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The PROJECT Acronym Framework: A Simplified Conceptual Approach to Supporting Learner Understanding of Similarities in Project Definitions Across International Project Management Bodies

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Abstract

The concept of a “project” is fundamental to Project Management education and practice; however, its definition varies across major international standards and has evolved over time. These variations may create conceptual ambiguity for learners and early-stage professionals.

This paper presents a conceptual synthesis of project definitions from widely recognized bodies, including the Project Management Institute, AXELOS, International Organization for Standardization, International Project Management Association, and Association for Project Management, as well as Agile approaches and Kerzner.

A comparative and temporal analysis is conducted to identify stable conceptual elements across definitions. These elements are synthesized into a structured mnemonic framework using the word PROJECT (Purpose-driven, Results-oriented, On constraints, Joint skills effort, Endeavor, Controlled, Temporary).

A conceptual similarity method is applied to evaluate alignment between the PROJECT framework and established definitions. The results show consistent conceptual overlap across all bodies, supporting the view that differences represent perspectives rather than contradictions.

The study is conceptual and designed to support learner understanding of foundational project management concepts.

Introduction

Project Management is widely taught through established methodologies such as those from the Project Management Institute, AXELOS, and International Organization for Standardization, among others. While these frameworks are highly valuable, learners may experience confusion due to differences in how each body defines a “project” [1-3].

These differences can lead to the assumption that definitions conflict, when in fact they represent different interpretations of the same underlying concept.

This paper addresses this challenge by introducing a simplified conceptual framework—the PROJECT acronym—to help learners understand the similarities across project definitions rather than focusing on their differences. The goal is to support learners in building a unified mental model of what a project fundamentally is before engaging with specific methodologies.

Literature Review

Project Definitions Across Major Standards (Paraphrased)

The following definitions are interpreted and summarized from major standards and sources [1-7] (Table 1).

Table 1: Interpreted Definitions.

Body	Definition (Interpretation)
Project Management Institute	A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result, increasingly focused on value delivery.
AXELOS	A temporary organization created to deliver defined outputs based on a business justification.
International Organization for Standardization	A temporary endeavor undertaken to achieve objectives within constraints such as time, cost, and scope.
International Project Management Association	A goal-oriented, time-limited undertaking requiring coordinated competencies.
Association for Project Management	A unique temporary activity designed to deliver change and achieve objectives.
Agile approaches	Iterative delivery focused on continuous value and adaptability.
Kerzner	Structured effort involving planning, organizing, and controlling resources to achieve objectives.

Temporal Evolution of Project Definitions

Project definitions have evolved over time in emphasis rather than in core meaning:

- a) **Project Management Institute:** Shift from outputs to value and outcomes
- b) **AXELOS:** Shift toward governance and business justification
- c) **International Organization for Standardization:** Shift toward systems and constraints integration
- d) **Agile approaches:** Shift toward adaptability and continuous delivery
- e) **Kerzner:** Shift toward integrated planning and control systems

Despite these shifts, core elements remain stable, including temporariness, objectives, constraints, and coordinated effort [1-3,6,7].

Key Insight

All definitions describe the same underlying conceptual structure of a project, though expressed through different methodological perspectives.

Methodology

Conceptual Synthesis

A qualitative synthesis approach was used to identify recurring elements across definitions. These were grouped into seven components forming the PROJECT framework:

- a) Purpose-driven
- b) Results-oriented
- c) On constraints
- d) Joint skills effort
- e) Endeavor
- f) Controlled
- g) Temporary

Similarity Model

A structured scoring model was applied (Table 2):

Table 2: Structured scoring model.

Score	Meaning
1.0	Explicit presence
0.5	Implicit presence
0.0	Not present

Similarity was calculated as:

$$Similarity(\%) = \left(\sum \text{component scores} / 7 \right) \times 100$$

This simple conceptual similarity index was developed for this study. Each project definition was evaluated against seven conceptual components derived from the PROJECT framework. Scores were aggregated and normalized to produce a percentage similarity score. This approach is adapted from standard index construction techniques used in conceptual content analysis and educational measurement [8]. All components were equally weighted to maintain conceptual neutrality across different definitions.

The PROJECT Framework

Acronym Structure

- a) P – Purpose-driven
- b) R – Results-oriented
- c) O – On constraints (time, cost, scope)
- d) J – Joint skills effort
- e) E – Endeavor
- f) C – Controlled
- g) T – Temporary

Simplified Interpretation

- a) Purpose-driven → clear objective
- b) Results-oriented → defined outcome
- c) On constraints → operates within limits
- d) Joint skills effort → requires collaboration
- e) Endeavor → structured activity
- f) Controlled → managed and governed
- g) Temporary → defined lifecycle

A simplified illustration of the framework is presented in Figure 1, followed by a more detailed representation in Figure 2.

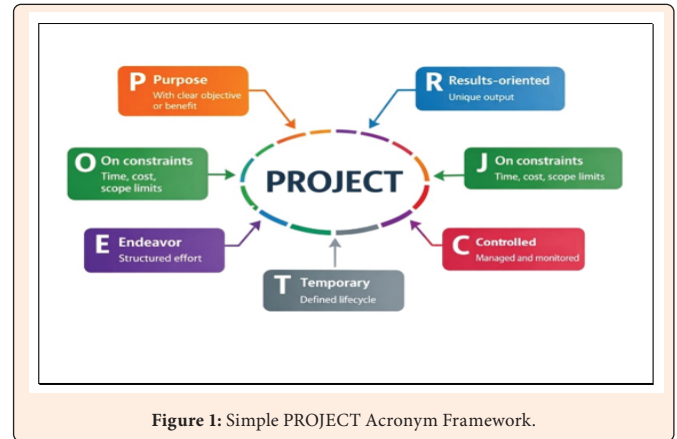


Figure 1: Simple PROJECT Acronym Framework.

Definition

A PROJECT is a purpose-driven endeavor that delivers results, operates on constraints, requires joint skills effort, is controlled, and is temporary.

Similarity Analysis (Across Standards)

Table 3: Similarity Analysis.

Body	Similarity %
PMI	43%
PRINCE2	57%
ISO	57%
Agile	57%
Kerzner	57%
IPMA	36%
APM	36%

Interpretation

The analysis shows consistent conceptual overlap across all major project management bodies. This indicates that differences lie in emphasis rather than in fundamental definition. This reinforces the view that project management standards are complementary rather than in conflict with each other.

Pedagogical Implications

The PROJECT framework can be used as a teaching tool to improve learner understanding of project management concepts.

Based on experiential learning theory, learners can be encouraged to actively construct understanding through reflection and comparison [9]. Specifically, learners can:

- a) Construct their own definitions
- b) Compare interpretations across methodologies
- c) Identify shared elements
- d) Develop a unified mental model

This approach aligns with constructivist learning principles, where understanding is developed through active engagement rather than passive memorization.

Discussion

Although project management standards differ in terminology and emphasis, they consistently describe a stable set of core characteristics. The PROJECT framework provides a simplified conceptual bridge that helps learners understand these similarities without becoming overwhelmed by methodological differences. This suggests that differences among standards reflect varying perspectives and priorities rather than fundamentally different interpretations of what constitutes a project.

Limitations

This study is conceptual and does not include empirical validation. The similarity scoring method involves interpretive judgment, particularly in identifying implicit relationships.

Conclusion

The final PROJECT acronym framework (Figure 2) represents the outcome of this study and serves as a simplified conceptual tool for supporting learner understanding of similarities in project definitions across international project management bodies.

The framework helps unify diverse interpretations into a single conceptual model, supporting foundational learning before engagement with specific methodologies.

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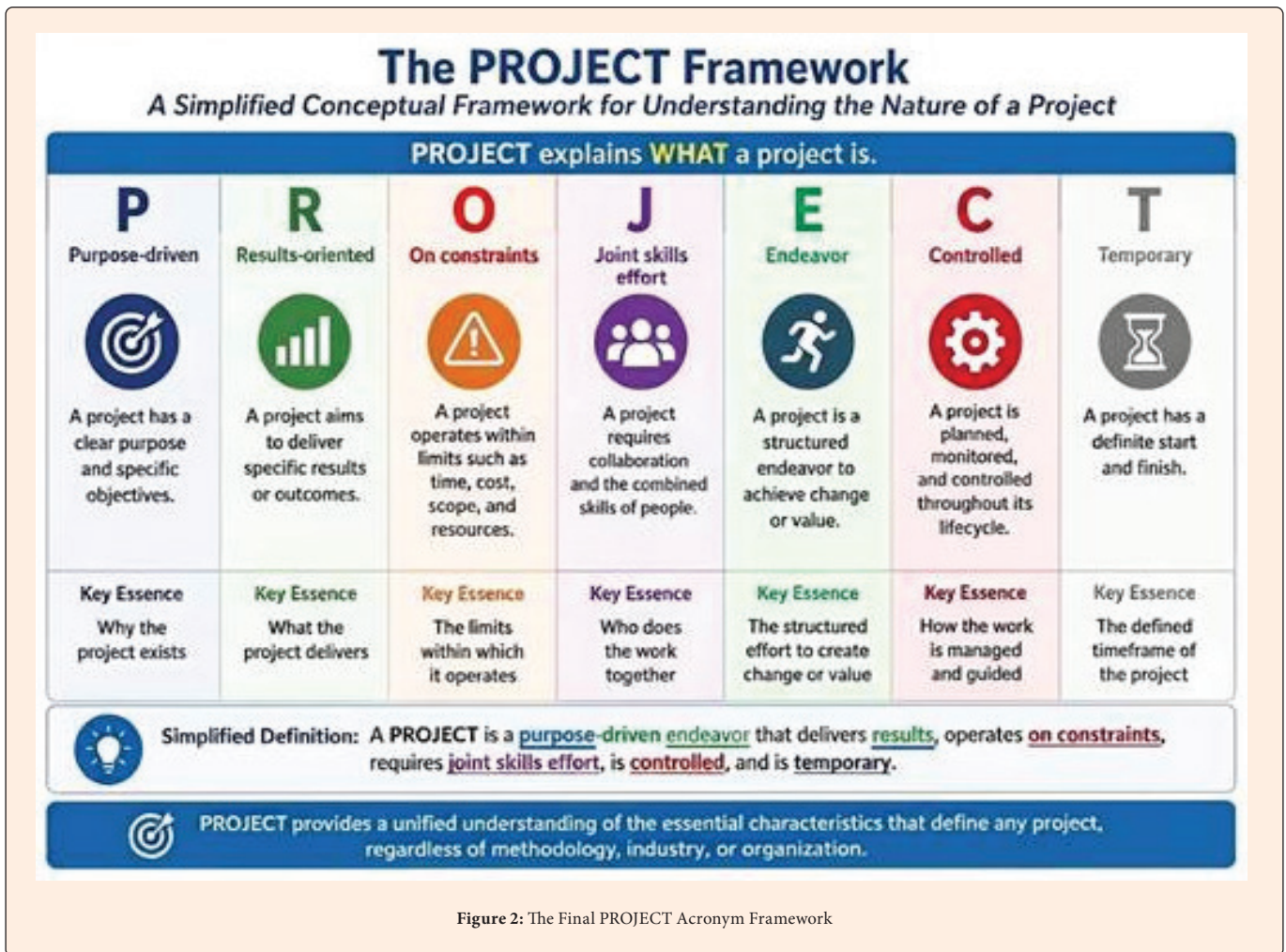


Figure 2: The Final PROJECT Acronym Framework