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## **Internationalising initial teacher education – a case of partnership working across borders.<sup>1</sup>**

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The present paper describes and analyses a programme that has been effective in generating valuable links between the United Kingdom and Germany, between universities and schools as well as local authorities. The programme is called PrimA, *Praktikum im Ausland*, which is a German acronym for school placements abroad. Whether the programme's destiny might be jeopardized by the Brexit referendum is a question that can only be answered in future. The analysis of the present PrimA programme, however, clearly reveals the effectiveness of partnership working especially across borders, contributing to the internationalisation of initial teacher education and showing ways forward in European higher education.

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the purpose and the history of the PrimA programme, while Chapter 2 focusses on six factors that have proven themselves to enhance international mobility in higher education. Chapter 3 addresses the PrimA programme as a case of partnership working, pointing out a variety of partners, whose collaborative work has helped to get the project off the ground and keep it running. Thus, in Chapter 4, the PrimA experience can be analysed with the help of Healey, Flint and Harrington's model (2014) of partnership learning communities. Finally, in Chapter 5, future challenges will be pinpointed and a way forward will be proposed for internationalising initial teacher education through partnership working.

### **Chapter 1 The purpose and the history of the PrimA programme**

The PrimA programme is a response to a wider strategy to increase international mobility among students in higher education (HE). At present the mobility of the German university student population stands at a respectable rate of 26% (DAAD/BMBF 2013: 2). This figure was established in a nationwide survey that also demonstrates a particularly strong link between the United Kingdom and Germany: for German students the UK is the most popular mobility destination with 12% of mobile students coming to this country for their stay abroad, followed by the US, France, and Spain. (DAAD/BMBF 2013: 10)

For a variety of reasons, it is considered especially important to support international mobility in German universities:

After 1945, international mobility was seen as an antidote to anti-democratic and fascist tendencies; facilitating mobility experience among the young generation was

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meant to help establish a more stable and democratic world (Aktionsrat Bildung 2012: 23).

More recently international mobility is considered to foster what has been termed 'brain circulation' among students and young academics, thus contributing to brain gain rather than brain drain (Aktionsrat Bildung 2012: 23f.).

From recent studies such as the so-called PEDES study (Personality Development of Sojourners) by Zimmermann/Neyer (2013) it has become known that staying abroad gives young people the chance to experience 'a life event that catalyzes' personal growth (525 f.). This study suggests that internationally mobile students become more open and show a decrease in anxiety (termed 'Neuroticism') after a long-term stay abroad. And the difference is made by the people overseas with whom they form new relationships (cf. 527). This finding suggests that the notion of partners and partnership is especially relevant for mobility programmes in HE.

From the Steeplechase study by Netz (2013: 21) we have learned that, once young people have had the enriching experience of staying abroad, they become more likely to participate in future mobility projects. Thus higher education institutions may want to support students taking the first steps abroad in order to take advantage of 'the self-perpetuating nature of mobility experience' (Netz 2013: 21).

At the University of Wuppertal, especially in the department of English and American studies, teacher education plays an important role, as up to 90% of students are planning to become teachers of English as a foreign language. With a long-term stay abroad future teachers' own mobility experience can be increased to strengthen their so-called 'multiplier position' in education in the long run, which means that each one of them will become a convincing role model for large numbers of students in schools.

Programmes such as PrimA are also expected to enable students to experience cultural and linguistic diversity and prepare them for their future tasks in diversity management in schools.

These are some of the reasons why the University of Wuppertal cooperates with schools in England and Wales in addition to universities such as Birmingham City University, which set great store by teacher education. PrimA involves language students in Initial Teacher Education, usually second-and-third-year Bachelor students.

The idea for this programme was born as early as 2003. At the time, a debate in HE had started about the increasingly diverse and multicultural pupil population in schools not only in Germany, but all over Europe. Four head teachers in the UK were contacted and asked if German student teachers could spend a placement at their schools operating as additional student teachers and classroom assistants for one term. As all four agreed, the following year, 2004, PrimA was launched with five students in their early twenties. Between 2004 and 2007 the take-up rate was rather low, with 5, then 7, then 2 student placements and then 1. Between 2008 and 2012 the number rose gradually up to 15. And then, 2013 saw an exponential increase up to forty, and growth continues to 48 students in 2016. Currently, more than fifty students have already applied to join the scheme in 2017. Already PrimA has allowed some 250 students to take part in school placements at 32 schools in the UK and has been judged to be one of the university's most effective schemes to increase student mobility.

## **Chapter 2 Six selected factors enhancing international student mobility**

From the empirical Steeplechase study (Netz 2013) factors have become known that might deter students from going abroad. The barriers to mobility identified by Netz match the

analysis conducted in the UK by the Higher Education Academy (HEA 2014a). Now, on the other hand, from the experience of running the PrimA programme for more than twelve years, it is possible to identify factors that motivate students to go abroad:

1. Over the years, the news of the advantages of the PrimA programme has spread by word of mouth. The interaction between returning students and those about to begin their placements has turned out to be an important factor stimulating mobility. This peer-to-peer interaction has become a formalised and vital component of the scheme. Realising how much they have learned about the school system in the UK, about how to manage their everyday affairs while living abroad, returning students put together a kind of 'survival bible' that they pass on to the next cohort preparing their placements in exactly the same schools which the returning students had left a few months earlier.
2. Another important factor is the preparatory module which students selected for the PrimA programme take with their university lecturer. They learn about theories of language acquisition and bilingualism as well as the practicalities of lesson planning. This TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) module is an optional component of general studies in the Bachelor course.
3. This above mentioned module has become a window of mobility combining the stay abroad with the award of credit points. Thus participation in the placement abroad does not delay students' study progress nor does it lengthen their study time. Bachelor students can gain up to 30 CP during their time abroad.
4. That is why intensive academic support throughout the placement is imperative. It is offered to each individual student employing the full range of available media: email, skype, telephone as well as a visit by their lecturer. It may sound trivial, but it is far from trivial to add that the support that is sometimes needed goes beyond academic feedback and to include a measure of pastoral support.
5. Another vital component of the programme is its emphasis on intercultural education, which includes case study analyses of critical incidents (cf. Göbel/Helmke 2010) and role play. Even though these training sessions cannot prevent homesickness or those occasional instances of feeling out of place and bewildered, they effectively prepare students to deal with these feelings, as has become obvious from repeated student feedback.
6. Unlike in the programme's early days, students nowadays can apply for a measure of financial assistance in the form of a mobility grant and an ERASMUS scholarship. Whether, in future, the International Office will be able to secure these scholarships for a stay in a post-Brexit UK is a worrying question that has, very recently, been generating a great sense of insecurity at German universities.

These six factors assisting student teacher mobility did not simply fall from the sky, but rather emerged as vital elements as the project gained momentum. They have been actively developed in co-operation with the various different partners, or stakeholders, in the scheme.

### **Chapter 3 Partnership working across borders**

Right from the beginning of the programme, the head teachers and their staff in the UK together with the German student teachers have been the pillars of the partnership. Additionally the following four parties played a crucial role in creating a sustainable cooperative network:

At the home university the board of studies, the board of examiners and the course adviser acknowledged the preparatory module as a genuinely academic component of the bachelor course making the award of credit points possible.

The International Office secured the funding for the individual student scholarships by negotiating a lump sum from the European Erasmus plus scheme. The staff of the International Office also assists students in filling in the complicated forms to apply for these scholarships and additional student mobility allowances. With the exponential increase in PrimA students, the Dean and the Vice President of the University of Wuppertal provided a small sum to fund a student assistant to help with the administration of the project.

Also, in the UK contacts at partner universities have made a valuable contribution in providing the University of Wuppertal with contacts to find new partner schools.

Over the years it has become evident how immensely important the returning students are for the success of the scheme as they pass on first-hand experience of having spent some time abroad as student teachers themselves. They are therefore also considered to be excellent candidates for the post of student assistant in PrimA. These student assistants are the cornerstone of the programme, assisting the academic coordinator in keeping in touch with schools, students, and acting in a sense as confidantes who, during the placement work very much as a go-between between home and abroad.

To illustrate the course of the programme's procedure, and to highlight the importance of the above mentioned stakeholders, the various partners will be mapped onto the phases a typical PrimA cohort passes through across one academic year. This mapping will be carried out with the help of an adaptation of the so-called Rubicon model (Heckhausen et al. 1987; Gollwitzer 1990; Achtziger/Gollwitzer 2007). While Netz in his Steeplechase study (2013: 4) uses the Rubicon model for analysing obstacles in student mobility, the model is used here to highlight the importance of the different groups at different points of time in the PrimA partnership.

The Rubicon model explains goal achievement with the help of four phases: the predecisional phase, the postdecisional phase, the actional phase, and finally, the postactional phase (cf. Heckhausen et al. 1987; Gollwitzer 1990: 55-60; Achtziger/Gollwitzer 2007: 769; Netz 2013: 3f.). With regard to student mobility the Steeplechase study identified two thresholds operating as barriers to going abroad - the most influential one being the decision threshold (Netz 2013: 4). According to Netz "the crucial task is to help students pass the decision threshold" (2013: 21) by providing them with plenty of information about the practicalities of going abroad. Then there is the realisation threshold for those students who have decided to go abroad but lack the determination and the means to put their plans into action (2013: 16, 21). How do PrimA students cope with these thresholds?

As the Prima cycle always begins with an extensive two-hour information session in April or May, students interested in going abroad meet a lecturer, peer students, course adviser, a member of the International office - all illustrating the benefits of going abroad as well as the technicalities involved in organising a school placement in the UK. However, it is those who have just returned from a stay abroad who play a decisive part in helping their fellow students to cross the decision threshold.

Once students decide that they wish to participate in the programme, they hand in a written application. By writing this application students take responsibility for their own learning experiences as they set out their motives and outline the academic work they intend to do during their placement. At this postdecisional phase the head teachers and local authorities are highly important figures, as they pledge to provide a place at their school for a specific

German student. These partners make it possible for German students to cross the realisation threshold.

From October onwards students become engaged in the actional phase, at first at their home university when they take the preparation module with their lecturer, then from March to July when they undertake their placement in the UK. During the summer term, the English and Welsh members of staff, especially the mentors, are the most important partners: they create a welcoming atmosphere at the schools, draw up timetables, suggest activities, and occasionally help with finding accommodation. These mentors encourage the student teachers to play an active role in the school life, comment on their lesson plans and teaching material, and provide feedback on lessons held by students.

On their return to Germany students participate in debriefing sessions and hand in coursework. This postactional phase is of vital importance in consolidating the learning gained in the stay abroad, as most students need a systematic framework of categories for analysis, to help them properly to reflect on their experience. Because of the cognitive challenges of the debriefing sessions it is the lecturer who plays an important role as learning partner to overcome the reflection threshold.

#### **Chapter 4 Benefitting from learning communities**

Exploring the PrimA programme as a case of partnership working (cf. also HEA 2014b), the insight emerged that mentioning only the gains achieved by the individual students is to give too narrow an assessment of the scheme's value. As Healey, Flint, and Harrington point out "a key characteristic of partnership is that all involved stand to gain" (2014: 36). Thus the following paragraph looks at all the different parties who were identified with the help of the Rubicon model and their potential gains.

A celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PrimA cooperation at the Pembrokeshire County Council in Haverfordwest, UK, showed how much the programme is appreciated by the host schools receiving the new student teachers. Particularly in schools located in rural areas, the German students are seen as bearers of cultural and linguistic diversity, enriching the schools' learning environment, making the entire programme a win-win situation for the host schools as well as for the German student teachers. The conceptual model designed by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) with its four areas of partnership also reveals academic advantages as part of the PrimA experience.

a) The area of curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (Healey et al. 2014: 24) is probably that part of the PrimA project where the effect is only fairly modest. Students are involved in the evaluation of the entire module, but so far students have not been engaged in designing the course programme. They are asked for their advice on how to improve the entire module. This activity, however, has not yet been formalised and institutionalised.

b) Scholarship of teaching and learning (Healey et al. 2014: 24) has become a promising and expanding area, as three former participants in the PrimA programme who joined the TEFL master's course carried out small-scale research projects on how students learn during their school placement abroad. These dissertations were conducted as qualitative interview studies and have helped to improve the general organisation of the programme.

Additionally, the student assistants have been trained in research methods to support the academic coordinator in investigating the students' progress throughout the programme. The development of teaching skills is of particular importance in initial teacher education, and it was demonstrated that their full integration into the working life of the host schools may account for the students' remarkable gains in this domain.

Between 2010 and 2015 180 students were asked to fill in a questionnaire before and after their placement in a British school. The analytical instrument was based on what is called EPOSTL, the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages, designed at the European Centre for Modern Languages in Austria (Newby et al. 2007). It contains seven categories representing areas in which teachers require skills and knowledge: they are, context, methodology, resources, lesson planning, conducting a lesson, independent learning, and assessment of learning (Newby et al. 2007: 13). The PrimA students ranked their competences on a scale of 1 to 10, '1' signifying a very low competence and '10' a very high competence. The analyses of the questionnaires filled in *before* the school placement abroad show an overall level of mediocrity. On average students rate their competence at a level of 5 or 6. However, the data compiled from the post questionnaires - filled in *after* the school placement abroad - suggest that the students improved their competences considerably over the duration of the placement in a British school. Students seem to have gained more confidence especially in the area of planning lessons. This gain is most probably related to the monitoring and feedback process from the teachers alongside whom they were working and the feedback they received on the lesson plans which they sent to me via email.

c) Students are also encouraged to engage in research and enquiry into their discipline (Healey et al. 2014: 24), for instance the teaching of history or mathematics in a secondary school or an innovative approach to teaching writing to primary school children. As all students participating in PrimA are required to carry out a research project to earn their credit points, they all hand in a 5000-word paper after their return to Germany. The insights gained in these small-scale research projects are then discussed with fellow students and lecturers, contributing to a widening of the range of discourse and to an expanding knowledge base especially in TEFL, but also in other disciplines.

d) The biggest gains are probably registered in the area of learning, teaching and assessment (Healey et al. 2014: 24) as students become active participants in their own learning. This is particularly true with regard to cultural understanding and intercultural awareness. This learning happens at every moment of the placements, even in the smallest daily interactions. Its sustainability, however, depends on an analytical and reflective study of those interactions. On their return from the UK all students as part of a debriefing block session, are required to present and analyse one concrete example of cultural learning which they themselves experienced. At the centre of the analysis is a specific utterance related to an interaction between the student and one or more native speakers. The returning students are asked to recall this utterance, describe the interlocutors' personal backgrounds, analyse the contextual and situational factors, and in the course of the process discover cultural values and standards relating to the host culture and their own culture (cf. Bosse 2010). A 22-year old German student, to give an example, analysed his own feeling of shock in response to the utterance 'I cleaned every corner of the house before you came'. This was said to him on first arrival at his accommodation. He was sharing a flat with two English students, one of whom was expecting a stereotypical German to be obsessed with cleanliness. The German student clearly had not seen himself as a very tidy person until this young Englishwoman made him regard his own cultural background from a new perspective. Another example is related to an occasion when a 21-year old female student was invited to a farewell gathering at the end of her placement and asked for her choice of restaurant. Unaware of how impolite her reply sounded to an English ear, the student replied 'I don't care', not yet having realised that to a native English speaker 'I don't care' indicates disdain or lack of interest. She had, of course, meant to express gratitude, and that she had no particular preference. Luckily by then she had developed some intercultural competence and was able to ask, whether she may have expressed herself inappropriately. She learned that 'I really don't mind' would have been a

more polite response, and in the end all was well and they all had a very pleasant evening at a Cornish restaurant.

The sheer variety of situations reported upon by students suggests the depth of cultural learning throughout their stay abroad. The advantage of the debriefing session, however, lies in the dissemination of these insights: it is not only the individual student who has learned a valuable lesson, but also some 50 fellow students listening to him or her, the representatives of the international office attending the debriefing session, and their lecturer, also listening to her students. During the school placement itself the British partners may also have had ample opportunity to change their perspective. Thus the gains in cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding are surely mutual.

## **Chapter 5 Future challenges and conclusion**

HEI all over Europe are well advised to put student mobility at the heart of internationalisation strategies. It is, however, important to add that any scheme needs to be fine-tuned to accommodate the needs of the specific institutions and the students involved. Whether the following three conclusions could be universally applicable is something that needs to be discussed among partners.

First, at the University of Wuppertal all those involved are beginning to understand that the challenges and difficulties in establishing partnership working in an international context are, at the same time, real chances, as they open up excellent learning opportunities (cf. Diehr 2013).

Second, in partnership working – even more so if it is of an international nature – students are in a dialectical situation: the framework of partnership working aims to empower students and to counteract consumerist attitudes (cf. Healey et al. 2014: 19); but at the same time it compels them to take responsibility for their own learning. In the PrimA programme students are required to write an application, to sign training agreements, to make all their travel arrangements, to find accommodation, and to identify a topic for their enquiry projects. And yet, they benefit considerably from all this, as they gain in confidence and determination as well as acquiring skills of self-organisation, equipping them with the skills necessary to rise to the demands of new partnership projects, because they are urged to become actively involved in a greater learning community.

Third, it is most important to stress that individual universities and HEI need to be properly supported by policy makers in trying to expand mobility programmes and establish partnership working across borders. Political measures in combination with mobility grants and recognition regulations would surely help to enhance the positive effect of internationalisation strategies.

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