

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR PROFESSIONALISATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The movement towards an increasingly globalised world goes hand in hand with the growing importance of international collaboration among higher education institutions. In this paper, we outline how international collaborations can contribute to professionalisation in adult education from a theoretical and practical perspective. As an international university collaboration, the ERASMUS+ strategic partnership 'International and Comparative Studies for Students and Practitioners in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (INTALL; 2018-2021) contributes to the professionalisation of adult education. By engaging in various forms of international collaboration (e.g., student mobility, joint research activities, joint curricula), students can broaden and reflect on their perspectives and contribute to international scientific discourse. Furthermore, international collaborations help students refine their language skills, intercultural skills, and international knowledge. Limitations to international collaborations include the need for financial resources and the need for a high level of commitment on the part of the higher education institutions. On the student side, financial means as well as temporal and mobile flexibility are needed. Shifts in the opportunities and limitations may result from the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The field of adult education is characterised by a variety of institutional structures, employment situations, fields of activities, learning contexts and providers (Breitschwerdt and Egetenmeyer, in press). Due to this diversity and complexity in combination with societal change (e.g., digitalisation, globalisation, COVID-19), adult educators are confronted with transformed and new requirements that must be taken into account with respect to professionalism in adult education (Schreiber-Barsch and Stang, 2021). Specifically, the emergence of an increasingly interconnected, globalised world (Jones, 2017, p. 22) highlights the need for internationalisation in adult education. This means that adult education as an academic discipline must prepare students for these developments in study programmes (Schüßler and Egetenmeyer, 2018, p. 1085). Therefore, international collaborations between higher education institutions have become essential (Jones, 2017; Knight, 2004).

This paper focusses on international collaborations in higher education institutions as a contribution to the professionalisation of (future) adult educators. First, we provide a rough definition of the term international collaborations between higher education institutions and

explain how they can contribute to professionalisation in adult education. Second, we analyse the contributions to professionalisation based on a concrete example: the ERASMUS+ strategic partnership INTALL.⁴ Finally, the last chapter discusses the opportunities and limitations of international collaboration with regard to professionalisation in adult education.

INTERNATIONALISATION AND PROFESSIONALISATION

Internationalisation can be understood as a process of “increasing connectivity, collaboration and mutual influence beyond cultural and national borders” (Schmidt-Lauff and Egetenmeyer, 2015, p. 272). This includes the alignment of higher education with demands and challenges associated with the external environment (Knight, 2004, 9 f.).

International collaboration in higher education institutions

In recent decades, the variety of international collaboration among European universities has grown. As a result, “joint international activities are less unique but more acknowledged and requested than a decade ago” (Egetenmeyer, 2017, p. 131). In Europe, this change was, on the one hand spurred by the development of mobility programmes carried out as part of the ERASMUS programme (Wit, Deca and Hunter, 2015, p. 5). On the other hand, the Bologna Process has contributed to the internationalisation of higher education institutions (Schüßler and Egetenmeyer, 2018, p. 1072). This process has led to learning agreements, credit systems (ECTS) and module structures, integrating mobilities and credit transfer policies in university degree programmes. International collaboration can thus take many forms, including student and teaching mobility, scholarships, joint research activities, strategic partnerships, double/joint degrees, language learning, joint curricula development, and the like (European Parliament, 2015; Knight, 2004; Wit, Deca and Hunter, 2015).

Professionalisation in the field of adult education

The complexity and the changes in the practice field of adult education require an ongoing professionalisation of adult educators. According to Gieseke (2018), this means establishing and expanding basic disciplinary and scientific knowledge, enabling educators to act in a reflective and individual manner. This necessitates informed transfer between academic knowledge and individual practice situations. Both individually and against the backdrop of societal conditions, professionals have to act in situation-specific and person-related ways, with their actions embedded in the respective context. (Schreiber-Barsch and Stang, 2021, p. 78) Egetenmeyer, Breitschwerdt and Lechner (2019) refer to organisational, institutional and social contexts that influence professional actions.

The basis for the professional development of adult educators can be found in “academic professionalisation”, which occupies a mediating position between theory and practice to give students both scientific knowledge and practical experiences. Following Schüßler and Egetenmeyer (2018, p. 1072), at its core, the term “academic professionalisation” embraces a structural and a subjective perspective. This means that the term focusses on both the diverse qualification possibilities in higher education institutions in adult and continuing education (structural perspective) and on individual professionalisation in the course of these academic qualification possibilities and the opportunities for developing competences (subjective perspective). From this, it follows that professionalisation is also embedded in different contexts and processes. This means that the societal context, institutional structures, and the individual professional biography must all be taken into account.

⁴ INTALL is run under the ERASMUS+ programme. It is a partnership between eight European universities and two practice institutions. For more information, see: <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/home/>

ERASMUS+ STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP INTALL – A CONTRIBUTION TO PROFESSIONALISATION

The ERASMUS+ strategic partnership INTALL (2018-2021) created international collaboration between eight European universities (Florence, Hamburg, Lisbon, Padua, Pécs, Ljubljana, Dublin, Würzburg) and two practice institutions (DVV, EAEA). It responds to internationalisation in the practice field of adult education (Staab *et al.*, 2020) and at universities (Varghese, 2017). Supporting the professionalisation of students and practitioners, INTALL is designed to build a bridge between the academic and practice sector. To this end, a joint module was developed, which forms the core of the partnership, aiming to contribute to internationalisation and professionalisation in the field. Moreover, INTALL developed several forms of international collaboration, which refer to the abovementioned discussion on internationalisation in higher education.

INTALL is designed for master's and doctoral students studying adult education and for practitioners working in the practice field from all over the world. Therefore, the partnership developed a joint module for teaching students and practitioners together. A blended-learning methodology was created, which serves as the core and is used in the preparatory phase. All participants are prepared on campus or online from November to January for their two-week participation in the Adult Education Academy in Würzburg, Germany. Students, practitioners, and teachers are supported through various funding opportunities (e.g., travel allowances) to travel to Germany in an effort to promote student and teaching mobility within higher education institutions. Additionally, as communication is conducted entirely in English, the mobility contributes to participants' language learning.

The Academy is divided into sessions on European and international policies and strategies as well as on Paulo Freire's theories on adult education (Week 1) and a comparison performed in small groups (Week 2). In addition, the joint module includes an online follow-up, which gives doctoral students and practitioners the possibility to co-publish their comparative results of the second week in an academic paper with the (co-)moderators of their group. The group moderators are professors from different international universities who bring their research expertise to the comparative group work and the joint publications, thereby contributing to joint research activities. Furthermore, through the development of a joint recognition model, students and practitioners can receive a graded formal university certificate, which is recognised for their study programme.

Due to COVID-19, the 2021 Adult Education Academy was conducted in a virtual format, for which an online methodology was developed. Besides using online tools such as digital pinboards or query tools during lectures and group works in week 1, participants were instructed in capturing the process and the results of their comparative group work in week 2 on an ePortfolio platform. This helped students and practitioners acquire and enhance their digital knowledge and skills.

To teach students and practitioners together during and beyond the joint module, a joint learning community for international teaching and learning settings was developed. The teaching methods outlined above are accessible via the INTALL website⁵ and the LinkedIn "Professional Network for Adult Education and Lifelong Learning".⁶ This is supplemented by "Guidelines on teachers practices: A guide for instructors and practitioners to innovate practices in higher education and adult learning" (Fedeli and Tino, 2020). Thereby, INTALL helps further develop international competencies among teaching staff in adult education and to support faculties in higher education to implement active teaching practices in international settings.

⁵ <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/home/>

⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8445381/>

A portfolio method was developed and included in the joint module. It provides information on career fields, skills needed on the labour market, the job application process, and online stories about the professional pathways of colleagues from the field of adult education practice. On the one hand, this gives students an insight into adult education as a career field and into the skills required on the international labour market; on the other hand, it gives them the opportunity to develop their own portfolio for entering the labour market. Instructions for university teachers on how to support students by equipping them with skills can be found in the “Didactical guide on employability: A Guide for Teachers to support Master’s and PhD students preparing for successful future work in the field of adult Learning and Education” (Boffo and Tomei, 2020).

Based on the joint module, a digital learning environment (INTALL@home) was developed. It is a fully open access environment consisting of online tutorials, reading and video materials from research and practice, interactive online groups, and online self-tests. INTALL@home offers an open learning opportunity for non-mobile students and practitioners interested in comparative adult education, thereby supporting professionalisation in the field in a cost-neutral way. Additionally, adult educators can use the materials as a tool for teaching international and comparative studies at their universities.

DISCUSSION

The movement towards an increasingly globalised world is accompanied by changing demands on the professionalisation of (future) adult educators. These demands are reinforced by the internationalisation of higher education institutions. INTALL provides an answer to these demands by offering international collaboration and a teaching methodology focussing on international and comparative adult education. Through questions for thought and discussion, (future) adult educators are encouraged to transfer theory to practice, which can be considered the essence of professionalism.

Internationalisation is a continuous process that varies by local, national, regional, and global context. This refers to the opportunities and limits of international collaboration from a structural and subjective perspective. Opportunities can be found in international study programmes, such as summer/winter schools, exchange programmes, or international internships). These forms of international collaboration give students the opportunity to gain intercultural skills and international knowledge, which can be seen as important aspects in the professionalisation of (future) adult educators (Staab and Egetenmeyer, 2019, p. 280). Furthermore, joint research activities between higher education institutions can help students expand their views and contribute to international scientific discourse by publishing joint papers. Publications in English boost international references in adult education.

However, international collaboration between higher education institutions also has certain limitations. These include the challenge to provide sufficient financial resources and administrative and bureaucratic challenges (Marinoni, 2019). Egetenmeyer (2017) also pointed out that the commitment of the universities involved is essential for making administrative and committee work more easy. For instance, technical equipment and services at the universities may influence teaching and research. Furthermore, international study programmes require students who have the opportunity to travel. Both aspects are related to the need for financial resources and flexibility. Students with low financial means and non-mobile students unable to attend face-to-face programmes for a variety of reasons (e.g., family and work commitments, health problems) may be excluded from international study opportunities.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, higher education institutions have been called upon to build or expand their online and distance learning offerings (Chan, Bista

and Allen, 2022, p. 3). This includes the 2021 Adult Education Academy described above, which had to be developed for virtual implementation in a short amount of time. On the one hand, virtual implementation meant an increased didactical development effort for the (co-)moderators and organisational effort for the organisers; on the other hand, the virtual format provides an opportunity for internationalisation in higher education without traveling. Video conferences and learning management systems help students unable to participate in a synchronous way to attend remotely (Chan, Bista and Allen, 2022, p. 3). The teaching and learning materials developed for and during the 2021 Adult Education Academy were made openly accessible and hence can be used as role models and information tools for implementing online formats. Making the material accessible, especially the recordings of each daily session, was necessary because of the time differences between the participants (e.g., Brasil, India, Russia), which are difficult to overcome in synchronous virtual formats. Furthermore, some participants had neither access to a stable internet connection nor to a device allowing full attendance. As a result, several participants participated via their smartphones, which limited their ability to participate in group work and use online tools. Increased facilitation during group work and when using online tools, as recommended by the evaluation, can keep participants from being (partially) excluded. It was observed that both the technical equipment and the digital skills of students can have a key influence on their participation (Chan, Bista and Allen, 2022, p. 4–5).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic means constant change for higher education institutions and adult education. Stable international collaborations in higher education support professionalisation and internationalisation. The ERASMUS+ strategic partnership INTALL (2018-2021) contributes to both professionalisation in adult education and to internationalisation in higher education, although it is important to keep in mind that international collaborations have their limitations. As illustrated by the example of the virtual 2021 Adult Education Academy, the lack of financial resources is the biggest challenge on both the university and the student side. While the coronavirus pandemic can partially address this challenge, new barriers are emerging (e.g., technical equipment, new teaching styles, digital skills).

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