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Borderless education: InterUniversity study – tutors´ feedback

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Abstract

The paper introduces the project of interuniversity study running within eight universities (United Kingdom, Ireland, Finland, Latvia, Italy and in the Czech Republic – three institutions). The paper (1) briefly describes the project and (2) presents the feedback collected from teachers/tutors engaged in the project.

Keywords: borderless education; tuto;, feedback; open access; online; Information Technologies; Financing; Management; higher education

1. Introduction

The process of internationalization has become standard within the current world. Altbach and Knight cite several reasons why universities focus on internationalization; the world-wide globalization is the principal one. Within the higher education this process includes several approaches, starting from exchange study programmes to the borderless education, i.e. to running the process of instruction online for students of other education institutions. This approach is supported by increased demand for professionals in various fields (those of informatics and business are strongly needed) on one side, and making cultural differences closer on the other side (Altbach & Knight, 2007). To capture the ways in which higher education goes about internationalizing, Arum described international education with three overarching categories: international studies, international educational exchange and technical assistance (Arum, 1987). There is no one way to be an international scholar or to define international scholarship. The history of internationalization within higher education is multi-faced covering e.g. administrative and managerial opportunities (Dolby & Rahman, 2008), and teaching/learning opportunities as cooperation on projects, teaching and

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curriculum design, participation in instruction/study abroad, or providing/using global, social, economic, political and educational resources (Ruther, 2002). Moreover, the participation in international academic activities provides scholars with globalizing academic communities (Solomon & Zukas, 2006). These communities create a "ceremonial space" (Solomon & Zukas, 2006, p. 372) in which scholarship is "played" and "performed" (Solomon & Zukas, 2006, p. 373) and both "knowledge and academic identities" are produced (Solomon & Zukas, 2006, p. 377). All these activities may assist individuals to expand and enrich their critical international perspectives, practices and identities. (Coryell et al., 2012)

2. R/IUS project

The Run-up InterUniversity Study Project (RIUS) was designed by three Czech higher institutions – University of Tomas Bata, Zlin (UTBZ), University of West Bohemia, Pilsen (UWB) and University of Hradec Kralove (UHK). The project having been successfully piloted continued as InterUniversity Study project (IUS) in the next semester. Totally 84 subjects were offered to students within the RIUS and IUS projects (49 in the RIUS, 35 in the IUS). The project aimed at following fields:

- To create the base of university network in the Czech Republic and connect it to the world, i.e. to prepare and verify conditions (infrastructure, processes, know-how) for the connection the Czech IUS network to similar networks in other EU countries; to design and stabilize the infrastructure (organization, processes) suitable for IUS in the network of other Czech universities.
- To enhance the quality and attractiveness of study programmes and subjects offered at particular universities.
- To increase the effectiveness of sources previously used in the distance form of studies using tools and approaches of eLearning.
- To extend the offer of study subjects at particular universities.
- To share study subjects guaranteed by leading field experts, to share didactic aids (mainly e-learning aids), educational infrastructure etc.
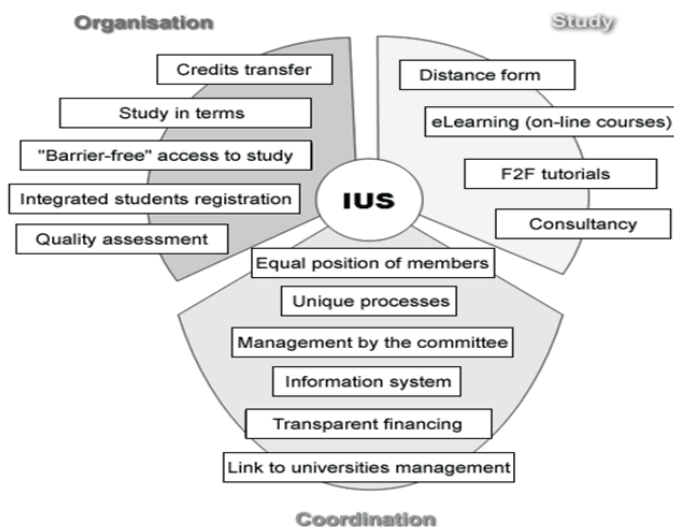

Fig. 1. Structure of the R/IUS projects

The project design focused on three fields – study, organization and coordination, as displayed in figure 1.

The process of instruction was held in the LMS WebCT/Blackboard in tutored distance online courses where only the starting tutorial and final assessment were organized in the face-to-face form. The transfer of credits was pre-arranged and approved, as well as the schedule and quality assessment. The process of learning was managed by the steering committee consisting of all partner institutions members. Running the R/IUS projects the barrier-free access to higher education was provided.

3. Tutors´ feedback – methodology and results

Totally 82 tutors (some of them tutoring more than one course, or several courses were tutored by more than one tutor) provided their opinions and experience from running online courses within the R/IUS projects, as well as proposals to improvements to be implemented in the near future.

Several tools were developed for collecting feedback in the R/IUS projects focusing on the learning content, management and organization of particular online courses:

- questionnaire for successful students,
- questionnaire for drop-out students,
- questionnaire for tutors,
- evaluation interview with students and tutors.

The tutor's questionnaire consisted of 15 items. Teachers provided responses in the form of multiple choice (nine items) and open answers (six items) marking one choice, most closely reflecting their experience. The questionnaire was structured in three areas focusing on:

1. the process of teaching,
2. the process of online courses organization,
3. technical support.

The collected data were analyzed and results summarized in figures 2 -5; detailed descriptions collected from the open-answers and evaluation interviews were also summarized and presented in full-text below the figures.

3.1. Process of teaching

In the field relating to the process of teaching tutors´ interests, experience and benefits were detected. Results are displayed in figure 2.
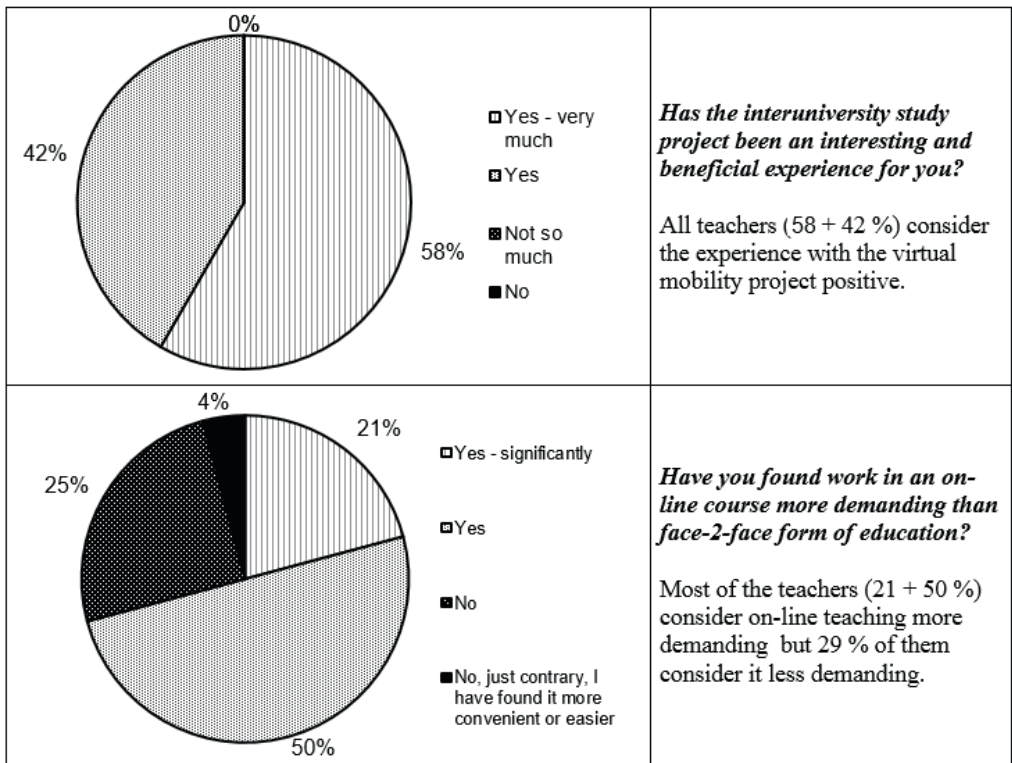
0% 42% 58%	**Has the interuniversity study project been an interesting and beneficial experience for you?** All teachers (58 + 42 %) consider the experience with the virtual mobility project positive.
☐ Yes - very much ☐ Yes ■ Not so much ■ No	
4% 25% 21% 50%	**Have you found work in an on-line course more demanding than face-2-face form of education?** Most of the teachers (21 + 50 %) consider on-line teaching more demanding but 29 % of them consider it less demanding.
☐ Yes - significantly ☐ Yes ■ No ■ No, just contrary, I have found it more convenient or easier	

Fig. 2. Tutors´ feedback: experience and work difficulty

In open-answer replies the strongest project contributions and benefits from tutors´ view were detected and summarized as follows:

- *The new teaching experience. / New experience with teaching online. / The new view of the virtual mobility. / Experience with on-line e-course in English. / Tutoring students, another type of teaching (another teaching approach), ...*
- *Variety of students and their opinions, experiences, etc. Possibility to get teaching experience form different universities, countries, cultures.*
- *I can teach over the Internet without the need of constant travelling and meeting students in the classroom.*
- *To have the opportunity to communicate with foreign students (also with Czech students) in English.*
- *The way students work and their essays which can be helpful for me how to improve my way of teaching.*

The project weaknesses from tutors´ view were defined as:

- *Impersonal contact and the higher possibility for students to cheat.*
- *Lack of communication, students did not have correct communication manners developed (no or late answering to tutor´s emails).*
- *Almost no personal contact. Technical equipment was not able to solve some is-sues effectively. Time demanding activity.*

- *Problems with mutual communication - not in the technical perspective but for example for clarifying the requirements.*
- *Lack of knowledge in teaching on-line.*
- *Lack of common distance education platforms.*
- *Difficult learning via LMS.*

3.2 Process of online courses organization

Within this area the project organization, financial matters and technical difficulties relating to tutoring online courses were monitored. Results are displayed in figures 3a, 3b.
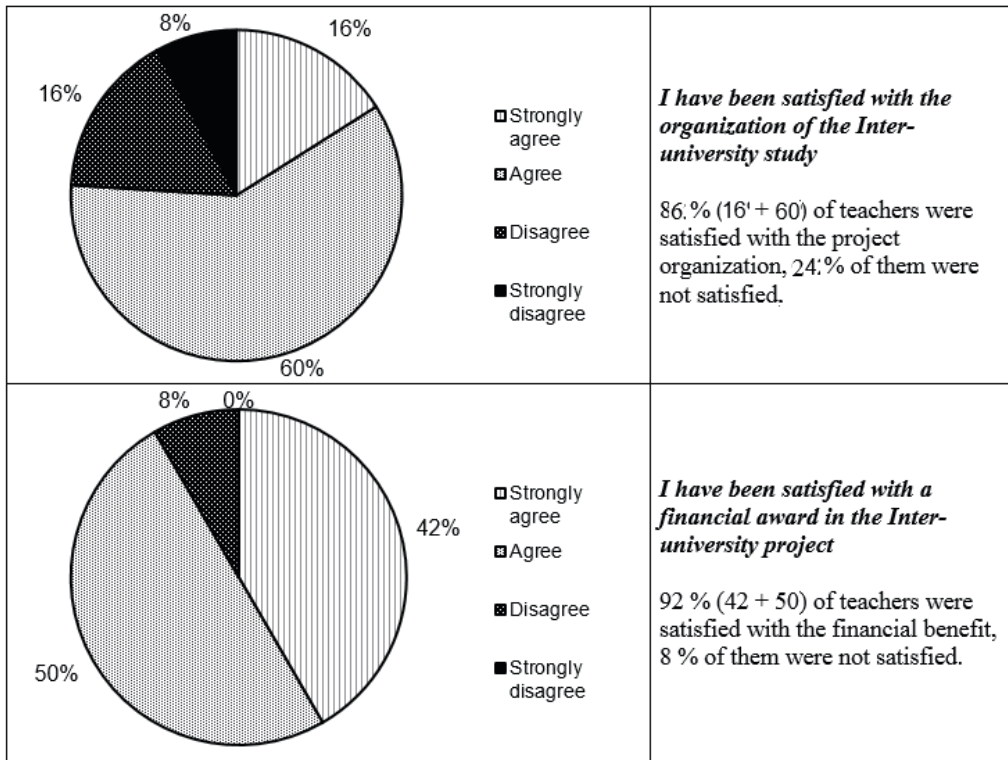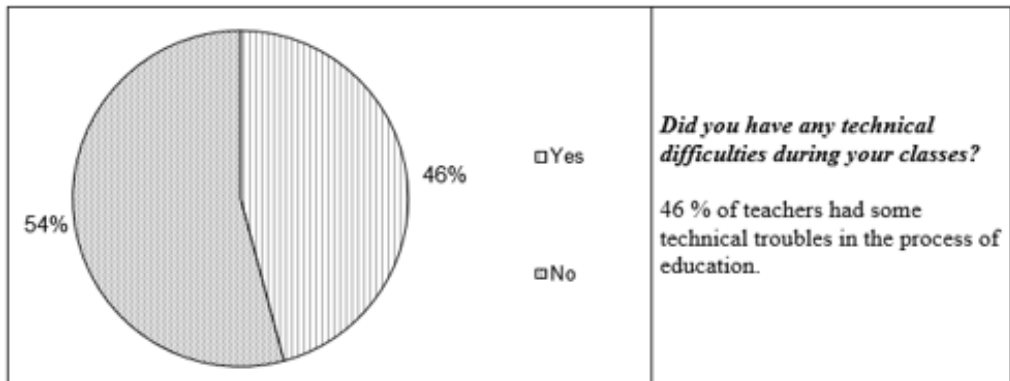

Fig. 3a. Tutors´ feedback: organization of study

Fig 3b. Tutors´feedback: organization of study

The most frequent students´ problems from tutors´ view focused on:

- *How to teach students essay writing on a given topic without any experience (the 1st year university studies).*
- *Clarification of assignment requirements.*
- *To perceive and to complete final task - students needed some help with submitting their assignments but it was not the problem of the project but the subject itself.*
- *The new teaching environment and level of English language knowledge.*
- *There where some technical problems with e-learning environment at the beginning but we solved it.*
- *Half of questions were technical issues and half questions was expert's questions (e.g. Can you explain ..., can you recommend ... etc.)*
- *I don´t know about any problems.*

And, what teachers liked about students:

- *Their interest in the teaching subject and the endeavor to fulfill submitted tasks.*
- *Regular submission of the assignments.*
- *Enthusiasm of students on initial tutorial in Finland.*
- *Regular work in the course - discussion, assignments.*
- *Very good seminary essays and seminary presentations.*
- *They worked out the tasks in a different way than students at my home university. Thus it was very beneficial to me.*
- *Self-study and virtual team work were perfect.*
- *Enthusiasm, high level of work.*
- *Their real and honest effort and positive attitude. Great people!*
- *Those who were serious about the course showed a lot of commitment.*

3.2. Technical support

Following fields relating to the technical support and tutors´work were detected – (1) the frequency of situations, when help and support were needed and (2) overall evaluation of the work in online courses monitoring whether the instruction was influenced by possible technical problems. Results are displayed in figure 4.
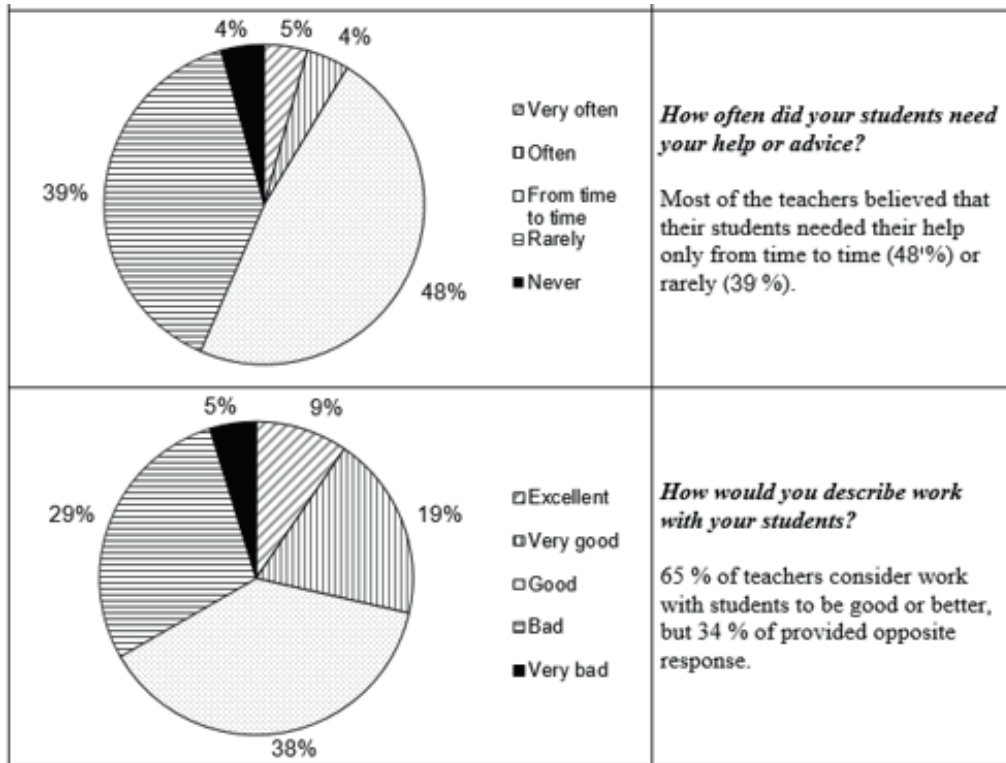
Fig. 4. Tutors´feedback: technical support evaluation of tutors´work

Despite tutors evaluated the courses positively, there were some (rare) matters teachers disliked about students:

- *Those, who started the course, should finish it.*
- *The huge decrease of students at the beginning and during the course.*
- *They began to study the subject too late and then were in hurry.*
- *Complaining about grades even after the detailed explanation was provided.*
- *In a group activity some students did not reply to their group's requests, but simply disappeared.*
- *Problematic communication (no responses from some students).*
- *Communication during the course.*
- *Level of difficulty with understanding English – it is difficult to communicate effectively with broken English.*
- *Standard of written English was poor.*
- *I think that all was OK.*

To sum up, tutoring was appreciated to be a new, positive professional experience requiring special (didactic) preparation before the online courses start, the adequate level of (written) English from both tutors and students and technical support in case of need. The experience of tutoring online courses was considered to be a strongly motivating factor for both sides which was highly recommended to other colleagues, as displayed in figure 5.
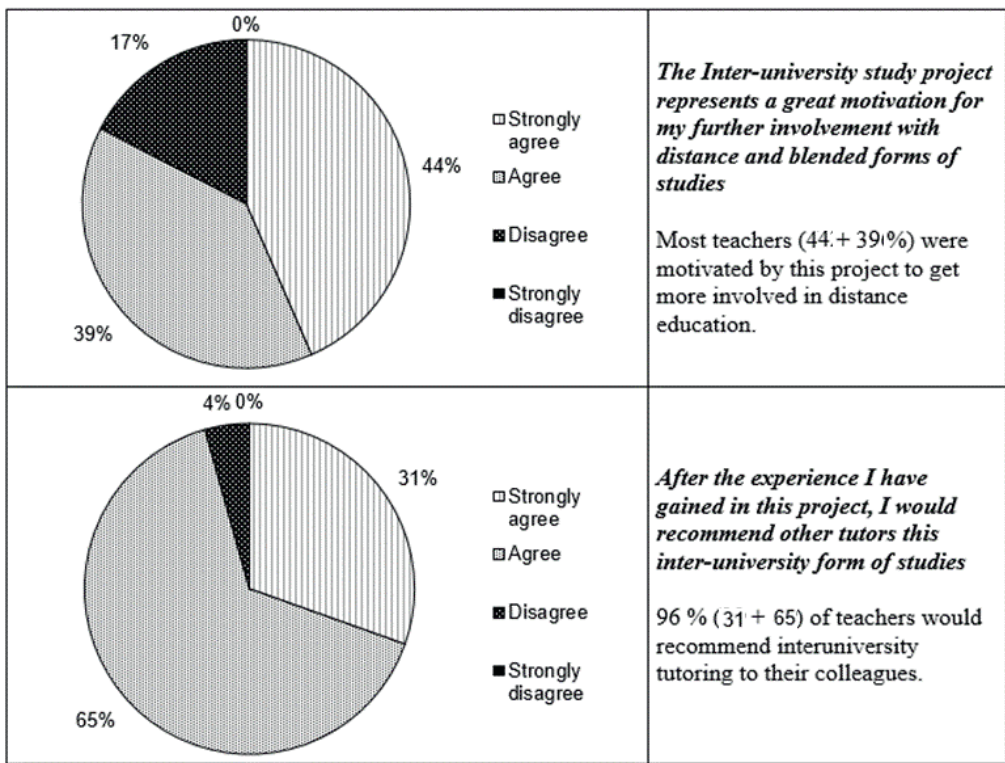
Fig. 5. Tutors´ feedback: involvement in the distance teaching and final recommendations

4. Conclusions and didactic recommendations

Latest developments in borderless education are being shaped by a number of factors including the emergence of lifelong education and advances in the use of ICT in this field. The traditional area of higher education (universities, colleges) is changing rapidly as new providers and forms of education emerge, thus defining a wider context of changes in education and society in general. The term of borderless education refers to developments that cross the traditional borders of higher education, both geographic and conceptual (Trent, 2007). The conceptual framework, we used to operate in, has to apply new didactic means, i.e. organizational forms, methods of instruction and other relating features, mainly the competences required from both the tutors and learners to successfully master this type of study. The results presented in this paper entitle us to state that the model of InterUniversity Study designed and verified within the R/IUS projects was successful and can be applied within the borderless education.

Below, final results summarizing teachers´ feedback and didactic recommendations are provided to contribute to further development in this field. Final comments and opinions reflected following topics:

- *Timetable for courses should be known earlier.*
- *The time spent with the course does not meet the normal standards concerning working hours and work load in any way. The server collapses at one point. Also some students were having difficulties with their host computers.*

- *This was a pilot and first semesters, and they show a lot of work needs to be done before it moves beyond pilot stage.*
- *Kick of meeting with students vital.*
- *Very rewarding experience but see important to know the students at a personal level.*
- *Thank you for this opportunity.*

A lot of tutors´ opinions and experience presented above resulted in summarizing didactic recommendations in several fields:

Emphasis on communication
- Teachers must be active in motivating students.
- Teachers must stimulate students to active communication.
- Different methods of communication (forums, web, …) are required in the course.

Feedback
- Supply students with constant feedback during studies.
- One mail after half term is NOT sufficient.

Level of information
- Provide information on the start of courses in time.
- Give more information to the students during the studies.

Promotion
- High level of promotion at partner universities is required
- When thinking about following project, have in mind:

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Start on time,
provide proper information to tutors and students,
have high quality self- study materials ready,
send emails directly to each student.

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Acknowledgements

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