



Mobility Opportunities in Teacher Education at the University of Cologne: Possibilities for Future Teachers to Go Abroad during Their Studies

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Abstract

Teacher education programmes have long been marked by relatively low mobility rates, especially in comparison to other study programmes [1]. This is due to, among other factors, an inherent focus on national and/or regional curricula, and the complex and often rigid structure of the study programmes in teacher education [2][3][4]. The University of Cologne (UoC) has been accommodating the needs and interests of this heterogeneous student group by offering a broad range of mobility opportunities and lowering the barriers for going abroad for many years now. The article will draw on different internationalisation projects and programmes that have been implemented by the Centre for Teacher Education at UoC, in cooperation with internal and external partners. The (perceived) benefits of staying abroad with different programmes will be presented, and challenges and lessons learned with regard to the implementation of internationalisation programmes in teacher education will be addressed. Voices from outgoing students as well as from colleagues responsible for mobility programs will be included to highlight and underline the corresponding points. Based on the presentation of the implemented projects and programmes, the mobility options are discussed in a critical outlook.

Keywords: *Teacher education, internationalisation, professionalisation, short-term and long-term mobility*

1. Introduction: The Importance of Internationalisation in Teacher Education

The implementation of internationalisation, albeit “a core element of teacher education” [5], is often challenging due to factors such as complex study structures, a high number of requirements or lack of mobility windows. Challenges have widely been identified in literature [2][3][4] and lead, together with other factors - e.g. financing difficulties or the fear of ‘losing time’ during one’s studies [6] - to relatively low mobility rates among student teachers, especially in comparison to students from other study programmes [1]. In addition, studies show individual differences between teacher education students and students in other programmes regarding their motivation to go abroad against the backdrop of their career entry and general career opportunities [6][7] which further exacerbate the problem: “Systematic incentives to spend time abroad during teacher training have been largely absent. In addition, the structural and organisational framework for international mobility in the teaching profession is relatively unfavourable” ([6], p. 221). This means that many student teachers cannot experience the benefits that can potentially come with international mobility. Testimonials from student teachers - submitted in written form or collected during counseling sessions and/or seminars at UoC, following their stay abroad - show that time spent abroad is largely perceived to contribute to cultural learning, professional and personal development. All surveyed students reported at least one positive effect, mentioning they had not only significantly improved their foreign language skills, but also acquired new methodological and didactic skills from international educational settings. More importantly, they claimed to have gained a more critical and differentiated view of their own educational socialisation, and a better understanding of people with a different first language and/or a history of migration. They also said they had become more independent, confident and resilient. Eventually, they had been confirmed in their career choice as prospective teachers by experiencing the teaching profession from another perspective:

“One of the important things I learnt and experienced during my semester abroad is that there are always different perspectives and how important it is to be able to put yourself in other



people's shoes. I came into contact with very different opinions on topics such as the school system and education, but also other topics such as Covid, racism, climate change, nutrition, etc. (all of which today's teachers are also concerned with) and found this exchange to be extremely important." (quote from an undergraduate student after a study abroad semester and internship in Namibia)

These personal experiences are in line with previous studies which point to positive changes - even after short study abroad experiences - in students' professional skills, including intercultural awareness, the differentiation of cultural and social identities and intercultural communication skills [8] as well as more complex and critically reflective views on what is considered "good teaching" ([9], p. 71). Those are all skills and competences that could, in fact, be beneficial with respect to many challenges that come with the teaching job, such as the complexity of highly heterogeneous classrooms, fast-developing technologies or the effect of environmental or political crises on schools and societies in general. Students who interned at schools abroad reported new perspectives on their own profession. "The way of teaching and working together at the school inspired me a lot and gave me a new perspective on the teaching profession", one student reported after her internship at a South African school. After an internship in Canada another student said that "my most helpful learning, apart from improving my language skills, was the commitment at school and how important a good community between teachers and pupils can be." These new perspectives on the teaching job could pave the way for much-needed changes and modifications regarding the teaching profession in one's home country, enabling student teachers to push school and education development processes. In a world characterised by change and ambiguity, today's and tomorrow's pupils need to be educated by teachers who are not restricted to their own thinking and are, in fact, capable of 'putting themselves in other people's shoes'. To achieve this, universities need to give student teachers the chance to widen their perspectives in international contexts, both abroad and in their home countries. In addition, thorough preparation as well as follow-up work and consulting needs to be ensured to increase the likelihood of experiencing the aforementioned benefits of international mobility [10].

Internationalisation in teacher education hence needs to gain significance and should be implemented and anchored sustainably in universities' existing structures. In the following, approaches to internationalisation in teacher education at the University of Cologne (UoC) and its Centre for Teacher Education (CfTE) in particular will be illustrated to show how they support (and boost) the topic of internationalisation in teacher education through transparent support structures, projects and programs.

2. Internationalisation in Teacher Education at the University of Cologne (UoC)

"Given the high proportion of teaching programs and students at UoC, the internationalisation of teacher training holds special significance" [11]. It puts teacher education in the spotlight and stresses the importance of internationalisation of future teachers to the UoC, despite the fact that - due to the complexity of the study programme and the involvement of several stakeholders from across the university - this is a challenging endeavor. UoC has been accommodating the needs and interests of a very heterogeneous student group by offering a broad range of mobility opportunities and lowering the barriers for going abroad, and is constantly working on expanding and further professionalising its range of services for students.

2.1 Cooperation and Division of Tasks

UoC is home to up to 13,000 teacher education students. Teacher training is offered at four different faculties (depending on the subjects studied), with all students studying two different subjects in different combinations. In order to include all students involved in teacher training as well as to take account of their different needs and, above all, their specific knowledge, UoC has created a structure involving the various institutions and projects by assigning them different responsibilities: study semesters abroad (at universities worldwide) are organised by the faculties (mainly for European partners) and the International Office (mainly outside of Europe); the CfTE, in cooperation with the International Office, is mainly responsible for organising internships at schools abroad. Consultation hours and information events present students the variety of possibilities for going abroad and point them in the right direction for their specific interest (see fig. 1).

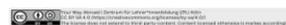
It is also possible for individual institutes to maintain individual partnerships (e.g. with institutions or faculties, based on similar research interests) which students can benefit from and use as contacts for stays abroad.



Both the division of tasks (based on beneficial use of expertise) and successful cooperations are main structural elements within internationalisation of teacher education at UoC. Due to the many different people involved in and responsible for internationalisation at UoC, cooperation between different university institutions has proven to be incredibly important for the success of internationalisation in teacher education in particular. Together with the UoC's Department of International Mobility in the International Office, the CfTE has succeeded in forming a strong university internal partnership that gives internationalisation in teacher education a decisive push. This unique close alliance of two central university institutions has proven to be especially fruitful for teacher education students since it brings together the necessary expertise in teacher education with all its challenges, mobility and funding options, and an international, worldwide (growing) network.



*Please note: Under certain circumstances, Internships and studies can be combined!



Graphic 1- Overview ways abroad for students

2.2 Building and Preserving Networks for Internationalisation in Teacher Education

Since 2012, a diverse network, based on intra-university programmes and a variety of projects, has been established at the CfTE which cooperates with other departments within the university (e.g. the International Office) and with universities, schools and further education institutions all over the world. CfTE also represents UoC in worldwide networks, e.g. the *Teacher Education Network (TEN)*, see teachereducationnetwork.org), in the teacher education arena of the *European University for Well-Being (EUniWell)*, see euniwell.eu or the *Erasmus+ Teacher Academy for a Future in Flux (teff)*, see teff-academy.eu). In the initial stages, this network had been based on a variety of rather intuitive strategies, such as

- using personal contacts as an entry point for further cooperation (initiated by visits or video/phone calls),
- approaching attractive institutions directly for specific projects or programs, and
- using existing university networks that fit teacher education as well.

These strategies still remain important after years of international cooperations at CfTE; but with a significantly bigger network of contacts, CfTE is now in the position to act much more strategically when it comes to making new contacts. At the same time, existing contacts must be maintained and cooperation must be evaluated. Hence, the following steps are being followed when setting up a new project or trying to extend an existing one:

1. analysis of existing partnerships and their usability to the framework conditions of a new project;
2. use of existing structures (if possible) to create synergies, saving resources and strengthening existing networks;
3. recognition of missing aspects in the network and active recruitment of new partners.



At the same time, CfTE itself is also being approached by potential partners who are interested in cooperations and projects. It therefore needs to maintain and expand their network by working on common interests with both new and old partners.

2.3 Mobility Windows for Teacher Students at UoC

At UoC, there are no specific periods for international mobility in the teacher training programme, meaning that going abroad is often seen as an additional option which may lead to an extended total study time. However, in the context of a so-called 'semester abroad', the faculties provide advice on recognising credits from foreign universities to ensure that students do not get the impression of 'losing' valuable study time abroad. In addition, possibilities to connect one's stay abroad with compulsory curricular elements are being promoted. For student teachers, mandatory practical phases - in most cases school internships - are often the preferred way to make this happen. Since one of the CfTE's main tasks is the organisation of such practical phases in general, it is also in their responsibility to consult students on opportunities for internships abroad.

At UoC, there are three practical phases every student teacher has to complete, all with different regulations that are not always compatible with a stay abroad. The 4-week '*vocational field internship*' ('*Berufsfeldpraktikum*'), which can be completed during the semester break, is most suitable for a stay abroad due to its higher flexibility. For students of modern languages, the possibility to combine their 90-day obligatory stay abroad with the vocational internship is an additional added value.

3 Networks and Internationalisation Programs at the Centre for Teacher Education

The CfTE offers a variety of mobility options - which will be presented in the following - that include short, middle and long term mobility as well as *international@home* options in order to meet the needs of the heterogeneous group of student teachers with their different backgrounds, socio-economic situations, and interests. Additionally, the CfTE offers student teachers at all levels and from all faculties advice to guide them through the many regulations, mobility opportunities, people and departments involved. This is being done via their website and social media accounts, special events at the CfTE and through regular (online) counseling sessions on individual opportunities and the many existing programs and projects.

internships@schoolsabroad

To facilitate orientation for students interested in internships abroad, together with UoC's Department of International Mobility, the CfTE has built a network of over 90 partner institutions worldwide, all of which can be found on the platform *internships@schoolsabroad*. Here, the School Guide provides an overview of opportunities and guidance for students; a structured and transparent application process for prospective interns and schools are presented comprehensively. While interested students can explore possible internship institutions and their requirements themselves in preparation for more detailed counseling, international schools are given the opportunity to clearly communicate wishes and expectations before getting into personal contact with an intern. Since many international schools are flooded with applications for internships, they also benefit (if desired) from the possibility to have the CfTE make a preliminary selection of applications. Apart from the platform, the *internships@schoolsabroad* program also includes support structures for outgoing students regarding (intercultural) preparation (see "(Intercultural) Preparatory and follow-up seminars").

UNITE Cologne

Students who prefer to study at a university rather than to do an internship abroad can do so using the infrastructure of the *UNITE Cologne* project. Together with the Department of International Mobility and a network of nine universities worldwide, *UNITE* offers an attractive portfolio, including scholarships, with a focus on primary, secondary and special education students. In addition, incoming students from partner universities are welcome to do an exchange semester at the UoC and are supported through (partial) scholarships, thereby contributing to and pushing UoC's efforts at *internationalisation@home*. Another crucial element of *UNITE's internationalisation@home* portfolio are the biennial Summer Schools on topics related to teacher education, e.g. 'Teacher Well-Being' or 'Sustainability in Schools'. *UNITE Cologne* is a project funded by the *German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)*, which has been realised across faculties since 2018.

Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)

Erasmus+ *Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)*, on the other hand, present a rather new hybrid opportunity - "a short-term physical mobility abroad combined with a compulsory virtual component" ([12], p. 52) - for students to come into contact with international students and their perspectives. They are

"short, intensive programmes that use innovative ways of learning and teaching, including the use of online cooperation. The programmes may include challenge based learning where transnational and transdisciplinary teams work together to tackle challenges [...]. By enabling new and more flexible mobility formats that combine physical mobility with a virtual part, blended intensive programmes aim at reaching all types of students from all backgrounds, study fields and cycles." (ibid.)

As part of *TEN*, UoC organizes *BIPs* since 2023 and enables UoC students to join *BIPs* in e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, or Finland.

Erasmus+ Teacher Academy for a Future in Flux (teff)

Other short-term mobility offers for student teachers are currently planned and carried out by the Erasmus+ *Teacher Academy for a Future in Flux (teff)*, coordinated by the CfTE. Within *teff*, various opportunities are being given to engage with international colleagues in different European areas of teacher education and to gain international perspectives during the project period. Alongside in-service teachers and teacher trainees, student teachers are given many opportunities to travel to different partnering institutions, e.g. to take part in compact seminars or innovative makerspaces organised by different partners of the consortium. By focusing on developing so-called *Future Skills* – "competencies that enable individuals to self-organize and solve complex problems and (successfully) take action in highly-emergent contexts [...] based on cognitive, motivational, volitional, and social resources, [...] value-based, and [...] acquired through a learning process" ([13], p. 57) – they all address international challenges affecting teachers and pupils of the future, e.g. 'Teacher Shortage in Europe' or 'School in the Digital Age'.

(Intercultural) Preparatory and follow-up seminars

The UoC has implemented various preparatory activities for outgoing students:

- All undergraduate student teachers who use their mandatory vocational field internship to teach at a school abroad attend a preparatory seminar at the CfTE. Here they are introduced to intercultural aspects of teaching. Before, during and after their internship abroad, they reflect on their learning experiences in an electronic portfolio. The final session of the seminar, after the stay abroad, offers extensive reflection opportunities in the seminar group. This is a mandatory and credited course [4].
- Students who go abroad with the *internships@schoolsabroad* programme attend two preparatory sessions on e.g. German as a foreign language, or intercultural challenges and awareness, with one of the sessions designated to connecting future outgoings with former outgoings. As these activities are extracurricular and students have a rather full schedule, the sessions are limited to two hours each. During their stay abroad, students can always contact the CfTE in case of questions or problems.
- Students who do an exchange semester at one of the *UNITE* partner universities receive an intercultural training and attend a 'Welcome Event' to connect with *UNITE* alumni and incoming students from partner universities. During their stay abroad, the students are supervised by the International Office of the UoC and the project coordinators at the partner universities.

As an additional resource for reflection and asynchronous learning, online modules on intercultural awareness designed for teacher education students are provided on the online learning platform (<https://zfl-lernen.de/lernmodule>) of the CfTE.

4 A Critical Outlook: The Future of Internationalisation in Teacher Education

Internationalisation is still an add-on to teacher training at most universities ([14], p. 55) and still seems to be an often marginalised topic: little money, few resources. Successful implementation is a huge task, however, and includes not only international mobility through (specialist) study visits to foreign universities or the placement of internships at schools abroad, but also *internationalisation@home* for teachers and students (ibid.).

Teacher training is a strategic profile feature of UoC and was also included as a strategic field of action in the re-audit of the German Rectors' Conference on internationalisation [15]. "In German-speaking countries, it can be stated that the many initiatives of education policy stakeholders have had



an impact: At numerous universities and teacher training colleges, the buzzword 'internationalisation of teacher training' has found its way into the development plans and strategy papers on internationalisation [...]" (ibid., p. 53f.). As part of the re-audit, the UoC is recognised as already having a very positive and diverse development in this area (ibid., p. 8f.). Nevertheless, despite the associated organisational challenges, it is strongly recommended that student teachers be motivated to spend longer periods abroad. The experts explicitly point to easier recognition of credit points as a prerequisite for success (ibid., p. 15). The size of the university should be used here as an opportunity to further expand the diverse opportunities for cooperation and to put together customised formats for student teachers, e.g. through a combination of a degree programme and an (accompanied) internship abroad.

Promoting and propagating the internationalisation of teacher education is an organisational measure. However, this should not obscure the fact that "[...] the scientific exchange on this has not yet been sufficiently conducted, neither with regard to its essential components and its potential for the professionalisation of teachers nor with regard to a specification and weighting of objectives and higher education didactic challenges" [14]. Baedorf, for example, points out that the targeted consideration of student teachers' stays abroad is still too rare, e.g. the investigation of competence development and personality structures in longitudinal studies [16] with multi-perspective and multi-criteria approaches that not only use self-reporting by students, but also other, objectifying measuring instruments [17].

The question of the extent to which mobility programs change professionally relevant attitudes and attitudes in prospective teachers has only been empirically clarified to a limited extent [9]. In addition to written surveys of students before and/or after the completed internship, qualitative interviews should also be conducted or internship reports analysed (see [18]). From a scientific point of view, the portfolios of the seminar participants of the vocational field internships are extensive sources that (can) reveal a great deal about the individual experiences gained abroad. Through a structured evaluation and comprehensive content analysis, they can bring to light a comprehensive set of data on the professionalisation process of prospective teachers through an internship abroad. However, resources (time, money, people) are needed to drive forward and carry out these studies. Gröschner and Schmitt point out the opportunities that could arise from cross-university research projects [17].

Although UoC and the CfTE have already taken crucial steps towards the implementation of internationalisation in teacher education, the results now have to be made sustainable by (i) securing funding for scholarships, (ii) ensuring sufficient human resources to manage mobility, (iii) establishing processes and clearly defined responsibilities, (iv) aligning projects with overarching strategic goals in teacher education, (v) implementing support programmes (e.g. intercultural trainings) as well as (vi) *internationalisation@home* learning opportunities in the curriculum, and (vii) offering a broad range of mobility opportunities to motivate even more student teachers. It is time to stress the benefits of going abroad for those who will be responsible for the education of our future society. At schools and universities alike, both at home and abroad, focus should therefore be put on (future and intercultural) skills and competencies that student teachers can acquire in international settings, e.g. by researching the effects of *internationalisation@home* programs or the effects of short vs. long stays abroad. As one principal from a South African school put it: "I find that the students who are abroad, because they are just willing and open to doing different things, different people, cultures, languages, because they are open to it, they are also open to all these different needs and challenges that the kids in our classes have, they see it differently. [...] The optimum of international collaboration is that we learn from each other. [...] You have to find the positive and take that with you."

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