasmus + program. Romanian and Italian organizations consider essential factors in attracting projects, the network of external partners with experience in writing and implementing projects, and internal human resource.

1. Introduction

The Erasmus Sport Program is a European Union-funded initiative that aims to promote physical activity and sports participation among young people. The program provides funding for sports activities and facilities and supports developing sports programs and initiatives. The Erasmus Sport Program plays a critical role in the field of sport for several reasons: it promotes physical activity among young people, which is essential for maintaining good health and well-being; it provides opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds to come together and engage in sports activities, supports the development of sports programs and initiatives that can help young people to develop their sports skills, promotes international cooperation and collaboration in the field of sport. All these can help to improve the quality of sports programs and facilities and foster mutual understanding and respect among young people from different countries. Thus, the Erasmus Sport Program plays a critical role in promoting physical activity, fostering social integration, developing sports skills, and enhancing international cooperation in the field of sport.

Considering the importance of the Erasmus Sport program for the development of the sports field in Europe, in general, and in Romania, in particular, this paper aims to realize a comparative analysis of the process of attracting European funds in the sports field, in Italy and Romania, through Erasmus Plus Program, using a model that links three variables, namely organization performance, organizational and individual learning. Overall, the model suggests that the performance of an organization is influenced by the extent to which it fosters corporate and individual learning. By creating a culture, structure, and systems that support learning at both levels, organizations can improve their performance and adapt to changing environments.

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2. Literature review

The dimension of organizational performance

Organizational performance refers to the effectiveness with which an organization achieves its goals and objectives. It encompasses various dimensions: financial performance, customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, operational efficiency, innovation, and social responsibility.

Organizational performance is an essential indicator of organizational success (Stegerean & Gavrea, 2010 in Sethibe & Steyn, 2016). In addition to organizational performance, organizational success also depends on employee skill levels, talent development, quality of strategic planning, and ability to understand and adapt to the nature and dynamics of the business environment (Moraes Carvalho et al., 2018). However, organizational performance is arguably the most critical indicator of an organization and one of the essential variables in success and management research (Stegerean & Gavrea, 2010 in Sethibe & Steyn, 2016). Most organizations use key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the success of an organization, project, or individual in achieving specific goals. For Parmenter, KPIs represent a set of indicators that focus on aspects of organizational performance that are essential for an organization`s current and future success. (Parmenter, 2007)

Some common KPIs include revenue, sales growth, customer satisfaction, employee turnover, productivity, quality, return on investment (ROI), website traffic, social media engagement, etc.

However, according to the aim of this study, the performance indicators were represented by:

- the number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organization between 2014-2021 as partners (Variable 2 – V2)
- the number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organization between 2014-2020 as a leader (Variable 3 – V3)
- financial indicators: Number of Employees (NR), Total revenue (VT), Result (REZ) -Surplus / Profit, Deficit/analyzed. We analyze only the data on the projects carried out by the coordinating countries; Italy is in first place with 234 coordinated projects as a project leader in 2014 - 2020. Let us analyze the data on the projects carried out by each country, both as project coordinators and partners. Italy ranks 1st with 610 projects, and Romania ranks 9th with 230 projects implemented as a leader and partner during 2014-2020.

The dimension of organizational learning

Organizational learning is how an organization acquires, develops, and applies knowledge and skills to improve its performance over time. It involves continuous improvement, innovation, and adaptation to changes in the external environment. Studies have shown a positive correlation between organizational learning and performance. In theory, organizational learning and business performance are built into the definition of organizational learning. Much has been written about organizational learning as a vehicle for organizational change and performance improvement. There are various definitions of organizational learning, and it has been suggested that a relationship exists between organizational learning and performance. Examples of organizational learning include: the process of increasing knowledge and understanding to improve behavior (Fiol and Lyles, 1985 in DellaNeve, 2007); capabilities or processes within an organization that maintains or improve performance based on experience (Nevis et al., 1995 in DellaNeve, 2007); organizational learning occurs when an organization can create, acquire, and transmit knowledge and change behavior to reflect new knowledge and understanding (Garvin, 1993 in DellaNeve, 2007); and learning drives behavioral changes that lead to improved performance (Slater & Narver, 1995), (DellaNeve, 2007). These definitions imply contributing directly or indirectly to organizational performance through organizational learning.

Bierema and Eraut state, "Organization-level learning is often concerned with facilitating organizational change and development that optimizes performance" (Bierema and Eraut in DellaNeve, 2007). Other authors claim that a belief in continuous learning is needed for survival and success (Lakos & Phipps, 2004 in DellaNeve, 2007). Jashapara defines the concept of a learning organization and performance through the seven forces correlated to organizational learning: direction, efficiency, proficiency, concentration, innovation, cooperation, and competition. (DellaNeve, 2007).

Other authors have developed a design model of organizational learning within the project team(s) through projects and-action learning activities. (Law & Chuah, 2004 in DellaNeve, 2007) These activities facilitate knowledge building and improve project performance. The authors developed a rating design model based on Individual, Team, and Efficacy criteria. Personal assessments measure performance parameters of knowledge application and transfer and motivation to learn. Team performance metrics compare team goals and actual team performance. In addition to project success, learning-based parameters such as knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, and motivation are also measured. (DellaNeve, 2007).

Organizational learning occurs when individual and group knowledge is institutionalized (Crossan et al., 1999). In other words, organizational learning can be defined as integrating individual and group learning into the non-human aspects of organizations, such as systems, structures, strategies, cultures, and processes. (Bontis, 1998).

An individual may have a high level of intellect. Still, if the organization has weak systems and procedures for pursuing its actions, global intellectual capital will not reach its full potential. An organization with a firm structure will have a supportive culture that allows individuals to try things, fail, learn, and try again. If culture improperly penalizes failure, its success will be minimal.

An organization learns through its members and is directly or indirectly affected by individual learning.

Suppose we refer strictly to organizational learning in writing and implementing European funds. In that case, we must point out that the euro (design) is an excellent opportunity for organizations and individuals to learn.

Design is a cognitive activity that refers to the transformation of materials and conditions: we often talk about urban planning, the design of software, a military strategy of attack or defense, the design of a new magazine, a new product, the design of an organizational change, a training course, a political program, an educational and rehabilitation intervention. (Leone & Prezza, 1999). Project-based work has countless organizational implications for the communication and coordination between different officials, roles, functions, organizational culture, decision-making systems, administrative procedures, and control.

Services and departments that start working on non-reimbursable projects, if previously working on models focused on the division of labor and functions and individual work in a single case, are forced to reinterpret and redefine the roles and forms of coordination. Also, decision-making processes, responsibility, and power are shared between several project managers who influence and control the management of economic resources, access to information, time management, etc. Thus, from a centralized authority to a competence-based authority, which does not consider the degree and level obtained in public administration. Project work also forces public employees to be informed and trained in different specific areas of the project - whether it is complementary public policies, project management, or new services: "In working for projects, employees are forced to ask about the meaning of the services provided, about the concept of efficiency, about the needs of the people (recipients, families, community ...), about the integration with other territorial services, about the possible distortions….. [.....]" (Leone & Prezza, 1999).

Although the three levels of learning - individual, group, and organizational - are distinct, they are interdependent. Individual learning is considered a prerequisite for organizational learning (Kim, 1993).

The dimension of individual knowledge/learning

Individual learning refers to how individuals generate new perspectives and knowledge from existing implicit or explicit information and expertise. From a competence approach, an individual's ability to learn is related to their ability and willingness to learn (Bontis, 1998). It is reflected in some of their behavior, like the desire to experiment, generate new perspectives, be aware of the critical issues that affect working people, and take pride in their work and take responsibility (Bontis, 1998).

Individual competence symbolizes applying knowledge, skills, and abilities to reach the desired results. Knowledge is a collection of information and experience that a person possesses. For example, understanding the concept of the Gantt chart could be considered knowledge. Skills are specific technical skills that allow a person to complete a task. For example, building a Gantt chart could be viewed as a skill. Ability is the practical application of knowledge and skills in a given context. For example, successfully developing and managing a project timeline could be considered a skill. However, it should be noted that a person must also have experience in addition to competence because, otherwise, competence cannot be demonstrated and improved. Experience is thus a key factor for individual improvement.

Also, even if there is an opportunity to activate the learning process, if the participant is not motivated to learn and does not feel safe, the learning process cannot occur. In this sense, Pellerey states that it is not enough for students to have the basic ideas and skills that serve as fulcrums for connecting the new knowledge they are about to acquire with the cognitive structures that already exist. Nor is it enough to have reached a level of intellectual development suitable for new tasks. It also requires a desire to activate the cognitive and metacognitive processes necessary to meaningfully and stably acquire proposed knowledge rather than merely mechanically and repetitively. Otherwise, he may refuse to participate in this constructive effort. Moreover, here the concept of motivation is essential for individuals. (Pellerey, 1994)

Motivation is the internal factor that causes a person to exhibit a specific behavior. Thus, motivation is an individual aspect. Different people are motivated by various motivational factors.

The dimension of group learning

Group learning refers to acquiring knowledge or skills through collaborative efforts among a group of individuals. It involves working together towards a common goal, sharing ideas and perspectives, and supporting one another's learning. Group learning can take many forms, such as group projects, study groups, online forums, and workshops. Group learning can be a powerful tool for individual and collective growth and development. Until recently, few researchers wrote specifically about group learning.

A workgroup is a collection of employees who work together to achieve organizational goals (Kukenberger et al., 2015 in Saha & Kumar, 2017). Individual knowledge within a workgroup is necessary

because it depends on how much the workgroup members feel that their job-specific knowledge and skills have improved through working in the group. This process is considered group learning. It is expected to be influenced by the employee and his/her relationship with other employees. A positive work environment, free of dysfunctional conflicts and with high levels of trust, fosters collaborative learning. Satisfaction positively relates to group engagement (Bishop & Scott, 2000 in Saha & Kumar, 2017). Both group learning and group participation are essential elements of working groups (Mathieu & Gilson, 2012; Kukenberger et al., 2015 in Saha & Kumar, 2017). Previous research has shown that employees learn and work by belonging to their workgroup (Tannenbaum et al., 2010 in Saha & Kumar, 2017).

Group learning can be a powerful tool for individual and collective growth and development.

An effective way to facilitate learning and development in a collaborative, supportive environment can be group-based training. In group-based training, participants learn from the trainer or facilitator and from each other through discussions, activities, and exercises. The group dynamic can enhance learning by allowing participants to share experiences, perspectives, and insights. The benefits of group-based training include increased engagement, motivation, and retention of information. Participants are also more likely to apply what they learn when they can practice and receive feedback in a group setting.

Thus, group-based training can be a valuable tool for enhancing organizational learning ability, leading to improved performance, productivity, and innovation.

3. Research Methodology

Hypothesis

This study aims to test the general hypothesis that organizational performance concerning European funds projects depends on the organizational learning process.

Specific hypotheses:

1. Performance in accessing funds is related to organizational learning, teamwork, and financial performance.
2. Performance in accessing funds is related to the organization's internal human resources specialized in writing and implementing projects.
3. Performance in accessing and implementing funds is associated with a low level of difficulty in writing and implementing European projects. The higher an organization's social capital (partner network, relationships), the lower the challenges in writing and implementing projects.

Research methods

We used qualitative and quantitative research methods to verify the hypotheses based on an online questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was designed in order to measure the following variables: *Objective/external variables* that influence the writing and implementation of projects:

- Dimension "Learning-oriented training": Wide application of training, Planned, and long-term training, Team-oriented training, Multi-skill training (Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
- Dimension "Individual learning level": Individuals can move away from traditional mindsets to see things in new and different ways; Individuals feel a sense of pride in their work; individuals have a clear understanding of the direction of their work; Individuals generate many new perspectives; Individuals are aware of the critical issues that affect their work; Individuals feel confident in their work; Individuals feel a sense of accomplishment in what they do (Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
- Dimension "Group learning level": We have effective conflict resolution when working in groups; Different points of view are encouraged in group work; The groups have the right people involved in addressing the issues; We share our success within the group; In meetings, we seek to understand each other's point of view; Groups in the organization are adaptable; Groups are prepared to rethink decisions when new information is presented to them (Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
- Dimension "Organizational learning level": We have a strategy that positions us well for the future; We have the necessary systems to implement our strategy; The culture of the organization could be characterized as innovative; The organizational structure allows us to work efficiently; We have a realistic but challenging vision for the organization; We have an organizational culture characterized by a high degree of trust; Our operational procedures allow us to work efficiently (Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
- Dimension performance of organization: Size of the organization - Number of Employees (NR), Total revenue (VT), Result (REZ) -Surplus / Profit, Deficit/loss

The *performance variables* (Number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organization between 2014-2020 as a partner, Number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organization between 2014-2021 as a leader) analyzed are constructed from the total base of all realized sports projects in Romania and Italy in the period 2014-2020.

The statistical methods involved in this research included planning, designing, collecting, and analyzing data to ensure meaningful interpretation and reporting of findings (Ali & Bhaskar, 2016). The results of the online questionnaires were collected via the Google Forms application, and then specific correlations were highlighted via SPSS.

The results of the structured interviews were interpreted through the NVIVO platform.

4. Research stages

The online questionnaires were e-mailed to all the sports organization coordinators of an Erasmus+ project from 2014 to 2020. The invitations to complete the online questionnaires were sent at the beginning of 2022, to the sports entities coordinating Erasmus + projects (project leaders), on the Sports component, both in Romania and Italy.

The online questionnaire was addressed to a sample consisting of:

- 234 sports organizations from Italy, project leaders in the Erasmus + Program, Sports component
- 49 sports organizations in Romania, project leaders in the Erasmus + Program, Sports component

Of all these, 20 representatives of sports organizations in Romania responded to the online questionnaire, and 17 in Italy (that have already won European projects through the Erasmus + program). Afterward, we also had in-depth interviews with Romanian and Italian sports organizations. The online interviews lasted approximately one hour for:

- seven representatives of sports organizations from Italy, project leaders in the Erasmus + Program, Sports component
- 12 representatives of sports organizations from Romania, project leaders in the Erasmus + Program, Sports component

5. Results

To evaluate the impact of organizational learning on the performance in accessing European funds, a comparative analysis of Romania-Italy was performed to study the factors determining an organization's performance in accessing European funds.

Regarding the number of projects that were submitted by sports organizations, in the period 2014-2020, on different European programs, between the two groups analyzed, Romania and Italy, there are significant differences (χ^2 (5) = 10,975), p <0.05), as we see in Table 1.

Table 1.The number of projects submitted by sports organizations, in the period 2014-2020, on different European programs, in Romania and Italy.

	Romania	Italy	N	Chi-Square	p	Cramer's V
How many European-funded projects have the organization you represent submitted for 2014-2020?			19	10.975	0.050	.552
0-5	25.0%	27.8%				
6-10	2.8%	13.9%				
11-20	11.1%	0.0%				
21-30	8.3%	0.0%				
Over 30	2.8%	5.6%				
I do not know	2.8%	0.0%				
Total	52.8%	47.2%				

The representatives of the sports organizations in Romania and Italy estimated the number of 0-5 projects submitted in the period 2014-2020, with 27.8% organizations in Italy and 25% organizations in Romania. On the e scale of 6-10 projects submitted in 2014-2020, there are 13.9% organizations in Italy and 2.8% organizations in Romania.

On the other hand, on a scale of 11-20 and 21-30, there are 0% organizations from Italy and 11.1% and 8.3% organizations from Romania, respectively. This indicates that in Italy, more organizations are applying for funding (in our case, about 200 organizations leading Erasmus Sports projects), with an average of 0-5 projects per program period/organization, and in Romania, fewer organizations apply for projects, but with several projects/organization. (in our case, about 30 organizations are leading Erasmus Sports projects). The government system can also influence this difference in each country. As we demonstrated in our paper "Attracting European Funds In Sport – A Comparative Analysis Of Good Governance In Romania And Italy," there is an implicit link between countries with good and effective governance systems and successful European project numbers and investment outcomes. Italy scores better than Romania on good governance, so EU funds can have a ,more significant impact and contribute more to long-term economic development when good governance is ensured. (Ionescu & Stanescu, 2021)

Concerning the number of projects funded by European funds on different European programs for which the Romanian and Italian organizations received funding, for the period 2014-2020, between the two groups analyzed, Romania and Italy, there are significant differences (χ^2 (4) = 9.299), p <0.05), as we see in Table 2. On average, one in every two projects submitted is won. For example, an organization that presented 11-20 projects stated that it had received funding for 6-10 of them). 61.1% of organizations in Romania and

Italy received funding for 0-5 projects/organization in 2014-2020. We notice significant differences on the scale of 11-20 projects for which funding/organization was obtained in Romania and Italy. (13.9% of Romanian organizations, compared to 0% of Italian organizations).

Table 2. The number of projects funded by European funds on different European programs for which the Romanian and Italian organizations received funding

	Romania	Italy	N	Chi-Square	p	Cramer's V
How many projects submitted on European funds, did your institution receive funding for 2014-2020?			22	9.299	0.050	.508
0-5	27.8%	33.3%				
6-10	5.6%	8.3%				
11-20	13.9%	0.0%				
Over 30	0.0%	5.6%				
I do not know	5.6%	0.0%				
Total	52.8%	47.2%				

As shown in Table 3, on the subject of the factors that contributed the most to the success of organizations in Romania and Italy in obtaining funding through the Erasmus + program, there are no significant differences between the two countries. Romanian and Italian organizations consider essential factors in attracting projects the network of external partners with experience in writing and implementing projects and internal human resources.

Table 3. Factors that contributed the most to the success of organizations in Romania and Italy in obtaining funding through the Erasmus + program

		Romania	Italy	N	Chi-Square	p	Cramer's V
What factor do you think has contributed / will contribute the most to your success in obtaining Erasmus + funding?				16	8.989	0.174	.500
1.	The quality of the planned initiatives and their social impact	0.0%	2.8%				
2.	We implement our experience and capacity for innovation through new needs-based ideas and advanced needs analysis through an annual monitoring procedure.	0.0%	2.8%				
3.	Personal concern	2.8%	0.0%				
4.	I participated in adult training programs: project manager, an expert in European funds, etc.	0.0%	2.8%				
5.	Good promotion of the Erasmus + program at the national level	11.1%	2.8%				
6.	Network of external partners with experience in writing and implementing projects	22.2%	8.3%				
7.	Internal human resource	16.7%	27.8%				
	TOTAL	52.8%	47.2%				

As shown in Table 4 below, adopting learning-oriented training within the organization is positively associated with individual and group learning. In other words, the more "learning-oriented training" is present in an organization, the higher the level of individual learning; the more "learning-oriented training" is current in an organization, the higher the level of group learning; the higher the level of individual learning, the higher the level of group learning. As a result, the higher the individual learning level, the higher the number of projects.

Table 4.Correlations between learning-oriented training, individual learning, group learning, and performance

Correlation Matrix[a]

		V2	V3	V8	V15	V23	V31	NR	VT	REZ
Correlation	V2	1.000	.164	.290	.445	.352	.185	.100	.397	.489
	V3	-	1.000	.109	.076	-.146	-.176	.286	.328	.289
	V8	-	-	1.000	.600	.657	.717	-.068	.163	.252
	V15	-	-	-	1.000	.506	.542	-.273	-.034	.120
	V23	-	-	-	-	1.000	.843	.204	.416	.345
	V31	-	-	-	-	-	1.000	-.096	.150	.218
	NR	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000	.732	.243
	VT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000	.706
	REZ	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000

Note: V2 – Number of projects as partners; V3 – Number of projects as leaders; V8 - Dimension "Learning-oriented training"; V15 - Dimension "Level of individual learning"; V23 - Dimension "Group learning level"; V31 - Dimension "Level of organizational learning"; NR - Number of employees; VT - Total revenue; RES – Economic Result, a. Determinant = .002.

The number of projects submitted by sports organizations in Romania and Italy as partners are closely correlated with the level of individual learning of the person involved in writing the project and does not depend on the organization's size or the total number of employees. Instead, the organization's number of employees impacts the revenues obtained and, implicitly, the financial result of the organization.

Regarding the dimension performance of the organization, we can observe that the number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organizations in the period 2014-2020 as leaders or partners correlates with the total income of the organization and with the total financial result (profit or loss) especially for in the case of the sports organizations involved in projects as partners.

The component pattern plot shows similar information in Figure 1 below. The variables Number of employees (NR), Number of projects as partners (V2), Number of projects as leaders (V3), Total revenue (VT), and Economic Result (REZ) are grouped in the same area and, as we have already seen, the number of employees of the organization impacts the revenues obtained and implicitly the financial result of the organization. Also, the number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organizations in 2014-2020 as leaders or partners correlates with the organization's total income and financial result (profit or loss).

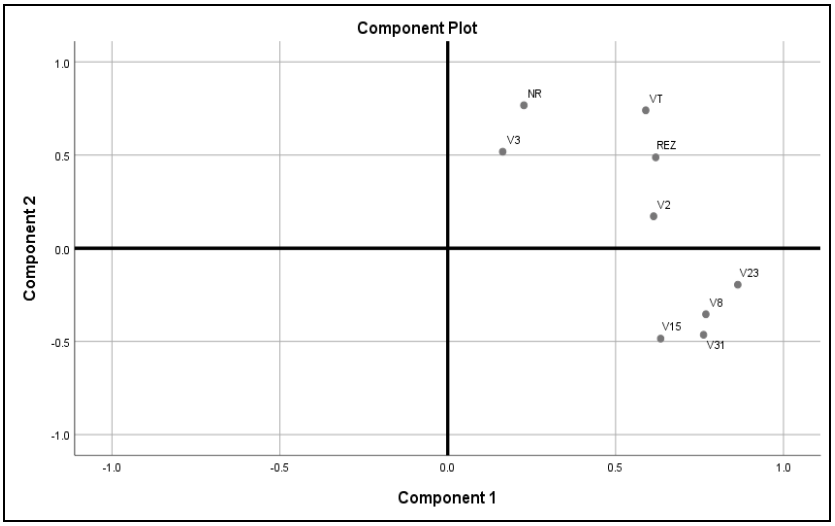

Figure 1. The component pattern plot - the correlations between the variables.

The variables V8, V15, V23, and V31 are grouped in the same area, which means that there is a correlation between the dimension "Learning-oriented training" (V8), dimension "Level of individual learning" (V15), dimension "Group learning level" (V23), and dimension "Level of organizational learning" (V31). In organizations where training is long-term and team-oriented, where the knowledge gained in training is applied, people generate new perspectives, go beyond traditional mindsets, and want to enter into European partnerships in the first instance. To this end, they are open to partnering with other organization

members, working in groups, and adapting to the needs of external partners who coordinate the writing of the grant application.

This result is also in line with what usually happens when writing Erasmus + Sport projects: if the organizations are a partner in a consortium, they share with the leader information about their organization, their needs, their profile, and their internal human resources so that the project leader can assign tasks to the organization and its members within the project. This transfer of information is crucial for the leader to organize their funding application.

However, the success of organizations that have won projects as project leaders is not necessarily due to group learning - as it turned out in the interviews - many project leaders do not share their funding applications. The entire consortium does not make the application; instead, the leader designed the application unilaterally based on exchanging information with project partners.

Group-level learning involves individuals transferring their knowledge within a group so that all members develop a shared understanding - in our case, on the funding application (Huber, 1991), (Crossan et al., 1999), (Kiessling et al., 2009). Dialogue and joint action, which describe the practical work of groups, are crucial in transferring knowledge within a group.

In-depth studies should be conducted between the project lead organizations that have shared the application and all project-related information with all project partners and the project lead organizations that have not had this practice to see if, in the long run, these practices may or may not influence the number of projects funded.

The Regression Scores factor analysis (see Figure 2 below) showed that the representatives of the sports organizations in Italy had similar approaches in their answers and were significantly different from the representatives of the sports organizations in Romania. Loads close to -1 or 1 indicate that the factor strongly influences the variable. Loads close to 0 indicate that the element weakly influences the variable. We can speak of collinearity - the presence of a complete or high-degree correlation between two or more variables in multiple regression analysis.

From the analysis of the respondents' self-assessments on a scale from 1-to 5 on the dimension of learning-oriented training, individual learning level, group learning level, and organizational learning, we can see a tendency for representatives of Romanian organizations to overestimate their organizations, their scores being on average much higher on all the independent variables analyzed, compared to the representatives of the organizations in Italy. However, the number of projects financed in Italy is much higher than those funded in Romania.

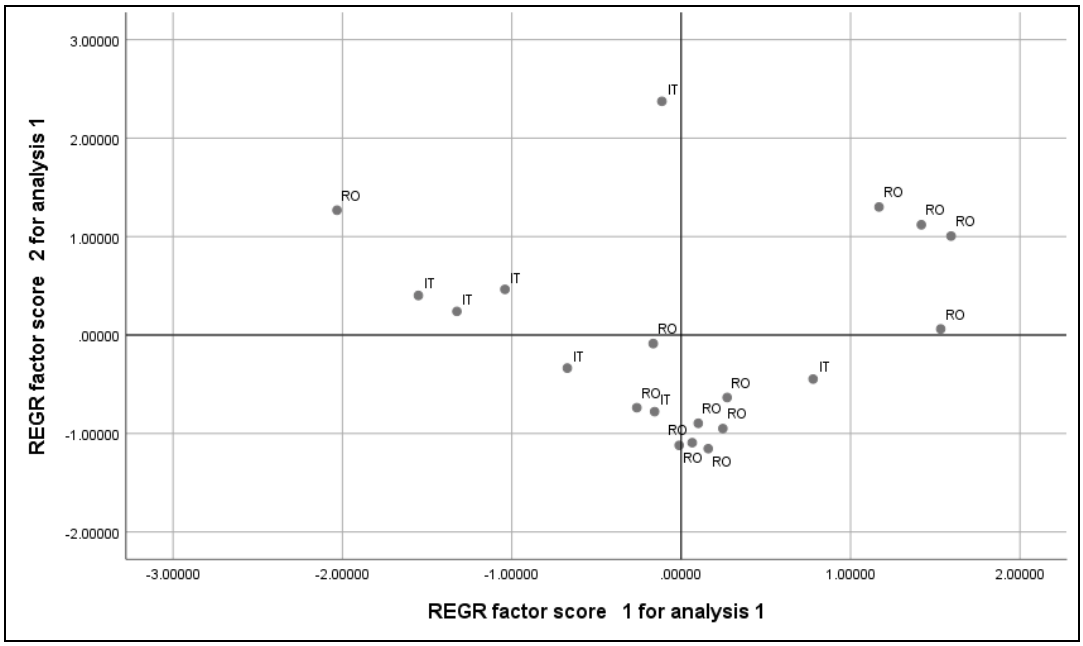

Figure 2.Regression Scores factor analysis, comparison between Romanian and Italian representatives' answers.

The data obtained through the analysis of the questionnaires were also confirmed by the interviews conducted with the participants in the online questionnaires. The following barriers were mentioned regarding organizational learning / external factors (Table 5).

Table 5.Analysis of the answers to the structured interviews conducted with the representatives of the sports organizations from Romania and Italy on the dimension of organizational learning / external factors

Speaker 1: What is the most challenging part of your work in the field of European funds?		
Barriers to writing and implementing European projects in the field of sport	**Romania**	**Italy**
Societal/political/governmental factors	"It depends on the project ... the biggest challenges are when you try to change things that are not right .... the second quite difficult thing is to admit bureaucracy."	„The barriers are different not only in the development phase of the proposal, because then, as you know when you are involved in a project proposal, there is a limited time when you can operate… there are problems during the preparation and implementation - when the development of the activities occurs - but there are also problems with the cultural barriers".
The human resources of the organization and an enabling environment	"My number one problem is the team; the second is accounting, two problems that I do not master… at a higher level…." "… The team, members of the team, and my Romanian partner were outstanding, so this contributed to my project's success and the institution's help where I found all the openness."	„The skills of a sports association are other than writing European projects. European projects are simply a tool. There should be created territorial subjects as CONI did, that is, to create a design project group that helps away from the various companies in writing projects at the national level. There is the European projects office at CONI. Still, not every individual regional committee has a project design expert who knows how to give the answers to the companies, so you have to pay for this service somehow." "Certainly, CONI having national sports schools and therefore national training centers of the highest level could be one of the cultures that can effectively achieve this activity (of writing European projects). I do not exclude that in parallel with CONI; some private training schools dedicate a specific channel for training project managers." "These small organizations have internal resources; the big ones always have the external consultant who does this European design work for them ... I think, it is only my opinion, 90% external and 10% internal resources."
Difficulty in finding/managing partners	"The first difficulty was to write the project … then another difficulty would be - and I noticed this happening to many colleagues - finding partners." "I think the most difficult part was the partnership because you often find yourself with a certain partner in the project team that you do not know very well and who is not very serious, and this partner makes your work more difficult." "The moment you realize that the partnership is not working as you would need and then you have to take over some of its work or ask other partners to get involved… we have a situation with a partner in Poland, and I was forced to take over a part of the activity, and another partner took over another part... so there are also difficulties with the partners."	"Much depends on the level of partnership ... to get this funding; one has to achieve a very high result in partnership power, so presumably this is what the European community is looking for". "The only hurdle we have had so far is that one of the partners had some issues, and he did not have a big organizational structure and could not be replaced within the partnership."

Interviews with representatives of sports organizations in Romania and Italy were analyzed through the NVIVO application, where it was possible to analyze the frequency of words used and make charts, and suggestive drawings, such as those in Figures and 4 below.

In Romania, from the interviews conducted with the representatives of the sports organizations performing in attracting Erasmus + funds, the following aspects resulted:

- Most of those who won projects funded by the Erasmus + Program had long experience in management as well as academic experience
- The primary skills that were mentioned are language skills, especially English, communication skills with partners, academic skills
- The primary motivation mentioned refers to the opportunity to know other countries and cultures and the desire to know and learn. Evidence shows that people with high or intense average motivation index have drafted projects and submitted applications under the Erasmus+ program. In contrast, those with a low Motivation Index have never drafted a project or applied to the Erasmus program. (Ionescu et al., 2022a)
- External factors that raised problems in writing and implementing projects were: limited internal resources, finding and managing partners, managing the financial-accounting part, bureaucracy, and cultural barriers.
- Most mentioned the need for education in writing and implementing European projects and the importance of training to increase knowledge, skills, and competencies. It also mentioned the idea of creating an online platform with standardized information on the steps for the application and implementation of a project.

Figure 3.Analysis of the keywords mentioned in the interviews with the representatives of Romanian sports organizations

In Italy, the following issues emerged from interviews with representatives of sports organizations performing well in attracting Erasmus + funding:

- Representatives of large organizations (e.g., federations) do not have specific courses in writing and implementing European funds and usually, for projects, cooperate with consultants in European design both for writing and for implementation and reporting of projects (the word "consulenza" / "consultancy" are very frequently used)
- Representatives of small organizations or universities have academic and management experience and use internal human resources to write and implement European projects (high-frequency words are: University - University, professor - professor, doctor - doctoral student, researchers - researchers). In this case, the only skill that raises issues is the financial-accounting aspect.
- Among the essential skills mentioned were: communication, flexibility, networking, autonomy, creativity, curiosity, discipline, innovation, and dynamism. Also, the primary skill that raises issues and is considered very important is the knowledge of English for the representatives of Italian organizations. This aspect also emerged in our paper "Factors Favoring the Level of Knowledge in Writing European Funds for Sports Structure" where we revealed that the level of English is the main factor favoring the level of knowledge in writing European funds for sports structures. Thus, facilitating access to knowledge about European funds will be combined with best practices regarding writing English applications, simulating English tasks and

opportunities to search and communicate with external partners to improve English proficiency and quality of applications. (Ionescu et al., 2023)

- The importance of the state / CONI (Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano - Italian National Olympic Committee) in creating a national European design centre to meet the needs of sports organizations and support them in their writing and implementation of European projects was also mentioned.
- The primary motivation in writing projects for small/private organizations is to attract funds because the resources from the state are limited, but also because it is a way of learning and personal and professional development.

Figure 4. Analysis of the keywords mentioned in interviews with representatives of Italian sports organizations

Possible limitations due to the definition of the research universe:

- The original database with the sports organizations that won projects through the Erasmus + Program was not up to date regarding contacts - email and telephone address, which meant a manual collection of data from the organizations' websites and beneficiaries of Erasmus + funded projects. In the initial contact database, in most cases, only the web addresses of the organizations appeared, not contacts of the project managers (people responsible for the projects financed from the funds), which led to an additional activity to identify them.
- In the case of qualitative research, respondents showed distrust in the "finality" of the study (also because many contacts of the project leaders led to consulting companies in European funds) conducted and, in many cases, refused to participate in the interview.
- Final beneficiaries (individuals): The results do not provide a sufficiently solid basis by including only the final beneficiaries of Erasmus + funded projects in the sample. To provide such information, it is necessary to extend the research universe to all categories of European funds.
- Beneficiaries (organizations): The restriction of the research universe to organizations already implementing projects does not allow, for example, the identification of barriers that prevent the transition from knowing the opportunities offered by European funds to designing and submitting projects or difficulties encountered by organizations that have had projects rejected. Investigating potential beneficiaries allows for identifying obstacles that prevented them from submitting projects or factors that contain the development of successful projects. In a previous article, we have identified three sports structures' profiles that may all be considered in future research: sports organizations that have never benefited from a European fund, are not looking to recruit new staff specifically for the creation and implementation of projects, and are unaware of any specific support programs; sports structures that have benefited from European funds, are looking to hire new experts to specialize in project creation and implementation, and are aware of different funding opportunities; and sports structures that have not benefited from European funding and are looking to hire new staff to specialize in project creation and implementation. (Ionescu et al., 2022b)

6. Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed that the general hypothesis is confirmed. The performance in writing and implementing European projects depends on external factors such as organizational dynamics, total income, total expenses, surplus/profit, and deficit/loss.

The results of our study show that regarding the number of projects submitted by sports organizations, in the period 2014-2020, on different European programs, there are significant differences between the two groups analyzed, Romania and Italy. We assess that more organizations from Italy are applying for funding, with an average of 0-5 projects per program period/organization. In Romania, fewer organizations apply for projects, but more projects/organization.

There are no significant differences between the two countries on the factors that contributed the most to the success of organizations in Romania and Italy in obtaining funding through the Erasmus + program. Romanian and Italian organizations consider essential factors in attracting projects, the network of external partners with experience in writing and implementing projects, and internal human resources.

The comparative qualitative study between Romanian and Italian representatives also confirms these findings. In Romania, external factors that raised problems in writing and implementing projects were: limited internal resources, finding and managing partners, managing the financial-accounting part, as well as bureaucracy and cultural barriers. Most of those who won projects funded by the Erasmus + Program had long experience in management and academic experience. In Italy, the representatives of large organizations do not have specific courses in writing and implementing European funds and usually cooperate with consultants in European design both for writing and for implementation and reporting of projects. On the other hand, representatives of small organizations or universities have academic and management experience and use internal human resources to write and implement European projects.

Our results also show that in terms of performance, the organization's number of employees impacts the revenues obtained and, implicitly, the financial result of the organization. Also, the number of Erasmus SPORT projects of the organizations in 2014-2020 as leaders or partners correlates with the organization's total income and financial result (profit or loss). This is consistent with most previous empirical findings on the performance evaluation of an organization.

Furthermore, the findings show that in organizations where training is long-term and team-oriented, where the knowledge gained in training is applied, people generate new perspectives, go beyond traditional mindsets, and want to enter into European partnerships in the first instance.

To this end, they are open to partnering with other organization members, working in groups, and adapting to the needs of external partners who coordinate the writing of the grant application. Thus, organizational learning is critical in accessing the Erasmus+ Sports Program. Writing European projects is an excellent opportunity for individuals and organizations to learn. Project-based work has countless organizational implications for the communication and coordination between different officials, roles, functions, organizational culture, decision-making systems, administrative procedures, and control. In-depth studies should be conducted on larger samples of respondents to analyze in detail all the variables described in this research.

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