

# Intercultural Education through Religious Studies (IERS)

*COMENIUS Multilateral project*

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## Abstract

Religious and cultural diversity are today more than ever a critical and political challenge as the recent emergencies related to geo-political and economical global transformations clearly show. European countries are concerned by a big immigration flow that demands an educational effort in order to foster the mutual understanding and integration.

According to Toledo guiding principles, IERS project meets the needs of an innovative approach in teaching about religions and beliefs at school by providing teachers of humanistic disciplines with new tools that help teachers and pupils to plunge deeper into religions and cultures of non-european countries, as well as raising the knowledge of the

religious traditions that contributed to the common European cultural Identity, promoting it in the best way suited for encourage intra -and extra- European cultural dialogue attitudes.

The Project aims to support the development of social, civic and intercultural transversal key competences by educating towards a positive understanding of cultural and religious differences, a readiness to engage in dialogue and to avoid or manage conflicts. By encouraging teachers and pupils to expose themselves to the differences and commonalities of religious topics, it promotes also the values of democracy, equality and human rights as it deals with social and civic dimensions of both intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The project will involve high school in-service teachers by developing a complete set of didactical tools and training experiences. The results will be:

1. A baseline study which analyzes the actual situation of teaching about religions throughout Europe;
2. New innovative didactic tools such as Multimedia Digital Modules to be used in classroom activities, accompanied by a Handbook with didactical guidelines for teachers.
3. Teacher support activities (virtual community, training activities, developing of didactical projects to apply in classroom).

**Keywords:** *Religions, Education, Digital Modules, ICT Tools, Methodology*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Religious and cultural diversity are today more than ever a critical and political challenge as the recent emergencies related to geo-political and economical global transformations clearly show. European countries are concerned by a big immigration flow that demands an educational effort in order to foster the mutual understanding and integration.

Religion is, indeed, an essential element in the cultural identity of a number of the groups that make up our societies, but it has also been associated with stereotypes or negative pre-conceptions, including the assumption of a so-called 'clash of civilizations' (Fact Sheet n° 34 (2007) of the European Network Against Racism; Eurobarometer Report on Discrimination, a survey issued in January 2007).

Responses to these challenges can be represented especially by considering the fundamental role of education about religious and cultural difference and diversity in building societies and social cohesion. The scholastic environment is the privileged space in which young representatives of several cultures currently in the European territory meet. The school today is as much as a frontier, in which some students are still risking a bad integration if not the ghettoization. Through education, the transmission of knowledge and understanding of religions and customs have – in fact – a role in forming, creating, and influencing social relations between students from different culture and behaviours.

Nowadays, European countries have different models of religious education in public schools, often organized by the dominant religion in the country. Overall, a comprehensive teaching of religions through a scientific, critical, historical and intercultural lens is still in embryonic and experimental level throughout Europe both regarding teacher training and intercultural approaches of didactical materials.

We consider that intercultural knowledge build a bridge towards the comprehension of the others, thus nurturing life-skills. By enhancing the respect of the different cultural, social and religious identities, the school communities are able to prevent and manage social and cultural conflict, to promote good practices of active citizenship, to strengthen social cohesion, the human dignity and the value of democracy.

IERS project aims to support the development of social, civic and intercultural competences by educating towards a positive understanding of cultural and religious differences, a readiness to engage in dialogue and to avoid or manage conflicts. By encouraging teachers and pupils to expose themselves to the differences and commonalities of religious topics, it promotes also the values of democracy, equality and human rights as it deal with social and civic dimensions of the intercultural and interreligious dialogue. It also raises the cultural awareness and appreciations of different religious and artistic expressions.

In order to do so then, teachers of Humanities, Social Sciences, History and Geography, Religions at Secondary School will be involved, with academic experts in the field of religious studies and teaching about religions, in a training process and a working by project that enable them:

1. to be conscious of the state-of-the-art of the teaching about religions in the European schools, to learn from a comparative overview the best practices already implemented in Europe and to be aware of the European guidelines and recommendations;
2. to get an up-to-date scientific knowledge about the religious phenomena;
3. to put in practice, in their teaching activities, a comparative and intercultural perspective on the various (European as well as non-European) religions, worldviews and cultures, in order to nurture in their class mutual comprehension, dialogue and respect.

That's why the project plans to realize:

1. A baseline study which analyzes the actual situation of teaching about religions throughout Europe, focusing in particular in the countries of partner institutions;
2. New innovative didactic tools such as Multimedia Digital Modules to be used in class, accompanied by a dedicated Handbook with didactical guidelines for teachers. Their contents will deal with the last findings of religious sciences and teaching methodologies, as well as the highlights of the aforementioned baseline study.
3. Teacher support activities (European virtual community, training activities, developing of didactical projects to apply in classroom) along the project lifecycle with teachers of associated schools involved in the project, in order to have steady review and active involvement of the teachers 1) in the Digital Modules implementations and 2) in the piloting in their institutions of contents and methodology and 3) in the dissemination and exploitation of project outcomes.

IERS project proposal was born capitalising previous experience and results of Comenius MP project – *MIH Multicultural Interdisciplinary Handbook: Tools for Learning History and Geography in a Multicultural Perspective*. Teams proceeding from University of Salamanca and University of Augsburg worked with part of the team from the University of Venice from 2009 to 2011 by developing the methodological and technical framework of a multicultural didactical approach to the learning of History and Geography. The involvement of academic institutions from Italy, Denmark and France with a specific research itinerary on the project contents will valorise project results with their scientific contribution in the field of religious and intercultural studies. In particular Denmark will share its knowledge in the field of religious education and teaching about religions. The university of Augsburg will implement its experience in teacher training. Finally the University of Salamanca will provide the technology for the innovative Multimedia teaching tools and the Internet platform for the internal and external communications of the consortium.

## **2 PARTNERSHIP**

The consortium is composed by the following institutions:

- Università Ca'Foscari Venezia (Italy)
- Institut Européen en Sciences des Religions (France)
- University of Salamanca (Spain)
- University of Southern Denmark (Denmark)
- Oxfam Italia Intercultura (Italy)
- University of Augsburg (Germany)

The Ca' Foscari University of Venice is well experienced in international projects management. Through the Department of Asian and North African Studies it makes available to the project a team of scholars with a wide expertise in Religions and Inter-cultural Studies as well as in Teacher Training.

The European Institute of Religious Science of the École Pratique des Haute Etude will coordinate the various expertises of the different partners in the creation of the Digital Modules. In order to do so its team features not only scholar of Religions and Religious Studies Teaching, but also experts of teacher training and cultural integration/immigration issues.

The University of Salamanca has well-documented experiences in international projects. It is involved via its Research group in Interaction and eLearning and it will be focusing on the production of educational digital tools. Thank to its experience as manager of the former COMENIUS MIH will be also in charge of the quality evaluation throughout the entire project.

The scholars from the German university of Augsburg are professors in didactics of history in the fields of multicultural dialogue, methods and contents for teaching. It is worth noting that Bavaria is one of the largest regions in Germany, an important aid to dissemination considering the high level of autonomy enjoyed by regions in this country. In fact, the University of Augsburg will coordinate with its expertise the Teacher Pilot work package.

The Institute of Philosophy, Education, and the Study of Religions of the University of Southern Denmark will provide distinguished scholars in Religious Studies research as well as Religious Studies teaching. It will be responsible for the baseline Study and will be actively cooperating in the creation of the Digital Modules.

Finally OXFAM will capitalize its experience in project concerning migrants and intercultural integration. In addition thanks to its international network, it will exploit it in the valorization and sustainability actions of the project, in order to disseminate and mainstream the project outcomes also outside the consortium's countries.

Each partner will bring into the consortium as associated partner at least one high school, in order to ensure constant involvement of and impact to the target group (teachers). In particular the experience of schools in Denmark where a well developed curriculum on religions is applied will be shared and capitalised during the project.

## **3 OBJETIVES**

The Project aims to be for teachers of Humanities, Social Sciences, History and Geography and Religions at Secondary School a complete set of didactical tools and training experiences in order to achieve these primary goals:

- to contribute to the development of quality lifelong learning and to promote high performance, innovation and a European dimension in systems and practices in the field.

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- to reinforce the contribution of the European school system to social cohesion, active citizenship, personal development, intercultural dialogue and equality, promoting the need to combat to all forms of discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief.
- to promote an awareness of the importance of religious and cultural diversity within Europe.
- to provide an opportunity to share knowledge and understanding among young people and educational staff of the diversity of European cultures and languages and its value, enhancing the quality and European dimension of teacher training.

To reach these primary goals the following elements will be developed within the framework of the project:

- 1) Creation of a transnational team from different European University Departments dealing with Religious Studies, Intercultural Studies and Teachers Training, each one linked with at least one school as Associated Partners and a team of teachers in service at Secondary School.
- 2) Production of a baseline study of the teaching about religions in the European schools.
- 3) Production of didactical tools (Multimedia Digital Modules and methodological Handbook) whose target are high school teachers of history and social sciences, humanities, arts, philosophy, and obviously, religions, so the they can use these products to enrich their courses with topics dealing with religions and intercultural education.
- 4) Development of teacher support actions (European virtual community, training activities, developing of didactical projects to apply in classroom).

## 4 METHODOLOGY

The IERS project methodological framework implies different methodological approaches according to the related set of activities to be developed through the project lifecycle, as follows:

- Management Methodology, to be developed in order to ensure the efficiency of management tasks and quality and evaluation processes.
- Technical Methodology, is oriented to implant the ICT environment for the developing all the project tasks (website, internal communication platform, Multimedia Digital Modules production, learning and social environment).
- Content Development Methodology, based on a set of (scientific, technical, didactical, ICT and methodological innovation) templates, guidelines and recommendations for supporting the contents development. These contents will be consumed in training actions for the teachers, and these teachers will use them with their own students in pilot phase.
- Teaching Training and Support Methodology will be based on a quality social community approach, where the strong presence of human roles (online tutors) and learning by doing, learning and practice communities and interaction will be key to ensure the effective acquisition of skills and competences by teachers who will attend the training and support actions in programme. This action will be implemented alongside the development of the Multimedia Digital Modules and the Pilot phase in order to ease the active collaboration and involvement of the teachers of the partner schools.

- Pilot Methodology will define the planning and the kinds of activities implemented by teacher in their own schools.

Dissemination, Exploitation and Valorisation Methodology will consist of two different approaches: on the one hand, it will involve “conventional” methods for disseminating and exploiting the benefits of the project: social media presence, attendance to workshops and conferences, organizing of workshops and events at school, elaboration of guidelines and recommendations, etc.; on the other hand they will be strengthened with a final conference in the context of teaching about religions in the European schools. With them it will be possible to engage the target groups with the project and its outcomes, specially the policy makers, academic managers and teachers.

## **5 ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

With the support of the Lifelong Learning Program of the European Union. Project Reference: 539803-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-COMENIUS-CMP. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication only reflects the views of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.