

# Project Management and Project Action Plan

Hand-out – Module 1

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German Academic Exchange Service

**HRK** German Rectors' Conference  
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## Hand-out Module 1

### Table of Contents

- 1. Project and Project Management**
  - Definition of Project
  - Definition of Project Management
  
- 2. Project Management Activities in the Project Cycle**
  - Project Initiation
  - Project Planning
  - Project Execution
  - Project Closure
  - The triangle in Project Management
  
- 3. The Project Action Plan**
  
- 4. List of Literature**

## Project Management and Project Action Plan

This hand-out provides you with some fundamental inputs of project management including its general rules of application. After a general introduction, the focus will rely on how to write a project action plan.

### 1. Project and Project Management

A **Project** is “a **temporary** endeavour designed to produce a unique product, service or result with a defined **beginning** and **end**, undertaken to meet unique **goals** and **objectives**” (*A Guide to Project Management Body of Knowledge*, 2000, 4). The essential features of a project are that it is innovative, time-constrained and resource-constrained. Different from the routine plans, the project tasks are often used as a preparation for future routine activities.

A successful project must (*Guidelines for Managing Projects*, 2007, 3)

- deliver the outcomes and benefits required by the stakeholders
- create and implement deliverables that meet agreed requirements
- meet time targets
- stay within financial budgets
- involve all the right people
- make best use of resources in the organisation and elsewhere
- take account of changes in the way the organisation operates
- manage any risks that could jeopardise success
- take into account the needs of staff and other stakeholders who will be impacted by the changes brought about by the project

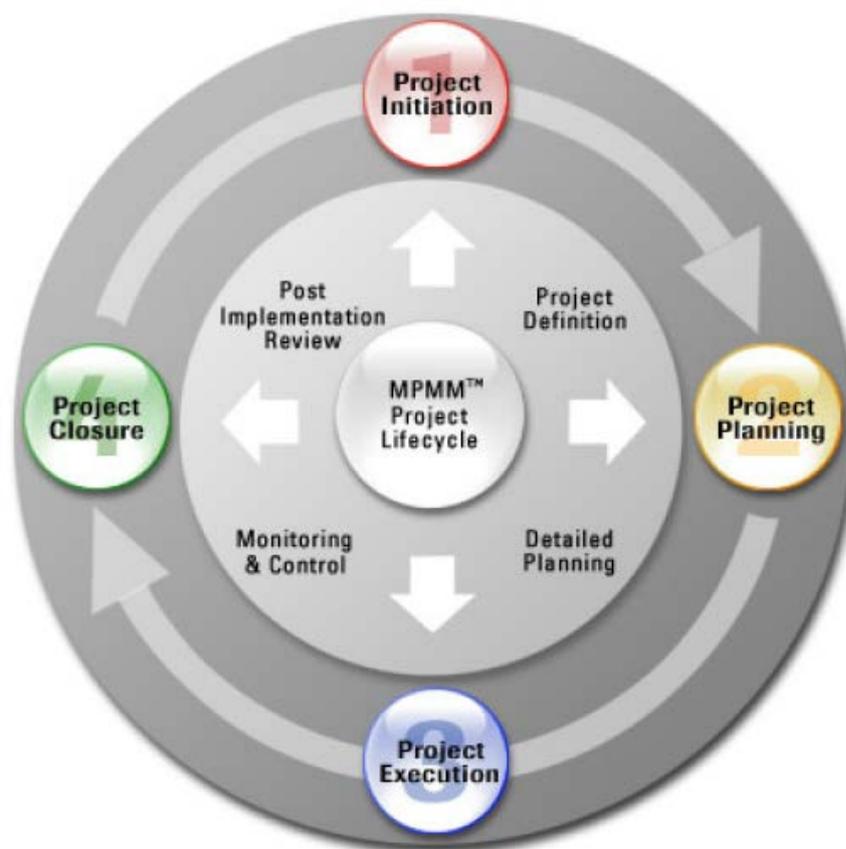
**Project management** is “the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements”. (*A Guild to Project Management Body of Knowledge*, 2000, 6) Its immediate goal is to assure the successful completion of the project. In its practice, this management process is frequently connected with **risk management** due to its complexity and unpredictability of future happenings. In this regard, the project manager, who serves as the intermediate between project board (project sponsor) and project team, often manages the risks of the project. (De Marco, 1997, 81) That means that the project manager should be able to recognize potential risks or resistance in good times, to communicate them (it) and to set up measures which will allow him to intervene when such risks or resistance arise(s). In addition, project managers are more and more challenged with a great deal of social competence.

Typical reasons for project failing are (*Guidelines for Managing Projects*, 2007, 3)

- failure to take into account the needs and influences of stakeholder
- failure to communicate and keep the stakeholders informed of developments
- lack of attention to the impact of project work on the normal business of the organization
- producing expensive “Gold plated” solutions when simple workable products would suffice
- failure to identify and deal with the many risks that can affect achievement of project objectives
- insufficient attention to planning, monitoring and control of the work of the project

## 2. Project Management Activities in the Project Cycle

The traditional project cycle includes project initiation, project planning, project execution and project closure.



*Figure 1 Project Cycle (Project Management Guidebook, 2003, 5)*

**1. Project Initiation** is often regarded as the project start-up. It is the very important preparation stage of project work. In this phase, the problems or

case studies are defined and analysed. A project initiative is then put forward for consideration. After a feasibility study, if the higher management or the responsible party decides for setting up a project to tackle the problems or test the solutions, project work will start. In this case, a project manager will be officially appointed.

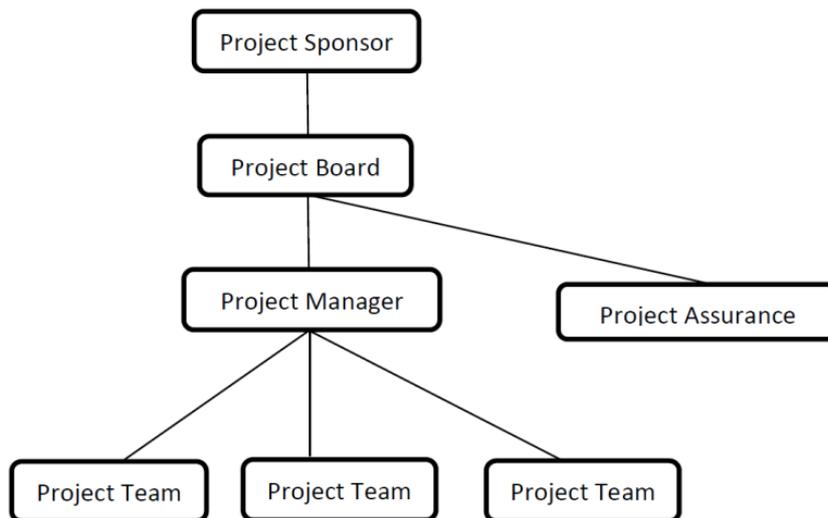
The project initiative is usually drafted by the party who raises or is familiar with the field problems and challenges. This person is normally appointed as the project manager or deeply involved in the project management. The project initiative will usually be further revised and finalised as project outline for documentation.

At the end of the first phase, the project outline will be agreed by all the parties involved. The project manager begins to recruit his team. A detailed phase of planning follows.

The project outline usually includes various <b>checkpoints</b> shown in the left column.	▪ reason for the project
	▪ desired benefits
	▪ objectives
	▪ scope
	▪ potential constraints
	▪ known risks if any
	▪ stakeholders
	▪ deliverables
	▪ estimated time
	▪ estimated resources

*Table 1 Checkpoints for Project Outline (Guidelines for Managing Projects, 2007, 9)*

Before the daily project work takes place, the **project organisation** needs to be clarified. The responsibilities and accountabilities need to be documented. The project manager is responsible for the management. However, the questions such as to whom he should report to and if there is a need for a project assurance body, need to be explicated as well. A common project organization comprises project sponsor, project board, project manager and project team. Subjected to the complexity of the project, the project assurance body such as quality manager or quality auditor might also be added to the project organization.



*Figure 2 Project Organization*

Project Sponsor is the owner of a project. He is paying the project and can be regarded as the customer. Some of its key roles are as follows (*Guidelines for Managing Projects, 2007, 19*)

- “provide leadership and direction to other members of the Project Board and to the Project Manager
- ensure ...the necessary funds and other resources are made available when required
- chair meetings of the Project Board”

Project Board should be composed of project sponsor, the senior user and senior supplier of the project. (*Guidelines for Managing Projects, 2007*)

Its roles include: (*Guidelines for Managing Projects, 2007, 20*)

- “set the direction for the project and approve key milestones
- take decisions as necessary throughout the life of the project
- give the Project Manager the authority to lead the project on a day to day basis”

Project Assurance is necessary in order to “assess the status of the project and hence gain assurance that it is properly organised, planned and controlled.” (*Guidelines for Managing Projects, 2007, 20*)

**2. Project Planning** is the phase of detailed planning. The project manager needs to fulfil the tasks of recruiting the right people, outline the activities and timeframe. In addition, financial plan and resource distribution need to be specified.

<b>Checkpoints</b> for the project planning	▪ define accountabilities, roles and responsibilities of each team member
	▪ define deliverables, activities and milestones
	▪ resource plan in detail
	▪ time plan in detail
	▪ identify risks/ constraints
	▪ monitoring and reporting plan
	▪ communication plan
	▪ documentation plan

*Table 2 Checkpoints for Project Planning (Guidelines for Managing Projects, 2007, 28)*

One tool that gives project planning a structure and helps you with it is the Project Action Plan which will be further explained in the next chapter.

**3. Project Execution** is the third phase in the project lifecycle. The main goal at this stage is to implement the planned activities in order to achieve the deliverables within the given time and resource frame.

However, no matter how precisely the project has been planned, in practice, it might take another route. This would not mean the failing of the project. Control at this stage is the one of the most challenging tasks for the project manager in order to manage changes and adjust the project plan accordingly.

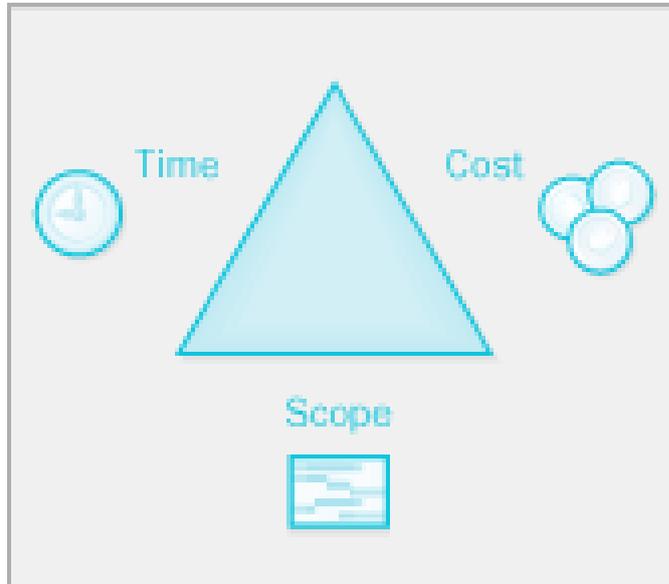
**4. Project Closure** marks formally completion of a project. In this stage, the deliverables will be presented to the stakeholders. A successful project will meet the defined objectives. In general practice, besides the project report to the stakeholders, a project review report will be drafted for the documentation and evaluation of the project. A lessons-learnt workshop might be organised so that the experiences of the project can be communicated among the stakeholders.

During the project management process, the project manager is constantly facing the challenges of balancing the scope<sup>1</sup>, cost and time, which is known as project triangle (see figure 3). These are the three competing constraints affecting the project performance: increased scope typically means increased time and cost, a tight time constraint could mean increased costs and reduced scope, and a tight budget could mean increased time and reduced scope. If

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<sup>1</sup> Chatfield and Johnson (2007) state that “Project scope describes the work required to deliver a product or service with the intended product scope. Product scope describes the intended quality, features and functions of the product.”

the project must be done fast and good, then the cost will rise; vice versa, if the project must be done low-cost and fast, the quality or scope will not be satisfying. This principle is also known as “pick any two” in project management.



*Figure 3 The Project Triangle (Chatfield and Johnson, 2007)*

### 3. Project Action Plan

The Project Action Plan is a tool for planning projects. It lays out the **steps** for implementing a project. It usually includes the planning of:

- Objectives
- Activities
- Resources
- Responsibilities
- Time schedules
- Outcomes

Before we start to plan the project in detail, the purpose and objectives must be clear. **Objectives** of a project answer the question of what you are trying to achieve with the project.

- Why do I start this project?
- What do I want to achieve?

<b>Example:</b> Tracer Study	Objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Collect representative data on university study, first employment and career profile of the graduates</li><li>▪ Analyse the influential factors of higher education to employment</li></ul>
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Once the objectives are clear and well defined you need to plan how to get to the set objectives. The main questions you should answer for the planning are:

- How do I reach the objectives? What are the milestones<sup>2</sup>?
- What do I need to reach these milestones and objectives?
- How do I control the quality of the outcomes?

Also it is crucial to think about the stakeholders and how to involve them, what motivations or resistance they could have towards the project and how to cope with them:

- Who are the stakeholders?
- Who should be involved?
- How to involve them?
- What are the potential risks of each stakeholder?

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<sup>2</sup> Milestones mark the completion of important tasks in project, which are essential for the success of a project.

With these questions in mind, we will start the Project Action Plan step by step which is based on a template matrix, which you will also find on the online learning platform.

### **PAP Example: Tracer Study**

Tracer studies are a useful instrument for quality management and allow higher education institutions to peak into the black box of the whereabouts of their graduates. It can also provide the HEI with information, which indicates the outcome of its education and shows its strengths and weaknesses. Tracer studies can, therefore, be used for evaluation purposes and as guidance for future planning.

To implement an own tracer study, it is recommended to have a team, which is experienced in questionnaire design, masters empirical research methods and is knowledgeable in statistical analysis. In addition, you might also need several (student) assistants for questionnaire dissemination and digitalization. Besides preparing and launching the survey in the field, it is important to think through the follow-up phase after the survey results are available: what is being reported and how? How are the results spread into the faculties and departments? How to encourage actions which are taken from the results? Our following exemplary PAP concentrates only on the conception of the survey leaving the other phases of a tracer study out.

The steps below are not necessarily needed to be followed chronologically, nor are they to be seen the only way to proceed for a well-done tracer study or PAP.

#### **Step 1: Define the objectives.**

Well-defined objectives are very helpful for the detailed project planning. Generally, the objectives should be possibly “specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound”. (Guidelines for *Managing Projects*, 2007, 15) When conducting a tracer study, you might have different objectives:

- Get new **information** and **monitoring**– for example know the first employment and career profile of the graduates, know their whereabouts with the ends to use this information to find challenges and critical points and benchmark. These findings could be then further analysed
- Use the data for **evaluation** purposes – for example evaluate your study programmes with regard to specific topics such as satisfaction with the study programme, achieved competences and their relevance in the job, etc.
- **Analysis of specific topics and research** purposes – for example analyse the relationship between higher education and employment or do

research on students and graduates on specific topics to gain knowledge on how to enhance study programmes and teaching and learning. For example, who are the successful students and why are they more successful than others are?

When preparing your action plan you can include the definition of objectives in the plan in order to discuss and identify them with relevant stakeholders. Nevertheless, you should beforehand decide on your own overall objectives. An objective for Tracer Study which is **not** achievable or measurable could be:

<p><b>Example:</b> Tracer Study</p>	<p>Objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Diagnose the competences of the graduates</li> </ul>
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**Step 2:** Analyse the stakeholders.

The stakeholders are the group of persons who have an interest in the project. By analysing the stakeholders, two key questions should be asked:

- What are their interests in the project?
- How important are they to the project?

The stakeholders for tracer study could be

- University management. The result of the tracer study might provide the higher management with the inputs for adjusting the strategy plan.
- Lecturers might be interested in the learning outcomes of the study programmes.
- Employers might specify the lacking skills of the graduates.
- Graduates are the participants of this survey. They provide the source information.
- Ministry of Education might be interested in the employment quote and career profile of the graduates. This incentive might lead to policy changes in higher education.

For your action plan, you also need to consider when to involve each stakeholder and if you need them to cooperate and deliver certain outputs or outcomes for the project.

The challenges in involving the stakeholders into the project could be:

- Some of the stakeholders are reluctant to the objectives of your project. Therefore, they might only passively involve themselves in the project.

- Some of the stakeholders might reject their involvement because of time restrictions or their daily work-load.
- There might be conflicts among the stakeholders as some might have opposite views and opinions over the others.

All this possible challenges and risks should be thought ahead; strategies should be developed to avoid them in case such situations appear.

**Step 3:** Define the survey population.

Graduates are the target group of a tracer study in higher education. However, you still need to determine who you will want to include to the “graduates group” in order to gain answers to your questions and to reach your objectives:

- Do I send the survey to the graduates cohort of last year or the last three or ... years? Here you will need to consider your objectives and decide who will be able to answer your questions accordingly. Usually you will want to know how the graduates managed their job search and what job they currently are in etc., so it would not make sense to ask graduates directly after their graduation but to select those who are out of your institution since minimum half a year or more (depending on the job-market).
- Do I send the survey to all the graduates of the cohorts I have chosen or will I only select a sample? To receive enough feedback and to be able to have information on study programme level you would usually opt for a full population survey, meaning to invite all the graduates of the chosen graduation years. For budgetary reasons, or if this should not be necessary to answer your question, you could also invite a specific sample only.

**Step 4:** Clarify the budget.

The budget for conducting a tracer study could be from external funding or included in the university’s annual budget plan. The possible costs for the project could be, in addition to the staff costs, software for design the survey and analysing the data, material costs such as printing and mailing for paper-based survey and the reporting.

**Step 5:** Set the timeframe.

Generally it takes 12 to 18 months for completing a tracer study if you include the analysis and follow-up phase. But this can vary very much depending on your objectives and resources available.

**Step 6:** Describe the milestones and tasks.

There will be **several key tasks** in a project that will lead you to milestones. Every milestone is supported by a set of tasks. Each task can be accomplished by various activities. In the tracer study, for example:

- Key Task A: Conception of a survey
  - Task 1: Conception
  - ✓ Activities: Define the objectives and themes of the survey
  - ✓ Activities: set the survey methods
  - ✓ Activities...
  - Task 2...
- Key Task B: Process of data collection
- ...

For tracer study for instance, task A is conception of a survey. Under this task, there is a series of subtasks. In order to complete task A, all the subtasks should be accomplished successfully. When all the subtasks are done, we could say, milestone A has been achieved. The first stage comes to an end. We move further to task B, that is the process of data collection.

**Step 7:** Plan the output/outcomes.

The outputs or outcomes are the items of a project that must be delivered for the successful completion. Think about what should be achieved after each task or milestone so that you can then check if you actually reached it. It will also help you to define the tasks in a more specific manner and to make the tasks and expected output/outcomes transparent to the project team and stakeholders.

**Step 8:** Identify the risks/constraints.

Generally you should consider if there could be any stakeholders who have no interest in the project or even who are against it. Further, explore any potential risks of your project (for example from literature) and decide on measures you can take against it.

Potential risks for tracer study could be:

- Can I receive the contact information of the graduates and how? How up-to-date is this information?
- Are there any data-protection challenges?
- How can I motivate the graduates to attend the survey?
- What should I do if the response rate is very low?
- How to design the survey in order to make it easy to understand for the participants and to minimise their workload for completing the survey?

**Step 9:** Project Summary and Outline

Before you start the detailed action plan, it is recommended to lay down a project outline and summary. If not already available, the outline can partially be the written documentation of the steps we just went through. The summary should contain all basic information on the project. You can see an example summary for a tracer study on page 12.

#### **Step 10: Write the PAP**

Once you have finished defining the basic outline and your summary, you can start writing your Project Action Plan. Preparing the PAP will help you to think through the steps you need to accomplish for your successful project. With every task you add in the PAP you might find a task, stakeholder or resources etc. you might not have thought of before and which could mean a change to your outline. This is normal and actually one of the reasons why to write such a PAP.

By completing the PAP template that you will find on the online learning platform you will notice that you might not have an answer to all the questions or that sometimes one of the columns does not make sense to fill it out. In that case you should try to find the answer or if necessary leave it blank. As a general rule you should not be afraid of revising and discussing the PAP with colleagues and team-members who might have additional information and know what to consider for a certain task etc.

Once you are done with writing the PAP you can concentrate on the implementation of the PAP. The PAP is not a fix plan you need to stick to word-by-word, new circumstances can always require a change, be it the extension of the timeframe, a new task or leaving out a task. Hence, it is normal that you revise your PAP continuously during the implementation process. It is important though that any changes are transparently communicated in case others are involved and that there are enough reasons and arguments to do such changes.

The following is an example of how a PAP of a tracer study could look like. As you see in the summary, we only included the first milestone. Further milestones could be added for your project as needed.

### Project Action Plan (Example)<sup>3</sup>

#### My Name, Position, University, and Country

Title of my Project	Tracer Study
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Collect representative data on university study, first employment and career profile of the graduates</li><li>▪ Analyse the influential factors of higher education to employment</li></ul>
Time	14 Months
Central Responsible Body	Centre for Quality Development and Assurance
Project-Team	XXX (statistician), XXX (evaluation expert),..
Stakeholders:	Divided in active (who need to deliver outputs/outcomes in order for the project to succeed) and passive (who are interested in the output/outcome of the project).
Budget	University budget plan
Milestones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Conception</li><li>▪ Data collection</li><li>▪ Data analysis and report</li></ul>
Potential Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ low response rate to tracer study by graduates</li><li>▪ Invalid contact information</li><li>▪ Underestimating the workload</li></ul>

<sup>3</sup> There are various PAP templates. What we have chosen here is only one kind of them. In practice, you could choose the template which better suits for your project.

<b>Task A: Conception of a Survey for Tracer Study</b>	<b>What are the key activities?</b>	<b>Who is involved?</b>	<b>How long will it take?</b>	<b>What are the resources needed?</b>	<b>What are the outputs/outcomes?</b>	<b>How to measure the output/outcomes?</b>	<b>What is my role?</b>
Task 1: Conception	<p>Define the objectives and themes of the survey</p> <p>Set the survey methods (online survey or paper-based survey)</p> <p>Define the target graduates</p>	<p>Vice Rector for Academic Affairs</p> <p>Project team</p> <p>Stakeholders</p>	2 Months	-	Minutes	<p>Clear objectives which are in line with stakeholders</p> <p>Definition of survey topics and questions that it should answer</p>	<p>Project Manager:</p> <p>Moderate the discussion and objective finding process</p> <p>Make proposals for objectives and methodologies</p>
Task 2: Design the survey including layout and contents	<p>Analyse relevant literature and research (incl. decision if to use certain existing models and/or questions or questionnaires where applicable)</p> <p>Clarify software and hardware requirements (which software shall we use to design the survey; how shall we</p>	<p>Project team</p> <p>Stakeholders</p> <p>Technical support for software and hardware</p>	4 Months	Survey software	<p>Result Report of literature review</p> <p>Survey draft</p>	<p>Methodologically proof survey draft according to objectives and needs</p> <p>Accepted survey draft by all relevant stakeholders, ready to dispatch.</p>	<p>Project Manager:</p> <p>Distribute tasks and help with literature research.</p>

	<p>analyse the survey result later)</p> <p>Design the survey (questions and layout)</p> <p>Discuss draft with relevant stakeholders</p>						
<p>Task 3:</p> <p>Test the survey</p>	<p>Review the survey</p> <p>Test the survey (incl. pre-test)</p>	<p>Project team</p> <p>A group of graduates who are invited for the pre- test</p>	<p>1 Month</p>		<p>Finalized survey</p>	<p>Tested survey</p>	<p>Project Manager:</p> <p>Find graduates group.</p>
<p>Task 4:</p> <p>Prepare for dispatch</p>	<p>Check and clarify private data protection rules</p> <p>Acquire the addresses (mailing address or email address)</p> <p>Check and update the addresses</p> <p>Prepare invitation letter</p> <p>Prepare for sending out</p>	<p>Project team</p> <p>University administration</p> <p>Local residents' registry office (for postal addresses)</p> <p>Student assistants</p>	<p>3 Months (parallel to other tasks)</p>	<p>Budget for printing surveys and mailing materials (envelop, etc.)</p>	<p>Mailing list</p> <p>Paper-based survey</p>	<p>Contact addresses of target graduates with name and gender</p>	<p>Project Manager:</p> <p>Obtain addresses and prepare invitation letter to be signed by VP.</p>
<p><b>Milestone A: Completion of survey design and test; ready for dissemination</b></p>							

...next task/milestone...

#### **4. List of Literature**

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