



## Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education

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



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This article explores the challenges faced by the University of Vechta in facilitating international experiences for students of teacher education. It presents the MAPS project (International Mobility in the Master's Program in Primary Education), a collaborative initiative between the University of Vechta (Germany), the University of Tallinn (Estonia), and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (Italy), funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The project aims to enhance the internationalization of teacher education through three key components: the structural integration of a study abroad program, an international summer school of teacher education, and expanded collaboration among the participating partner universities. The article examines structural and organizational adjustments to promote mobility, factors influencing participation, and students' perceptions of these initiatives. The findings provide insights for future strategies to promote internationalization in teacher education.

Schlagworte: internationalization of the curriculum; teacher education; structured mobility; summer school; students' experiences

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## Breaking Down Barriers with MAPS – (How) Do Future Elementary School Teachers Use International Learning Opportunities?

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# **Breaking Down Barriers with MAPS – (How) Do Future Elementary School Teachers Use International Learning Opportunities?**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the challenges faced by the University of Vechta in facilitating international experiences for students of teacher education. It presents the MAPS project (International Mobility in the Master's Program in Primary Education), a collaborative initiative between the University of Vechta (Germany), the University of Tallinn (Estonia), and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (Italy), funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The project aims to enhance the internationalization of teacher education through three key components: the structural integration of a study abroad program, an international summer school of teacher education, and expanded collaboration among the participating partner universities. The article examines structural and organizational adjustments to promote mobility, factors influencing participation, and students' perceptions of these initiatives. The findings provide insights for future strategies to promote internationalization in teacher education.

Keywords: internationalization of the curriculum, teacher education, structured mobility, summer school, students' experiences

## **Outline**

1. Introduction
2. Starting Point
3. Concept Development
4. Experiences
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## **1      Introduction**

In 2021, the project “MAPS – International Mobility in the Master's Program in Primary Education” was launched, a joint initiative of the University of Vechta (Germany), the University of Tallinn (Estonia) and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (Italy). It is funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and is one of the various internationalization initiatives in Germany that aim to promote global and intercul-

tural perspectives in teacher education. The project is coordinated by the University of Vechta, a small institution in the rural landscape of Lower Saxony with around 4,000 students. Since 1830, the university has pursued a traditional focus on teacher education for elementary school and lower secondary education (University of Vechta, 2024). In view of the current challenges, the University of Vechta, like other teacher education institutions, is faced with the task of preparing educators for increasingly diverse classrooms (European Commission, 2017).

## 2 Starting Point

The importance of internationalization was recognized early on at the University of Vechta. Over the past ten years, the institution has consistently prioritized internationalization as a fundamental element of its strategic planning. To strengthen this commitment and improve learning opportunities, the University of Vechta has made important structural, curricular and organizational changes. One important aspect focused on initiatives to facilitate study abroad and the recognition of academic achievements.

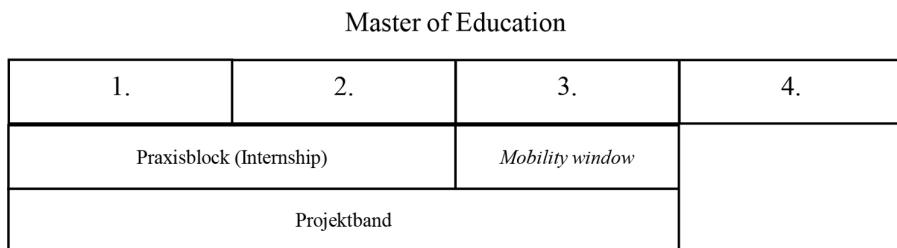
### 2.1 Internationalization at the University of Vechta

In the winter semester 2012/13, the University introduced a mobility window in the fifth semester of the combined Bachelor's program and in the third semester of the consecutive Master's program. This concept maximizes flexibility for students seeking international study experience by minimizing the number of required curricular components in these semesters. The University of Vechta uses the ECTS grading system, which ensures easy recognition of credits earned abroad. In addition, students have the opportunity to complete general school internships, orientation internships, and internships abroad specifically for the study of English. The University recognizes the acquisition of additional qualifications in the field of interculturality with the Extracurricular Certificate in Intercultural Competence, for which participation in intercultural training, study abroad, or language courses can be recognized as partial credit. The International Office and the Center for Teacher Education provide comprehensive support and guidance, including placement in partner schools and consideration of individual preferences. The University's extensive international network of partner institutions facilitates access to a wide range of opportunities. The annual International Week and a Teacher Education Program for Incomings underscore the University's commitment to providing diverse opportunities for intercultural learning.

### 2.2 Challenges in Recruiting Students for International Experiences

Despite the aforementioned facilitations, incentives and positive structures, the University of Vechta, like many other educational institutions, faces the challenge of attracting teacher training students to international experiences, especially abroad. In the view of the authors of the article, various factors contribute to the fact that students are not yet making sufficient use of the wide range of opportunities.

From the authors' point of view, one of the reasons is the Master's structure in Lower Saxony. In the winter semester 2014/15, the Master of Education in Lower Saxony was reformed and the teacher education program for elementary and lower secondary school teachers was extended from two to four semesters. The aim of this change was to strengthen the practical and professional orientation, integrate reflection on aptitude, promote academic orientation and support research-based learning (MK, 2014). To this end, an 18-week internship block was introduced, which, together with the preparatory, accompanying and follow-up courses at the university, forms the so-called internship block (Praxisblock) (see Figure 1). At the same time, a project (the so-called "Projektband") intended to support research-based learning was introduced for students to carry out at their placement school. The Projektband is accompanied by a seminar (see Figure 1). The seminar extends over three semesters and includes the development of a research question in the first semester, the practical implementation in school practice in the second semester, and the subsequent evaluation/follow-up in the third semester. From the authors' point of view, this structure of the Projektband could be perceived as a potential obstacle to studying abroad, especially as it coincides with the mobility window.



**Figure 1:** Structure of the Master of Education and integration of a stay abroad

According to the authors, another reason for the low interest in international experiences may lie in the needs of the target group. Students at the University of Vechta often state that they chose the university because of its familiar atmosphere and proximity to their home town. The familiarity and comfort associated with studying in familiar surroundings could influence the willingness to embark on an international experience, especially if uncertainty and lack of family proximity play a role. It is also possible that the relevance of internationalization for later careers is not fully understood (Wernisch, 2016), that the removal of barriers at a structural level is not perceived, or – as reported in the literature – that the organizational and financial costs of studying abroad, the perceived extension of study time, or the lack of support systems act as a deterrent (Middendorf et al., 2017).

In summary, the challenges identified for the internationalization of teacher education at the Master of Education level raised several questions. On the one hand, the question was how the structure of the Master of Education can be changed in order to offer students more flexibility and at the same time promote participation in international experiences. On the other hand, there was a need to clarify how the needs of the

target group could be better taken into account in internationalization efforts so that they can embark on an adventure abroad or an international experience at home. These considerations formed the starting point for the development of the MAPS pilot project.

### 3 Concept Development

Based on the challenges outlined above, the MAPS project was developed with the aim of offering an internationalized teacher education at the University of Vechta that takes into account the specifics of teacher education in Lower Saxony and the particular target group of students at a small university in a rural area. The activities should primarily be aimed at students in elementary school teacher education, as the authors believe that they are a particularly difficult group to reach with internationalization offers. Low-threshold learning opportunities should be developed that enable students to gain international experience in a structured way, to acquire intercultural, linguistic and subject-specific skills through different formats, and to make the international dimension and its relevance more visible. In addition, cooperation in the area of teacher training should be institutionalized and expanded with suitable project partners. For this, the project is based on three pillars:

- Pillar 1: The structural integration of a stay abroad into the teacher education curriculum by means of an internationally perspectivized Projektband.
- Pillar 2: The institutionalization of a 14-day summer school in the interdisciplinary profile area in the form of a Module.
- Pillar 3: The expansion of cooperation between the Universities of Vechta (DE), Tallinn University (EE) and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (IT).

#### 3.1 Structural Integration of the Stay Abroad

The internationalization of the Projektband seemed a promising approach from the authors' point of view. This was to be achieved by linking a possible stay abroad in the third semester with the educational seminar accompanying the Projektband and thus embedding it in the curriculum. In order to internationalize the content of the seminar, the research topics should be related to the compulsory school system and include multilingualism, diversity-sensitive pedagogy, social inequality and global learning. In the first semester, an internationally comparative research question is developed, which will then be worked on in the practical block (2nd semester) and completed during the stay abroad (3rd semester) – digitally accompanied (see Figure 1). Research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and classification of results will be developed in the seminar.

Since student teachers have to complete three additional compulsory modules in the third semester, the mobility window, in addition to the Projektband, it seems necessary to cooperate with partner universities where students have the opportunity to take modules similar to those they would have to complete in the third semester in Vechta

(e.g. school development, teaching and learning in elementary schools, and inclusion) in order to increase the attractiveness of a stay abroad. This is intended to facilitate the recognition of coursework completed abroad and to dispel concerns about a longer duration of study (Middendorff et al., 2016, p. 21). The fact that the fourth compulsory module is an elective module from the interdisciplinary profile area is an additional incentive for study abroad. If it is completed abroad, it can be credited with 5 CP, which reduces the workload in the third semester from 20 ECTS to 15 ECTS. At the same time, it can be counted towards the Intercultural Competence Certificate mentioned above. In order to meet the challenges outlined with regard to the student body in Vechta, it also makes sense to look for partner universities for the stay abroad that are similar in size and general conditions to the home university and are easily accessible within Europe.

Therefore, the University of Tallinn and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano were considered for a project partnership. Both universities meet the aforementioned requirements and are known for their strong teacher education programs. There is great expertise in digital technologies and school development at the University of Tallinn. This is particularly beneficial for students who wish to develop their skills in these areas. The Free University of Bozen-Bolzano offers a specialized Master's degree in Elementary Education with a special focus on Inclusive Education. This program offers students the unique opportunity to design their academic profile according to their interests and career goals. In addition, both universities offer modules with qualification profiles that are closely aligned with the three modules mentioned in Vechta. This alignment ensures a coherent and complementary learning experience for students at these institutions. An additional incentive is that the language of instruction at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano is German. This linguistic feature opens up opportunities for students without advanced foreign language skills to participate in a semester abroad. It is worth noting that existing Erasmus+ agreements already facilitate smooth cooperation between the aforementioned partner universities and the University of Vechta.

In order to minimize financial concerns, scholarships for the 5-month stay abroad should be awarded by the DAAD. In addition, all scholarship holders should be given the opportunity to prepare themselves linguistically for their stay abroad and to participate in intercultural training, also in order to collect these partial credits for the certificate "Intercultural Competence" (cf. also Brück-Hübner, Müller, Joseph, et al., 2024, in this anthology).

### **3.2 International Summer School for Teacher Education**

The second pillar of the project involves the introduction of an annual, two-week English-language "Summer School for Teacher education" at the University of Vechta. This program is designed to be offered as a curricular module, firmly anchored in the profile area of the participating partner universities. In line with the goal of internationalization at home, the summer school aims to provide students, including those who do not plan a longer stay abroad, with the opportunity to engage in a low-threshold exchange with student teachers from different countries. This experience will enable

them to acquire professional, intercultural and language skills. The condensed format of the summer school is strategically scheduled outside the lecture-free period of all participating universities. This scheduling minimizes overlap with other courses and exams and ensures optimal participation.

To ensure a rich and diverse curriculum, the module is designed collaboratively by faculty from different partner universities, incorporating a wide range of perspectives. Each year, a minimum of five students from participating partner universities will be encouraged to enroll. Financial support for their stay will be provided by the DAAD.

In terms of content, the module will cover various professionally relevant topics in elementary teacher education, with a particular focus on cross-cutting issues such as inclusion, diversity and internationalization.

### **3.3 Steering Group**

In order to institutionalize and expand the cooperation in teacher education between the stakeholders of the University of Vechta, the University of Tallinn and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, a steering group consisting of students, lecturers and an administrative staff will be formed. This group will be tasked with developing initiatives for the internationalization of teacher education at the participating universities. The role of the steering group is to ensure the continuous development of internationalization in line with student needs and university conditions. Regular bi-annual digital meetings will facilitate this coordination. The steering group will continue throughout the duration of the project, monitoring the development of cooperation and planning new joint activities.

In order to underline the international dimension of teacher education at the University of Vechta and to strengthen its importance, special guidance and information materials will be provided. These materials will assure an insight into the project's objectives, activities, available modules at the partner universities, recognition opportunities, and key contacts.

## **4 Experiences**

In the first project year 2021, a project website was set up to raise awareness of the project and its activities. As part of the International Week at the University of Vechta, information events on the study abroad program were held annually onwards, which were more or less well attended. In addition to announcing the scholarships on the bulletin board of the university and in newsletters and presenting the teaching modules, leaflets, information videos and posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were made available about the scholarships abroad and the summer school. These videos were published on the MAPS website and on social media. The number of clicks shows that only a manageable group of people were reached (< 200). The personal promotion of the summer school at the partner universities, on the other hand, proved to be a valuable measure. It has increased the number of people interested in the summer school.

In addition, information about mobility opportunities and internationalization activities as well as the importance of internationalization for teaching in heterogeneous classes is regularly provided in various introductory courses. Overall, a large number of students have been reached as a result.

#### **4.1 Experiences With the Study Program Abroad and Accompanying Seminar**

For the winter semester 2021/22, a module description for the internationally oriented educational science seminar of the project band was created and successfully integrated into the regular curriculum. The seminar was specifically advertised as an internationally oriented course and met with interest in the first round with a total of nine participants, including three MAPS scholarship holders who had applied for a stay abroad. The participants rated the professional added value of internationalization as particularly high. The project reports of the three students who completed a stay abroad during the seminar showed a successful analysis of discrimination and inequality in schools and teaching from a comparative perspective of the Italian and German education systems.

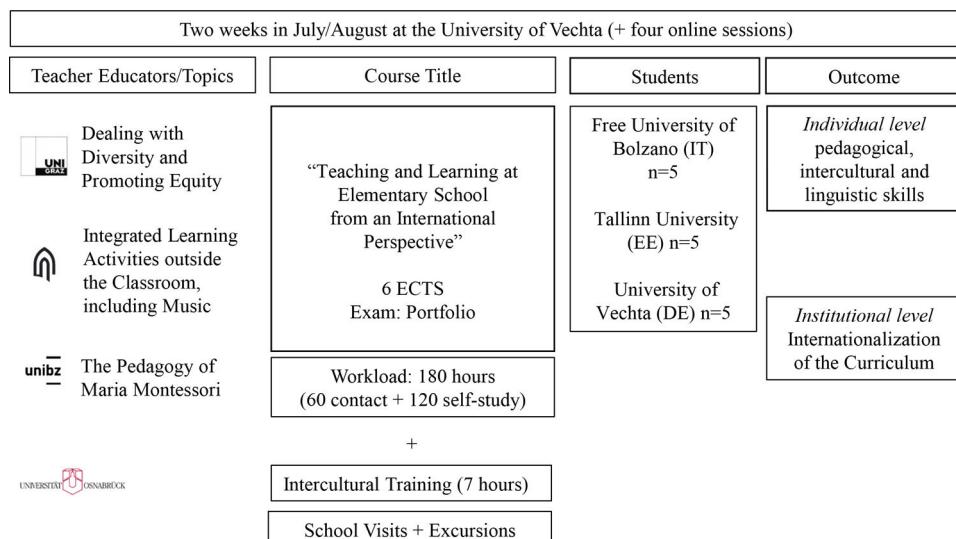
However, despite intensive advertising of the project and publicizing the scholarships through various channels, only four students applied for the five scholarships advertised for the five-month stay abroad at one of the two partner universities. The applicants showed an increased interest in studying at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, with German as the language of instruction and an interest in the Italian way of life cited in the oral interviews and application forms as decisive criteria for choosing the FU Bozen-Bolzano. In summer 2022, five students applied, but even in the second cohort only three scholarships could be awarded – two to the University of Bozen-Bolzano and one to the University of Tallinn. A further scholarship for the University of Tallinn could only be awarded after a third call for applications. Here, personal discussions revealed that the language of instruction, English, was perceived as an obstacle.

The selection of modules that can be studied abroad was rated positively by the students, even if the recognition process proved to be more difficult than expected. This was due to last-minute curriculum changes in the Master of Education program at the University of Vechta and at the partner universities, which meant that different modules than had been planned had to be selected abroad. It also became apparent that many university lecturers were not sufficiently familiar with the basics of recognition practice in the European Higher Education Area, which led to a greater need for communication than assumed before the start of the project. It also became clear that students who did not follow the study plan had difficulties completing recognized modules.

Nevertheless, the experience reports of the first cohort, who completed their stay abroad in the winter semester 2022/2023, show that the personal benefits of studying abroad outweigh the additional organizational effort. The support provided by the lecturers was rated very positively.

## 4.2 Experiences with the Summer School

As already indicated in the previous chapter, a module and its description, entitled “Teaching and learning at elementary school from an international perspective” was developed in collaboration with lecturers from all partner universities. It was included in the compulsory elective program of all three universities in the winter semester 2021/22. The module consists of three seminars with changing thematic focuses, so that different priorities can be set depending on the availability of lecturers. As can be seen in the diagram, the program consists of various optional and compulsory elements (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** International Summer School of Teacher Education at the University of Vechta

The first round of the summer school took place in the first half of August 2022. The second round took place in the second half of August 2023. At the first summer school in August 2022, 5 Estonian and 2 Italian students were taught by international guest lecturers from Austria, Italy and Estonia. The second round in 2023 was attended by 5 Italian and 5 Estonian students. In 2022 (and 2023), 16 German students each registered for the summer school at the University of Vechta, but only a limited number of them took part (2 in 2022, 5 in 2023).

In order to find out the reasons for the high drop-out rate among German students, the students who backed out were politely asked via email to explain their reasons: some German students stated that they “had expected the summer school to be less demanding”. Overall, however, the reasons remained hidden from us. The higher participation of Italian students in the second summer school in 2023 is mostly due to an intensive introductory event in Italy in March 2023, where a lot of time was spent informing students about the summer school.

In order to systematically assess the experiences of summer school participants, an adapted questionnaire from the “EduSaPMan” project (2017) was used, with additional questions included. Each section, covering reasons for participation, organization, content quality, lecturer competence, practical work, excursions, student contributions and reported learning gains, showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha$  between 0.87 and 0.94). The response options for the EduSaPMan project questions used a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), while other questions used a four-point Likert scale.

The following analysis is based on the responses of the first cohort of students ( $n = 9$ ).

The overall organization, different seminars, variety of lecturers, time management, recognition of the summer school in the university curriculum, workload, atmosphere and excursions were consistently rated as very good. With regard to the topics covered, the intercultural training stood out as particularly positive, fostering the participants’ willingness to change their perspective and embrace cultural differences. 56 % strongly agreed that their level of knowledge before attending the summer school was sufficient to understand the seminars. 67 % strongly agreed that their knowledge increased significantly after the summer school. A substantial 77 % felt much better prepared (23 % better) for future work in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. In particular, students reported feeling well prepared to “become a more open teacher” and “better understand what to do to be effective in the classroom”.

In addition, participants emphasized increased theoretical and practical knowledge “in dealing with a multicultural classroom” and “a better perception of different aspects of multicultural diversity and how to deal with different problems”. The summer school significantly increased confidence in language and communication skills through intercultural interactions. 55 % rated their growth in intercultural and language skills as high, 45 % as very high. Students expressed enthusiasm for meeting new people and interacting with others, and emphasized how intercultural encounters helped them accept different perspectives on the same topic. Overall, students found the program “very motivating and inspiring”. One student suggested that “there should be more initiatives like this in the future.”

### 4.3 Experiences with the Steering Group

The steering group, established in 2021, has become a cornerstone of the MAPS project. It meets regularly, at least every six months, to discuss strategic aspects of the internationalization of teacher education. The project partners actively take on important coordination functions at their respective locations and ensure lean processes in the application and implementation of the various internationalization measures. Face-to-face and digital meetings have been important forums for collaboration and decision-making. The impact of the steering group goes far beyond the formal meetings. Individual members not only participated in the planning and implementation of the summer schools, but also served as guest lecturers. This dual involvement underscores the commitment of the group, which is not limited to formal meetings. This

collaborative approach has allowed for efficient decision-making and successful implementation of initiatives. As the steering group continues to achieve its goals and foster collaboration, its dynamic influence remains critical to the ongoing success and adaptability of the MAPS project. However, it is important to recognize that student participation in the activities of the steering group has been limited. Given the importance of the student perspective, future initiatives should include strategies to actively involve students in decision-making processes.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

In our view, the “MAPS” project (International Mobility in the Master’s Program in Primary Education) has successfully met the major challenges of internationalizing teacher education at the University of Vechta. By systematically overcoming structural barriers, such as those inherent in the Master’s structure in Lower Saxony, and taking into account the special needs of a specific target group – the Vechta students at a small, rural teacher training university – the project has taken decisive steps to better prepare students for the demands of a globalized world.

The students’ experiences have been consistently positive across all programs, with the short-term format of the summer school in particular proving to be a valuable strategy for a structured learning opportunity to develop professional, linguistic and intercultural competencies. On a positive note, the summer school has become a central component of teacher training at the participating universities and is attracting growing interest, which is reflected in extended cooperation with other institutions such as the Karl-Franzens University of Graz (AT). This suggests that a compact international offering can provide significant added value for the development of professional skills and is a low-threshold but effective way to prepare students for the challenges of a multicultural classroom. However, the sustainability of these experiences should be further researched.

Of particular importance for the future development of measures is the realization that personal introductions through information events lead to an increasing number of people interested in internationalization measures. This should be emphasized again, especially with regard to German applicants, as they are still difficult to reach, while experienced and international students participating in Erasmus programs or completing adaptation qualifications at the University of Vechta often show great openness and interest in formats such as the summer school. Further activities are needed in the future, e. g. holding the summer school at the partner universities in order to possibly increase the interest of German students in the short-term program.

Despite the overall low number of applications for the scholarships, it is noteworthy that, according to documents from the Master of Education Examination Board, which is responsible for recognition procedures, more and more students at the university have applied for recognition of academic achievements abroad in recent years.

This increasing demand underlines the impact of the MAPS project, even if it is certainly not possible to prove causal chains of effect. It shows that the increased communication and awareness of internationalization and recognition opportunities means that more students are taking advantage of the learning opportunities on offer. However, it also shows that certain hurdles only became apparent as a result of the increased demand, which now need to be addressed, such as changes in the curricula and teacher educators lack of knowledge about recognition procedures in the European Higher Education Area (cf. also Brück-Hübner & Nierste, 2024, in this anthology).

The exchange with the steering group was particularly important for the success of the project, which also demonstrates a positive approach to long-term institutional cooperation beyond the duration of the project. The close cooperation between the universities and the establishment of a steering group have helped to break down barriers and facilitate the exchange. However, it is important to ensure that recognition practices are continuously improved and that students' needs are at the center of attention.

Overall, the MAPS project shows that the internationalization of teacher education in general, and at small universities in rural regions in particular, is possible, but that it poses specific challenges. The development and implementation of measures must be closely aligned with the needs of students and the structural framework of teacher education. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of measures is crucial to ensure sustainable internationalization and to optimally prepare students for the demands of a globalized world.

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