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Mobility Models for a Future in Flux: Exploring Alternatives in European Teacher Education

Abstract

Mobility has become a key element in European teacher education, aiming to equip future educators with intercultural skills, transnational perspectives, and the ability to teach in diverse and dynamic contexts. Traditionally, long-term mobilities – often supported through Erasmus+ – have shaped the landscape of international experiences in initial teacher education. However, these longer formats are not suitable for all students due to time, financial, and/or curricular constraints. The Erasmus+ Teacher Academy (*teff*) focuses on short-term mobility models as a complementary alternative. This contribution presents experiences and findings from *teff*, which piloted various forms of short mobility, including virtual, hybrid and blended learning formats. The experiences suggest that while short mobilities cannot replace the depth of long-term mobility, they offer accessible and scalable opportunities to internationalize teacher education and prepare future teachers for a profession in flux.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Mobility, Internationalisation

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education in Europe has been a goal for most European countries, and the European Union for many years. Building on ideas which first appeared in the 1960s, the aim was to create international networks and collaborations, support lifelong learning, initiate intercultural competence, and encourage a more democratic and inclusive living environment (International Labour Organization, 1966; UNESCO, 2023; Pedersen, 2023). Sieber and Mantel (2012) outlined the strategic value of internationalisation of teacher education and how international discourses shape local teacher education programmes. The European Union mentions the importance of (future) teachers as multipliers for next generations (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2015; Pedersen, 2023). This is linked to the expectation that future teachers who have spent time abroad or dealt with global cross-cutting issues will have a higher level of intercultural competence, knowledge of global networks, and a positive perspective on heterogeneous classrooms (Mantel et

al., 2022). In general, it is expected that this will positively influence future teachers' professional personalities (Leutwyler & Meierhans, 2016).

Building on these goals, the international networking of universities and the opportunities to work together abroad with support of Erasmus+ have become increasingly important in teacher training. At the same time, obstacles to study and stay abroad still exist. Missing mobility windows in teacher training programmes, recognition of international academic achievements, caring responsibilities at home and financial burdens are all common examples that highlight the difficulties posed by experiences abroad (Leutwyler, 2014; Mantel et al., 2022; Pedersen, 2023). Taken together, these factors highlight the necessity of innovative new forms of shorter mobility programs. This article briefly outlines a selection of the various mobility options available to teacher training students and presents contributions made by *teff* in this domain.

‘Traditional’ Mobility Models in Teacher Education

The European Union's focus on lifelong learning has gradually become a guiding principle for all policies and strategies promoted at European level, starting with the Lisbon Strategy launched in March 2000. The Lisbon European Council included, among the priorities of Community employment policy, the need to give greater importance to lifelong learning, considering it the foundation of the European social model (European Parliament, 2000). Based on these political choices, all exchange and international mobility programs between the various countries of the European Union are strengthened and the Erasmus+ program acquires central value, especially for the training of students and teachers, both in schools and universities.

Over time, Erasmus+ has funded practical exchanges, with steadily rising numbers of participants (Amendola & Restaino, 2017). These internships and academic exchanges allow students to acquire practical and academic skills, and also increase their instrumental and methodological knowledge compared to other work contexts. Through longer academic exchanges and internships in schools, students can gain language competencies, practical knowledge, and new perspectives on their profession, while simultaneously developing professional and personal skills (Klein & Wikan, 2019). Therefore, longer exchanges funded through Erasmus+ have immense value for teacher education. Longer exchanges offer the opportunity to follow a more structured study path and improve one's learning performance. This encourages the development of a supranational sense of belonging, the building of a profound intercultural mindset, and the transformation of future life plans (Nada & Legutko, 2022). An extended time window allows for a more complete cultural and educational immersion, the experimentation with multiple teaching and working strategies in different institutions and an immersive experience regarding human relationships. However, novel forms of short-term mobility can also offer an enriching experience of educational practices abroad – and can be understood as an expansion of the mobility portfolio for the diverse group of students.

New Mobility Models in Teacher Education

Firstly, The Virtual Exchange (VE) concept encompasses various online collaborative learning initiatives that connect students and educators across diverse cultures under structured academic guidance (O’Dowd & Dolly, 2022). VE allows students to gain intercultural experience without traveling, while teacher educators engage in global collaboration. Gutiérrez et al. (2021) emphasise that VE’s strength lies in its accessibility and ability to reach diverse learners globally, however, it is not inherently inclusive. Its success depends on how well projects represent diverse cultures and ensure equitable participation (O’Dowd, 2023).

Secondly, Blended Mobility Programmes (BIPs), introduced under Erasmus+ 2021–2027 (KA131), strategically combine online learning phases with short periods of physical mobility. BIPs offer short, intensive, and innovative educational experiences, that combine virtual collaboration with brief, in-person mobility (O’Dowd & Werner, 2024, European Union, 2022).

Blended mobility is implemented by the *teff* project and offers numerous opportunities to all participants. The utilization of BIPs ensures greater accessibility, allowing more students to participate in mobility throughout their teacher education, due to lower costs and sufficient financial coverage. Moreover, it gives teacher educators the chance to implement agile new teaching formats, fresh perspectives and cross-cutting topics in teacher training programmes. Thus, blended mobility gives rise to an international experience that did not create excessively long interruptions from study or work commitments at home.

Mobility Opportunities in *teff*: Examples

teff offered several different mobility models. Essential to all *teff* activities was a cross-phased strategy (Springob et al., 2023). A core feature of *teff* activities and events is their inclusion across the entire span of teacher education: students, teacher trainees, and in-service teachers. This has always been a central feature in the design of *teff* activities and has led to innovative and generative learning scenarios in which participants could learn from one another and co-create. In the following sections, a selection of examples are briefly presented.¹

A) *Makerspace and Urban Laboratory*

Working on future scenarios and challenges, the *teff* Future Fiction Makerspace and the Maritime Makerspace, the Urban Laboratory on Changing Cities, and the Hybrid Seminar on Teaching Climate Change all followed similar structures: preparatory online sessions, a two-day workshop on-site in one of the partner countries, and an online follow up meeting. Basic theoretical concepts, methods, and tools were introduced in the preparatory online sessions. The on-site events were used to allow cre-

1 These formats are outlined in other chapters of this volume.

ative collaboration *r* in unique settings, real-world laboratories, with experts and/or pupils. The Hybrid Seminar on Teaching Climate Change also included a testing phase at the respective home location of each participant. Learning, creating, and testing knowledge and methods led to theory-practice transfers. All of these activities centered around problem solving and future thinking scenario methods based on design-based thinking methods.

B) teff Educathon

The *teff* Educathon is “designed to enable student teachers, working teachers, stakeholders from educational practice and practitioners from the EdTech scene come together in interdisciplinary teams to find solutions to current challenges in the digital transformation of the education system [...]” (Benincasa et al., 2025, p. 303). Even though the Educathon can be implemented entirely on-site, the first *teff* Educathon has been organised in a hybrid manner, to engage as many partners as possible. The Educathon included online input, presentations, and group pitches, while teams worked collaboratively at their local institutions.

C) Virtual Lecture & Seminar Series

teff organized two lecture and seminar series. The lecture and seminar series “#teachingtomorrow: Cultivating Diversity and Inclusion in Schools” invited participants not only to 14 online events, but also provided extensive online reading material on the different topics. The lecture series “#teachingtomorrow: Sustainability Education – Preparing Future Teachers for a Changing World” followed a clear structured and moderated discussion, based on presentations by experts from at least two countries/universities per topic.

Conclusion

Due, in part, to the efforts of Erasmus+, international mobility is no longer seen as a rare experience, but as a standard component of training and professional development. International mobility requires careful organization, which unfortunately does not always meet the needs of all participants. A solution to this problem in teacher education lies in the implementation of many different forms/formats of mobility. Mobility can be adapted to suit the aims and needs of an activity and/or its participants, and can be used to introduce innovative ideas in teacher education.

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned ‘traditional’ mobility formats consisting of longer educational exchanges (Bryła, 2015; Kurnaz C, 2020); these, however, are not always possible for all students. To accommodate even more students and in-service teachers, with their different needs and interests, it is important to find a balance between long- and short-format mobility, which we have attempted to explore here within *teff*. The type of event and the specific target group are two important criteria when choosing the best form of mobility. The lecture and seminar series, for example, took place online to reach as many participants as possible. The Mak-

erspaces, on the other hand, took place in blended learning formats and included on-site elements, attempting to create real-world laboratories.

The activity's objective should always align with the chosen mode of mobility. For example, the first *teff* Educathon was initially planned to be carried out on-site. However, when designing the activity, the mode of mobility was changed to test and evaluate the Educathon with as many European partners and stakeholders as possible. Changing the setting to online allowed students, teacher educators and teachers to work together over one day across Europe – without travelling anywhere. This way, international exchange was made possible without any organisational burdens for participants.

Generally regarding mobility, well-planned communication strategies are required to make offers and relevant information available and accessible. Information must be made available promptly and comprehensively to advertise effectively and respond to any queries from potential international participants. This creates additional work in a project involving many collaborators and untested structures. Within and beyond the *teff* network, partners develop and implement Erasmus+ BIPs and report rising applications and great interest of students. From the perspective of *teff* partners, the additional opportunities offered by new innovative mobility options are an attractive complement to longer stays abroad, which can focus on new and/or interdisciplinary topics and methods, and contribute to international exchange. The implementation of BIPs and the associated funding from Erasmus+ are ideally suited for this purpose.

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