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EXPERIENCES IN CREATING ONLINE LANGUAGE OFFERINGS IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

M. Ohinen-Salvén, T. Hämäläinen

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present how the offerings of online language courses for a new European university can be planned and created in cooperation between several universities and universities of applied sciences from different European countries.

The work is being done within the framework of Ulysseus European University Alliance. The aim is to provide the learners in the Ulysseus community and beyond two foreign languages in addition to one's mother tongue. Alongside the online language courses, there is an option to plan and offer other language-related activities to support student and staff mobility.

Ulysseus European University Alliance is created by six universities and universities of applied sciences: Université Côte-d'Azur (France), Università di Genova (Italy), Universidad de Sevilla (Spain), Technical University of Košice (Slovakia), Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Finland) and Management Center Innsbruck (Austria).

This paper presents the language program created by the partnering Ulysseus universities, the main focus being in experiences in creating online language courses on several levels [1], the benefits that the cooperation entails and the potential challenges that might appear. In addition, the paper discusses the expectations the partnering universities have for the common language offerings.

Keywords: Online language offerings, European cooperation, European universities, International Cooperation.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the globalizing world, versatile language skills are nowadays essential for personal needs, studies and working life. Being able to speak each other's languages as well as understand the cultural differences enhance multilingualism and mobility among both students and professionals in different fields.

If some higher education institutions had not understood the importance of online education before the covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic concretely showed them how much need there is for online education. Online education offers flexibility for both students and universities and opens new ways for the teachers to develop both their professional skills and the courses they are teaching. Thus, the demand after online language courses has risen significantly, and +2 Language Programme within the Ulysseus European University is responding to this need.

2 ULYSSEUS EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

Ulysseus European University is a new university for the citizens of the future. The vision of Ulysseus is to develop an excellency-recognized European University with such European values as social cohesion and respect for human rights being fundamental in the process. Within Ulysseus there is a strong belief that European Universities should be open-to-the-world, solidary institutions beyond European borders. [2]

There are five key goals within Ulysseus. The Ulysseus community aims to modernize the universities by developing a long-lasting Ulysseus territorial and digital Innovation Ecosystem, to contribute to the development of the European regions and cities by implementing student-centered, flexible, work-based European Joint Programmes. The aim is also to reduce the competence gap through a combination of innovative learning and teaching activities and to enhance the knowledge and practice of the European values by shaping a European citizen of the future, respectful to human rights, equality, and inclusiveness. In addition, another goal is to promote an open-to-the-world model of University through a combination of in-person and virtual mobility. [2]

Ulysseus aims to be an international, person-centered, and entrepreneurial University that will shape Europe's future. Ulysseus will develop both joint and double degrees and promote research activities. The joint degrees and research activities are strongly connected to the six innovation hubs located in each partner university. [2]

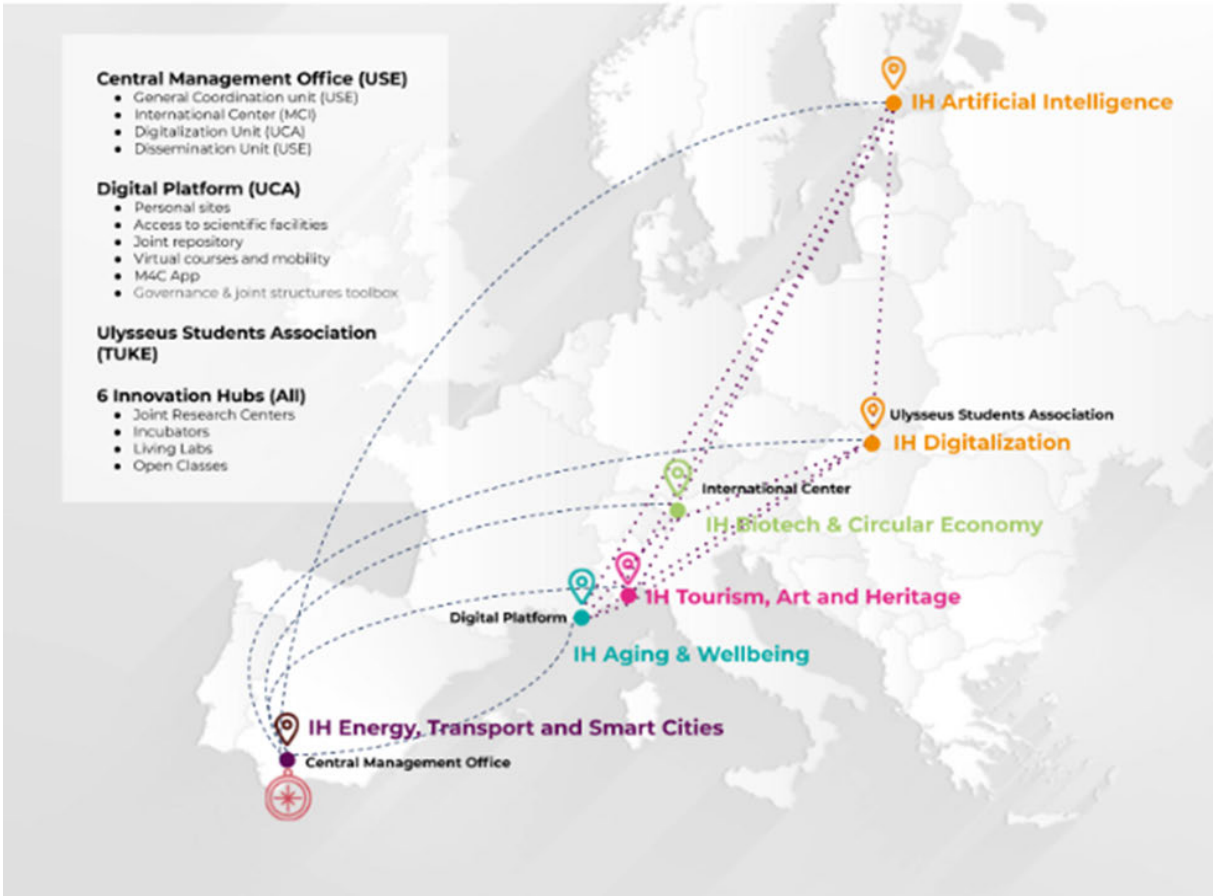


Figure 1. Ulysseus Organization. [2]

Table 1. Ulysseus European University Alliance in figures. [2]

Students	163 530
Faculties	87
Research centers	54
Patents and trademarks	636
Staff	19 171
Academic staff/researchers	8 499
Research groups	1 035
Science & technology-based companies & partnerships	235
Associated partners	99

3 +2 LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

The Ulysseus online language programme aims to educate highly-skilled digital, multilingual, and entrepreneurial European citizens by offering the students a combination of innovative learning and teaching activities. There is a team with members from all participating universities working on these topics.

The language programme is called +2 Language Programme (+2LP) and it provides the learners of the Ulysseus community a possibility to study two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue,

which is aligned with the vision of the European Commission. Linguistic and cultural diversity is utilized to promote multilingualism, enhance employability and mobility, make other countries and their cultures accessible, and strengthen intercultural understanding.

“Foreign language skills play a vital role in enhancing employability and mobility. Multilingualism also improves the competitiveness of the EU economy.” [3]

The language courses offered by Ulysseus complement the selection of the language courses provided at each partner university. Within +2LP there will be offerings in ten different languages on several levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. [1] Totally, there will be 36 online courses available from beginners’ level to proficient language users’ level. [1] The languages and the levels are presented in Table 2. [2]

Table 2. Ulysseus +2 Language Programme Languages and Levels.

Language	Level
English	A1 – A2 – B1 – B2
French	A1 – A2 – B1 – B2
German	A1 – A2 – B1 – B2
Italian	A1 – A2 – B1 – B2
Russian	A1 – A2 – B1 – B2
Spanish	A1 – A2 – B1 – B2
Arabic	A1 – A2 – B1
Chinese	A1 – A2 – B1
Slovak	A1 – A2 – B1
Finnish	A1 – A2 – B1

The A1 level [1] courses in English, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish will have open access to anyone interested, also from outside the Ulysseus universities. The openness supports and diversifies language reserve [4] in the European community. The first courses start in October 2022, and the courses offered are A1 Beginners courses in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. A1 Beginners course in Russian will start in January 2023.

There are both asynchronous and synchronous courses available within +2LP; the courses vary from self-paced ones to courses, which have online lessons taught by the teacher.

4 COOPERATION

The +2LP team started working in March 2021 by mapping out the already existing courses provided by the partner universities. The partner universities had a varying number of online courses to offer for the cooperation. In April 2021, the team submitted the first deliverable which was a “Ulysseus +2 Language Programme Framework and Design Handbook” consisting of a process description for the work to be done including the deliverables and the schedule for the work. The next step was to ensure that the already existing online language courses provided by the partner universities matched Ulysseus needs and criteria. As mentioned above, in autumn 2022, some of the courses are ready to be taught, and others are still being planned and developed for the Ulysseus needs.

The +2LP team members find this cooperation and having common language offerings very positive because working together offers a good opportunity to enlarge the offerings of the universities and the possibilities students have.

Also, language is seen as a key cultural element, and learning a new language means that there is an access to communication and culture. More courses mean more possibilities for the students to learn languages they are interested in, and enhance the bonds they have to the country whose language they are learning.

The year and a half long cooperation has been very constructive and goal oriented. The +2LP team members have been able to share ideas, concerns, etc. in a cooperative and productive environment, and the attitude and support from the members of the group have made the work a positive experience.

There have been some challenges to face but the important goals have been reached.

5 BENEFITS

As mentioned above, the Ulysseus +2LP aims to offer a wide variety of language training to the Ulysseus community and beyond, the aim being that 75 % of the community should be able to learn two languages in addition to the mother tongue by 2030.

To make this goal, the language courses created within the +2LP are meant to complement the selection of the language courses of the partner universities. Therefore, the meaning is not to substitute the already existing language courses offered by the partner universities, but to give the partners a possibility to widen their course offerings through cooperation.

The +2LP offers students from different universities the possibility to study languages their home institution does not offer. In addition to this, there is a chance to reach more advanced language skills by taking higher-level courses that might not be available at the students' home universities. Of course, the benefit is reciprocal: some +2LP universities might offer basic level language courses, which are not available at some of the other universities. Students who study at a university with only synchronous language courses with face-to-face teaching can also have an access to asynchronous courses with more flexible schedules and new ways of working; this is considered as a valuable addition at the partner universities.

In addition to learning new language skills, +2LP provides the Ulysseus community and beyond a possibility to get and enhance transferable skills for international mobility and cooperation. Also, participating in the Ulysseus online courses lets the students get more international experience and contacts than their own institution might offer, gives them chances to meet and study with an international group of students in multilinguistic cooperation and teaches them different ways of doing things. This overall competence for internationalization is important not only during the studies but even later during the students' careers as well. Getting international experience and cultural competence without leaving the home country and home institution is a big benefit for many people. In addition to the students, Ulysseus can also offer new international connections to the staff members at the partner universities enabling mobility and cooperation both for the academic and non-academic staff.

For language teachers, the Ulysseus cooperation offers new options, for instance, new chances to work on course offerings. Especially teachers of the so-called less studied languages might get more courses and students when teaching internationally. This is a benefit thinking about the employment of the teachers. The Ulysseus cooperation also offers teachers a possibility to learn, enhance and practice their online pedagogical skills and didactic methods as well as to get acquainted with new digital tools. Already at this stage, there has been online pedagogical cooperation between the partner universities, and there is an intention to deepen this reciprocal learning opportunity. Different perspectives and experiences, strengths and weaknesses are considered as an opportunity to grow together.

There are also plans to create other activities than online language courses within +2LP. Options already discussed are the virtual each-one-teach-one solution, where students work in pairs and teach each other their native tongue and virtual café lingua. These are considered to be a useful way for the students to develop their autonomy and cooperation skills and even create friendships.

6 CHALLENGES

All Ulysseus universities share the common goal to offer new language courses to Ulysseus students and to others in the community. However, some practices and differences in ways of doing things might slow the process.

Some partner universities have concentrated only on synchronous language teaching with a teacher leading the learning process. More independent studies on asynchronous language courses and new ways of doing things demand a new mindset and skills from both the students and the teachers, which can cause uncertainty at the beginning.

A wide common course offering might challenge the partner universities administratively because it is difficult to predict which courses the students will choose; will there be interest in the courses offered by the home institution or the courses offered by the partners? Even factors like the Ulysseus courses being free of charge might have an impact on the choices in the countries, where there are fees for higher education studies. In addition, practical issues like registration, assessment and certificates have caused some concern because the procedures are still being implemented.

When new common courses are created, they will be current for a certain amount of time, but at some point, they need to be updated, and this work has to be planned and there has to be resources for it.

7 EXPECTATIONS

+2LP team has high expectations for cooperation. An important reason for this is that by cooperating the universities can offer a variety of courses in languages that otherwise would not have enough interested students and enrolments. However, when all interested students' enrolments from each participating Ulysseus university are put together, there is a chance to have a decent-sized group and a possibility to implement the course.

The common courses can also create communities of learners. When students from several countries and universities form a group, they have the chance to notice how important learning languages are, and how interesting and fun international cooperation within Europe can be.

In addition, from the language teachers' perspective, working together and seeing how colleagues from other countries and universities do things, plan their courses, use materials and conduct classes, mean that everyone can learn something new that benefits them in working life.

8 CONCLUSIONS

As a whole, the +2LP team and the participating language teachers from the Ulysseus universities find cooperation with other countries in Europe very interesting and inspiring. Despite some adjustments needed, the cooperation provides the participating universities with new and unique ways of developing their operations and activities – something they could not reach working only by themselves. As one representative of a partner university commented: "I believe our university has benefited greatly from the other universities' experiences..."

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