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Teacher collaboration in the international partner network - UAS Journal



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The aim of this article is to discuss the experiences, good practices, and challenges when higher education institutions (HEIs) collaborate within a university alliance building up a new online university. The alliance that is being referred to is made up of six different HEIs, which collectively form what is known as the Ulysseus European University. The goal of Ulysseus is to build up a dynamic and versatile European University alliance to modernise European universities. In addition, Ulysseus aims to enhance knowledge and practice of European values, promote an open-to-the-world model of European universities.

This study draws on a theoretical foundation that includes the examination of collaborative practices among teachers in online environments, the incorporation of digital pedagogical strategies, and the consideration of multilingualism as a crucial component of contemporary education in the European context. By exploring the intersection of these three key areas, this research seeks to shed light on the complex dynamics that shape teaching and learning in the digital age, while also offering insights into collaborative course design approaches.

To achieve also practical contribution, we will describe how international teacher teams

collaborate remotely using technological solutions when planning a new kind of international cooperation and how the different parties experience the process.

Academic offering of Ulysseus

This article studies collaboration processes and practices when creating new academic offering in Ulysseus European University in 2020–2023. During this first phase the alliance comprised three comprehensive universities (University of Seville, Université Côte d’Azur, and University of Genoa), one technical university (Technical University of Košice), and two universities of applied sciences (Management Center Innsbrück and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences).

Ulysseus Vision for 2030 is to create a European University for the Citizens of the Future whilst prioritising excellence, openness, and a people-centric approach. By fostering entrepreneurial skills and embracing a global perspective, the alliance aims to create a vibrant educational environment that attracts individuals from around the world.

The Ulysseus academic framework encompasses joint and double degree programs that offer numerous advantages for students, including enhanced mobility experiences and increased job opportunities. Additionally, the university provides educational activities focused on digitalisation, languages, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and other skills essential for the future.

This article specifically explores the development of online language as well as entrepreneurship and design thinking study programs. It delves into the creation and implementation of these educational offerings within digital environments.

The Entrepreneurship and design-thinking programme prepares students to learn up-to-date techniques for project direction and to turn ideas into reality. The offering is built up from three parts:

- 1) online entrepreneurship and design thinking courses, which were based on Ulysseus’ partners’ already existing offering
- 2) new massive open online courses and
- 3) Ulysseus Entre Camp summer school.

Language skills and intercultural competences are the key factors in understanding each other in multilingual and global cooperation. Thus, the aim of the +2 Language programme (+2LP) is to offer the learners within Ulysseus a possibility to study two foreign languages in addition to one’s mother tongue. The offering consists of 36 online courses in ten languages and on several levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, European Union, 2018, 2020).

The languages and levels are presented in Table 1. The offering includes already existing courses created by the partner universities and modified for Ulysseus’ purposes, as well as totally new courses created specifically for Ulysseus’ needs.

Language learning is enhanced when studying in a multilingual community (Pirhonen, 2023, 11-12, 51), and in addition to the language offering, multilingualism is strongly implemented on several levels of Ulysseus: on online courses in multilingual and international groups, in exchange programs and international summer and winter camps for both students and staff members and in teacher collaboration with colleagues from different countries.

Languages	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
Finnish	A1 – A2 – B1
Slovak	A1 – A2 – B1

Collaborating with teachers in an international partner network to develop an online offering can bring numerous benefits and serve as a platform for collaborative learning.

Theoretical framework

Covid19 changed the education system globally, and new pedagogical methods and mindsets were extensively adopted also in HEIs (Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020, 87-88). In today's society, online collaboration has emerged as an indispensable skill, extending its influence on the teaching profession. Although there are various obstacles and challenges associated with embracing and effectively utilizing online teacher collaboration, it has also been acknowledged as a valuable practice that brings forth numerous advantages, as perceived by teachers. (Romeu, Guitert, & Sangrà, 2016, 592).

Firstly, it enhances the capacity for collective reflection by facilitating the exchange of ideas, information, and experiences. This allows for meaningful debates and inclusive participation, enabling a diverse range of opinions to be considered. Secondly, online collaboration provides teachers with the support of their colleagues, resulting in increased effectiveness throughout the collaborative process and shared ownership of the outcomes. Lastly, it serves as an opportunity for collaborative learning, with more experienced individuals offering guidance and encouragement to less experienced participants, thereby fostering knowledge acquisition and the refinement of working styles.

Coordination plays an important role in online collaboration. According to Romeu et al. (2016,

601–602), the role of online coordination can be summarized into five key functions:

(a) facilitating design, conceptualization, and redesign processes to foster innovation and achieve improved outcomes

(b) organizing and guiding the overall process and activities

(c) enhancing virtual team interaction and collaboration

(d) collecting feedback and monitoring the progress of the process, and

(e) facilitating the professional development of online teaching practices.

International teacher teams collaborating remotely using technological solutions

When initiating the collaborative development of these two programs, the emphasis was placed on fostering a shared understanding and building collective knowledge among teachers, rather than solely working together to create a unified study offering. The academic participants from different partner universities were not familiar with either each other or with the ways of working when the course creation process started. Understanding the different administrative processes, roles, organisation and decisions making processes took several months before the actual course creation was able to start and continued throughout the planning and implementation phases.

The collaborative work process encompassed a combination of synchronized virtual meetings and asynchronous work conducted within Teams groups. The whole study offering in these two programs was developed fully online, but the process for developing the course offerings varied to some degree in the two programs. In the Entrepreneurship and design-thinking programme the courses were developed in co-creation with teachers from all partner universities participating equally in the creation process of each course.

In the +2LP, due to the multiplicity of languages and CEFR-levels (Council of Europe, European Union, 2018, 2020), each partner university took on the creation of specific courses. However, collaboration took place, and for instance in order to reach the quality criteria defined by the +2LP team, every course was cross-checked by colleagues from two partner universities.

In a feedback survey, the language teachers expressed a very positive view of creating online language courses for Ulysseus. The teachers enjoyed designing the courses in collaboration for an international target group. Both to use one's existing digipedagogical skills and to deepen them, when creating new materials made the process meaningful and rewarding. The cross-checking process of the courses was experienced as a valuable way to get feedback from the course design work.

The level and the background of digipedagogical proficiency varied between the partner universities, and it was highly appreciated when Haaga-Helia UAS could offer digipedagogical mentoring to the teachers at partner universities. Technique was mentioned as the biggest challenge in the course creation process.

Conclusions

Collaborating with teachers in an international partner network to develop an online offering can bring numerous benefits and serve as a platform for collaborative learning. However, successful collaboration relies on trust, familiarity, and a deep understanding of the unique contexts within each university. These factors take time to establish, making it challenging to achieve immediate increases in efficiency.

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Ulysseus has a clear vision for 2030: to establish a globally recognized European University known for excellence, international appeal, openness, student-centricity, and entrepreneurship. This article explores experiences, challenges, and best practices in higher education institution (HEI) collaboration within the Ulysseus European University alliance.

Drawing from collaborative online teaching practices, digital pedagogies, and multilingual education, this study uncovers the intricate dynamics of digital-age education and collaborative course design. It also delves into international teacher team collaboration through digital solutions for innovative cooperation, offering practical insights into the process. This article specifically explores the development of online language as well as entrepreneurship and design thinking study programs.

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