

Extending and reinforcing good practice in teacher development: an Erasmus+ funded project



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This article provides an overview of the key activities that have been carried out in the first two years of this three year project (2016-2019) Erasmus+

Project background and aims

Although formal professional development for learning and teaching in higher education is well established in the UK and some other European countries (Pleschová et al., 2012), other institutions within the European Union, such as those in Eastern Europe do not necessarily have a record of such formalised support, particularly with regard to support for early career educators. More than two decades since the change of regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, universities in these countries are still, to a certain extent, playing catch-up in terms of academic development. Those new to higher education teaching tend to emulate teaching styles and techniques of more senior teachers, which, in turn, can hamper the introduction of more effective teaching methods and approaches, and adversely impact the student learning experience. This exciting project, led by the University of Economics in Bratislava (Slovakia) seeks to offer professional development opportunities to early career university educators in countries where this was hitherto lacking. It comprises a range of partners from across Europe that bring their own expertise and perspectives to the project delivery and intended outcomes:

- University of Economics, Bratislava (EUBA) (Slovakia)
- Central European University, Budapest (Hungary)
- Masaryk University, Brno (Czech Republic)
- University of Lund (Sweden)
- University of Tartu (Estonia)
- SEDA (UK)

THE PROJECT PARTNERS



Building on past professional development pilot projects undertaken by the University of Economics and Masaryk University, and their resulting recommendations, the project aims ultimately to enhance the student learning experience, by providing professional development for early career university teachers in countries where didactic learning and teaching styles remain prevalent. The main objectives of the project are to:

1. offer an educational development course, which is designed to help participants transition from a teacher-centric perspective towards more active, student-focussed approaches;
2. evaluate the factors that support and/or inhibit the transfer of knowledge and skills from formalised academic development to lived practice;
3. prepare a group of local professionals that could replace in the future foreign academic developers and run teacher development courses for their institutions

The second and third objectives are still a work in progress, so here we focus on the considerable progress that has been made with regard to Objective 1 and look at some of the feedback that participants have provided on the programme, and the impact for their own professional development.

Teaching programme

The design of the overall programme - through face-to-face and virtual meetings - was undertaken in 2016-2017 by colleagues across the project partnership in readiness for its first delivery in August 2017. As previously mentioned, the underpinning principle of the programme as a whole is to promote student-centred approaches to learning and teaching in Higher Education, and encourage the adoption and development of those approaches by early career educators within the University of Economics (Bratislava) and Masaryk University (Brno).

The programme starts with an 8-day face-to-face summer school during which participants have the opportunity to discuss essential theories in higher education, and are encouraged to apply that knowledge through active formative activities such as planning individual sessions, learning activities, and assessment and feedback approaches. As part of the summer school they also carry out a short teaching demonstration which is peer and tutor critiqued, and are encouraged to use the feedback from this experience to reflect on how they might enhance their professional practice. The summer school is facilitated by colleagues from across the project partnership, including two SEDA representatives.

The second part of the program is an online coaching programme that covers the whole of the academic year and which provides support to the participants in the daily challenges of their teaching. During this segment of the participants work with an individual coach, drawn from the pool of summer school facilitators, who supports them through the process of designing, implementing and evaluating a learning and teaching innovation.

A key factor in the overall ethos of the programme was also the desire to make overt linkages to the wider educational development community, and show that this activity is valued its own right, and that appropriate accreditation is recognised

internationally. As a project partner, SEDA was ideally placed to facilitate this formal recognition, and the project, under the auspices of the Services and Enterprise Committee, was successfully accredited by the SEDA Professional Development Framework (SEDA-PDF) in relation to the *Supporting Learning Award* in August 2017.

Background of Participants (Cohort 1, 2017-2018)

This initial cohort who successfully applied to take part in the programme participated in an eight-day summer school held in Bratislava, Slovakia during Autumn 2017. The cohort came from different discipline backgrounds and places of study. Three participants study/work at EUBA, three participants at EUKE (Košice Kampus), and twelve at Masaryk University. They also represented a highly international group, coming from: Slovakia, Czech Republic, Albania, Ghana, Poland, Croatia, Germany and Russia. The students they teach also come from a wide range of countries. Some participants teach in English, whilst others teach in Slovak or Czech. The language of instruction at the summer school and related assessment tasks was English.

Prior to engaging in the summer school, participants were asked about their expectations from the programme. The responses included *inter alia*: to help them become better teachers, design sessions, encourage students to participate, facilitate discussion, think critically, read, to deliver interesting courses/sessions, help students to stay focused during the entire class, create safe learning environments - a relaxed, yet productive atmosphere in a class.

The participants appreciated the opportunity to have a mentor/coach assigned to guide them beyond the summer school for an extended period and from which they would receive feedback on planning, executing and evaluating their teaching innovation. They also valued highly the opportunity to work towards and achieve an internationally recognised award – the SEDA-PDF Supporting Learning Award. Interestingly, and as noted above some of the participants were aware of deficits in their own teaching approaches and recognised that there didn't exist a culture of 'discussing teaching with colleagues'. This apparent lack of the scholarship of teaching (Trigwell et al., 2000) was something that the summer school and overall programme planned for, and was successful in addressing.

Participants at the summer school in Bratislava, August 2017



Feedback from participants in cohort 1

An evaluation was carried out in relation to objective 1 of this project. Participants from this first group were asked a series of questions after completion of the online coaching program - designed to provide support to the participants in the daily challenges of their teaching. The table below offers a snapshot of the data gathered from this evaluation and includes direct quotes from some of the participants in relation to their opinion of the overall programme.

Keep organizing this course. It's very valuable experience for any beginner or even experienced teacher.
Please, offer the programme to the regular teachers at the University of Economics in Bratislava.
Thank you very much for all the efforts, advices, encouragements. I am very thankful for having the opportunity to learn from you and I recommend the course to people around me.
I think this program should extend to Kosovo. I would be ready to assist in any respect.
I consider the whole program to be very valuable for my current and future teaching.
It is just great, very well prepared. The program is very beneficial.

Table 1 feedback from cohort 1

A second cohort who successfully applied to take part in the programme participated in an eight-day summer school held in Brno, Czech Republic during August 2018. Similar to cohort 1, this group of 19 PhD students came from different discipline backgrounds and places of study; 13 from Masaryk University and 6 from EUBA.

They too represent a highly international group, originating from Slovakia, Czech Republic, Ghana, Nicaragua and Canada.

Further evaluation will be carried out in summer 2019, when this second cohort complete the online element of the programme. It is intended that once all data has been collected and analysed – further dissemination of this will be carried out.

Online Book

Another exciting output from the project concerns the innovation projects that the 2017-18 participants completed as part of their Supporting Learning Award. These project reports have been further refined, and are now being incrementally published as online book chapters by SEDA, and were launched at a drinks reception at the SEDA Autumn 2018 conference in Birmingham. Not only does this demonstrate the valuable contributions and insights that early career educators are able to bring to the SEDA community, but also allows the participants to take ownership of the development and dissemination of their own scholarship in learning and teaching.

Professional development

Participating in this three-year project has brought professional development for the programme leaders and coaches too. Like the participants, this group of project leaders represent an international group coming from: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Sweden, and the UK. From a SEDA perspective it has allowed us to widen our understanding of higher education cultures - an important consideration when looking at how SEDA-PDF awards are shaped for and interpreted by an international audience. It also allows the SEDA values to permeate a new initiative and shape the evolution of educational development in Central and Eastern Europe, and welcome new members to the SEDA family. From a personal perspective it has allowed us to “live” the reality of teaching in a multicultural setting – pushing beyond our comfort zones at times – and allowed us to participate in a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002) beyond our familiar ‘significant networks’ (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009).

References

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Project website:

https://www.seda.ac.uk/extending_and_reinforcing_good_practice_in_teacher_development

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