



International - Intercultural - Interreligious: Perspectives on Islamic Religious Education from Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey was the title of a 2021 virtual summer school conducted by members of Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), Germany, in the framework of the Lehramt.International project IMPACCT. Students and lecturers from JLU and six partner universities in four countries participated in a threeday program including lectures, workshops, and social activities. Before outlining some aspects of organization, preparation, and realization of the summer school in question, brief introductory remarks comment on summer schools as instruments of internationalization. In the conclusion, the article takes a brief comparative look at a 2023 physical summer school held within the IMPACCT project as well.

Schlagworte: virtual summer school; virtual exchange; Lehramt.International; digital competencies

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# Virtual International Summer School of the IMPACCT Project: Organization, Preparation, and Realization

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## Abstract

*International – Intercultural – Interreligious: Perspectives on Islamic Religious Education from Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey* was the title of a 2021 virtual summer school conducted by members of Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), Germany, in the framework of the Lehramt.International project IMPACCT. Students and lecturers from JLU and six partner universities in four countries participated in a three-day program including lectures, workshops, and social activities. Before outlining some aspects of organization, preparation, and realization of the summer school in question, brief introductory remarks comment on summer schools as instruments of internationalization. In the conclusion, the article takes a brief comparative look at a 2023 physical summer school held within the IMPACCT project as well.

Keywords: virtual summer school, virtual exchange, Lehramt.International, digital competencies

## Outline

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## 1 Summer Schools as Instruments of Internationalization

Summer schools are block courses of up to four weeks offered during summer break to enable intensive work on a specific topic in a usually heterogeneous group (cf. Educational Network on Soil and Plant Ecology Management, 2017, for another example). In terms of internationalization, summer schools are an excellent opportunity to provide a short-term international experience, maybe even an international experience at home (cf. Nilsson, 2003; Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). Because of comparatively low costs and shorter duration, they can be a low-threshold mobility alternative for students who do not have the opportunity to spend a longer period abroad (Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy,

2020, pp. 35–37). In the best case, participation in a summer school motivates students to undertake an extended stay abroad (Kato & Suzuki, 2019) once they discover that they can find their way in an internationalized academic context. Compared to long-term mobilities, that one naturally assumes have stronger effects (DeLoach & Kurt, 2021), short-term mobilities can also have significant effects and educational value. These can include an increase in self-confidence and openness to collaboration with people from other cultural backgrounds as well as a reflection on and questioning of own cultural preconceptions, which in turn might lead to a rise of global awareness (Willard-Holt, 2001; Carley & Tudor, 2010; Kurt & Olitsky, 2013; Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, 2020, pp. 39–50; Hudson & Luke 2021, pp. 64–85). As is the case in any learning scenario, preparation, accompanying reflection, and follow-up activities can significantly influence the mobility's long-term effects (Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, 2020, pp. 37–38). In recent years, several studies have shown that also virtual exchanges (see O'Dowd, 2023, pp. 10–18 for definitions of virtual exchange and virtual mobility) promote the acquisition of intercultural competencies (Rawal & Deardorff, 2021, pp. 46–59; The Evaluate Group, 2019, pp. 26–43).

## 2 Context: The IMPACCT Project

In 2019, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) launched a program called *Lehramt.International*.<sup>1</sup> With funds provided by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), the program aimed at increasing the international mobility of student teachers (see Bloch, 2024, in this anthology). The Giessen project IMPACCT (International Mobility with Partners Abroad for Culturally Competent Teachers) was part of module A (model projects) in the two funding periods 2019–2022 and 2023–2024. Besides summer schools, study abroad semesters, guest lectureships, networking trips etc. belong to the eligible project measures. At the time of writing, the second funding period with the main aim of internationalization of primary and lower secondary education in the fields of Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant religion as well as Ethics with a specialized focus on interreligious dialogue is in progress.

## 3 Virtual International Summer School: Organization, Preparation, and Realization

The virtual summer school held in August 2021 was one official project measure within the first funding phase 2019–2022 (see for another brief comment Wild, Nierste, Kaiser, & Dasouqi, 2023, pp. 256–270). Students and lecturers from JLU and the six partner universities participated (University of Innsbruck, University College for Teacher Education Vienna/Krems, University of Stockholm, Université de Fribourg, Bursa Uludağ University, Marmara University). Since the target group of our internationali-

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<sup>1</sup> Find more information on *Lehramt.International* here: <https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/further-information-on-daad-programmes/lehramtinternational/>

zation efforts at that time had been primary education students with the subject Islamic Religion, we agreed on the thematic focus: *International – Intercultural – Interreligious: Perspectives on Islamic Religious Education from Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey*. The Lehramt.International program provided the primary learning goal: to enhance future teachers' intercultural competencies in order to prepare them for teaching in heterogeneous classrooms. The following section deals with some aspects of the organization, preparation, and realization of the virtual summer school and addresses some lessons learned.

### 3.1 Organization and Preparation

The organization of any event requires prior consideration of several stakeholder groups' expectations and interests. Project sponsors, organizers, lecturers, and students can have quite different opinions on the when, what, and why of an event such as a summer school. Being aware of and inquiring about these expectations and interests is crucial to ensure the event's success. With regard to the students, who are the main beneficiaries of a summer school, it is imperative to consider whether summer schools are part of the students' academic cultures. To ensure a reasonable number of participants, information material must be provided that gives a vivid impression of the educational benefits.

No matter if virtual or face-to-face, setting dates for an international summer school is always demanding. As everyone who works with partner universities worldwide is aware, term dates and academic years usually collide with one another. Summer is the time for well-deserved vacation, for internships in schools, or for fulfilling other academic obligations. The virtual summer school took place at the end of August, which against the background of upcoming semester starts in Sweden and Turkey was the only time possible.

For the IMPACCT summer school, the project description originally envisaged a five-day physical summer school in Giessen. It seemed more reasonable, despite the general preference for a physical summer school, to settle on a virtual format in light of the impossibility to assess the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021. Having experienced the ramifications of distance teaching and learning for two semesters, lecturers were especially sceptical about a virtual summer school's success. In retrospect, a virtual summer school can be a real alternative especially for students unable to finance upcoming costs. Organizers and lecturers, however, need the knowledge to guide virtual exchange properly. Profiting from the vast experience of all lecturers can be very helpful in program design.

Since the organization of a virtual summer school was new to the members of the project team, it became necessary for them to expand their knowledge about didactics of the virtual space and to learn more about online resources to facilitate interaction. Thus, members of the organizing team attended a number of expert led trainings. As one result, we set up the online whiteboard Conceptboard to use for check-in and check-out activities. Overall, the whiteboard functioned as a collaborative platform allowing us to share information, to document results of group work, and to engage in dialogue prior to as well as during the summer school.

### 3.2 Realization: Program Design and Student-Centered Approach

One week before the official start of the summer school, we offered an online meeting to familiarize the participants with the platform Cisco Webex. Breakout sessions allowed a first encounter. After this, the participants created short profiles on the Conceptboard answering questions such as: Which languages do you speak? What are your favorite hobbies? What is your cultural background? The event then started at noon on Wednesday and ended early afternoon on Friday. To guarantee attention, presentations given by lecturers lasted 20 minutes, a didactics workshop allowed collaborative work in mixed groups. Small activities gave students the opportunity to reflect on their learnings. Including regular short breaks or other activities was supposed to make online participation as pleasant as possible. On the first evening, we had a Meet and Greet to learn more about, for instance, each other's motivation to participate. Naturally, it was intended that especially students network to strengthen the feeling of belonging to a group of learners.

A secondary goal of the summer school was the promotion of semesters abroad at the partner universities. In their evaluation, seven students stated that the summer school motivated them to study abroad; one Turkish student afterwards did a semester abroad in Stockholm. Furthermore, the summer school was a perfect place to connect future outgoing students with members of prospective host universities. The students prepared university presentations, which should start conversation about university life in the different countries. Of course, everyone also had to get to know Giessen and Justus Liebig University, which is why we shared several brief videos. A highlight was an online concert given by an Austrian professor. One student in their evaluation called the musical interlude "a breath of fresh air".

In line with the objectives of the Lehramt.International program, the promotion of intercultural competencies was imperative. Therefore, the summer school started with the icebreaker exercise *Circles of my Multicultural Self*. When asked about Wednesday's most important insight on Thursday morning, one student wrote:

"Yesterday, the most important insight was that we all are so different, but at the same time so much alike. We are all human beings and our diverse backgrounds are valuable and complete each other."

When asked what we could do better next time, students gave valuable feedback, too. One student favored an increased number of lectures, another wished for more games, two pointed out that a summer school should be held in presence. One student connected the virtual setting with a certain lack of interaction:

"Students were still shy after the icebreaker – but I guess it was because it was held online. If it was in person, maybe more people would interact more."

In retrospect, spreading the summer school over five days might have been an alternative worth debating. Not only could we have distributed the amount of screen time better over single days – admittedly with the risk of a dissolution of the program –, but we

could have used the time to the benefit of the students for more networking and group work. The declared goal of a summer school should be that students produce something, be it a teaching unit or work sheets for use in the classroom. An increased amount of group learning scenarios fosters intercultural learning. Consideration should be given to an extremely reduced amount of frontal teaching scenarios.

In our case, the preparation definitely revealed digital competence deficits we had to tackle to ensure smooth execution. Combining this with deliberating the specificity of the simultaneous foreign language based intercultural encounter illustrated the complexity of the undertaking for everyone. Mindset, openness towards virtual exchange, and the development of digital skills are clearly fundamental success factors.

## 4 Conclusion and a Short Comparative Look at a Physical Summer School

In conclusion, the virtual summer school was a very exciting and positive experience. The format definitely bears a lot of potential in the internationalization of higher education. The 2023 physical IMPACCT summer school held in September 2023, however, was a completely different experience. A physical summer school raises other practical questions especially concerning traveling, financing, and catering. The overall impression we got while planning our 2023 summer school is that attracting students for physical short-term mobilities is quite challenging. Students weigh costs and benefits in this case with particular care; organizers should do the same. Some of our partners had to do a lot of convincing to motivate students to register.

Scheduling stays a challenge. It might come into a special focus because of the increased expense of travel. In our case, for example, visa problems led to a few cancellations at short notice. The definite advantage of a physical summer school is the personal intercultural encounter. At the end of the week, one student commented that she was positively surprised because the week did not match her expectations. The organizing team was very happy with the outcome as well, especially the networking between the students.

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