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Key role of teachers in sustainable inter-university education

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Abstract

Over the past decade, European education initiatives have sought to promote collaboration between higher education institutions. This collaboration has been encouraged and facilitated by programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European University Alliances. Although institutional agreements and technology platforms facilitate inter-institutional cooperation, local constraints can hamper the success of collaborative projects. To improve the effectiveness of inter-university educational initiatives, this article proposes that teachers be given a central role once again. More specifically, based on observation of the contributions made to the Portfolio project (Erasmus+ K2, 2022-2024) by five teachers from different European universities, the aim is to reveal a posteriori how teachers play a key role in this type of initiative. This was done by analysing the way in which these teachers coordinated to meet the challenges at local and dislocal levels throughout the various phases of the project's implementation.

Keywords: *networked education, innovative pedagogies, inter-university collaboration, teachers' added value, Portfolio project, Erasmus+*

1. Introduction

The landscape of European higher education has witnessed a transformative shift in the past decade with the initiation of several policy-driven endeavors aimed at fostering the creation of expansive education networks among higher education institutions. Notable among these initiatives are the well-established Erasmus+ program and European University Alliances, which serve as linchpins for encouraging transnational education and cooperative agreements. While these initiatives manifest the aspirations of seamless collaboration, the successful implementation of cooperation partnerships encounters multifaceted challenges that extend beyond the formalities of cross-institutional agreement signatures or the adoption of shared technological platforms.

1.1. The need of hard-core players engagement in collaboration

Coordination plays a crucial role in elevating the quality of education and fostering both professional and organizational growth within educational institutions. This principle extends beyond mere administrative tasks, positioning itself as a vital catalyst for transformative change. It is essential to recognize coordination not just as a logistical tool, but as a strategic mechanism designed to cultivate an environment where autonomy, creativity, and collaboration flourish among educators (Bolarin–Martínez, 2015). Understanding the significance of coordination requires seeing it as more than a structural necessity; it is a dynamic process that empowers educators to take deliberate actions towards their professional development and the enhancement of their teaching practices. By intentionally engaging in cooperative activities, educators can share insights, experiment with innovative teaching methods, and collectively tackle challenges, thereby enriching the learning experience for students. The emphasis on 'intentionally involved' educators highlights the importance of active participation and engagement in the process of coordination (Bolarin–Martínez, 2015). It suggests that for coordination to be truly effective, it should encourage teachers to be proactive in their approach to collaboration, seeking opportunities to contribute their unique perspectives and expertise. This intentional involvement is key to creating a vibrant academic community that values continuous improvement, adaptability, and shared responsibility. Moreover, the promotion of autonomy and creativity through coordination underscores the need for educational systems to support teachers in exploring new pedagogical approaches and developing their instructional strategies. By fostering a culture of innovation, where educators feel empowered to experiment and take risks, coordination can lead to more engaging and effective teaching practices.

1.2. Legal and technological top-down approaches limitations

Unfortunately, verry often, the approach used to foster inter-university collaboration overlooks the critical role of intentionally engaged teachers. Many initiatives aimed at promoting collaboration between universities tend to focus narrowly on administrative alignments and superficial partnerships, neglecting the profound impact that a truly coordinated effort could have on enhancing autonomy, creativity, and cooperative activity among faculty members.

Indeed, the approach commonly employed to foster inter-university collaboration is predominantly centered on the technical development of common platforms or the establishment of legal infrastructures, without a genuine connection to the activities of those who are the lifeblood of the university—namely, the teachers. This technocratic and legalistic focus overlooks the essential human element and the organic interactions that are crucial for nurturing a vibrant academic community. By concentrating on hardware, software, and formal agreements, these efforts often fail to address the needs, aspirations, and creative potential of the educators themselves. Such an approach neglects the fact that meaningful collaboration arises from the exchange of ideas, shared experiences, and the collective pursuit of educational

excellence. Moreover, the success and the sustainability of inter-university collaborations is heavily base on the capacity of middle-positioned actors as teachers, to correctly articulate global and local objectives. We claim that, to handle the multi-level setup of inter-university collaboration, the middle level of teachers is paramount.

Concretely, bypassing teachers in the efforts to foster inter-university collaboration carries significant adverse consequences that undermine the initiative's effectiveness and sustainability. When pedagogical activities across universities are designed without input from teachers, it becomes increasingly difficult to engage educators who are expected to adapt to these preconceived structures. This approach disregards the importance of aligning with educators' teaching philosophies or practical needs, leading to a lack of interest or willingness to participate in such collaborations. As a result, the potential for enriching the educational experience through diverse pedagogical approaches is significantly underutilized.

The absence of teacher involvement in the planning and execution stages of collaborative education creates a substantial knowledge gap regarding the requirements for effective cooperation. This gap manifests both locally and globally, affecting the ability of educators from different institutions to collaborate effectively and aligning institutional requirements from various universities. Without a mutual understanding and shared objectives, collaborative efforts can become disjointed and inefficient, a mere temporally response to an institutional demand.

2. The transformative potential of middle positioned key actors

In general, the tension between overarching strategic goals set at high management levels and the intricate realities faced by individual institutions has been a focal point of significant academic interest (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004; Enders & de Boer, 2009). Within the context of inter-university collaboration, the critical role of teachers goes beyond the classical critique of top-down approaches. Empowering teachers within these initiatives serves as a method of achieving what neither technical nor legal platforms can accomplish, that is, to find local implementations for global ambitions. This requires a dual vision that encompasses both context and the capacity to exert influence at various levels of agency.

This research seeks to address the pressing problem of HEIs local constraints threatening the attainment of broader strategic goals in collaborative educational projects. The focus is on the crucial role that teachers, as key actors at the grassroots level, play in bridging the gap between global policy objectives and local operational realities. Literature indicates that a bottom-up approach, where the agency of teachers is acknowledged and leveraged, can enhance the success of collaborative educational initiatives (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2007). Identifying challenges in project development, understanding the dynamics of education coordination, and exploring

the interplay of top-down and bottom-up approaches are integral components of this research inquiry.

The primary objective of this study is to unravel the added value brought by teachers from five distinct European universities participating in an inter-university pedagogical project—specifically, the Portfolio project under Erasmus+ KA2 (2022-2024). We examine teachers' contributions across critical phases of the implementation process:

> Project proposal: phase in which teachers coordinate to implement the different project activities as originally conceived by the proposal
> Chaos: phase in which teachers experience the challenges emerging during the project implementation
> Solution: phase in which teachers coordinate to implementing solutions for project challenges

This research aims to provide nuanced insights into the coordination efforts of teachers in navigating both local (HEI level) and global challenges (project level) in building the solution.

In light of the aforementioned context and objectives, the central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do teachers, engaged in inter-university collaboration within the framework of the Portfolio project (Erasmus+ K2, 2022-2024), contribute to the successful implementation of the project by addressing local constraints and aligning with global project requirements?

3. What inter-university collaboration mean and how to expand this definition

Collaborative networking among professionals who are involved in education (leaders, educators, scholars, policymakers and other educational and social agents) is essential to the success of projects, and even more so in these new times of uncertainty, when face-to-face human interactions are less frequent due to the COVID-19 crisis. (Harris and Jones, 2020). Collaboration has become a beacon of good practice for innovation and improved learning (Azorín, 2017; López-Yañez & al., 2014; Prenger & al., 2021; Robinson & al., 2020; Schnellert & Butler, 2020). It has become a permanent feature of school life as it can foster and strengthen professional links and communication among stakeholders (Azorín, 2020; Abellan, 2020; Harris, 2020). Collaboration has become a necessary component in adapting to the demands of contemporary education (Azorín, 2020). It has become a tool for better connectivity between stakeholders with the different levels of the system to achieve defined educational goals. It is an innovative paradigm that promotes school development and enables problems to be solved collaboratively and flexibly (Azorín & Fullan 2022).

In the field of education, collaboration draws on alliances and connections between education stakeholders. Collaboration is associated with an extensive group or system of connected people or organizations with similar interest that interact and exchange knowledge for mutual

assistance, support, and learning (Hadfield & al., 2006; Kools & Stoll, 2016). Also, it is related to different institutions and professionals who have diverse roles and work together in order to achieve their common goals (Azorín & al., 2020).

It is said (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016) that collaborative education leads towards: a) better student learning outcomes; b) interchange of effective pedagogy practices; c) a development of collaborative inquiry; d) growth of interaction and partnerships.

Common research topics about collaborative education (Azorín, 2022) include: the emphasis on the power of community, the possibility of learning from differences and overcoming isolation, the development of interconnected systems or ecosystems, the need to cross borders and work towards a school without walls, the potential for more effective management of resources, the driving force for change and the effective improvement of schools through networking.

In the first approach to collaboration, the coordination efforts seek to leverage the different "resources" distributed among multiple destinations, for example, students, teachers, and materials belonging to a higher education consortium. Research on distributed education focus on how the different resources interact, for example, through e-learning or mobile learning, and how these interactions behave, for example, synchronically or asynchronically (e.g., Oblinger & al., 2001). The use of existing resources distributed in multiple locations tends to be considered as a great opportunity in terms of sustainability, while "decentralization" (of resources) is usually claimed to be an innovative added value for learning.

What seems relevant for the development of distributed education is that the execution is not that complex. To implement it, interested institutions advocate to develop the necessary technological infrastructure and set the "legal frameworks", if missing.

In the second approach to collaboration, coordination efforts leverage the power of the "network", i.e., the consortium. Unlike the distributed perspective, the networked education approach draws on the potential of the partnership, especially in solving problems, exchanging knowledge or, broadly speaking, achieving a common goal (Azorín & al., 2020). Thus, research on "network education" assumes that stakeholders play an important role in ensuring collaborative education. However, this assumption still lacks sufficient empirical evidence.

4. Testing networked education

We tested networked education in a project in which a consortium of five European universities design and implement a micro-minor under a coordination scheme which allow teachers and pedagogical staff to identify the needs belonging to both the global and the local dimensions of cooperation. While the global dimension includes the inter-institutional requirements to execute the activity, the local one mainly includes the pedagogical needs of the dyad teacher-student. We claim that the success of collaborative education relies on the ability to articulate the global

and the local dimensions. This case study corresponds to an Erasmus+ KA2 project, known as "Portfolio", which serves as an exemplar of how successful distributed education can be achieved when stakeholders are actively involved in the coordination process.

We claim that for succeeding to install inter-university education, the key role of teachers needs to be push forward. Teachers can engage in peer-to-peer collaboration with colleagues from different institutions. Building professional networks and communities of practice can facilitate the sharing of experiences, resources, and effective strategies for overcoming coordination challenges. Teachers can promote cultural sensitivity and inclusive teaching practices. Incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum, fostering open discussions, and embracing inclusive teaching methods contribute to a positive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers can promote multilingual support in online joint programs. Encouraging language exchange initiatives and providing language resources can help create an inclusive learning environment. Teachers can organize workshops or training sessions on credit transfer and recognition processes. Providing guidance on how to navigate credit systems and ensuring transparency in qualification recognition can empower students and facilitate smoother coordination. Teachers can actively participate in the curriculum development process, sharing insights, and collaborating with colleagues from other institutions. They can contribute to creating a curriculum that reflects a balance of perspectives and meets academic standards.

To do this, as explained above, we rely on a case study, the 'Portfolio' project, and more specifically on a collection of qualitative data of various kinds. Throughout the project (over more than two years), data was collected in the form of direct, participant or participant-observer observations, focus group interviews conducted by the coordinator with the five teachers from the partner universities, and questionnaires for both students and teachers/instructors.

5. Results: teachers' key role in managing local and global contexts and stakeholders

The role of teachers in the inter-university education can be summarize in five dimensions: Institutional recognition strategy, Preparation, Promotion and registration, Execution, and Certification, each containing specific tasks that can be coordinated at global and/or local levels. A global-level task is ruled by top-hierarchies of the consortium; thus, they involve decisions that cannot be made by the teachers. On the contrary, a local-level task can be ruled by low-hierarchies, which implies that a decision can be easily made by teachers.

Although we will not delve into all sub-dimensions in the subsequent sections, Figure 1 presents the complete array of task interdependencies critical for the implementation of the activity. In the following section, we will discuss the principal aspects and lessons from the a posteriori analysis, which is based on the continuous feedback collection obtained during the execution of the project.

Figure 1. Task dimensions for developing inter-university collaboration. Source: article authors (2023).

5.1. Institutional recognition. This dimension involves three tasks

Transversal theme definition: Involving global and local levels of coordination, this task involves determining the transversal topic at an early stage. In the original proposal, the "entrepreneurship" was defined as a transversal topic for the minor content. Teachers from consortium universities warned that discussing certain European values could be sensitive at an institutional level. Indeed, the value of "democracy" intended to be developed during the summer school had to be shaped carefully by the coordinator in charge of it. Working with "European values" was conceived as non-problematic.

Carrier course strategy: The consortium adopted the strategy of implementing "carrier courses". This is a solution in which an existing course at University A is used to validate the micro-course taught at University B. Carrier courses are meant to validate ECTS corresponding to the chosen micro-courses. Thus, a 5ECTS carrier course will be able to be validated, for example, through two 2ECTS micro-course and one 1ECTS micro-course. The carrier strategy has allowed the Consortium to coordinate, execute, and ensure the success of this pedagogical innovation, without depending on institutional agreements which need specific institutional inversion. The validation of a carrier course depends on the number of ECTS of the micro-courses chosen by the students. Students may choose a combination of micro-courses (e.g., 2 courses of 2ECTS each) which prevent them to obtain the required number of credits (e.g., 5ECTS). In this case, the consortium agreed to ask students for a compensatory assignment which help them to meet the academic requirements to validate the credits.

Sustainability strategy: Before starting the micro-minor, it should be decided by the consortium how the activity will be embedded in the curriculum of the consortium. It should be determined how the activity will remain active after the second iteration. Importantly, it should be decided how the funding is assured to continue with the activity one the project comes to an end.

5.2. Preparation

Scheme: The micro-minor was conceived as a flexible minor as students can choose their micro-courses according to their needs. Students must be reminded that flexibility does not mean optional. All micro-courses, once enrolled, they are mandatory for students.

Learning competences: Originally, micro-courses are designed based on a set of competences. Competences valid content and allow teachers to monitor what kind of skills needs further development. Competences should be complemented between the online courses and the summer school. Also, competences can be linked to learning objectives and assignments. A full revision of the competences should be made to verify to which extent they were accomplished.

Timings and schedule: Originally, the consortium envisioned a common start across all Consortium Universities. After creating the micro-courses, the consortium determined that the minor kickoff may not match the carrier course kickoff. This should be carefully revised by all consortium partners. The minor kick-off should consider the async lessons, i.e., micro-courses can start before the first synchronic module. A kick-off meeting should be considered before all academic activities start to inform students about the micro-minor concept.

5.3. Promotion

Promotional information: Originally, promotion efforts were not considered given that the original purpose was to target only students following a course from a consortium teacher. Since two institutions had to publicly open the recruitment at a university level, the consortium had to

develop a promotional and recruitment strategy very quickly. For all types of students, the promotion strategy should be supported by visual tools informing on timings and key dates. Visual information can be uploaded to the website. Thus, the website should be constantly updated, with the latest information regarding courses, content, dates, and video pitches. Each university has its own promotional channels. The internal promotion of the activity will heavily depend on local channels. Social media, although we do not know up to which extend, have a promotional impact. The consortium had to re-consider the "value claims" to attract more students. This considered claiming flexibility and micro-modularity as main value claims.

Value listing: The consortium originally claimed that the main value of the Portfolio activity was its distributed design, in which the micro-courses are offered by several institutions. The consortium agreed that the "micro modularity" feature was the essential property since students are granted the possibility of choosing their own learning experience in a flexible way. This "modular" feature is taken into account into the promotional efforts.

5.4. Recruitment

Enrolment: The conceptual version considered a "close recruitment", which involved registering students from partner teachers only. However, given institutional regulations, two universities from the consortium were obliged to open the offer to external participants, i.e., to all programs of the university, not only among partner teacher's students. Some lessons: registration should consider all ethical and inclusion criteria. It is normal that one course of the portfolio attracts most of students' attention. To avoid that a course is overpopulated, a vacancy system should be implanted. Students were confused about the micro-courses they had taken. Then, an email with a summary should be send in the end of the registration process. Valid emails should be provided.

5.5. Execution:

Concept introduction. The original versions considered that each teacher would oversee explaining to students the "micro-minor" concept. A kick-off meeting is necessary. A kick-off presentation about the Minor concept should be conducted before any academic activity. Students must know the "portfolio" concept. It should be decided what to do in cases in which an async module is the first activity for the students

Timings for gradings: In the original proposal, the consortium had anticipated the finalization dates for each micro-course. However, the date for communicating dates to the institutions departments varied considerably across the consortium. There might be a case in which an institution of the consortium needs the final grades earlier in the process, i.e., before students even finish their courses. This should be anticipated in the planification. Universities in the

consortium have different grading systems (1-5; 1-10;1-20, etc.). In the end, teachers should send a file containing the original grade and the converted grade (upon partners decision).

Satisfaction feedback: Satisfaction surveys were planned to be administrated at the end of the courses, even some days after the finalization. This impacted on the response rate. Course-based surveys should be applied during the last session to avoid a low response rate. Teachers should be in charge of asking students to answer the survey. Minor-based survey should be sent by the coordinators after the course-based survey

5.6. Certification:

With regard to the preparation and issue of the certificate, it should be noted that certification was dependent on the availability of grades. There was no agreed strategy for deciding how certificates would be created and how would create them. There should be a defined planning. For example: grades should be collected by the consortium coordinator and then distributed to the responsible (of the carrier course, for instance). It should be decided who (what partner) creates and sends certificates. An automatized process (canvas) is the most convenient. Minor Certificates should be sent only to those completing at least two online courses. If a student finished only one micro-course, then only a micro-course certificate should be issued.

It should be noted that there was no plan to monitor dropouts. A distinction should be made between those who fail courses due to poor results and those who drop out. There should be a mechanism for monitoring students throughout the course. It may be important to verify when a student has dropped out the course, for example, when submitting an assignment, when participating in an evaluation, etc. It is important to have this information before asking students to answer the satisfaction surveys.

6. Conclusions

Our results emphasize the significance of teacher involvement in inter-university collaborations, showcasing how educators play a pivotal role in the success and sustainability of educational projects like the Portfolio project.

One of the primary challenges of inter-university education lies in the sustainability of activities within an inter-organizational framework. A teacher-centered approach proves to be highly efficient in addressing this challenge, as it directly fuels the core activities that keep the universities' educational machinery vibrant and responsive. By focusing on the pivotal role of teachers, such an approach not only enhances collaborative efforts across different institutions but also ensures the long-term viability and success of these educational endeavors. This strategy acknowledges the critical contribution of educators in navigating the complexities of inter-university collaborations, making it a cornerstone for sustainable educational practices.

In the realm of inter-university education, a pivotal area of research is the development and enhancement of collaborative practices, alongside a thorough evaluation of their impact on educational outcomes. Central to this endeavor is the reintegration of teachers into the core of these practices. By focusing on strategies that trigger and strengthen collaboration, and assessing their effectiveness in improving learning, the role of educators becomes essential. This teacher-centric model not only fosters a more dynamic and engaged educational environment but also ensures that the benefits of inter-university collaborations are maximized for both students and faculty.

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