

Teacher students' experiences from Nordic exchange – the ALKA project

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Abstract

This paper discusses students perceptions from one international exchange; the Nordic network ALKA. The network organizes an intensive course week every year. The purpose was to make a pilot study about how students use the subject content and network connections established during the ALKA intensive course week in their teaching. A questionnaire was sent out to 22 former teacher students that have participated in the course during 2010-2013. All informants are very satisfied with the course content, the experiences from the intensive course and the contacts established during the course. However, none of the participants express that the intensive course have generated in co-operation with some of the colleagues from other countries. Instead, all of the participants in the study have used the course content in their teaching or teacher training. The meeting with new landscape, animals and plants has been used in geography or biology lessons. Also the didactical discussions during the course have inspired some of the students in their teaching. Particularly the out-door education situations have inspired the teacher students to move their science lessons outside the classroom

Key words international exchange, intensive course, teacher education, ALKA network, science education, environmental education.

Introduction

International exchange and collaboration are often emphasized in policy documents and public goals among universities all over the world. This international exchange has become an important part of many universities curricula. The interchanges are justified and explained in terms of cultural understanding, border crossing, network building and knowledge sharing (Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005). So far, the results of this international exchange have not been enough investigated (Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005). They call for studies where perceptions of the students involved in different international programmes are investigated. This paper discusses such students perceptions from one such exchange; the Nordic network ALKA.

The collaboration among universities has increased since the Bologna declaration. The declaration has been a major push for the recognition and integration of the international perspective in higher education (Beerkens and Derwende, 2007). According to Teichler (2004) all higher education institutions have to be international, it is not only a task for large, high-ranked universities. The focus has often been on globalisation, where long-distance knowledge exchange has been emphasized (Teichler, 2004). Teichler observes three areas of learning and research related to internationalisation which are quite similar to Van Hoof and Verbeeten's (2005) points above. Teichler's call this areas knowledge transfer, international education and research, and border-crossing communication and discourse. He argues that the mobility of students in Europe, in contrast to the predominantly "vertical" mobility between continents, is predominantly "horizontal" (Teichler, 2004, p.14). It implies the possibility to establishing communication between the partners.

Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005) state the most common benefit identified is the student's exposure to different social and cultural environments. In their study about undergraduate students' international exchange they found the three most important reasons for studying abroad; good opportunities to live in another culture, good opportunities to travel and interest for the visited country. The international studies had benefited them personally, helped them becoming more mature adults. Fewer students mention new knowledge about an academic subject content, for example science, as main reason for the exchange.

The ALKA network is a Nordic network with universities from seven different countries. The network was established almost 15 years ago as a part of NORDPLUS. Nordplus is the Nordic Council of Ministers' most important programme in the area of lifelong learning. The main objectives are to strengthen and develop Nordic educational cooperation. The participating institutions in ALKA have as main objective to support exchange between teachers and students from teacher education institutions at the different universities. This exchange has been of various kinds, but the main activity has been an intensive course connected to science education. This intensive course is carried through one week every year. The different institutions alternate to be hosts and course leaders for the course. One or two teachers and two students from every institution join the intensive course week. The teachers are almost the same every year; the students are however usually joining the course just once. The course has science education in focus every year but the main theme varies. Some of the course themes during the last years have been timber, volcanoes, fishery and energy. The students prepare themselves at home, make some work during the course and in the end of the week they have a presentation of their work. During the course week, the participants visit schools, teacher education institutions, make field trips and excursions connected to the theme. The language during the course is both "Scandinavian" and English.

Research questions and Method

The purpose with the study was to piloting a questionnaire which investigates how the ALKA intensive course week affects the participating students' opinions and use of the subject content and network connections established during the course. The reported short and long-time effects related to the participation in the course were examined.

Research question:

How do students use the subject content and network connections established during the ALKA intensive course week?

The questionnaire was sent to 22 former participants of the intensive course during 2010-2013. It was sent out during December 2013. In this questionnaire some randomly chosen students who have joined the course during the last four years have been asked to report the gains with the course and how they have worked with the course content and the established network in their teacher profession. Thirteen students answered the questionnaire, seven of them are still teacher students while the other six work as teachers.

Results

Even if several of the participants in the study mention how interesting it is to talk to people from other countries, it has not resulted in any larger co-operation. The established network is used by one student to ask questions in connection to geography lessons. The rest of the connections between former participants in the network are general email or Facebook-conversations. All informants are very satisfied with the course content, the experiences from the intensive course and the contacts established during the course. However, none of the participants express that the intensive course have generated in co-operation with some of the colleagues from other countries in form of exchange of meetings, even if they hope to meet their course colleagues and their pupils in the future. Instead, all of the participants in the study have used the course content in their teaching or teacher training. The meeting with new landscape, animals and plants has been used in geography or biology lessons. Especially the course week on Greenland has inspired the participants to discuss Greenlandic nature, animals and culture during their lessons. Also the didactical discussions during the course have inspired some of the students in their teaching. Particularly the out-door education situations have inspired the teacher students to move their science lessons outside the classroom. Some student describes herself becoming a “real nature figure” after the course and she wants to share this interest with her pupils. Also the use of drawings as a method to investigate pupils’ understandings (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2011) is mentioned by three students. Another mentioned gain is the knowledge of different school systems, both in compulsory school and at universities.

Discussion and conclusions

The results demonstrate the difficulties for teachers or teacher students in the study to use the established network for future exchange between the countries. The participants have however been inspired by the intensive course. But it is not the meeting with other teacher students or teachers that has been used in their profession or teacher training lessons. However has the science content discussed during the course been used in different lessons. This reported science knowledge sharing differs from Van Hoof and Verbeeten’s (2005) conclusion that the most common benefit identified is the student’s exposure to different social and cultural environments. The Nordic countries have much in common, historically and culturally. Maybe this fact give the opportunity to knowledge sharing in higher degree

compared to exchange with far abroad countries. This is also in line with Teichler's (2004) "vertical" mobility which implies the possibility to establish communication between the partners.

The piloting of the questionnaire demonstrated the possibility to investigate how the participation in an international exchange is used in the participants' daily practice. The low numbers of answers can be explained by the difficulties to reach some students. The results must be analysed with this in mind and further investigations must be done. An explanation to the low number of exchanges between the former participants of the course might be the fact that several of them still are teacher students.

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