

EPTE-Programme: Cross-national Teacher Education

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„It can be said that internationalisation of education is inevitable as the advancement of knowledge and understanding is a global enterprise that has no borders.“

KNIGHT, J./DE WIT, H. (1995), p.13

DEVELOPMENT OF EPTE

Teaching and studying across borders in teacher education has started to move from the fringe of institutional interest to a central challenge at the PH ÖÖ. The objective is to go beyond international activities which already have gained a certain established tradition such as mobility programmes for students and staff and to offer new innovative approaches that foster the internationalisation of the teaching and learning processes in the curriculum itself. First steps have been made some years ago by starting to internationalise some small bits of the curriculum in the course of a module titled „Teaching across borders“ offered for outgoing and incoming students.

The internationalisation strategies embrace two objectives: fostering the exchange and understanding between different educational realities of HEIs located in other countries and making staff and students participate in an international and intercultural study and research community. Yet, it appears that the internationalisation of the PH ÖÖ is driven by a preoccupation of major interest: do the different measures taken in the field of internationali-

sation have a sustainable impact on individual students and staff as well as on the institution as a whole? Do the results of projects elaborated with international partners find their role and space in the national curricula as envisaged by the EU policy? It cannot be denied that structural obstacles often hinder their implementation on a long-term basis, which raises questions about the efforts. As Michael Fullan remarked: “Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas.” (Fullan quoted by Scott, 2003). This article, however, presents a programme that has the potential to contribute in a significant way to the quality of education and research for the benefit of the students and teachers.

The Pädagogische Hochschule OÖ has been involved for several years in the implementation of an original Erasmus Curriculum Development Project, which has resulted in a 60 ECTS points study programme for future primary school teachers. There is no doubt that such an involvement also presents a lot of challenges when carrying out such a study programme year after year in cooperation with the partner universities. I shall revert to these challenges after having detailed the main issues concerning the development of said study programme.

Seven European partner HEIs were involved in the development of EPTE (European Primary Teacher Education) over a period of two years from 2009 to 2011:

- Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen, *the Netherlands*
- *Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal*
- *Pädagogische Hochschule Oberösterreich, Linz, Austria*
- *Unywrsitet Marii Curie-Sklodowskiej, Lublin, Poland*
- *Univerzity Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, Nitra, Slovak Republic*
- *Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta, Ljubljana, Slovenia*
- *Umeå Universitet, School of Education, Umeå, Sweden*

Several principles have served as guidelines for the construction of this European curriculum. From the very beginning of this cooperation, the challenge was to gain – in long debates – a common understanding of what is to be seen as “good education”, “European education” and “European teachers”. There was a common agreement among all partners that EPTE’s overarching principles, the respect of human rights, diversity and inclusiveness,

should be reflected in education; furthermore, that the EPTE curriculum should strongly support the idea of democracy and a European identity based on a sense of solidarity and interdependency and should promote the “European dimension in education”, as already postulated by the Treaty of Maastricht in article 126.1, being the core of European policies.

Thus, the concept of EPTE promotes this “European dimension” in several ways: on the one hand the students participating in EPTE are supposed to be **internationally mixed**, 3-4 students being sent from each involved **partner institution**. This should then allow the EPTE students to experience **intensive academic** and cultural contrast. On the other hand each module is taught by a team of internationally mixed experts, each of them applying different teaching approaches according to their educational and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the original 60 ECTS (=two semesters) programme was supposed to include two mobilities for the students, who would study at another consortium’s university each semester. Unfortunately, as the EU-rules for funding mobility did not allow a double mobility to two different universities, it was decided to reduce the programme to one semester taking place once a year at one of the universities involved in the development process.

The universities’ senate or study board had to ratify the EPTE study programme in order to make sure that the home institutions would recognize the students’ performances after their return. The two partner universities in Poland and Sweden, however, decided for internal reasons not to bind themselves to this commitment and to quit the consortium instead. The five remaining universities in Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia started to implement the EPTE study programme for the first time in winter term 2012 at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia. The following year, it was decided to carry out EPTE during summer term only, due to the differences in the academic calendar of each university. In the meantime, EPTE has taken place at the Pädagogische Hochschule OÖ, Austria, and at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, SK. In summer term 2016, it will take place at the Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal.

The study programme comprises 6 modules of 5 credits each and covers the following areas:

- Society, Culture and Education
- Plurilingual and Intercultural Education
- Environment and Sustainable Development
- Mathematics
- Arts
- Pedagogy and Didactics

School practice as well as a local language course, complete these five modules, which are composed to one-third of contact hours and to two thirds of students' self study.

FRAMEWORK OF EPTE

Concerning the organisational framework of EPTE, one of the major advantages is the fact that EPTE provides a complete programme of 30 ECTS in English as a package for future primary school teacher students. There is no necessity to search among the courses offered at the receiving university in order to establish a list of courses for the learning agreement, which would meet (often only partly) the expectations and recognition of the home university. All partner universities have acknowledged EPTE, a precondition that guarantees the full recognition after the students' return. Furthermore, as the receiving institution prepares the schedule, students do not any longer have to put efforts into establishing their individual timetable.

Compared to the individual Erasmus students EPTE students are very much guided and obliged to fulfil the whole programme and normally cannot skip a lesson or a module at a whim. It is often experienced that the Erasmus students decrease their workload compared to their studies at the home institution, which in most cases is "translated" into an increase in various leisure time activities. (cf. Tsoukalas 2008, p.133). Studying abroad for the EPTE students, however, means to have a semester *on* and not a semester *off*. (cf. Vande Berg, Paige, Hemming Lou 2012, p.7).

Of course, the EPTE students also benefit from being in an international community with students from very diverse national backgrounds, which is important for European integration. But at the same time, EPTE also facilitates the interaction with local students due to the fact that the receiving institution's own students also participate in this programme. Needless to say

that because of this fact, the EPTE programme contributes to the internationalisation at home. Students who are not mobile may nevertheless take part in this international programme, which can be seen as an interesting alternative to student mobility. "Without denying that the combination of local and international students in the lecture room can make a significant contribution to internationalisation, simply having international students is not sufficient. Unfortunately, countless examples can be given of programmes that are oriented exclusively toward international students or where international student are being added as an isolated group" (de Wit 2012, p. 6). Internationally mixed group work as a principal social working form fosters the interaction between all EPTE students, the local students included. Hence, EPTE students do not experience their study period on the margins of the host society by forming a compact international group without any contact to local students.

Mixed teacher teams contribute to achieve the objective to enhance the international character of EPTE and to intensify its European dimension. Three teachers coming from different countries, using the EU-funding of teacher staff mobility, intervene in each module.

TEACHING IN THE INTERNATIONAL SETTING OF EPTE: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

Working as a teacher in an internationalised environment requires specific or additional competences, which only recently have been discussed in the context of internationalisation at home (cf. Beelen, J., De Wit, H. (ed), 2012):. First of all I must highlight the importance of languages. This does not only concern the high demands in English language skills for being able to teach in that language in the multilingual setting of international student groups: "Proficiency in English is de facto part of any international strategy for learners, teachers and institutions". (EU Communication, 2013.)

The expected competences cover also didactic and intercultural competences, knowledge about different educational systems including different learning and teaching styles and the capacity to embed one's own subject in an international context (cf. Van der Werf, 2012, p.102-103).

Taking over the responsible role as a teacher in EPTE definitively also requires a strong commitment and an open-minded attitude. The teaching

staff is not only expected to teach to internationally diverse groups of students: working in EPTE requires them to feel responsible for the success of the programme and to undertake a much wider variety of activities. The quality of the whole programme depends enormously on the quality of the teachers and their commitment.

Every year it is essential to coordinate the content and learning outcomes among the module's colleagues, and to agree on a common type of assessment, in case if there having been changes in the teams, the objective being to establish a logical progression within the modules as well as among the modules. The lecturers are expected to counsel and supervise domestic and international students in preparation for and during the programme and last but not least they are also in charge of the regular update of the module's bibliography and content. All these tasks are based on maintaining collaborative relations with all partner teachers as well as with the students.

All in all, those who are engaged in EPTE need to be highly committed, both personally and professionally. They need to be openminded and interested in international academic life. "Academic staff have a role to play both as discipline experts and, in an affective way, as genuine cosmopolitan role models (Sanderson, 2011, p.662). Permanent contact with and coordination among the partners and a student-centred teaching approach, which is taking into consideration the diversity of the international student group, reflects the double responsibility of the EPTE teachers.

To structure the coordination of EPTE clear role definitions have been elaborated. In each module there is one teacher responsible for the coordination within the module as well as for the contact with the coordinators of the other modules. The receiving institution fully takes over the planning of the programme schedule respecting the constraints imposed by the curriculum and availability of the teachers. The overall coordination of the whole programme lies in the hands of the steering group, which consists of one or two representatives of each institution. This group meets once a year, to address challenges, which have emerged during the EPTE semester, to design the framework for the following one and to take together decisions about modifications with the objective of improving the programme.

EPTE STUDENTS EVALUATE THEIR STUDY EXPERIENCE

Each receiving institution has conducted an evaluation of the EPTE programme run at their institution with their own instruments. With the exception of the PH OÖ in Linz questionnaires with quantitative and qualitative questions have been used, covering topics such as the organisation, the teaching and learning process in the modules, the assessment system used and the school-practice. During the first run of the programme in Slovenia, the steering committee performed a SWOT analyse. At the PH OÖ, I opted for an interview with all participants together based on questions referring to the topics mentioned above. As the local coordinator at PH OÖ and also teacher in one of the modules I had developed quite an intensive confidential relationship with the students, which seemed to me a good precondition for a fruitful dialogue about how EPTE was experienced and perceived. In this part I will content myself with summarising the most essential issues, which have been raised in the questionnaires or discussion, and which finally served and will serve the steering committee as guidelines for optimising the programme.

Concerning the motivation to participate in EPTE, the students highlighted on the one hand the fact that their home institutions would recognise all credits and on the other that the programme represented a coherent package of modules for primary student teachers and was thus apparently more specific than other Erasmus study programmes. The local students emphasised particularly the fact that they had got a chance to study in an international setting in spite of staying at their home institution. They could experience at home how it is to study "abroad with abroad made more an integrative part of at home" (de Wit, lecture in Vienna, 2014).

With regard to the organisation of content and schedule the major challenge for the receiving institution is to distribute the face to face hours evenly on the whole semester. However, as is frequently the case, the guest teachers benefiting from the Erasmus+ exchange programme are only available for one week, which has an impact on the schedule. Sometimes it was not even possible to avoid intensive weeks with two guest lecturers at the same time, which resulted in approximately 30 contact hours in one week, far too much according to the students. The complexity of the organisation of the schedule is without doubt an important challenge. The coor-

dinator at the receiving institution has not only to cope with time constraints on behalf of the guest teachers but also to respect the progression among the modules.

Concerning the teaching and learning processes the students expressed their opinions about “what is taught and learnt” and “how it is taught and learnt” in EPTE. As one student put it: “EPTE was a good mixture of different topics and scientific disciplines. When I look back at it now, there were a lot of contents we dealt with” (Sarah, written communication, June 2015).

Additionally, the students also very much appreciated the fact that they had teachers from different countries, which for them brought in different perspectives on the content as well as relevant issues from the society the teachers came from. This is a crucial point in EPTE: The teachers’ contributions as well as those of the students create a fantastic exchange forum about educational topics that arise in the different societies. Apparently some students expected to get even more insight in countries’ specific educational challenges as the following quotation shows: “Even though we could have gone more into detail [...]. As in Slovakia (as well as in many other European countries) the problem of Antiziganism is very urgent we could have read something on this topic from scientific approach. It’s history, it’s constructions, [...]” (Sarah, written communication, June 2015). Thus, the EPTE study programme embraces several objectives, in fact. It should underline local, regional, national and international priorities in education.

In general, the students shared the impression that compared with non EPTE Erasmus students at the institution, they had learnt very much in the course of EPTE: an impression that is strengthened by the fact that learning about the “others”, was very much supported by making the students work on given tasks in internationally mixed groups or pairs when appropriate. Nevertheless, according to EPTE students, there is still potential in broadening the students’ horizon and fostering also the development of their intercultural knowledge and competences by offering more space for discussions in the whole community. “They will need many opportunities to interact with each other and share knowledge, ideas and theories from multiple contexts, to explore each other’s and their own culture, conceptual systems and values [...] Students can benefit greatly from working together in culturally mixed small groups but the benefits derived are to a large extent

dependent on the nature of the tasks that they are set, the support they receive prior to and during the task and the rewards they receive for making the effort” (Briguglio, 2006, quoted from Leaks, 2012, p.78).

One of the major challenges is apparently – according to the students’ feedback – the coordination of assessment tasks, which needs a closer cooperation among the teachers in order to avoid similar tasks or too many small tasks per module.

Each receiving institution has so far also established an online working space, so that lecturers and students can put their material and tasks on it. However, in the future it will be necessary to create a platform, which additionally supports all the coordination work required among the teachers. It would not only facilitate the dialogue between the lecturers and the students, but also among the lecturers themselves, in so far as the teachers’ team is always slightly changing from one year to another.

EPTE IN THE FUTURE

The students’ and teachers’ feedback has made its way into the strategic planning of EPTE for the next years. At a first step the steering committee envisages a closer cooperation and coordination among teachers and students concerning content and assessment assignments. In the future internationally mixed student groups of three students will have to present *one* project work connecting *two* EPTE modules. The students will get the same grade for the two modules combined in the project and for the other modules according to the defined assessment in the module. The guidelines for the project work as well as the criteria for the assessment will be presented to the students at the beginning of the teaching period. Special cooperative ateliers provided in the schedule for the students will facilitate the development of tasks in internationally mixed students groups. Thus, the EPTE program demonstrates once more the importance of equipping all students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to ensure success in an international setting in the future.

The teachers for their part will be a decisive catalyst in assisting their students to realise an interdisciplinary task. They shall serve as an example for such an interdisciplinary approach by introducing small parts of interdisciplinary phases, if possible through international team-teaching, which

will probably instigate intensive reflection and discussion among the teachers themselves and thus stimulate thinking on what and how to teach. This sits well with the objective of making EPTE an enriching experience for teachers, too. There is no doubt that the teachers have to benefit, both on a personal and a professional level, from their efforts for EPTE. Answers must be found to the following questions such as: How is it possible to integrate the teachers' experiences in their daily professional lives? Do they discuss their work with their colleagues? How is it possible to connect the students' and their own learning experiences with the home study? Do they feel supported by their institution of origin? I agree completely with Lemke (2012) who points out that "the way lecturers make sense of the process [of internationalisation, added by author] highly affects their commitment."

As a consequence for the future, EPTE will go beyond the mere coordination and teaching activity. Research activities concerning EPTE itself will be undertaken, conferences about internationalisation processes will help to disseminate information as to the further development of EPTE. The study programme will be also accessible to other teacher education institutions interested in contributing to this international curriculum and teaching.

As a further step the curriculum in general will be revisited with the objective of preparing students for the heterogeneous educational reality that is increasingly influenced by international and global migration in a better way. Interdisciplinary approaches and concepts about inclusive education as well as CLIL will become an integrative part of every module.

As can be seen, the whole project of EPTE is not carved in stone. Research on EPTE's impact on students and lecturers based on quantitative and qualitative evaluation shall justify future modifications and hence contribute to the improvement of the study programme.

According to the IAU Global Survey (2014), among the internationalisation activities, outgoing mobility (29%) and international research collaboration (24%) are top-ranked, followed by efforts to strengthen the international content of curricula (14.5%) (Egron-Polak/Hudson, 2014). EPTE, under the condition that the different aspects mentioned above be implemented on a regular basis, has a great potential to mark a milestone in the internationalisation of the involved institutions as a whole.

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