Reflection [1]Report for Product-Based Assignments

Website to help new international students in Trondheim

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[1] Reflection is “the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired” Raelin, J. A. (2001). "Public Reflection as the Basis of Learning." Management Learning **32**(1): 11–30. A reflective practitioner is a person capable of learning, acting and adapting to environments, someone who is constantly seeking to widen their experience and knowledge by adapting their manner of work in the profession. Someone who always learns through what they do, and who continually combines action with reflection on what has been done.

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1. Introduction

In this section we are going to introduce our project assignment giving a description of the project per se, the goals of the project and a first insight of how the team managing the project was able to exploit it for gaining experience of a real-life case scenario of the development of a product.

To pass the TPK5100 Applied Project Management students must choose an assignment among three proposed: product base, empirical investigation, and theoretical review. Our group decided to confront the product base assignment. It consists of the planning, the creation and the delivering of a product of our choice. We chose the product base assignment because to us it’s the best way to try to work on a project and face the real-life problems that can arise when a project management team works to reach a certain accomplishment.

After a first brainstorm we ended up with two main ideas:

- the creation of a website to help international students with their arrival and studies at NTNU and to give them our hints to fully enjoy their time in Norway and in Trondheim
- the organization of a party to celebrate the end of the studies

Once we had a rapid confrontation with our professor, we understood that the second option was not practicable because events are not considered actual projects. In the next group meeting we further outlined the details the website should have and agreed on the following:

- have helping tools for international students get information for their start at NTNU and in general in Trondheim
- be a folder centralizing information and links now spread in different webpages
- have tools in form of videos

We can analyze our assignment purpose from two different perspectives, the didactical one and the practical one. On the didactical side the goals of the product/based assignment are the developments of skills and conditions needed to manage projects, understandings of the difficulties in project management and, the actual development of a product. From the practical one we can anticipate some of the problems we encountered. We can say that within our group, we experienced problems linked to time management, communication skills, loyalty to initial planning and motivation.

2. Evaluation of Project management effort

Our project management organization can be divided into *time planning*, *risk management*, *communication plan* and *project success.*

a. Time planning

In order to reach our goal of delivering a helpful website, we started off organizing our own project management as a newly formed group. After determining our project deliverables, we divided different tasks and responsibilities in our first project meeting. Every group member got her/his own project part to take care of and was responsible to communicate the results with the rest of the group. For other tasks, like stakeholder interaction (e.g. interviews, surveys) we worked in groups of two.

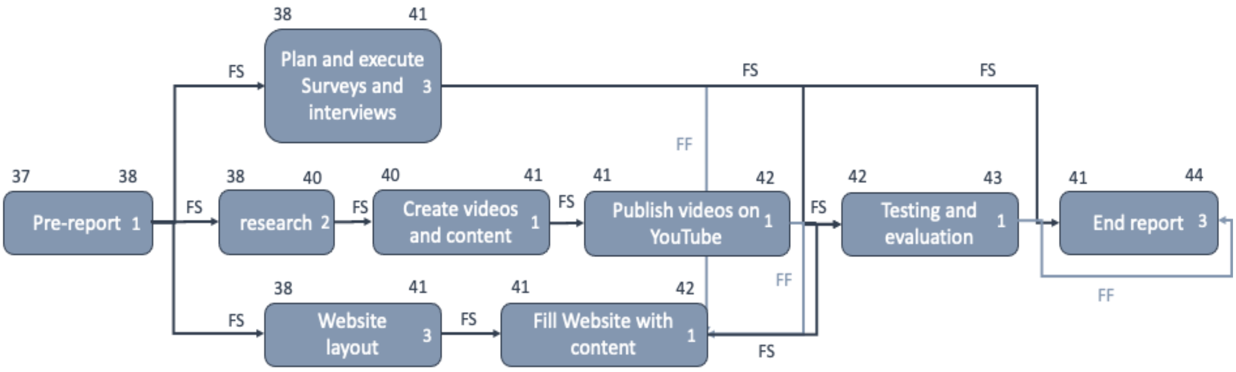


Figure 1: Project schedule (with calendar weeks)

Moreover, we agreed on a time schedule that enabled us to mostly work parallel to each other, only the creation of the website was relying on the finish of the content first. And the testing and evaluation as well as the written report and presentation was of course relying on the results of the previous work.

Figure 2: Diagram of time planning (estimated and real) divided by tasks and persons

To evaluate our own project management, it should be stated that we started off very well organized and motivated, but in the middle of the project we had some time overlapping which is why we could meet for three weeks. This is when we lost track of what everyone was doing and got stuck in our progress. Afterwards we were at different stages and different expectations about other people's work, which made it harder to work effectively together. In the end we spent some time on group communication and then managed to reach every deliverable in time. Our time chart shows the time everyone was estimating to take on a single task (bars) and the real time (line) we used. There are some deviations between estimated and real and between the workload of the team members, but since we reached our time goals, the time planning can be considered as a success.

b. Risk management

First step for being aware of risks of the project is to determine them within a risk chart divided by probability and impact of consequences. Depending on their level of probability and impact the color ranging from green (low risk) to red (high risk) is determined. In our case, the risks are green or yellow as they are either low in probability or low in consequences. To avoid the risks, we revised our time planning and different responsibility roles.

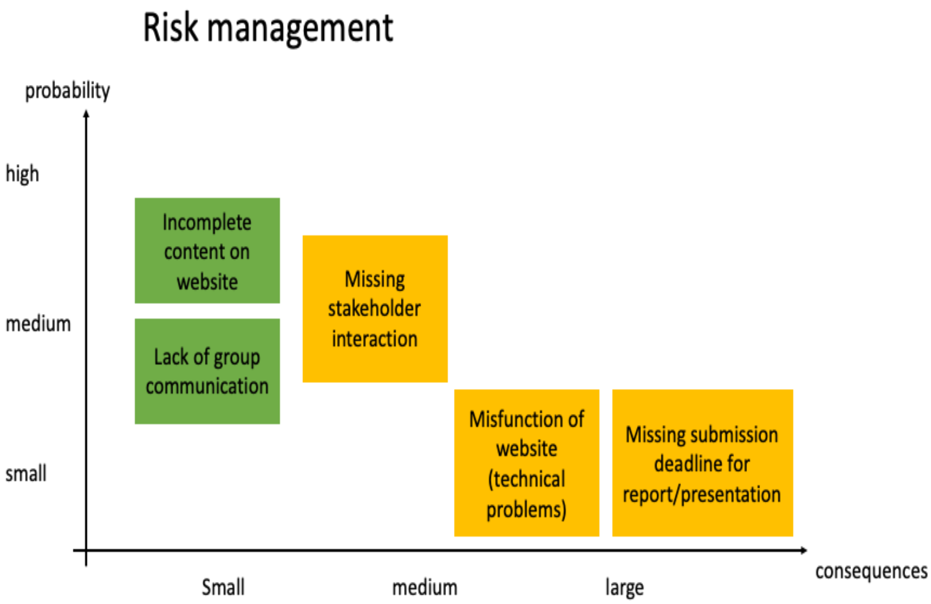


Figure 3: risk factors determination

At the end we managed to avoid the risks with a large level of consequences and only saw minor risks with very small levels of consequences happening, such as miscommunication within the group that led to minor mistakes. If we want to avoid these risks next time, we will need to spend more time on discussing our expectations about the content of the website and take more time to communicate within our group. But the risk plan helped to avoid any bigger problems.

c. Communication plan

In our project stakeholder communication was considered a key task since the purpose of the project was to help international students for an easy start at the NTNU. Therefore, we needed to speak with recent international students for their advice and feedback as well as with different organizations (ESN, SIT and international office). We divided the communication from group to stakeholder into different responsibilities connected to each task. We managed to have a dialogue with our stakeholder as early as possible and therefore guaranteed to get an answer in time. Communication with students via surveys published in social media was a bit more difficult than expected and reached less people, but we still managed to get a significant number of answers (see results in appendix 4).

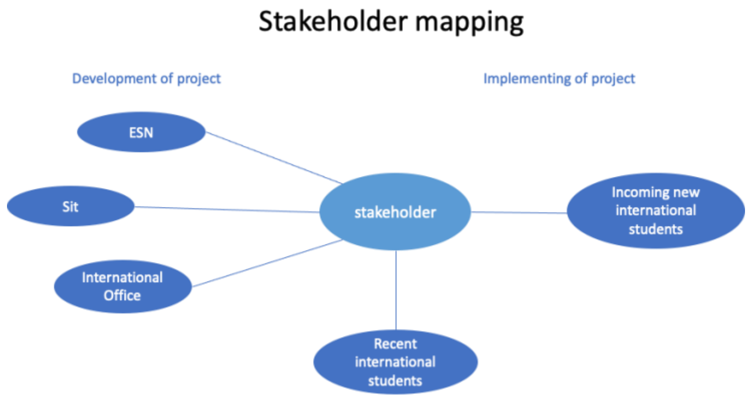


Figure 4: communication mapping

The right side of our stakeholder mapping consists of the communication after implementing our project/publishing the website with new incoming international students and it didn’t happen yet but would be the next step in our project. While communication with our stakeholders went smoothly, we didn’t expect our internal group communication to be difficult and didn’t put enough effort into structuring our dialogue, which should be improved next time.

d. Project success

Looking back at our success criteria determined in the early stage of the project, we can say that our project management met our success criteria, although we had some unexpected difficulties to overcome. The project itself (website with useful content and helpful videos) is finished by the time we determined it to be, we got positive feedback about the usefulness of the website and included our stakeholders’ input. Also, the deadlines were met and we all contributed to the deliverables.

Table 1: Stated success criteria and their result

Determined success criteria	Result
The website provides useful information for incoming international students	Can be confirmed after testing and evaluation from int. students

The website is easily accessible and shows information in an appealing design	Can be confirmed after testing and evaluation from int. students
Feedback of stakeholder is included in website content	Stakeholder input got included
All project deadlines are met	All external deadlines were met
All group members contribute to the deliverables	Everyone filled their tasks

Please evaluate the degree of your support to the following statement (group-based evaluation):

We evaluate our project management effort as successful:

Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Your response				X	

3. Evaluation of the impact (Project success)

An evaluation of the impact or the significance of their final product.

A) Who is the target audience of your product?

The audience of our product consists of new students at NTNU, especially international and exchange students. This is the group we want to support by offering easily accessible information and links to all the relevant pages regarding different issues when arriving in Trondheim.

B) How do you evaluate the quality of your final product? What evidence do you have to support your evaluation?

To evaluate the quality of our product for the named target group, we gathered opinions before and after creating the website. Before we started the development progress, we assessed what information the students found lacking or difficult to find in this semester and what they wished they had known earlier via a survey. This way we created requirements: Which topics are interesting for students, what is most difficult when you are new in Trondheim etc. Besides the survey, we also included our own, first-hand experiences, as all of us are exchange students in Trondheim. After the development process of the website, we conducted short testings and interviews with a few other exchange students, to make sure the website itself is easily understandable for people outside of our group. We ourselves acted as experts to check whether we covered all necessary and urgent topics. Since we divided the content into groups, everybody was at the end not only checking his or her own section of the content, but also the content of the other group members to make this evaluation more reliable. If we saw mistakes or missing details, we communicated these in an informal but direct way towards the responsible group member. The testing with other students from outside of our group was done orally and documented in notes. These notes were then considered for further adjustments on the website. Unfortunately, we were not able to reach our target group directly, as we are not in contact with any future exchange students who will come to NTNU. Instead, we were working mainly with students who have arrived this fall and asked them if the given information would have been helpful to them.

However, by the gradual inclusion of feedback from within our team and other students throughout the last few weeks of the project time we were able to increase the quality of our website further and further. The feedback we gave one another within the group was mostly related to typing errors, layout and sentence structure. The reduction of these mistakes and flaws increased the trustworthiness and readability of the page. From students outside of our group we received further feedback mainly e.g. if topics needed further elaboration or explanation or regarding the order of the information. This way we reduced misunderstandable or incomplete passages and are now confident to provide help to new students and especially exchange students via our website. Its layout is not aligned with the design of the NTNU pages, but rather like a blog in order to show that we, ourselves, are also students. We choose this to highlight our independence from the university, sit and other student organizations and have so far not received negative feedback about it.

We evaluate the quality of our final results as outstanding (group-based evaluation):

Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Your response				X	

Of course, our website cannot cover every possible issue new exchange students will come across, but it can give them a head start that we wished we had ourselves at the beginning of our exchange semester. Especially the large collection of links that is included and leads to all the relevant websites can make it much easier to find the needed information. Moreover, our website is compact and not

too large in volume. This way a conscious and interested exchange student can easily work through the content pages before his semester starts to get the most possible benefit early on.
However, the actual impact of our website cannot be fully evaluated until new exchange students arrive at NTNU in Trondheim in the next semester. As all the current exchange students have already made their own experiences with student life in Trondheim, they are not in the same situation anymore as new or future exchange students without this experience and therefore biased as test persons.

4. Factors that have contributed to failure / success.

Since we think we accomplished our assignment by giving out a finished functioning product to the final users and stakeholders, and the tests we performed gave satisfactory results, we consider our project a success. Given this consideration, we are going to present in this section the factors that contributed to the success and the failures (or, to us, what worked against the success) of the final website creation project. It is useful to first state what we thought would have constituted a risk at the beginning of the project:

- not reaching new students
- not covering all necessary information
- not creating value for new students
- no support from international office or other stakeholders.

In the light of our knowledge of how the website project management work went, we can see that the risks we had identified in no way included the human relationships challenges that arise within a team composed by people from different backgrounds who did not know each other. In fact, the greatest risks to the success of the project came not so much from external factors (dissatisfied end-users and stakeholders) but from social dynamics within the group that were not well understood at the outset.
We can now proceed to list more clearly what were our success and failure factors.
Success factors:

- Sense of urgency. Last minute panic is often the time when people realize the most of the work. Light-hearted jokes aside, we encountered problems linked to the fact that the workload not yet done was quite big as the final deadline was approaching. We proceeded to finish everything in time with this feeling of urgence raging within ourself.
- Feedbacks on the work done by the other members of the group. We used a WhatsApp group to keep each other updated on our work and to give and receive feedback. If this way of working was sometimes worthwhile for its speed on the other hand, sometimes we missed the

messages and unintentionally ignored them, for sure a messaging group cannot substitute an in-person meeting.

- Motivation. The strive for a good grade, or for not failing the exam, is something that fed our motivation in these weeks of work. Motivation can also be a double-edge sword when it is absent or when it is not cooperated with discipline and alignment to initials plans
- Adequate early planning. The implementation of a WBS, the creation of an online folder in which inserting all the works of the single members of the group, and the use of a simple excel file with a to do list associated with the deadlines we gave them and with a simple check cell for each task were probably the best means to the success of the final project.

The failure factors we encountered were especially of social nature:

- Communication skills. On more than one occasion we, all English-speaking students at least as second language, could not communicate effectively with each other to find common solutions to the approaching challenges. We managed the situation by breaking down the problem in smaller subproblems and facing each one of them one by one.
- Time management. It is no secret that as exchange students in Trondheim we want to make the most out of this experience, so our non-university activities sometimes took the place of the university ones. This led to some delays in the completion of some of our tasks.
- Loyalty to initial planning/ continuity of project development. Particularly linked to the previous point, this failure in managing the project taught us to be more careful in forecasting the time needed to complete each task.
- Lack of team cohesion. Apart from the chat and meeting strictly work related there were no other types of small talk or leisure meetings. This itself is not so different from the reality and it is not linked directly with the failure of some areas of the project, but the contrary is for sure true: a strong cohesion between team members would have led to better and/or faster results.

In “The road to success” (Hussein 2018 pp-92) there is listed a long summary of success factors, we can say all the success factors we found within our journey to complete the assignment are inside said list. Many of the success factor listed are in fact not applicable to our case like experience from previous projects, transparency, selection of optimized solutions,

5. Most important lessons from your project

1) You should first identify the learning objectives of your final product before deciding on the type of product, only by doing this you will be able to define your stakeholders, your final goal and the material you have to work with in order to succeed.
2) Our advice is to have meetings with the people you are working with to get information on their strengths and weaknesses, so you can organize in a better way and determine the roles and responsibilities. Also talk with the stakeholders if possible and get all information possible from books and projects of similar characteristics. Implementing tools such as SWOT analysis to get information about the group you are working with and the project and product.
3) We learned that even with a strict structural plan, planning doesn't always go as anticipated, things can get delayed for many different reasons, so it is important to gain the ability to adapt to those circumstances. Considering the different backgrounds of the group members there will also be different priorities, timings and ways to work.
4) Our experience suggests that it is important to anticipate risks that may appear during your project, which could be external factors or internal factors such as delays from your group members or stakeholders. Using teams, drive, etc. is also fundamental, as well as sharing information with your group members, finishing tasks on time, coordinating communication, and considering how aspects and tasks will affect other parts of the project.

6. Reflection on learning and unlearning

What we needed to learn

1) In Teamwork one of the most important things to be considered is different mentalities. As a group of students that have different backgrounds, we all have different ways to approach tasks. That's why setting rules, ideas and communicating is very important.

2) Knowing when to finish a certain task is another important skill when it comes to meeting deadlines. It’s always possible to add more content in order to make it more appealing but if you focus on these details you might lose track of time that can be used for the parts that matter the most. For example, in our case trying to use many programs that get better video quality required a lot of time but would only do a small change to our output. Putting too much effort on this would have not added as much value as getting information summarized in a way everyone without previous knowledge of the city could understand easier.

3) Making reports on how things are going, keeping information updated from all members is fundamental and gives you an idea of the progress of your project and allows members to review and check the research made by others.

4) How to work with the theory learned in class, even though all students in a project have different backgrounds because we all are taking the same class, the information and strategies taught in them are a good starting point on how to face the project and tools that we all have in common.

What we needed to unlearn

5) More information is not always better. When we started the project, we focused on getting all the information possible to create a website with all possible questions a student could have but while progressing we realized that too much information could be not user-friendly to read. It is important to do research on other platforms, focus on the main priorities and create links to other pages that can answer students' questions.

6) Sometimes using too many tools can make the workflow more difficult even though these tools are supposed to make things easier. When we were deciding on what programs to use in order to coordinate our work more efficiently, we encountered the problem that a lot of us have never worked with the same programs. The best option was to use what we all have experiences with (e.g. excel), even though it might not be the best program, but it saved us time, because everyone was able to start working immediately.

7. Acknowledgments

We are grateful to our professor for his work and his involved way of teaching.
Additionally, we want to thank the references students which helped during the process of writing and realizing this project.
We are also grateful for all our stakeholder organizations for their open-mindedness towards our Project and their quick response to our requests.
Thanks, should also go to the people who took part in the surveys and beta tests we had.

8. References

Hussein, B. (2018). The Road to Success: Narratives and Insights from Real-Life Projects, Fagbokforlaget.
Raelin, J. A. (2001). "Public Reflection as the Basis of Learning." Management Learning **32**(1): 11–30.

9. Appendix

Appendix 1: Our pre-report
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WLXFhrSYvXchSOILrx5IpCnHalXdIW05/view?usp=share_link

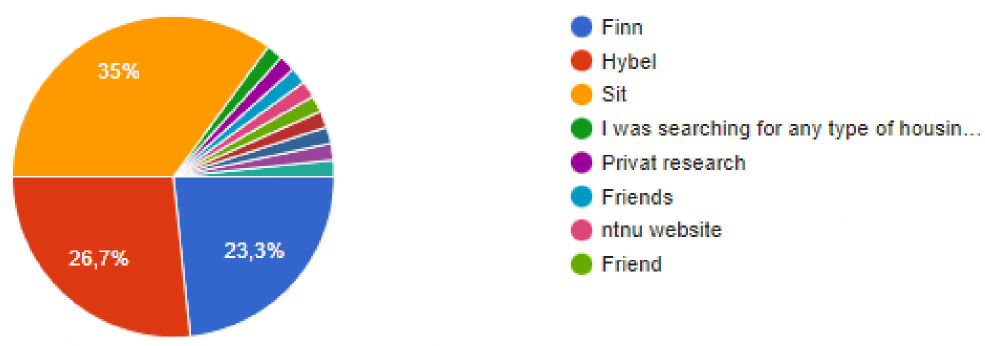
Appendix. 2: Our project/the website
https://ntnuinternationals.wordpress.com/

Appendix 3: Link to video presentation
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gknlQiAzOntgoFTd3PwjUawwCvdOl5G7/view?usp=share_link

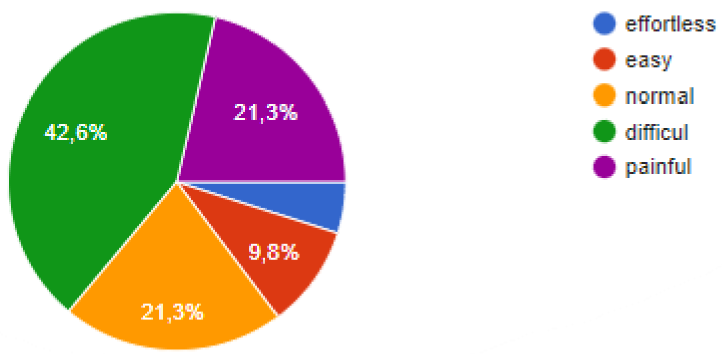
Appendix 4:

These are some of the graphs we made with the answers of

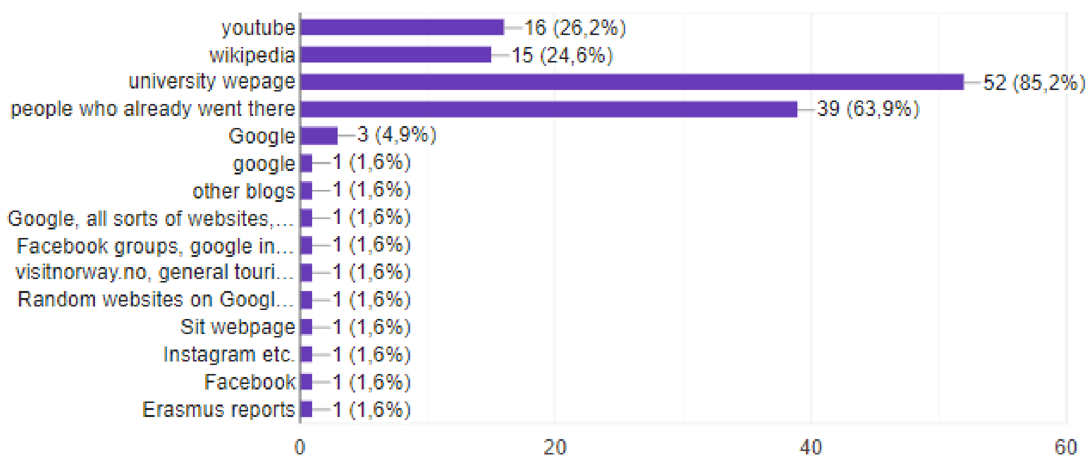
How did you find your accomodation?



Was it easy to find accomodation?



Where did you look for information about Trondheim?



Appendix 5: Results of Stakeholder Questionnaire

Results of Questionnaire:
Help new international students to get started

1. Out of your experience…

What are the most frequently asked questions by international students?

- Housing (incl. furniture)
- Practical stuff about moving to a foreign country (e.g. bank account)
- Trips and events
- Best experiences
- Courses and registration

Do international students need more help with university related content (learning agreements, registration, Studentweb etc.) or with information on arrival and housing?

Yes, more than Norwegian students

How many weeks/days before the semester start do you receive most questions?

- During and after admission
- Most frequently from mid-July until semester start in august

2. For our project…

Do you think an additional website with videos from students to students to give additional information to the NTNU website would be helpful for new international students?

Absolutely!

Do you think it would be possible to spread the information/link to our website via your communication channel(s)?

Yes/to be discussed

Do you have any advice/ recommendations/ suggestions that you can give us?

- Use facebook as information tool
- Get in touch with former exchange students from same country/university