

# **International Mobility with Partners Abroad for Culturally Competent Teachers**

## **IMPACCT in Context**

### **Introduction**

Internationalisation is omnipresent in higher education. It is often equated with incoming mobility (internationalisation at home) and the outgoing mobility of students and scholars (internationalisation abroad).<sup>1</sup> Internationalisation is generally viewed as having positive outcomes like the strengthening of foreign language competencies, personal growth, the acquisition of relevant soft skills, or the fostering of tolerance and openness, which both have a positive impact on society, especially in migrant societies. One of the most frequently quoted, yet continually revised, definitions of internationalisation comes from Jane Knight: “Internationalization at the national/sector/institutional level is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education.”<sup>2</sup> Despite all the positive effects associated with internationalisation, it is under constant scrutiny. Scholars tend to evaluate internationalisation increasingly critically by reflecting on its negative side effects. On the one hand, scholars point out that internationalisation has, for example, political and ethical implications that have not been given sufficient attention in the recent definitional debate on the term.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, scholars argue that the discussion about internationalisation lacks a critical perspective regarding the fact that periods of studying abroad, for instance in teacher education,

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1 Hahn 2004, 13.

2 Knight 2003, 2, cited in Knight 2004, 11.

3 Buckner/Stein 2020.

can reinforce differences, othering, stereotypes and racism if not accompanied and reflected on appropriately.<sup>4</sup>

Internationalising teacher education certainly is one of the most important yet challenging cross-sectional tasks in higher education.<sup>5</sup> In line with general discourses on internationalisation, there are eight thematic areas that stand out in relation to the internationalisation of teacher education, among them crucial topics like the internationalisation of curricula, recognition of academic achievements abroad, the implementation of mobility windows or the measurement of competence growth.<sup>6</sup> Compared to other groups, student teachers, especially those who do not study foreign languages, are not very prone to mobility for a number of reasons.<sup>7</sup> In a survey conducted as part of the DAAD project “International University Benchmark” (BintHo) for the 2020/2021 academic year, more than 10,000 data records of student teachers were analysed in order to find out which difficulties and hurdles the students cited as obstacles to a study-related stay abroad. About 62 % of the students surveyed said they did not want to be separated from their social environment in Germany, followed by excessive costs (43 %), loss of time (42 %), too much organisational effort (36 %) and no advantage for their future career opportunities (31 %).<sup>8</sup> If we factor in historically grown and culturally anchored educational values and traditions, teacher education is naturally oriented towards the national school system and school practice, making international mobility not an obligatory part of studies. In general, internationalisation requires higher education and education policy to be rethought in order to open up the system to curriculum transformation, the development of sustainable collaborative teaching formats, systematic international exchange on teaching and learning, multiple languages of instruction, and, in the face of global developments, a newly defined set of competencies which pre- and in-service teachers should develop.

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4 Massumi 2017.

5 One reasoned volume focusing on approaches to and strategies in internationalising teacher education is Brück-Hübner/Seifert/Müller 2024.

6 Cf. Falkenhagen/Grimm/Volkman 2019, 1.

7 Cf. Ahlgrimm/Westphal/Wallert/Heck 2019 or Kercher/Schifferings 2019.

8 Cited in Bloch 2024, 68.

For a few years, several national and supra-national institutions have been focusing on enabling the internationalisation of teacher education through tailor-made funding programmes. One of those is the programme *Lehramt International*, launched by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2019.<sup>9</sup> This DAAD funding programme is based on three fundamental principles. The objective of Module A is to provide support for model projects conducted by German higher education institutions with the intention of facilitating the internationalisation of teacher education. The funding provided to the participating universities offers them the chance to reinforce or extend their collaboration with foreign partner universities, as well as to further the internationalisation of teacher education at their home institutions. Module B offers targeted scholarships for internships in schools abroad to student teachers and graduates. Module C facilitates policy dialogues in the German federal states between political and academic stakeholders, with the objective of influencing the training of teachers at this level in a positive manner. Another component of Module C is public relations work in social media and on other channels for example the campaign “Studieren weltweit”<sup>10</sup> The marketing strategy for the scholarship programmes especially will be further developed in this module.

The programme’s structure allows the DAAD to respond at various levels to the findings of national and international surveys (*DAAD working paper, December 2021; PISA 2018, TALIS 2018; Education and Training Monitor, EU Commission, 2019*), which highlight the needs of teachers and students alike. This encompasses both the design of training programmes and the challenges encountered by students prior to them undertaking international placements. A review of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS 2018) indicates that only approximately 32 % of teachers feel adequately prepared to work with diverse student populations.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, a survey of student teachers conducted by the

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10 Here you can find an example of one of our IMPACCT students: <https://www.studieren-weltweit.de/welt-erleben/sophie-tuerkei/> (Last accessed 14 Mar 2025).

11 TALIS 2018, 99.

DAAD (BintHo) indicated that this cohort of students is the least likely to engage in international mobility because of the significant challenges and obstacles that they perceive. In addition to the question of financing such a stay, the possibility of extending the regular period of study was also identified as a significant challenge. Furthermore, the BintHo survey indicates that a relatively small proportion of student teachers with a non-linguistic major pursue a period of study abroad.<sup>12</sup> This very brief look at current studies shows that the internationalisation of teacher education is challenging, but extremely worthwhile considering current conditions in schools worldwide.

## **The IMPACCT project (International Mobility with Partners Abroad for Culturally Competent Teachers)**

Against the background of this complex overall situation, the IMPACCT project has focused on two fundamentally important aspects: firstly, the provision of target group specific counselling and information, and secondly, the support of students before, during and after their stay abroad in terms of their acquisition of intercultural skills.<sup>13</sup> This support was provided through specific intercultural learning opportunities and accompanying discussions.

In the initial funding phase of the IMPACCT model project (2019 to 2022), the primary objective was to engage one of the least mobile groups at Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU), namely, students pursuing a degree in primary education with the subject Islamic religion. The establishment of a broad-based network comprising six partner universities in Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey enabled a multi-layered view of Islam and Islamic Religious

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<sup>12</sup> DAAD 2023, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Against the background of constantly changing concepts of culture, interculturality is not the only term that is used when it comes to analysing communication and interaction across cultures. The term interculturality has, for instance, been criticised by scholars for assuming that there are clearly definable cultures (for example, Moosmüller 2020). One other concept favoured by a number of scholars is transculturality, which understands cultures as interconnected and melted into one another (cf., for example, Erfurt 2021). See also Antor 2020.

Education (IRE). The variety of partner universities gave students a chance to select or their study abroad period whichever suited their individual requirements best. In order to provide counselling tailored to the specific needs of the target group, a comprehensive analysis of the stakeholder groups, student teachers and partner universities was conducted in order to prepare tailor-made information and counselling offers. These events served to present the project and its partner network as well as the courses offered by the respective universities. Additionally, they provided an opportunity for students to engage in dialogue with project staff and address any questions or concerns they may have had. Peer-to-peer counselling by a student assistant who had already spent a semester abroad with the project was identified as the most effective form of counselling during the course of the project. In order to prepare the students for their stay abroad and to enhance their understanding of the IM-PACCT project, two intercultural learning opportunities were organised during the semester preceding their departure. These events comprised two intercultural training days and a didactic practical course designed to facilitate reflection on the students' experiences and the didactic/pedagogic competencies they had learned for their future work.<sup>14</sup> The objective was to cultivate a more nuanced inter-religious and intercultural understanding and to foster sensitivity to the challenges of culturally diverse classrooms. To this end, an accompanying discussion was scheduled with the students during their period of study abroad, as well as a reflective final discussion a few weeks after their return. This also afforded the project staff an opportunity to gain an insight into the extent of change in the students' perspectives.

The second funding phase (2023–2024) saw the range of the target group expanded. In addition to students pursuing a degree in primary education with an emphasis on Islamic religion, students enrolled in secondary education programmes were included. The curriculum was expanded to encompass Protestant and Catholic RE, as well as Ethics. This reflected the growing awareness, evident during the initial funding phase, that in addition to students of Islamic religion, some students of Christian denominations and

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14 For this see Ermert in this volume.

Ethics were also interested in participating in a project like IMPACCT. In the second funding phase, the students were also provided with comprehensive support before, during and after their stay, which was consistently identified as a key strength.

It should be noted that the objective of both funding phases was not solely to facilitate student mobility abroad; it also encompassed the provision of opportunities for internationalisation at home. Guest lectureships and virtual workshops were established with the objective of providing students at JLU with the opportunity to interact with lecturers from partner universities, thereby facilitating the decision-making process regarding the choice of a stay abroad. One virtual and one in-person summer school were held in the first and second funding phases,<sup>15</sup> providing an opportunity for students to engage in exchange on different models and principles of RE. All in all, the project's focus on interreligious dialogue and RE is unique in the total number of 36 funded projects in Module A.

## Conclusion

Five years of collaboration in the IMPACCT project have shown clearly how important it is to facilitate international cooperation between all the stakeholder groups involved. In the course of the cooperation, it quickly became apparent that, in addition to interreligious dialogue, inner Islamic dialogue needs to be promoted constantly. This anthology is above all a testament to the committed discussions of the project partners that resulted from the first and second funding phases regarding the development in focus from the Islamic to the interreligious perspective on RE.<sup>16</sup>

This article ends with five lessons learned out of five years of international project activity within IMPACCT. All the lessons learned

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15 On the virtual summer school, see Nierste 2024.

16 Around the same time as this anthology was written, the project team acquired the third grant for IMPACCT (2025–2029). The next developmental step is to interconnect the focus topic of interreligious dialogue with the topics peace, justice and inclusive societies based on the synergies with the European University Alliance EUPeace: European University for Peace, Justice, and Inclusive Societies. <https://www.eupeace.eu>

are formulated in general terms, as they can be applied beyond the internationalisation of teacher education as well.

- 1) Internationalisation needs multiprofessional teams consisting of academics and higher education professionals well-versed in facilitating and promoting internationalisation.
- 2) Successful internationalisation highly depends on detailed knowledge of the target group and target group-oriented communication channels.
- 3) Against the background of cultural differences in international project work, it is essential to exchange information intensively about common objectives, expectations as well as roles and responsibilities.
- 4) Stable personal relationships built on trust and reliability, which need time to develop, are a prerequisite for internationalisation.
- 5) Internationalisation requires institutional commitment as it is a task that encompasses entire institutions.

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