



Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education

Theories, Concepts and Practical Approaches of Virtual, Blended and Physical Mobility



THEMA 142 Blickpunkt Hochschuldidaktik

dghd
Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Hochschuldidaktik

wbv

E-Book Einzelbeitrag

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International and Sustainable?! Digital Pathways to Building International Cooperation in Teacher Education from a Management Perspective

aus: Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education (9783763977352)

Erscheinungsjahr: 2024

Seiten: 171 - 180

DOI: 10.3278/I77352W017

In the following article, a good practice example of building international cooperation in teacher education while considering different aspects of sustainability will be discussed, using the experience of project LiMa - Lehramt international in Marburg. The focus of this article is on the management aspect of relationship building and lessons learned in this project. In addition, benefits for students will be reported. Project LiMa aims to provide teacher education students in its pilot subjects biology, geography and education sciences with opportunities for international and intercultural exchange, so that they may increase their intercultural competencies in preparation for culturally diverse classrooms. The four-year project funded by the DAAD established strong partnerships with four universities in Poland, Portugal, Romania and Serbia, using an intentional combination of virtual and in-person measures. The article will first describe the relationship between sustainability and internationalization, considering potential goal conflicts. It will then investigate the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual kickoff event and explore opportunities of how virtual formats can be used for international relationship building on the level of staff and lecturers. Finally, the article will address teaching for sustainable development as an important transversal topic for international cooperation in the context of teacher education.

Schlagworte: internationalization; teacher education; sustainability; education for sustainable development; virtual formats; transversal topics; relationship building

Zitiervorschlag: Morbach, Zina, Steinbach, Inga, Bludau, Sophie, Page, Sven & Huppert, Annette (2024). *International and Sustainable?! Digital Pathways to Building International Cooperation in Teacher Education from a Management Perspective*. In Annika Brück-Hübner, Ulrike Beate Müller & Anja Seifert (Hg.), *Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education: Theories, Concepts and Practical Approaches of Virtual, Blended and Physical Mobility* (S. 171-180). Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. <https://doi.org/10.3278/I77352W017>

International and Sustainable?! Digital Pathways to Building International Cooperation in Teacher Education from a Management Perspective

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Abstract

In the following article, a good practice example of building international cooperation in teacher education while considering different aspects of sustainability will be discussed, using the experience of project LiMa – Lehramt international in Marburg. The focus of this article is on the management aspect of relationship building and lessons learned in this project. In addition, benefits for students will be reported. Project LiMa aims to provide teacher education students in its pilot subjects biology, geography and education sciences with opportunities for international and intercultural exchange, so that they may increase their intercultural competencies in preparation for culturally diverse classrooms. The four-year project funded by the DAAD established strong partnerships with four universities in Poland, Portugal, Romania and Serbia, using an intentional combination of virtual and in-person measures. The article will first describe the relationship between sustainability and internationalization, considering potential goal conflicts. It will then investigate the advantages and disadvantages of a virtual kick-off event and explore opportunities of how virtual formats can be used for international relationship building on the level of staff and lecturers. Finally, the article will address teaching for sustainable development as an important transversal topic for international cooperation in the context of teacher education.

Keywords: internationalization, teacher education, sustainability, education for sustainable development, virtual formats, transversal topics, relationship building

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1 Internationalization vs. Education for Sustainable Development?

Climate change and the sustainable use of the world's resources are urgent and world-wide concerns. While at first internationalization and sustainable development goals (SDGs; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2023) appear to be at odds (the most obvious example being CO₂-production while traveling abroad), when inspected more closely they share many similar and overlapping goals (DAAD, 2020; DAAD, 2021; Lang-Wojtasik et al., 2022). Internationalization aims to help people develop inter- and transcultural competencies, empathy, and tolerance, as well as an ability for personal reflection and for handling ambiguity and ambivalence, and generally a broader worldview. These competencies are also essential for teachers in conducting an education for sustainable development (ESD) at schools (UNESCO, 2020). Here, especially the goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning (SDG 4), specifically sub-goal 4.7, which focuses on education for sustainable development, can have a guiding function for internationalization efforts (Lang-Wojtasik et al., 2022). But also other SDGs, such as achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls (SDG 5), reducing socio-economic inequality within and among countries (SDG 10), and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16), can benefit greatly from internationalization measures. Schools are often thought responsible for addressing social challenges such as sustainability in the classroom. Considering sustainability in internationalization efforts within teacher education is therefore crucial, especially since their goals might appear to be in conflict (for a more theoretical analysis of the link between ESD and internationalization see Buddeberg et al., 2024, in this anthology.)

Using project LiMa ("Lehramt international in Marburg"; English: International teacher education in Marburg) as an example, we will showcase how virtual formats, especially at the beginning of a cooperation, can help build relationships while considering ecological sustainability, and increase the commitment to the cooperation through quick and easy collaboration. Although personal contacts will remain important for internationalization efforts, virtual formats help initiate and sustain international relations while also being an important building block in making internationalization more sustainable in the economic, social, and ecological sustainability dimension (Kropp, 2018). This article therefore wants to explore how a conscientious use and combination of virtual and in-person experiences and events can help build sustainable, long-term cooperation on an institutional level within the internationalization of teacher education. Project LiMa received a four-year funding (2021–2024) within the DAAD-program "Lehramt.international", which promotes the internationalization of teacher education programs in Germany, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. (For more information on "Lehramt.international", see Bloch, 2024, in this anthology). The project has four partner universities, namely Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland), University of Kragujevac (Serbia), University of Lisbon

(Portugal), and Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (Romania). LiMa focuses on the subjects of biology, geography and teacher education sciences.

2 Sustainable Networking and the Benefits of a Virtual Kick-Off Event

Starting a project on internationalization during a global pandemic seemed a challenging endeavor at the time, but as digitization efforts at universities increased and more and more useful platforms became available, these were a great starting point for building international cooperation networks. Thus, the subsequent recounts and advice need to be regarded as having worked primarily in the year 2021: On the one hand, people were used to virtual meetings and were looking for ways to engage abroad, during travel restrictions and beyond. On the other hand, they started seeing the light at the end of the tunnel and were hopeful to be able to travel again and meet new contacts in person soon enough.

2.1 Designing a successful virtual kick-off event

To start off the project, LiMa organized a virtual kick-off event. The goal was to create an event that was informative while being as engaging and personable as possible. In a first step, to acquire participants from all relevant departments of the partner universities, existing contacts at the partner universities were used to find interested colleagues. With each potential participant, at least one virtual meeting was set up with, during which the contacts were personally invited to the kick-off event. Secondly, to ensure participation and engagement at the event, one person from each partner university was asked to present the structure of teacher education in their country as well as the study program of their university. As a final preparatory step to show our appreciation and to make up for the event being virtual and not in-person, 'surprise care packages' were sent out to all invited people. These packages contained little presents connected to Marburg for a nice coffee break: a university coffee mug, fair trade coffee, locally produced cookies, a brochure with beautiful pictures of the city and a handwritten note. During the kick-off itself, a focus was put on atmosphere building. This included an effort to create a feeling of collegiality by welcoming everyone by name and including participants from the beginning, by building on the rapport from the virtual meetings conducted beforehand, and by paying attention to all comments or feelings of concern. Due to virtual meetings being more exhausting than in-person meetings, the program was also set up to be as varied as possible, i. e. short presentations alternated with videos and participatory elements, and various people from the organization team took on speaking roles to make the meeting more dynamic and diverting.

Regarding the software used, the kick-off was conducted in BigBlueButton, a meeting platform that in our experience has a comparably stable connection even with bad internet connectivity, which is important in an international setting. It also provides a space for collective note taking, has some interactive features and a chat func-

tion. Additionally, the interactive presentation software Mentimeter was used for participation (e. g. asking whether participants had experience in international project work) and for collecting feedback. After the official part of the event was over, a space for more informal exchange was provided; it turned out to be useful to switch platforms so participants knew that they could freely decide whether they wanted to participate further. The interactive conference tool Wonder.me offered a more relaxed context for this purpose.¹

The number of colleagues who participated in the event (24 people from partner universities, 14 people from Marburg University) showed that our strategy for preparation and invitation was successful. Based on feedback collected at the end of the event with Mentimeter and based on personal communication with participants following the event, participants were very happy with the kick-off meeting, felt integrated and well-informed, and appreciated that the event was an international learning and exchange opportunity in addition to being a project kick-off. Communication with the international colleagues who presented during the kick-off showed that they felt a sense of responsibility for the event as well as for the project, and their commitment to the cooperation was mostly stronger in the long run than that of their colleagues without a speaking role. This all showed that it is worth putting in the effort to build personable relationships, as especially the ‘care packages’ were mentioned again even a year later when the team was finally able to visit all partners in person.

2.2 Benefits of a virtual kick-off vs. an in-person kick-off event

Looking back, conducting the kick-off event in a virtual format this way was the best start the project could have had, especially when considering factors of sustainability. Considering the process of connecting to our partners and weighing the benefits an in-person kick-off might have had against the ecological and financial resources needed, it seems that a well-designed virtual event can provide many of the benefits of an in-person meeting while coming up with some additional advantages:

- building personable relationships through proactively communicating appreciation (e. g. personalized gifts) and creating a relaxed atmosphere (through a personable communication style)
- shared feeling of accomplishment and learning, each partner is valued for bringing in their perspective and expertise
- a very small ecological footprint, no financial resources needed
- less organizational effort for the project coordination and the participants
- more people are able to participate – not limited by financial resources and less time commitment for the participants

Conducting a virtual kick-off gave us the chance to avert hurdles, such as financial efforts, ecological concerns, and organizational efforts. Digital media therefore helped us focus on internationalization measures more directly early on in the process, which has also been described by other projects (Staab & Egetenmeyer, 2019).

¹ Wonder.me has now been discontinued, but there are many similar tools, for example HyHyve: <https://www.hyhyve.com/de/>

3 Strengthening International Relationships through Virtual Formats

Even after conducting a successful kick-off event, building consistent and stable relationships with international project partners remains challenging. Project LiMa used different strategies to achieve this goal, which will be described and reflected upon below.

3.1 Virtual cooperation as a tool for relationship building at staff level

Regarding relationship building, it is beneficial to have goal-oriented communication to ensure that the partners benefit from the cooperation, and to communicate these benefits clearly. One measure that corresponded with these principles was the extracurricular virtual international lecture series which project LiMa organized and to which colleagues from the partner universities were invited as speakers. This collaborative endeavor provided a clear topic for discussion in online meetings and after completion allowed for the shared experience of a successful event, which helped build relationships immensely. Additionally, there were clear benefits for speakers, as all talks were remunerated and speakers could add their international speaking engagement to their CV. Moreover, as more indirect benefits to all partner universities, topics were varied so that some of the partners were able to integrate sessions into their own teaching, students and lecturers had an opportunity to learn from experts from other universities and people were able to network over a series of events. These lecture series were an important cornerstone of the relationship building process and provided a basis on which to explore further cooperation, as described below.

3.2 Networking trips

Besides the ecological dimension of sustainability, internationalization projects also need to consider the cultural, social, and economic dimensions. Virtual formats may in some cases replace in-person meetings (as in the case of the virtual kick-off) and support long-distance relationship building (as did the virtual lecture series). Nevertheless, international networks will continue to depend on social interaction and personal relationships. Networking trips of administrative staff and lecturers to each of the four partner universities were very important to further the international exchange, to explore ideas of collaboration and to better understand working and living conditions of the partners.² The chart “Good practice: Using virtual tools to sustainably internationalize teacher education” shows an overview of the measures related to relationship building with partner universities taken by project LiMa.

² In accordance with ecological sustainability, we aimed to reduce our ecological footprint as much as possible: by traveling by train where possible and compensating for our CO₂-production otherwise.

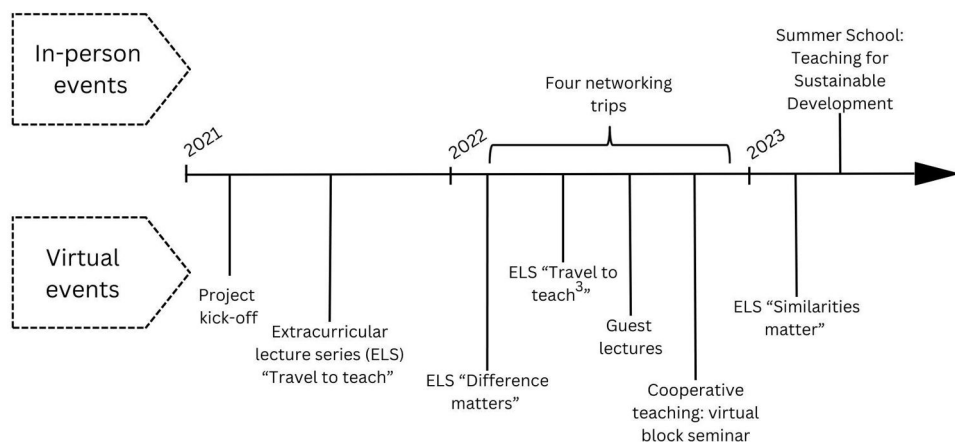


Figure 1: Good practice: Using virtual tools to sustainably internationalize teacher education.

The virtually established personable relationships built using the strategies described above were fundamental for the open and effective exchange during these visits to the partner universities. The very good rapport, especially with the people involved in the lecture series, established a good baseline to continue an ongoing conversation rather than conducting a first meeting. The clearly communicated expectations discussed during preparatory online meetings and the collaborative organizational planning of the trip were also extremely helpful.

Having these opportunities for personal exchange with the partners is important not only for long-term relationship building via shared experiences, but also for increasing the intercultural competencies of the staff members and for decreasing existing stereotypes among them. This is also in line with the *whole institution approach*, one of the guiding principles in ESD, which states that institutions can strive for innovation if they work holistically (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, n. d.). In-person exchange during networking trips also helps to procure a clearer understanding of the living, studying, and working conditions of students as well as lecturers and staff. This knowledge directly benefits student counseling and helps the project team understand limitations in the cooperation based on resources or challenges the partners face. In practical terms, it also turned out to be quite helpful to solve issues such as exchange agreements in person, to get to know the point of contact for the students personally and to visit and thus acquire new partner schools abroad.

4 Virtual Teaching Cooperations and ESD as a Common Transversal Topic

Based on the knowledge acquired during the virtual relationship building and during the networking trips, collaborations with each partner could be fostered based on their individual challenges, needs, and availability. Here, cooperation is not a 'one shoe fits

all' but needs to be individualized. In general, though, transversal topics such as ESD, inclusion, digitalization and education for democracy are topics that are well suited for cooperation. They are relevant for teacher education in all countries while at the same time different countries have different perspectives and different conditions from which they approach these topics (e. g. economic background of pupils, urbanization, national history, and political systems; see also Seifert, 2024, in this anthology).

4.1 Virtual cooperation formats

Based on connections made virtually and during the visits, it was possible to establish different kinds of virtual cooperation focusing on various (transversal) topics. Formats and topics of virtual cooperation included:

- Extracurricular lecture and workshop series: virtual lectures and workshops open to students and staff from all partner universities conducted in English. Topics included: gender sensitive teaching, education for democracy, ESD, digitalization, and inclusion.
- Guest lectures: (virtual) lectures given by lecturers from a partner university as part of curricular teaching. Topics included: politic didactics, working abroad as a teacher.
- Cooperative teaching: virtual cooperation within curricular teaching where lecturers from at least two universities cooperate to create a new course which benefits from expertise and perspective of two different cultures. Topics included: inclusion/exclusion.

4.2 ESD as a common transversal topic

Regarding in-person exchange, a summer school in Marburg was one of the main project activities in this area besides actual student mobility between the partner universities. During the networking trips, ESD as a transversal topic turned out to be a topic that was very relevant to all partners and their students, connected the three pilot subjects biology, geography and teacher education sciences, all while being mostly underrepresented in curricula. It also offered a framework that includes most of the other transversal topics (such as education for democracy – SDG 16; inclusion – SDG 10; gender equality – SDG 5).

Therefore, for the 2023 international summer school, the topic “Teaching for Sustainable Development” was chosen. A topic, which was bound to connect the scientific interests of our partners with each other, while also having high relevance for schools and teacher education. Colleagues from all partner universities were invited and tasked with selecting and nominating students for stipends to attend the summer school in Marburg. Advertising was therefore based on the successful networking strategies described above, as the invitations and information were sent out to the partners abroad as well as being advertised locally and virtually, e. g. via Instagram.

In line with the topic of ESD and with the goal of intercultural exchange, the aim was to create a program that was as varied as possible, including many different formats of learning and teaching, and providing as much space for personal exchange and

collaboration as possible. Besides traditional formats of learning, such as workshops and keynotes, we therefore put a special emphasis on interactive learning opportunities using a project-based learning approach. As such, a large amount of time was reserved for phases of international and interdisciplinary group work, during which participants (students and lecturers alike) collaborated to design and create small projects related to teaching for sustainable development. Projects included lesson plans, interactive learning activities and cutout animated videos on international project ideas. To further focus on values and principles related to ESD, such as education for democracy, equality, and non-hierarchical communication, elements for atmosphere building and personal exchange were implemented. Examples for these elements are icebreakers, a digital-based city rally via the app Actionbound, a communal evening, a session at an improvisation theater, a group discussion as well as setting up a 'quiet space' all participants could use freely.

To ensure that sustainable collaboration would continue after the summer school, several measures were set up: During the event, we connected partners and university members with similar research areas and interests and arranged meetings for them during the week. Students were encouraged to create their own groups and networks and to use the project ideas developed during the summer school for further collaboration. An information fair, which included local and international initiatives and scientists, gave participants the chance to network and draw inspiration for further activities related to education for sustainable development. All the presentations, links, contact information of fair participants, photos, and videos were made available using a learning platform. This platform also included a collaboration space participants could use during the event. Recordings of keynote are publicly available and are converted into elements of Open Educational Resources, so that lecturers from the university of Marburg and its partner universities can use them subsequently in their own teaching.

Overall, the success of the summer school was based on the substantial work put into relationship building in the first years of the project. The higher than expected number of participants is likely in part due to the good network built during the project start and the very personable relationships within this network. Furthermore, the topic of ESD and the relevance for the coming generations was the most mentioned reasons for student participation, and the varied program was mentioned repeatedly in the evaluation. Furthermore, the relaxed working atmosphere was pointed out during the evaluation as well and was crucial for the successful intercultural exchange and the friendships built during the event.

5 Conclusion

As this article shows, virtual components, supported by intentionally selected in-person measures, can lead to more collaboration in efforts of building sustainable relationships with international partners. The efforts were sustainable in several different regards: They helped focus on internationalization efforts while saving resources, specifi-

cally on travel, and thus reduced the environmental footprint of the project. Virtual exchange possibilities also helped to reach more staff and students from the partner institutions, since financial and organizational hurdles were reduced. Finally, project LiMa was also able to address sustainability as a transversal topic in teacher education during the summer school on “Teaching for Sustainable Development”. Although obstacles remain, the careful and attentive alignment of the project measures makes it possible to establish sustainable international connections and collaborations in the context of teacher education.

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