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# Teachers Education Students and Virtual Mobility Formats – Insights from a Student Survey on the Flexibilization of Internationalization

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## Abstract

The project “Partners in Flex-Mobility” at Europa-Universität Flensburg in Germany aims to sustainably increase internationalization and foreign mobility in teacher education programs through integration and by enhancing the flexibility of foreign mobility options. To this end, we designed and evaluated different virtual and hybrid formats and carried out a quantitative study on the factors identified by educational science students as hindering their mobility abroad. Analysis of selected data on virtual mobility in general, and on specific virtual mobility formats, reveals that teacher education students are only mildly interested in doing a study-related mobility abroad, and that those who are not interested in going abroad show more interest in virtual mobility than those who are. Despite the challenges in engaging students with digital formats, the project continues to include them as part of the university’s mobility portfolio. This approach allows flexible mobility pathways for all students, especially for those who might not otherwise take any further steps to deepen their international awareness and engagement.

Keywords: internationalization of teacher education, virtual mobility, mobility formats, quantitative study, survey

## Outline

1. The Project “Partners in Flex-Mobility”
2. Offering and Evaluating Hybrid and Virtual Formats
3. Study on Mobility Formats
4. Conclusion and Perspectives on the Future Use of Virtual Formats

## 1 The Project “Partners in Flex-Mobility”

In recent years, Europa-Universität Flensburg (EUF) in Germany has increasingly internationalized its teacher education program. Among other measures, it introduced a fifth-semester mobility window in the B. A. program, adopted internationally compati-

ble semester times, professionalized its recognition processes, and refined its communication strategies to highlight the professional relevance of study/internship abroad. In 2017, EUF was awarded the “bologna hub” by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for its innovative approaches and exemplary mobility promotion models. These measures have boosted student mobility at EUF and increased its use of internationally oriented class content and supervision models. Nevertheless, mobility among teacher education students continues to lag behind that of other degree programs – a trend, as studies by i. a. Ahlgrimm et al. (2019), Kercher/Schifferings (2019) and Schön/Sliwka (2014), and others have shown, that appears to extend to teacher education programs across Germany. Researchers on the topic (Ahlgrimm et al., 2019; Barsch & Dziak-Mahler, 2015; Kercher & Schifferings, 2019; Lörz, Netz, & Quast, 2016; Schön & Sliwka, 2014), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD, 2019) and first-hand accounts from students who have gone abroad point to various possible reasons for this trend, including family or personal circumstances, language barriers, planning and financial uncertainties, or lack of recognition when entering the preparatory service. In short, teacher education students appear to face unique challenges when it comes to balancing their specific life situations with study abroad.

In response to these problems, the “Partners in Flex-Mobility” project, funded by the DAAD and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under the Lehramt International funding program (see Bloch, 2024, in this anthology), aims to sustainably enhance internationalization and increase foreign mobility in teacher education programs. To achieve this, the project seeks to further integrate and increase the flexibility of foreign mobility formats at EUF. The project pursues the following key objectives:

1. To increase international mobility in the teaching profession by establishing sustainable structures, processes, and initiatives tailored to the interests and needs of students, partner universities, schools, and EUF employees
2. To integrate flexible mobility paths in degree programs, including semesters abroad and innovative combinations of short-term mobility and internationalization at home (in accordance with Nilsson’s original definition, 2003, p. 31), termed “flex-mobility”
3. To adapt and expand information, advice, and support services to students, lecturers, and service staff.

A central aspect of the project is the active participation of students, alongside partner universities, school, and internal stakeholders, as ‘partners in mobility’. Students are instrumental in identifying and providing feedback on the obstacles to their international mobility and their specific mobility needs, with a primary emphasis on B.A. students.

## 2 Offering and Evaluating Hybrid and Virtual Formats

The integration of flexible mobility paths in teacher education programs includes, besides semesters abroad, innovative combinations of short-term mobility and internationalization at home. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was initially forced to rely exclusively on virtual formats. However, students continued to request video conference participation options even after in-person formats had become possible, and the project accommodated this demand. To maximize attendance, some events were also offered in hybrid form. The following sections present and evaluate various virtual and hybrid formats for internationalizing teacher education.

### 2.1 Virtual and Hybrid Formats

#### 2.1.1 Winter school

In Fall Semester 2020/2021, a one-day digital winter school focused on *Intercultural Education in a Nutshell* was organized. The target group were teacher education students, school teachers, and university staff. The winter school aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Exchange a range of different perspectives on education
- Raise awareness of intercultural topics in education
- Train critical thinking skills
- Develop intercultural empathy.

Lecturers from EUF and the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) gave insights into various aspects of Dutch, German, and Finnish school education and the options for international school internships. Additionally, staff from different German universities involved in *Lehramt.International* (Teaching. International) projects met for a think tank to develop a Europe Module/European Certificate for teacher education. The winter school successfully engaged approximately 40 participants from Europe and Africa.

#### 2.1.2 Workshops

Since 2020, “Partners in Flex-Mobility” has offered EUF teacher education students online and, subsequently, hybrid workshops lasting two to four hours and refined its communication strategies to highlight the professional relevance of study/internship abroad. Taught by peer students and project staff from EUF, schoolteachers from Germany, and university lecturers from several different countries, the workshops include first-hand accounts of student experiences abroad under different mobility formats. During such sessions, the presenting students answered questions from their peers about how to plan, fund, and execute a stay abroad and helped alleviate worries by engaging in informal discussion with other students about financing and planning issues. Overall, the workshops aimed to familiarize students with different physical mobility formats and the added value of different mobility formats.

In other workshops, the students gained insight into different education systems, education policies and intercultural education in matters such as lifelong learning, dig-

italization, minority education, and multilingualism, in order to whet their appetite for stays abroad and international experiences in teacher education.

To further prepare them for study or an internship abroad, students also received introductory workshops on intercultural communication by university staff. These workshops aimed to give a very condensed overview of intercultural communication processes, covering the structural features of culture, values, and norms, and the phenomenon of culture shock. The broader goal was to stimulate reflection processes that students could continue to develop during their time abroad.

Together with the EUF's in-service training facility, internal and external university staff also offered workshops in which teacher education students could train with schoolteachers on language-sensitive teaching and plural approaches to foreign language teaching. These sessions provided ample opportunities for students to interact with teachers, offering insights into everyday teaching conditions in schools.

Finally, in-service schoolteachers from Germany and Hungary also offered workshops on everyday school life shaped by migration and interculturality. In these sessions, the teachers shared their experiences, discussed the problems posed by their pupils' increasing cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, and explored potential solutions, approaches, and coping strategies for authentic conflict situations. The aim was to demonstrate to the students the significance of their own intercultural experiences for their later professional roles. However, it was noted that many of these workshops failed to attract high levels of participation.

### 2.1.3 Lunchtime Lectures

During the spring semesters of 2021 and 2022, EUF organized a series of digital lunchtime lectures entitled *Current Challenges in Internationalising Teacher Training and Digitalisation of Education* respectively. The lecture series sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To raise awareness among students and lecturers on different topics within the internationalization of teacher education
- To contribute to teacher education students' internationalization by making them and university staff interested in different educational systems and views
- To connect staff and students across the universities
- To foster the exchange of ideas with scholars in different fields and with fellows
- To sharpen critical thinking, and
- To develop intercultural empathy.

Lecturers and/or students from all five project partner universities participated in 12 lectures per semester. Each lecture consisted of a 15-minute presentation followed by a 15-minute discussion in the first year, a 30-minute discussion in the second year, in response to audience requests for more time to discuss and connect with each other. Whereas in 2021 only lecturers and administrative staff gave talks, in 2022 also students contributed. We encouraged them to realize themselves as co-designers of digital education within the internationalization of teacher education. The lectures were moderated in turn by the participants to facilitate networking.

In 2021, the lunchtime lectures attracted between seven to thirty-five attendees per session. Although we had expected attendance rates in 2022 to rise due to a heightened focus on student participation, attendance actually dropped to between one and seven that year. This prompted us to change the lectures to a hybrid format, allowing both online participation and in-person on the EUF campus. Yet attendance rates still did not increase, suggesting that the low turnout was not due to the lectures' digital format.

### 2.1.4 International Seminar

Since 2021, Europa-Universität Flensburg and University College South Denmark have organized a joint international seminar every spring semester. Taught in English, the seminar engages several lecturers and 40 to 60 students from both institutions working in international teams. It is organised a bit differently every year, with the student projects, reports and films created during the seminar made available to all participants via the Padlet digital platform.

The 2021 seminar was planned as an in-person event, but was shifted to an online project week on short notice due to the pandemic. The topic *“The World Into the School – The School Into the World”* focused on the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly on SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). In 2022, the seminar dealt with minority pedagogy, cultural identity, discrimination and intercultural pedagogy. In 2023, the seminar topic was “Minorities as ‘Windows to the World’: Education and Diversity / Minderheiten als ‘Fenster zur Welt’: Pädagogik im Zeichen der Vielfalt / Mindretal som ‘vinduer til verden’: Pædagogik i mangfoldighedens tegn”, covering philosophical, historical, social science, (language) pedagogical and didactic aspects of the selected topic. To promote multilingualism, classes were held in English, Danish, and German. Blended learning and flipped classroom methods prepared students for the attendance week, which included joint excursions to four different cities in the border region. The seminar aimed to provide a broad knowledge of the key factors underlying inclusive and culturally sensitive teaching in schools, preparing students to teach in (linguistically and culturally) heterogeneous contexts.

Starting in 2025, the international seminar is planned to take place as a yearly blended intensive program involving all project partners – Europa-Universität Flensburg in Germany, University College South Denmark in Denmark, Linköping University in Sweden, Jyväskylä University in Finland and Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary.

## 2.2 Evaluation

Despite its short preparation time, the winter school succeeded in reaching out to a significant number of participants. A supporting factor was certainly the pandemic situation, which limited mobility opportunities. On the other hand, the pandemic also made it difficult to actively engage staff from all project partner universities, as many were fully absorbed by the high demands of digital teaching.

Many workshops suffered from low attendance, which did not seem to only depend on the time slots, although evening workshops were less popular. Some topics

were not relevant for those not interested in mobility; in addition, some digital workshops were not as interactive as they probably would have been had they been held in person. This is especially true for the workshops on intercultural competence, which typically involve interactional activities like body positioning, avoiding/searching for eye contact, and group formation. Supporting factors include the relevance of the specific topics, the mandatory nature of some workshops, and the opportunity offered by other workshops to earn credits towards future in-service teacher training. Advancements in technology over time have made it easier to bridge the distance between participants in digital learning formats.

The lunchtime lecture series successfully engaged student and staff participants from all partner universities, as nobody had to travel. The cooperation between different universities expanded the range of topics, attracted more speakers, and broadened the audience, thereby potentially expanding the international network. In theory, greater student involvement could have been achieved by soliciting more student contributions; however, the timing of the lectures may still have deterred those who did not take the invitation to have lunch during the talks literally, so that attending such a lecture may have felt more like sacrificing one's lunch break. Due to the wide range of topics covered, the audience varied from lecture to lecture.

The international seminar consistently attracted a stable number of participants, most likely because it is a for-credit, compulsory elective module at both universities.

### 3 Study on Mobility Formats

As described above, the project carried out virtual and hybrid formats for teacher education students for the purpose of internationalizing their studies through flexible mobility pathways. In addition, a study was conducted on hindrances to mobility with the aim of designing tailor-made mobility formats. The following section reports on selected aspects of virtual forms of mobility from this survey.

#### 3.1 Objectives and Approach

The study aimed to identify the students' perceived barriers to international physical mobility, as well as their preferred internationalization formats and ways of communication. This analysis and identification of the expectations, conditions and needs of teacher education students serve as a basis for the further development of mobility formats. Flexible mobility paths within the student journey, ensuring foreign course recognition, shall be modelled and modularized. The data shall also allow to adapt and expand information and advisory services, and develop a target group-oriented communication strategy.

As "partners in mobility", the students participated in a quantitative study on their perceived obstacles to going abroad. Between Fall Semester 2020/21 and Fall Semester 2022/23, undergraduate students in EUF's BA in Educational Science program participated in annual online surveys. The survey questionnaire asked students about their

- Socio-demographic background
- Education, including languages learned in various contexts
- Choice of teacher education program and university, and the factors underlying this choice (university reputation, proximity to home, – possibility of undertaking a stay abroad within the degree program, etc.)
- Experiences abroad during and after school, including the types of activity undertaken and satisfaction levels
- Desired international interactions and exchanges within the teacher education program (current interest in studying abroad, interest in specific types of international encounter/virtual mobility and learning opportunities, etc.)
- Opinion on temporary stays abroad as a student, and the possible obstacles to this (agreement with given reasons for not currently considering a stay abroad, general views on temporary stays abroad as a student)
- Factors that would most likely increase the student's willingness to complete a study-related stay abroad
- Preferred types of collaboration with the "Partners in Flex-Mobility" project, such as workshops and training opportunities on topics such as intercultural communication, diversity in schools, and multilingual education, including preferred channels of communication.

The questionnaire contains approximately 430 items.

In the first year of the study, only first- and second-year students were surveyed. Although the aim was for the same students to complete the questionnaire three years in a row, this could not be reliably verified in practice. To boost the number of participants, all undergraduate students in the bachelor's degree program in Educational Science at EUF were asked to fill in the questionnaire during the second and third years of the study. As a result, the study was not strictly longitudinal, but can be considered a cross-sectional survey.

Written surveys are particularly suitable for evaluation studies (cf. Zydatiś, 2012, p. 116), as they eliminate interviewer influence (cf. Diekmann, 2004, p. 439) and allow for standardized (cf. Bortz & Döring, 2006, p. 237) and comparable data collection (cf. Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 94). Due to their anonymity, such surveys are also expected to yield more honest and thoughtful (but possibly also more superficial) responses than oral surveys (cf. Bortz & Döring, 2006, p. 237; Riemer & Settinieri, 2010, p. 773). When a written survey takes the form of a questionnaire, a larger amount of data can be collected in a manageable way (cf. Riemer, 2016, p. 157).

In addition to multiple-choice answers, the survey collected data on experiences and attitudes using end-point Likert scales with five scale points. While five to nine scale points is generally recommended, it should be noted that more scale points can lead to less differentiated answers. The individual points were verbalized in each case. In principle, data obtained using Likert scales are not interval-scaled due to the lack of equal spacing between points (Riemer, 2016, p. 159).



The analysis of the collected data is quantitative. The evaluation of closed questions typically does not require any further categorization, and quantification takes place at the nominal, ordinal, or interval scale level.

### 3.2 Data analysis

In the first year of the survey, 505 students participated (male: 19 % ( $n = 96$ ), female: 79.4.2 % ( $n = 401$ ), diverse: 0.6 % ( $n = 3$ ), no gender indication: 1 % ( $n = 5$ )). The mean for age at baseline was 20.54 years, the median age 20 ( $sd = 3.266$ ). The age range was 17–21 years.

From the second year on, when all Educational Science undergraduates were included, participation increased to 918 students in the second survey (male: 14.9 % ( $n = 137$ ), female: 83.4 % ( $n = 766$ ), diverse: 0.9 % ( $n = 6$ ), no gender indication: 0.8 % ( $n = 7$ )). The mean age at baseline was 20.64 years and the median age remained 20 ( $sd = 2.928$ ). The age range expanded to 17–47 years.

In the third year, 747 students responded to the questionnaire (male: 18.2 % ( $n = 136$ ), female: 80.6 % ( $n = 602$ ), diverse: 1.1 % ( $n = 8$ ), no gender indication: 0.1 % ( $n = 1$ )). The mean for age in years at baseline was 20.69 years and the median age was again 20 ( $sd = 3.165$ ), with an age range of 17–41 years.

**Table 1:** Participants by year of study

Year of study	t1	t2	t3
1	57,8 %	33,1 %	31,9 %
2	35,9 %	30,4 %	31,8 %
3	5,8 %	35,1 %	35,3 %

The students were queried about their interest in a study abroad period, and those who responded affirmatively were offered a range of international encounters and exchanges, with different formats, in the teacher education program. If they indicated an interest in virtual mobility, they were then shown eight different formats (see Table 2), which they in turn could tick if they were interested.

In the first survey, 56.63 % ( $n = 286$ ) out of 505 students expressed an interest in a study period abroad, whereas the rest of the cohort did not. Of these, 3.5 % ( $n = 10$ ) were interested in virtual mobility. In the second survey, 55.66 % ( $n = 511$ ) out of 918 students expressed interest in going abroad during their studies; of these, 0.7 % ( $n = 6$ ) were interested in virtual mobility. In the third survey, 50.74 % ( $n = 379$ ) out of 747 students reported their interest in study abroad, 1.85 % ( $n = 7$ ) of whom expressed an interest in virtual mobility. As Table 2 shows, interest for all eight of the virtual format options remained low, ranging from 0 to 2.1 % across all survey dates.

**Table 2:** Student interest in virtual formats

Interest in virtual formats	t1	t2	t3
School internship abroad	2.1 %	0.39 %	1.58 %
International seminar	2.1 %	0.2 %	1.32 %
Courses in other languages	1.75 %	0 %	1.32 %
Virtual excursion	1.75 %	0 %	0.59 %
Study phase abroad	1.75 %	0.39 %	1.1 %
Lectures by scientists at foreign universities	1.4 %	0.2 %	1.1 %
Summer/winter school	1.4 %	0.2 %	0.59 %

All students in the survey were asked what would most likely increase their willingness to undertake a study-related stay abroad. Since this contribution focuses on virtual formats, in the following we only consider the data for the items ‘Virtual mobility formats’ and ‘Prior contact with students at the host university’. For the second item, it can be assumed that such contact would take place virtually.

**Table 3:** Formats that would increase the willingness to undertake a study-related stay abroad

Formats	t1	t2	t3
Virtual mobility formats instead of a stay abroad	7. %	14.81 %	5.4 %
Prior contact with students at the host university	35.2 %	56.88 %	21.8 %

As Table 3 shows, in the first survey, 7.5 % ( $n = 38$ ) of respondents reported their preference for virtual mobility formats over in-person stays abroad, while 35.2 % ( $n = 178$ ) indicated that prior contact with students at the host university would increase their willingness to undertake a study period abroad. In the second survey, the percentage of students interested in taking part in virtual mobility formats rose to 14.81 %, with 56.88 % wanting prior contact with students at the host university. However, student interest in both formats dropped sharply during the third survey, to 5.4 % and 21.8 %, respectively.

When comparing the responses of students who are and are not interested in going abroad, the picture changes. Here, we see that students not interested in going abroad show a stronger preference for virtual mobility formats (t1: 13.1 % vs. 4.5 %, t2: 9.1 % vs. 4.3 %, t3: 8.4 % vs. 2.6 %). Conversely, students who expressed an interest in going abroad expressed a stronger preference to establish contact with students at their host university before their stay (t1: 39.2 % vs. 28 %, t2: 29.2 % vs. 16.9 %, t3: 26.1 % vs. 17.3 %).

### 3.3 Discussion of Findings

Looking at the students' expressed interest in a period of study abroad, the first two surveys show relatively stable figures (with 56.63 % and 55.66 % of students expressing interest in such a prospect, respectively) followed by a decline to 50.74 % in the third survey. This drop could be attributed to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have made students less inclined to seek a major change of location.

Only few students showed an interest in virtual mobility. On average, those interested in studying abroad were not significantly attracted to virtual formats.

When examining the factors that could increase the students' willingness to undertake a study-related stay abroad, we considered the figures for virtual formats and prior contact with students at their host university (assuming this would be conducted virtually). What is noticeable here is that students not interested in mobility showed a greater interest in virtual mobility formats than those who were interested in mobility. In turn, those interested in mobility were more attracted to the idea of establishing prior contact with students at their host institution than those not interested in mobility. This indicates a clear preference for this type of (presumably virtual) prior contact among students who are interested in physical mobility.

## 4 Conclusion and Perspectives on the Future Use of Virtual Formats

In conclusion, it can be stated that only about half of the teacher education students at Europa-Universität Flensburg are interested in mobility. Notably, those who are not interested in mobility show more interest in virtual mobility formats than those who are. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the "Partners in Flex-Mobility" project was forced to offer only virtual formats for the internationalization of teacher education during its initial stages. The number of participants attending these events varied greatly and workshop attendance was particularly low, suggesting that virtual formats in general, and virtual workshops in particular, are not attractive to teacher education students. Most participants registered for the international seminar and winter school in their digital formats, with the former being the most sustainable and eventually institutionalised format. The new Erasmus+ funding for the short-term mobilities in form of blended intensive programs will enable all five project partner institutions to participate in the future. The winter school's success may be attributed to its timing as the very first internationalization opportunity following the onset of the pandemic.

Despite the challenges in engaging students with digital formats, the project continues to include them as part of the university's mobility portfolio. This approach allows flexible mobility pathways for all students, especially for those who might not otherwise take any steps to deepen their own international awareness and engagement. In Fall semester 2023/24, the focus was on health for (future) teachers. In cooperation with Gdansk University, a digital lecture series on healthy teaching and learning of foreign languages was offered, workshops on mental health and study abroad in the

teacher education program as well as on self-management during such stays abroad. In addition, the program is exploring new physical short-term mobility options to offer a comprehensive range of internationalization opportunities for teacher education students.

To learn more about the perceived barriers that hinder teacher education students from going abroad, the survey referenced above will be complemented by qualitative interviews with immobile students in the BA program in Educational Science at EUF. These interviews will enable an in-depth study of those obstacles identified as most significant by students in the quantitative study.

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