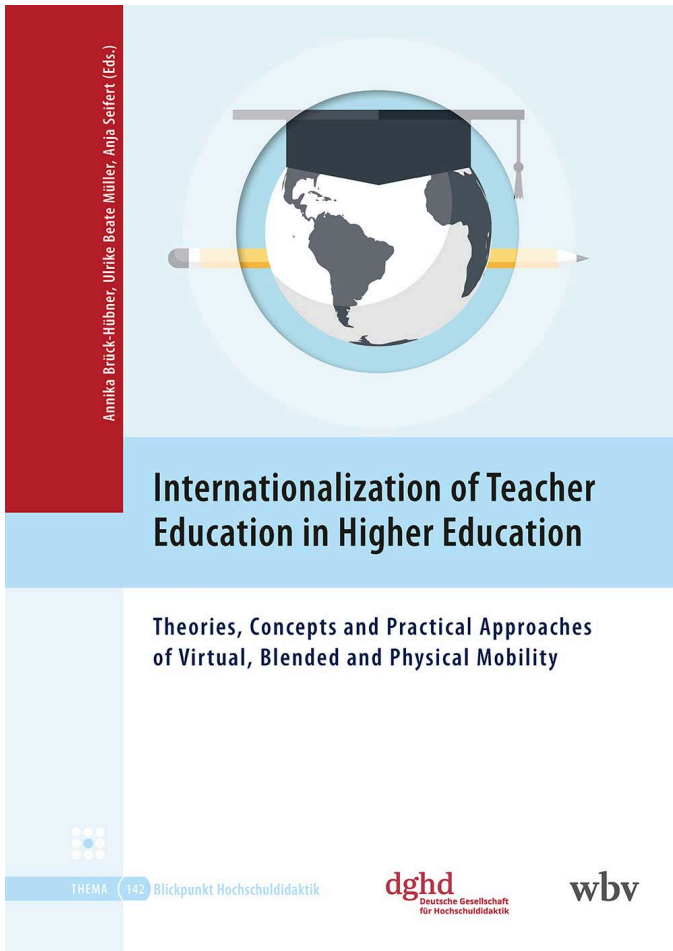


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Potentials and Barriers of (Virtual) Internationalization of Teacher Education

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Keywords: international mobility, intercultural exchange, intercultural competencies, virtual mobility, virtual exchange

1 Introduction

It has been said that the major global challenges of this century can only be overcome by close cooperation between international partners (Wit & Altbach, 2021, p. 44). To do this, all actors involved need global knowledge, diverse (intercultural) skills, openness to the world and an awareness and understanding of intercultural similarities and differences (c. f. Osakwe et al., 2022, p. 25). According to the German Rectors' Conference (HRK, 2017) students shall be equipped “adequately to practice responsible global citizenship” by developing intercultural competences, intercultural communication and critical reflection of their own perspective (ibid., p. 3 f). Referring to teachers and teacher education in specific, teachers not only have to deal productively with the increasing heterogeneity of the student body in schools, they also have the task of adequately preparing students for life in a heterogeneous society and – in the sense of global citizenship – of developing them into responsible, tolerant and interculturally competent adults. The Council of the European Union maintains cross-border mobility – either virtual, blended or physical – as a valuable opportunity and a powerful learning experience for teachers and trainers (2020, p. 5). The aims and advantages of internationalization, particularly in teacher education, are clearly stated (Falkenhagen et al., 2019; Kricke & Kürten, 2015).

The anthology “Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education: Theories, Concepts and Practical Approaches of Virtual, Blended and Physical Mobility” has presented an overview and a concrete insight into different levels of internationalization in teacher education – theoretical foundation, conceptual approaches, and formats of virtual, blended and physical mobility. Through a structure and elaboration like this, the anthology intends to make an important contribution to promoting the internationalization of teacher education in Germany and other countries. A wide range of possibilities for the (virtual) internationalization of teacher education is presented and opportunities and limitations are discussed in various ways.

This article intends to systemize and bundle experiences gathered by the authors of the anthology. For this purpose, all contributors of the book were invited to a web based written interview in January/February 2024 in order to reflect on and explain

their very personal motivation for their commitment to the internationalization of teacher education, as well as the opportunities and limitations they see as the key factors of internationalization. The teams of authors were asked to have at least one person per contribution take part in the survey, 18 of the 42 authors completed the survey. As the survey was anonymous, no further information on the participants can be provided.

2 Reasons for Personal Engagement to Internationalize Teacher Education

In the first question, the authors were asked to indicate the most important aspects for them personally about why they engage for the internationalization of teacher education. The answers can be systemized into seven categories:

1. Promoting a global mindset (broaden horizon and reflection)

The most common reason given by 15 of the participants in the study (83 %) for their commitment to greater internationalisation of teacher education is that they want to help students – but also, through the multiplier function of (future) teachers, society as a whole – to develop a global mindset and awareness, and to see school and social issues not only from a local, but also from an international and global perspective, e. g.:

“[...] Ultimately, the overarching goal is to cultivate a global mindset among educators. This mindset goes beyond the classroom, instilling openness, tolerance, and a genuine appreciation for diversity. By embracing internationalization in teacher education, we equip educators with the tools to shape a new generation of students who are not only academically proficient but also culturally sensitive and globally aware.” (P2)

“Worldwide exchange of experiences, questioning national barriers and categorizations, working against discrimination and othering, education for a transcultural world (teachers as multipliers).” (P8)

In this context, internationalization is linked to the hope that it will enable “learning from one another”, e. g.:

“We know that school systems around the globe are very diverse and so is teacher education. Internationalization gives us a chance to see where we stand, to see what other ways of teaching and learning there might be and to learn from each other [...]” (P12)

“[...] Sharing knowledge and experiences in this manner enables a broader perspective on the work being done domestically and facilitates learning from mistakes made elsewhere.” (P13)

As a central prerequisite for this, some participants of the survey also name the need to broaden the own horizon and to reflect on one’s own location and perspectives. This is where an understanding of “Bildung” comes into play, which has already been ex-

plained in greater depth in other contributions in this anthology (see e. g. Brück-Hübner, 2024; Redecker, 2024; Vogt et al., 2024), e. g.:

“It is important for me that all students get in touch with international perspectives on the contents they deal with, that they interact professionally with pedagogues from other countries and that they reflect on their own perspectives [...]” (P11)

Some of the survey participants’ own internationalization experience also plays a role in this aspect, e. g.

“The most important aspects for me personally to advocate for the internationalization of teacher education are: my personal unforgettable and enriching experiences during stays abroad. And that I experience the same enthusiasm from students who talk about their semesters abroad and the extent to which this has shaped them personally and opened their eyes professionally [...]” (P7)

“[...] I have experienced the positive effect that stays abroad have on personal development and personal attitudes [...]” (P15)

2. Promoting the development of students’ intercultural/diversity competencies

In close connection with the first criterion, five participants (27%) also named the specific goal of teaching their students intercultural skills and encouraging them to deal productively with diversity, e. g.:

“For me, the internationalization of teacher training is of increasing importance in view of the growing multiculturalism of society and the associated increase in heterogeneity in schools. Intercultural skills can only be “taught” to a limited extent, they can best be learned and promoted through intercultural exchange [...]” (P9)

“[...] Especially for language teachers, I find it very important to gain international experience as intercultural (communicative) competence is embedded in the school curriculum but cannot really be taught/learned without international contact and exchange.” (P12)

The objective of promoting intercultural skills was also addressed in numerous contributions in this anthology (e. g. Sauer et al., 2024; Schultheis, 2024).

3. Opportunity for intercultural exchange and to build networks

The establishment of international networks and intercultural exchange is named by four participants as a motivation for internationalization, e. g.:

“[...] Building international networks and collaborations is another key aspect. The connections formed between educators, institutions, and researchers transcend borders, leading to collaborative projects and partnerships. This not only enriches the professional development of teachers but also contributes to the development of global perspectives in teacher education curricula [...]” (P2)

“Networking with colleagues from different countries”. (P3)

Morbach et al. (2024) examined the form such networking can take at lecturer level in this anthology.

4. Personal competence development/professionalization

Four participants also emphasized that they are committed to the internationalization of teacher education because they find it enriching for themselves and their own skills development and professionalization, e. g.:

“In addition, I find the collaboration with international colleagues very appreciative and there is always something new and interesting to experience and learn [...].” (P7)

“Personally, I also find internationalization extremely exciting. Working with colleagues from abroad as well as with (international) students is stimulating and inspiring and I also really enjoy it. I’m constantly learning new things and also making progress in my own professionalization [...].” (P9)

This aspect was also discussed in some of the practical examples in this anthology (e. g. Brück-Hübner, Müller, Joseph, et al., 2024; Renner, 2024).

5. Promoting the development of language competencies

Two participants named the promotion of language skills as a reason for the commitment to internationalization. The gain is not only limited to the students, but also includes the gain for the lecturer:

“[...] Language proficiency is a natural byproduct of exposure to international contexts. Teachers and students alike benefit from improved language skills, a valuable asset in today’s globalized society. This linguistic diversity adds depth to the educational experience, fostering effective communication and understanding [...].” (P2)

“[...] Communicating in English is also a great exercise that I find enriching [...].” (P9)

The argument that (virtual) international courses promote the development of language skills has been emphasized in many of the contributions to this anthology. Particularly noteworthy is the contribution by Bellet (2024), whose project focuses on the goal of preparing students for learning in multilingual classrooms.

6. Idealism/Desire to make a difference

Another perspective that is mentioned as a reason for the commitment to internationalization is the desire to make a contribution. One participant emphasized that he/she finds the topic of internationalization important and therefore wants to work to contextualize it:

“[...] An efficient internationalization of teacher education needs proper conceptions, which I want to contribute to.” (P11)

Another participant opens up the perspective even further and talks about the ideals he would like to pass on:

“[...] Last but not least, I am personally guided by an idealistic idea, namely to contribute to peace, tolerance and understanding through my work in internationalization.” (P7)

7. Prepare Students for the global job market

A final perspective put forward by one participant is that he would like to support students in qualifying for the global job market:

“[...] Moreover, an internationalized teacher education system prepares educators for the global job market. The skills and perspectives gained through international experiences make teachers more adaptable to different educational contexts, expanding their career opportunities and making them valuable assets in an increasingly globalized workforce [...]” (P2)

3 Chances for (Virtual) International Teacher Education

Secondly, the authors were asked to describe the most important chances for (virtual) international teacher education that they currently see. Many aspects were stated to be relevant for students and educators, some only for either students or educators. The answers can be put into six categories:

1. Change of perspective

Almost every second participant (8 of 18, 44%) described a change of perspective that he/she thinks to be an important chance, e. g.:

“[...] have the opportunity to expand or change their previous horizons and understanding.” (P7)

“To overcome the national perspectives of the national educational systems.” (P1)

2. Chance to work sustainably

8 of 18 (44%) participants indicated chances, which they especially see in using virtual formats of internationalization (see e. g. von Lieres & Lang, 2024; Wild, 2024; Nierste, 2024b; Kaiser & Biehl, 2024; all in this anthology). All of them address aspects of sustainability in sense of a broad concept referring to sustainability of resources:

“Virtual international teacher education programs enable location-independent cultural exchange and, moreover, are resource-efficient.” (P4)

Additionally, accessibility, inclusivity, and flexibility can be regarded as interrelated with sustainability and are mentioned in this context as well. The aspects of sustainability and inclusion have been reflected in relation to internationalization in other articles of the anthology as well (see e. g. Buddeberg et al., 2024; Morbach et al., 2024; Müller, 2024; Seitz & Demo, 2024; Vogt et al., 2024).

Examples for this are the following statements:

“Accessibility to a broad group of students (finances, organization, inclusion of people with disabilities.)” (P16)

“[...] digital flexibility of time and place.” (P8)

3. Fostering intercultural competencies

Intercultural Competencies were seen by 5 of 18 (28 %) participants as an important gain for students and for educators, e. g.:

“For me, internationalization has the great potential to prepare student teachers more sensitively for exchanges with people from other cultures or with other cultural backgrounds [...]” (P9).

“[...] Moreover, virtual international teacher education promotes cultural exchange and understanding. Through virtual classrooms, educators can expose themselves and their students to diverse cultures, languages, and teaching styles. This exposure nurtures cultural competence, an essential skill for educators in today’s interconnected world.” (P1)

4. Chance to exchange and network internationally

Some participants (4 of 18, 22 %) highlight the opportunity to exchange internationally, as other articles in this anthology have also discussed (see e. g. Brück-Hübner, Müller, Joseph, et al., 2024; Bürger & Enders, 2024):

“[...] networking and connecting worldwide (especially with students who do not have the means to travel abroad), exchange about commonalities and differences in teaching and learning.” (P5)

“[...] fosters a global community of educators who can easily exchange ideas, share best practices, and collaborate on projects.” (P1)

5. Improve language abilities

A chance to improve language competencies is seen by three participants (17 %), which is described in the following statements:

“[...] Furthermore, virtual international teacher education enhances language proficiency. Engaging with peers from different linguistic backgrounds on virtual platforms provides an immersive language learning experience. This linguistic diversity not only improves communication skills but also enriches the overall educational experience for both teachers and students.” (P1)

“I see the most important chances of internationalization in teacher training in general in the possibility for students to come into contact with other languages [...]” (P7)

6. Improve personal competencies

Further single contributions show a chance for personal competence development:

“[...], increase in flexibility when you are confronted with unforeseen situations [...]” (P5)

4 Barriers for (Virtual) International Teacher Education

In addition to all the advantages that are seen in the context of internationalization in teacher education and that are attributed to higher education didactic events in the context of internationalization, there are difficulties and obstacles in the concrete imple-

mentation (see also e. g. Bartels et al., 2024; Brück-Hübner & Nierste, 2024, both in this anthology).

The third question of the survey dealt with the most important barriers of virtual international teacher education that the authors currently see.

1. National orientation in teacher education's policy

One important problem area mentioned by about half of the participants ($n = 9$; 50 %) focuses on the national orientation of teacher education and the resulting structures and framework conditions. In Germany in particular, federalism is already making it more difficult to organize teacher education across state borders. The problem is becoming even more difficult across national borders. In many cases, genuine internationalization is not desired or is made more difficult by educational policy requirements. This also includes the fact that universities in Germany not only have a different division into semesters or trimesters compared to European or international countries and thus different start and end times of studies, but that there are already differences within the federal states referring to rhythms and curricula, e. g.:

“I see the biggest hurdles for the internationalization of teacher training in Germany in general as being the federal state-specific requirements for teacher training. The picture is similar worldwide: the study structure and curricula are very different, which makes direct comparability difficult. Therefore, methods beyond direct comparison are a promising approach. Furthermore, the organizational effort, different semester times and study requirements, financial resources, linguistic and intercultural difficulties as well as the political situation in some countries represent obstacles to the internationalization of teacher training that should not be underestimated.” (P7)

“We know that school systems around the globe are very diverse and so is teacher education.” (P 13)

Some answers point out very decidedly that how the regulations are dealt with depends on the respective location, country, region and also university, and that socio-cultural differences also play a role in how freely the requirements are dealt with. In addition, legal hurdles and problems are mentioned such as regulatory barriers as described in the following statement:

“Additionally, socio-political factors can impede international collaborations. Regulatory barriers, visa restrictions, and geopolitical tensions may limit the mobility of educators and hinder the seamless exchange of ideas and best practices on a global scale. Furthermore, the effectiveness of virtual international teacher education depends heavily on the willingness and commitment of educational institutions and policymakers to adapt and invest in this mode of learning. Resistance to change, traditional mindsets, and budget constraints can act as formidable barriers to the widespread adoption of virtual international teacher education initiatives.” (P 2).

The challenges of quality assurance and mutual accreditation are also closely linked to the national orientation of higher education e. g.:

“The absence of a universally recognized framework for evaluating and accrediting virtual international teacher education programs is another challenge. This lack of standardization may lead to disparities in the quality and recognition of virtual initiatives, impacting the credibility and transferability of acquired skills and knowledge.” (P2)

“Lack of accreditation and lack of support from home university.” (P 4)

The strong national orientation can also lead to a lack of institutional recognition of internationalization, e. g.

“Currently, virtual international teacher education is not established enough. In Germany especially, we are very conservative when it comes to teacher education. In many specialist areas, the idea is widespread that an international mobility is not necessary because Maths, for example, is the same everywhere in the world [...]” (P5)

In this context, internationalization often also competes with other key issues that are of national importance, see e. g.

“[...] competition between internationalization and other important topics such as teacher shortages, digitalization and inclusion [...]” (P15)

This also has an effect on the general willingness and interest of student teachers to participate in internationalization measures, e. g.

“Students might not always see the benefit in internationalising themselves. They are neither interested in going abroad for studying nor in virtual formats.” (P17)

In this anthology, the central importance of framework conditions and their influence on internationalization measures has been pointed out in many of the contributions. The articles by Nierste (2024a) and Brück-Hübner & Nierste (2024) are particularly important here.

2. Organize a fitting cooperation

Closely related to the first challenge is the second central challenge associated with the (virtual) internationalization of teacher education: 50 % of the participants stated that finding a suitable cooperation across borders is not so easy. The factors that have to fit are manifold, including suitable university framework conditions, e. g.:

“[...] a fit for official module/course descriptions [...], teaching periods, grading systems and criteria, attendance [...]” (P12)

But also convictions, e. g.:

“You need [...] a system of joint values and aims.” (P1)

“Different attitudes towards learning, teaching and the aims of education [...]” (P8)

as well as organizational factors, such as the time difference, e. g.:

“Moreover, coordinating schedules across different time zones presents a logistical challenge, making real-time engagement difficult.” (P13)

3. Technical Resources, problems and competencies

50 percent of participants of the survey (n = 9) also address technology-related challenges in their boundaries. The frequency can also be explained by the fact that virtual forms of internationalization were the focus of an excessive amount of attention in this book compared to others. This criterion can be divided into different sub-categories.

On the one hand, it is about the basic equipment and availability of technical devices, but also about the stability of the Internet connection, which is a prerequisite for virtual forms of internationalization to take place at all, e. g.:

“Limited internet connectivity, restricted access to computers or other digital devices can hinder the implementation of virtual teaching methods [...]” (P 5).

“[...] participants need to have a reliable internet connection as well as a camera and microphone to ensure they are clearly visible and audible to others [...]” (P13)

The digital divide and the lack of digital skills on the part of both lecturers and students also play an important role.

“[...] You need digital skills [...]” (P2)

This is also accompanied by the challenge that different universities work with different tools and systems, which in turn makes collaboration more difficult, e. g.:

“[...] Another barrier is the lack of standardized technology infrastructure and digital literacy across educational institutions globally. Inconsistent access to high-quality digital tools and insufficient training in utilizing virtual platforms can hinder educators’ ability to fully leverage the benefits of virtual international teacher education.” (P2)

“[...] administrative restrictions like access (login-in) to course rooms [...]” (P14)

4. Language barriers

A key challenge identified by 8 of the survey participants (44%) is speaking, teaching and learning in a foreign language, e. g.:

“The biggest barrier is certainly language. I notice this time and time again when talking to students – but also lecturers. I often stumble with the language myself and it is simply much more difficult than communicating in German. This is probably one of the main reasons why it’s not so easy to motivate enough students to take part in the courses.” (P9)

“Additionally, language barriers can hinder communication and collaboration among participants, as not everyone may be proficient in the common language used, often English.” (P13)

In addition to the general challenges of communicating in another language, the different professional vocabularies and understandings associated with the individual constructs, which differ internationally, also play a central role (see also Seifert, 2024, in this anthology).

“Specific languages and national foci of didactic material for university teaching which makes it hard to refer on from an international point of view.” (P6).

5. Support for the lecturers

Five of the participants (28 %) in the survey also emphasized the lack of suitable support services for lecturers. They relate to different areas.

Firstly, the implementation of (virtual) international courses is challenging and requires decisive didactic expertise, which must be imparted, e. g.

“[...] the lack thereof, the acquisition of skills for university lecturers with regard to didactics in virtual, international teaching settings [...]” (P7)

Secondly, the large amount of work involved in running (virtual) international courses is emphasized, for which there is unfortunately too little assistance from the universities, e. g.:

“[...] organizing and conducting virtual international teaching is much more time-consuming than “normal” seminars, and especially in COIL seminars, agreements are not always made without conflict. It takes a lot of work to coordinate the respective interests and needs in such a way that everyone continues to get along well and the cooperation is productive [...] Due to the high workload, the lack of support from the universities is also a challenge for me as a lecturer. We have to keep finding new funding for tutorial support, for example, and there is also no reduction in workload at other levels (e. g. reduction in teaching load). – I can therefore understand very well if colleagues are not willing to make this great effort.” (P8)

In addition, the desire for more support in the international search for partners, the support by language development and the provision of technical equipment is also mentioned, e. g.:

“[...] the opening up of opportunities for university lecturers to find international partners for virtual cooperation, the support of foreign language skills of university lecturers and students as well as the provision of technical equipment.” (P7).

The support structures needed for (virtual) international teaching have also been analyzed in depth by Brück-Hübner and Nierste (2024) in this anthology.

6. Successful intercultural exchange

The final category named by four participants (22 %) is the challenge of a successful intercultural exchange – especially in the virtual space, e. g.:

“[...] While virtual platforms provide opportunities for cultural exchange, they may not fully address the complexities of diverse cultural contexts. [...] the nature of virtual interactions may sometimes limit the depth of personal connections and networks formed between educators. The absence of face-to-face interactions can make it challenging to build strong, lasting professional relationships and collaborative partnerships, which are often crucial in the field of education [...]” (P2)

“Lack of personal interaction (depending on the methods used) [...]” (P16)

Cultural differences in particular can lead to conflicts and make cooperation more difficult, e. g.:

“[...] Cultural differences also play a crucial role, as varying norms and expectations can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts, impacting learning outcomes [...]” (P13)

This challenge is also affected by more organizational factors, like e. g. “Time zone differences” (P4).

5 Discussion

This article has presented current reasons, chances and barriers for (virtual) internationalization of teacher education, which have been reported by 18 people with experiences in international teacher education (see figure 1).

Reasons for Personal Engagement	Potential	Barriers
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promoting a global mindset (broaden horizon and reflection) 2. Promoting the development of students' intercultural/ diversity competencies 3. Opportunity for intercultural exchange and to build networks 4. Personal competence development/ professionalization 5. Promoting the development of language competencies 6. Idealism/ Desire to make a difference 7. Prepare students for the global job market 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Change of perspective 2. Chance to work sustainably 3. Fostering intercultural competencies 4. Chance to exchange and network internationally 5. Improve language abilities 6. Improve personal competencies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. National orientation in teacher education's policy 2. Organize a fitting cooperation 3. Technical resources, problems and competencies 4. Language barriers 5. Support of the lecturers 6. Successful intercultural exchange

Figure 1: Overview of the results of the authors' survey

The responses of the anthology's authors who took part in the survey show that there is a clear overlap between the reasons for personal commitment and the potential attributed to internationalization measures. It is also noticeable that most of the authors name several reasons at once. One particular focus – in the sense of the didactic double-decker – is on promoting a global mindset and diversity of perspectives as well as on acquiring skills for dealing with an intercultural classroom. In addition to the perspective on students' skills development, numerous authors also emphasize that

they themselves also benefit from (virtual) internationalization formats and find them personally enriching. Thus, the greatest potential of (virtual) international teacher education is seen in a widening of people's perspectives – students and educators – and in the development of intercultural competencies. Kricke & Kürten (2015) refer to an opening of perspectives through international exchange. The development of intercultural competencies has been stated to be an essential aim of internationalized teacher education (HRK, 2017; Janert, 2022; Pachler & Redondo, 2015), which research has proven to be achieved indeed (European Union, 2019; DAAD, 2023; Kercher & Schifferings, 2019).

The limitations mentioned relate in particular to factors that have an external influence on international courses. Above all, the strong national orientation of teacher education and the associated (political) framework conditions, and the establishment of successful cooperation and dealing with technical challenges are the most frequently named barriers of (virtual) internationalization of teacher education. In addition, teaching and learning in a foreign language is cited as a further hurdle. There is also a desire for more support for lecturers in the (didactic) planning, organization and implementation of international courses. Finally, the authors surveyed also emphasized that it is a major challenge to enable successful intercultural exchange – especially in the digital space (see figure 1).

6 Conclusion and Prospects

The contributions to this anthology have impressively demonstrated how diverse the practice of (virtual) internationalization of teacher education is. The numerous experiences as well as the statements of the internationalization-experienced authors of this anthology not only point to a comprehensive potential for a stronger internationalization of teacher education, but also demonstrate the conviction with which practitioners are committed to the implementation of (virtual) internationalization. In many cases, it is clear that there are always external constraints that limit freedom of action and can therefore also prevent innovation. However, the common voice that emanates from the contributions in this collection shows that greater internationalization of teacher education is a worthy goal that can make a central contribution to improving teacher education and, above all, to more peace, justice, and inclusive societies.

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