The process of initiation and establishment of a long term co-operative relationship in teacher education: Cross-cultural and multi-lingual challenges

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Abstract

Establishing partnerships is often used today as a way to keep pace with changes met by society in general in an innovative manner. The process of thinking, planning, and working together can facilitate the achievement of goals that cannot otherwise be accomplished alone. Thus, a collaborative partnership provides the mechanism that allows the design and implementation of comprehensive projects. As a result of different interactions between the participants, collaborative partnerships can be a very rich source of knowledge. However, many potential sources for misunderstandings and consensus building may arise when collaborative partnerships have as aim to offer educational programmes across countries and cultures. Resolution of differences in a manner that does not create barriers for the members’ participation, while not reducing the quality of the final product, requires many abilities from the project leader and the group members.

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss the process of establishing a cross-national and cross-cultural co-operative partnership in teacher education through the submission of an Erasmus Mundus master degree proposal (MUNDUSFOR - Formation de Professionnels de la Formation) to the European Commission, with a focus on the preparation of teacher educators. This project will be carried out by a consortium consisting of 5 universities – University of Reims Champagne Ardenne (France), Akershus University College (Norway), University of Rovira i Virgili of Tarragona and University of Granada (Spain), and the University of Porto (Portugal). Thus, it focuses on the various challenges met by an international group of educators in reconciling the different educational views and beliefs, in addition to their language and cultural differences, during the preparation phase of the program.

This paper describes the process of initiation and establishment of a co-operative relationship that enabled the collaboration between partners of the consortium and culminated with the submission of a proposal to the European Commission. It discusses the various challenges met by an international group of educators in reconciling the different educational views and beliefs, in addition to their language and cultural differences.

The success in sending the proposal was the result of several factors. Among others, one can mention trust between the partners, effective leadership skills of the coordination, partners’ ability to collaborate in a multicultural and multi-lingual environment, capability of consortium members to keep the focus on shared objectives and shared ownership, and, finally, the open mindedness of consortium members to accept differences and have own convictions confronted by others’ ideas. The open minded and flexible attitude on the part of consortium members was important for overcoming misunderstandings.
The preparation of the proposal was the first step on the establishment of a long term partnership. Therefore this phase was very important for the future implementation of the project, which was approved by the European Commission in October 2006.

The process of establishing the MUNDUSFOR consortium

MUNDUSFOR is the acronym of the Erasmus Mundus Master Degree – Formation de Professionnels de la Formation. The MUNDUSFOR consortium consists of 5 universities located in four countries: Université de Reims-Champagne-Ardenne, in France; Universidad de Granada and Universidade Rovira i Virgili of Tarragona in Spain; Universidade do Porto, in Portugal; and Akershus University College, in Norway. As one can see, there is a variety of countries and languages in the consortium, with the accompanying cultural and educational specificities. One of the intentions of this project is that the collaborative effort will provide meaningful opportunities for closer relations and joint responsibility for the creation, development, and dissemination of new knowledge. This master degree offers also the opportunity for collaboration with countries outside de European Union in the form of exchange of students and academic staff.

The first steps to establish the MUNDUSFOR consortium were based on the existing academic network between the participating universities. All the participating universities had previously had some form of collaborative relationship, mostly as dyads. The form of collaboration varied from collaboration/co-participation in projects, exchange of academic personnel, or participation in academic activities such as summer university programmes or participation in colloquia and seminars. The University of Virgili i Rovira, in Tarragona, Spain, was the initiator of the consortium and sponsored the first meeting which took place in February of 2005 under the co-ordination of the late Prof. Vicente Ferreres. The figure below presents the links that already existed between the universities that participate in the Mundusfor consortium when the first meeting took place.
Universities that participate in the MUNDUSFOR consortium

Université de Reims Champagne Ardenne, France

Student exchange 
languages teaching

Universidad de Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain

Joint doctoral degree

Akershus University College, Norway

Evalve Project and collaboration agreement

Universidad de Granada, Spain

Teacher Exchange program

Universidade de Porto, Portugal

Why to send a proposal to Action 1 of Erasmus Mundus? Justification for the Erasmus Mundus master degree programme

There is a wide heterogeneity among professionals regarding their qualifications to carry out teaching and training activities. These activities are often under the responsibility of professionals that have a university degree, but lack a specific preparation for teaching tasks. The lack of specific pedagogical education is observed among those who teach in institutions of higher education and is particularly observed in enterprises. In the latter group, professionals have mainly professional experience followed, sometimes, by a short duration teacher training. Thus, it appears that the teaching competencies of professionals in charge of training are quite heterogeneous. Besides these aspects and having as background the declaration of Lisbon, which emphasizes the increase of the European general level of education and development of the knowledge society, the purpose of Erasmus Mundus master degree - MUNDUSFOR - is to offer teacher education to professionals involved with teaching in educational institutions, in enterprises and in community development agencies and associations. Thus, the preparation of teacher educators that work in higher education, schools and enterprises is the thread that links together the five universities of the consortium MUNDUSFOR.

Preparation of the proposal for MUNDUSFOR: A brief narrative of its process and spin-offs

This brief account focuses on how the collaborative partnership started and how it was strengthened during the different phases of the preparation of the MUNDUSFOR proposal. This collaborative partnership started when the consortium was formally established, in the
first meeting that took place at the University of Rovira i Virgili (URV) in Tarragona, February 2005 and it has gradually grown stronger, not only during the meetings associated with the preparation of the proposal but also in other academic activities that were a direct result of the ties established during the consortium meetings.

The consortium partners have until now participated of five meetings. The two first meetings had as a purpose to prepare the first proposal to Action 1 of Erasmus Mundus, whose deadline was May 31, 2005. The consortium did not succeed in its first attempt, and the proposal was not approved by the European Commission. However, due to the very positive evaluation (the proposal was placed as second in the waiting list), the consortium partners decided to participate in a new call for proposals for Action 1, whose deadline was April 30, 2006. Two more meetings were carried out for the preparation of this proposal.

There have been two spin-offs of the preparation of Erasmus Mundus proposal. One of them was the collaboration of members of the consortium in the European Summer University promoted by the University of Reims, Champagne-Ardenne and carried out at the Maison de la Recherche (AEP) and Institut Universitaire de Technologie de Reims, from June 26 to July 1, 2006. The other spin-off is the present narrative of the experiences and challenges encountered by the group during the preparation of the proposal. Next, a brief account is made of the creation of the consortium during four meetings, which resulted in the Erasmus Mundus proposal for Action 1, which was recently approved by the European Commission

**Preparation of the first proposal**

*The meeting in Tarragona: participants, objectives, accomplishments*

After the first contacts through e-mail and telephone, the first meeting took place at the University of Virgili i Rovira (URV), the initiator of the consortium and sponsor of the first meeting, on February 24th and 25th, 2005. The overall aim of the first meeting was to bring together the participants of the consortium for discussing the proposal which would be sent to the European Commission within the deadline of May 31st, 2005.

Participants:
- Coordinating university – University Rovira i Virgili, Vicente Ferreres
- University of Granada: Manuel Fernández Cruz
- University of Porto: Manoel Matos and José Alberto Correia
- Akershus University College: Içara da Silva Holmesland
- University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne: Daniel Niclot and Giles Baillat

This was a very important meeting because it laid the Consortium’s foundation stone. During two days of intensive work, the participants had the opportunity to carry out deep discussions about the various cultural and educational perspectives of the institutions which they represented. All were quite aware of the need to establish a common perspective that would preserve the nuances of the cultural specificities that colour the different structures in graduate education and modes of carrying out research in each country.

**Objectives**

Since the deadline for sending the proposal was May 31, 2005, the first meeting had as a main purpose to decide whether the Department of Pedagogy of the Universidad de Rovira i Virgili
(URV) of Tarragona would become the administrative and coordinating site of Erasmus Mundus master degree consortium. Other decisions to be made referred to:

- the inclusion of new members, in this case it was Akershus University College, from Norway
- the content of the Integrated Program of Studies already drafted by URV;
- the management and aspects related to the coordination;
- necessary documentation to complete the proposal within the deadlines specified by the European Union;
- place and date for the next meeting.

Development and accomplishments made in the first meeting

Many important decisions regarding the establishment of this Erasmus Mundus consortium and its future accomplishments were made in the two days the group spent in Tarragona. It was very positive that all the group members had received the first draft of the proposal, which included the Integrated Program of Studies that the first coordinator, Vicente Ferreres, had prepared with his collaborators at URV. It was important to have such document in the hands as a basis for the discussions.

Since this was the first face to face meeting of representatives from different universities, discussions went beyond the content of the first draft of the proposal and were affected by the participants’ educational/cultural views and understandings about Erasmus Mundus. Part of the time was used by the different participants to clarify their own doubts regarding the program, how their institutions would participate and what was necessary to do in the next months prior to sending the final proposal. This meeting was very necessary in order to establish a common ground for discussions and for the involvement of all participants in the preparation of the proposal. It was also a time for clarification of what was the understanding of each member regarding the different words used to express the concepts. Four languages were being used – French, Spanish, Portuguese and English. All the participants had a different proficiency in the languages used. French and Spanish were used most often. But, whenever necessary, Portuguese and English were also used. However, the understanding of concepts was not only a problem of translation of words from the different languages to one’s own. The need for meaning clarification went beyond the translation of the words and into the cultural roots of the educational systems represented by the different participants in this meeting.

Decisions reached

After a thorough examination of the first draft for the proposal and discussions about the role of each participating university, the group made some decisions. However, at that time, the group still had many uncertainties and open questions regarding how each university would participate in the Erasmus Mundus master degree. It became clear that the visiting representatives needed to discuss several issues with colleagues and leaders, at their own institutions, before a final commitment could be made. One of the main questions referred to what each university could contribute in terms of knowledge to the programme. What would be the value-added from each university in terms of their existing knowledge and how would it fit into the general programme?
After the many hours of discussions in the meeting in Tarragona, the participating representatives reached agreement on important points of the proposal and established some goals for the period after this meeting:

- The partners committed themselves to introduce the Erasmus Mundus project at their institutions and agreed to take the necessary steps to raise the interest of their colleagues and their leaders to participate and give support to the preparation of the proposal. The participants accepted the responsibility for being contact persons and supplying all information that was necessary for completion of the dossier.

- The second commitment was to have a second meeting prior to sending the proposal. The purpose of this meeting would be to discuss the contributions of each institution’s internal debate about Erasmus Mundus. The new meeting would probably be held and sponsored by the University of Reims, depending on the acceptance by this university’s administration;

Preparations for the second meeting at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne

There was an intensive exchange of e-mails between the coordination at URV and all the partners in the period between the first and the second meetings. The representatives made efforts to engage the academic staff and leaders of their universities by discussing their involvement in the project and keeping them informed about the developments made. The University of Reims took the responsibility for the next meeting, which took place on the 26th and 27th of April, 2006. The group of participants was almost the same as the one that had participated in the meeting at URV I in Tarragona. Two of the first participants were substituted by colleagues in the second meeting. However these two new members were quite well informed about the whole project and brought many positive contributions to the preparation of the proposal.

During the meeting in Reims, the time was used to further discuss the content of the final document to be sent to the European Commission before the deadline on May 31st. This meeting had, as the first one, an atmosphere characterised by a common feeling of collaboration and willingness to accomplish as much as possible toward completion of the proposal. Many clarifications were made during this meeting in regard to some remaining doubts regarding the proposal and documents that each university had to send to the project’s coordinator to complete the dossier.

After the meeting in Reims, there were frequent contacts between the coordinator, Prof. Vicente Ferreres and all the partners. In spite of a serious illness manifested during the final preparation of the proposal, the coordinator was very eager to finish and send the proposal to the European Commission. Unfortunately, his health condition did not allow him to do it. He was hospitalized during the month of May and substituted by his colleagues at URV. The proposal was sent in due time and he was informed about it. In the beginning of June 2006, Vicente Ferreres passed away.

Result of the evaluation of the first proposal and decision to send a new proposal

The proposal sent in May 2005 was not approved. The evaluation report with the denial to finance the first proposal was received in the autumn of 2005. The evaluation was quite positive and the project was placed as second in the waiting list of 2005. The evaluation committee’s report emphasised that the proposal had many positive features, such as to cover...
in a holistic way all the aspects pertinent to education while respecting the principles of the
declaration of Lisbon and of lifelong education. The committee praised also the project’s
contribution to the excellence of European University and European competitiveness, as
expressed in the Common European Objectives for Education and Training and confirmed by
the Maastricht Communiqué (2004). Regarding the consortium’s collaborative partnership,
the committee evaluated positively the following aspects: coherence and integration of the
structure of the study programme across the Consortium, the equal treatment of all students,
and the definition in clear operational terms of the role of each University. These three items
bring forward some underlying factors supporting the consortium’s cohesion.

With such result, the consortium was encouraged to try again and was supported by the
leaders of the participating universities. The group was also motivated to try once more. It is
important to notice that the good evaluation and comments received from the evaluators
provided the rational justification for sending a new proposal. However, it is important to
mention a second justification, and this was based on the degree of attachment and esprit de
corps that had been established during the months of preparation of the first proposal. Perhaps
one of the strong reasons can be linked to the inspiring leadership coming from the first
coordinator, Prof. Vicente Ferreres from the University of Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona. This
strong commitment had an “inspiring effect” on the whole group, which persisted after Prof.
Vicente Ferreres passed away, immediately after the first proposal was mailed to the
European Commission.

Preparation of the second proposal
During the time preceding the third meeting, the group continued in contact and attuned to the
announcements made by the European Commission. There was a pre-established agreement
that the first meeting for the second round would take place at the University of Granada.
Several e-mails were exchanged during the autumn of 2005 and the group was informed about
the criticisms made on the first proposal by the evaluating group.

The meeting at the University of Granada
This meeting was held during the 28th and 29th of November 2005. There were two new
participants in this meeting. One of them was from the University of Porto and the other from
the University of Granada. This meeting had as main purpose to examine the first proposal,
having in view the evaluation made by the expert committee, and discuss the changes and
improvements to be made in the proposal for the next call. Another purpose was to hold a
research seminar in which all partners would report about the research lines of their
programmes and present the research activities carried out. To become acquainted with
research activities of all consortium partners was regarded as very important in regard to the
next proposal of Erasmus Mundus master degree.

An important decision made during this meeting was to move the coordination from the
University of Rovira i Virgili to the University of Granada. This decision was based on the
fact that the University of Granada would have, at that point in time, more capacity to carry
out the preparation of the proposal under the leadership of Manuel Fernández Cruz, who had
had an intensive participation in sending the first proposal and a close collaboration with the
previous coordinator, Prof. Vicente Ferreres. Manuel Fernández was very much regarded as
the natural follower and his nomination was very well accepted by the whole group.
The combination of the Erasmus Mundus meeting with the research seminar was very successful. The seminar gave an opportunity for all members to learn about each others’ research activities, and, at the same time, to open up doors for collaborative research activities in the future.

This meeting reasserted the group’s feeling that all partners were willing to make extra efforts to send a new proposal. At the end of this meeting, several commitments were made by the partner in terms of improving the first proposal on several points that had not been so clearly presented. At the end of the meeting, the partners from the University of Porto indicated their willingness to host the next meeting. The invitation would be sent after being approved by the Faculty Research Center (CIIE) director. The general feeling of the group at this point was that of a strong commitment to each other. The group was functioning as a team and had a strong wish of sending a proposal that will show that MUNDUSFOR was a feasible project.

**The meeting at the University of Porto**
The fourth meeting of the consortium took place on the 16th and 17th of March 2006. This meeting was the culmination of 13 months of an intensive collaborative partnership. In the period between the meetings in Granada and Porto, all partners carried out their duties to finish the project. By this time the core group had become consolidated with the following participants:
University of Granada: Manuel Fernández Cruz (co-ordinator) and Maria José Leon;
University of Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona: Charo Barrios and Pilar Iranzo;
University of Porto, Portugal: Manuela Terrasêca and Alexandra Sá Costa;
University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne: Daniel Niclot and Emmanuelle Leclercq;
Akershus University College: Içara da Silva Holmesland

It is important to add that, at this point in time, the whole group was functioning very cohesively and all members were quite at ease in expressing their doubts and criticisms openly. There was a positive feeling toward each other and the main thought was to contribute to the overall aim, which was understood as sending the best possible proposal for Action 1 in April 2006. This objective was accomplished, and the consortium partners continued in contact also after the proposal was sent. As previously mentioned, the European Summer University at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne was one important spin-off. The most recent collaboration was the preparation of this paper for the 31st ATEE conference in Slovenia in October 2006

Many more encounters and collaborations will certainly take place in the future. The consortium has recently being informed that the MUNDUSFOR proposal has been approved by the European Commission. The next meeting of the consortium is already planned to happen at Akershus University College in Norway on the 24th and 25th of November 2006.

There will be many opportunities for strengthening the collaboration partnership of our consortium. However, the group is aware that new challenges will be faced. To finalize, we present some of those we have already experienced but know that they will also provoke us to look for innovative solutions.

**Considerations about challenges and opportunities for collaboration**

The preparation of joint international degrees requires a good deal of efforts from the participants, especially regarding time and resources. It is not always easy, for example, to
find a common date for a meeting. You need also the financial means. When all are finally together, there are always some obstacles to be overcome in terms of a common understanding that goes beyond the language aspect, just because misunderstandings might be deeply rooted in the educational philosophies and traditions of the participants. This is perhaps the greatest challenge for carrying out a joint international educational programme. While participation in such groups requires from the members clear ideas and beliefs regarding educational aims, in addition to the knowledge in their own areas of expertise, there is also an expectation of open mindedness, flexibility and willingness to accept confrontation of some well-established convictions. A joint international group requires especially good leadership skills from whoever assumes the role of co-ordination. If we think of a continuum that goes from “iron-hand” to “highly flexible”, where should the co-ordinator stand?

Another point to be considered is the schedule for the meetings. Since there is usually a limited amount of time for the meetings, it requires a high degree of effectiveness. What is the best way to be effective while allowing time for important discussions? The use of time can be a two-edged sword. When you limit the discussions you get to the end of the programme within the time, but what about the quality of the final product? When you do not limit the time, the discussions might be very relevant for a high quality final product that is never finished! A good preparation prior to the meetings, with an early exchange of written materials, can be a good way to facilitate effectiveness in the meetings.

Then there is also the language aspect. In which language shall the group communicate? What is the meaning of each concept in each language? In our experience with the proposal that was sent to the European Commission, we used four different languages – Spanish, French, Portuguese and English - going on, sometimes simultaneously. Has it created barriers for our communication? Yes, some, but possible to overcome, because the level of collaboration has been very high. There has also being an open atmosphere for expressing doubts. Thus, the challenge of diversity in the language and cultural interpretations provided a unique opportunity for learning and self-development.

Finally, it is important to notice that collaborative partnership in teacher education is a powerful tool in the development of the teacher profession because it offers meaningful opportunities for closer relations and joint responsibilities, opening spaces for knowledge development and dissemination. An additional remark can be made regarding the importance of the positive role played by the leadership of the institutions involved in the consortium in terms of facilitating the establishment of this collaborative partnership.

The future of the collaborative partnership

Summarising, the preparation of a proposal for Action 1, which focuses on the execution of a joint Master Degree – MUNDUSFOR – has been the means to the following accomplishments:

- confront culturally diverse academic realities within Europe;
- bring closer the members of the partnership by adopting a perspective of understanding towards each other and using the opportunity to learn about the approaches employed by the other partners in higher education and research;
- develop a common perspective that respects all the particularities and advances towards the construction of an European approach of higher education.
Action 1 is also the front door to other actions of collaboration intended by the program Erasmus Mundus. Action 2 will finance the participation of students and scholars from outside Europe, who will contribute with their own cultural roots and enrich our vision regarding education and the preparation of teacher educators. With the arrival of these college students, the intention of MUNDUSFOR is not to carry out an absorption process into the European culture, but to consider them like a new opportunity for learning and extending our views. Reinforcing this idea, Action 3, whose deadline for application is the 30th of November 2006, will allow the establishment of partnerships with three non European Universities, to which the students and professors can travel to improve their knowledge about education and teacher education.

Finally, the partners at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardene, are already initiating the preparation of Action 4, which will stimulate the flow of academic and cultural exchanges towards the world of research with the creation of an European Observatory for the education of professionals in teacher education. This will constitute a new challenge for all of us in the confluence of languages, theoretical foundations and methods and practice of educational research.