

Reflections on the Erasmus+ LEANbody project (October 2021 to October 2024)

First of all, I consider it a great privilege to have been a participant in the Erasmus+ LEANbody project, which was coordinated by Dr András Nagy, University of Pécs, Hungary. The very positive experiences that I have had throughout the three years of this project testify to the importance of collaboration between different institutions, and I have learnt so much through the many interactions I have had with my anatomist colleagues at the University of Pécs, Masaryk University, and the University of Zagreb, as well as the educationalists from the Karolinska Institute.

This short article represents my personal reflections and perspectives after having visited the anatomy departments in Pécs, Brno, and Zagreb, along with my attendance at the workshops and conferences which had been organised as part of the LEANbody project. I will also describe some of the more wide-ranging and ongoing outcomes that have arisen from these collaborative activities.

Positive observations

During my visits to the anatomy departments of the participating institutions and observations of the way anatomy is taught and assessed, I was immediately struck by the similarities in many of their practices compared to our own institution. It was very gratifying to see the clear recognition of the importance of hands-on cadaveric dissection, as well as the efforts being made to maintain this type of teaching programme despite the financial implications. As many medical schools in the UK have replaced cadaveric dissection with other ways of teaching, I was especially encouraged to see that our partner universities acknowledged the significance of this method of instruction for medical students. It was also good to see how the donors were respected by both staff and students, and to learn about how body donation programmes were established in the various countries.

The use of demonstrators to teach small groups of students at the donors was also similar to our practice, as well as the involvement of clinicians in helping students understand how anatomical knowledge can be applied to clinical situations. Lectures included radiological images and clinical cases, the Anatomage™ Table was used at Masaryk University. It was helpful for me to understand how the past history of the different countries had influenced their teaching traditions and practices. The ability to develop and form good personal relationships with my counterparts over a long period of time through the regular online meetings throughout the project, as well as the in-person workshops and conferences, was invaluable to the exchange of ideas and fostering of long-term collaboration.

Perceived challenges

Many of the challenges to anatomy teaching have already been described in detail as part of the outcomes of this project, and solutions have been proposed and tested to overcome them. From a personal perspective, I noted the difficulties involved in teaching large numbers and disparate groups of students, especially international students who could not be admitted to medical schools in their own countries. The latter had to contend with linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as the academic rigour of the anatomy courses. In general, there would seem to be a considerable amount of what might be considered to be extraneous detail included in the curriculum, with correspondingly less focus on clinical relevance and application, although this is definitely being addressed.

The reasons for maintaining hands-on cadaveric dissection in terms of its added value in promoting professionalism and other skills did not appear to be clearly laid out for the students. Some formalisation of the hidden curriculum in these areas may be helpful for both staff and students. In addition, concepts in educational theory such as student-centred pedagogy, constructive alignment and students as co-creators were introduced during the project, as these were found to be lacking in current curricula, and pilot studies incorporating these ideas have been introduced.

While our institution has not used *viva voce* examinations for undergraduate assessments for some years, primarily in view of increased student numbers and the more subjective nature of these types of evaluations, it was interesting to see how these were conducted in our partner institutions. One of the main problems was the high failure rate and its negative impact on student mental health, but programmes are already being established to improve student health and wellbeing.

Additional beneficial outcomes

While the outcomes of the LEANbody project have been described in detail elsewhere, there have been additional beneficial outcomes which have arisen beyond the boundaries of the original proposal, but which would not have been possible without the relationships generated by the project.

1. COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) series of Clinical Anatomy Lectures

The original discussion took place among project participants in September 2021, and this series of lectures, which are held weekly in October and November, have continued annually. Each lecture includes a 30-minute anatomy talk on a specific region, followed by an illustration of its relevance by a clinician from the host institution. Last year we included students from Sumy State University, Ukraine, who appreciated the additional input in view of the ongoing disruption to their studies.

2. Erasmus+ Staff Mobility Visits

As a result of relationships developed during the project, I have been able to host 5-day Erasmus+ staff mobility visits for two anatomists from Masaryk University and three anatomists from the University of Pécs. They had the opportunity of participating in our anatomy teaching programme and observing at first hand how our course is organised and run, through attending lectures and practical classes, as well as talking to our demonstrators and staff.

Through project workshops and conferences, anatomists from other universities in Central Europe, including Charles University Faculty of Medicine in Hradec Králové and the University of Maribor, Slovenia, will also be visiting our institution through the Erasmus+ programme in 2025.

3. International Collaboration Exchange Program (ICEP), Columbia University

In view of my involvement with this programme, which was established by anatomists at Columbia University, New York (<https://www.internationalcollaborationexchange.org/partner-universities>), I recommended the inclusion of our partner institutions in the LEANbody project. After consideration by the ICEP Board (I am not involved in this process), the decision was made to include Semmelweis University and the University of Pécs for the coming academic year.

4. Newsletter Article for the British Association of Clinical Anatomists

I wrote an article entitled *Anatomy in the Heart of Europe* for the 2022 newsletter of the British Association of Clinical Anatomists, of which I am a Council member. This was a description of my experiences at Masaryk University, as I was able to participate in their anatomy teaching course after attending the inaugural meeting of the LEANbody project in December 2021. As the project has now been completed, I am planning to submit another article to the newsletter, as well as to the annual Magazine produced by Magdalene College, University of Cambridge. I am convinced that the invaluable experiences I have gained during the project should be widely shared.

I would like to take this opportunity to convey my most grateful thanks to everyone who has worked so hard to make the LEANbody project a reality. What the project has achieved goes beyond the outcomes that have been described, as the intangible benefits – deepened friendships, shared values – cannot be quantified or measured. We acknowledge the generous support of the Erasmus+ programme, without which implementation of the project would not have been possible.

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