

Promoting Shared Academic Paths Through University Alliances: A Survey for The Investigation of Teachers' Training Needs

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an overview on the history of one of the most impacting strategy to promote teachers' training in higher education, Faculty Development, worldwide and on the reality of European universities inside the alliances as a strategy to promote the connection among people and institutions belonging to common contexts. For long time the European Union gave many guidelines on the features these realities should put into practice. In this contribution we will provide a focus on one specific consortium called UNITA Universitas Montium, which is dealing with these directions especially focusing on the promotion of learning innovation through new strategies related to teachers' training inside the different institutions that are part of the alliance. In this regard, it has been created and implemented a survey to understand teachers' needs and interests on many training topics, that will be deepened through the organization of focus groups' sessions. These steps will represent the starting point to give birth to more and more ad hoc and engaging training projects and consequently develop a common and shared course of action in the learning field.

Keywords: Teachers' training needs, higher education, Faculty development, teaching and learning centers, university alliances

Cite this article as: Messi, N. (2023). Promoting Shared Academic Paths Through University Alliances: A Survey for The Investigation of Teachers' Training Needs. *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, 4(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v4i1.324>

1. Introduction

The paper aims at giving an overview on the promotion of *Faculty Development* (Bergquist, Philipps, 1975) and cooperation inside university alliances, with a focus on UNITA Universitas Montium (UNITA, 2020) consortium's work. We consider this alliance's instance a remarkable tool to promote an effective connection and shared sense of belonging of the teaching staff to a common European educational environment. Before presenting the birth of the European universities' action, we will focus on how the Faculty Development movement got started and how it expanded in different contexts, during the years, with the most recent findings detected in the literature, until its promotion in the European universities' alliances nowadays. We can define this initiative as a trend, focused on the teachers' role, which aims at enhancing skills, knowledge and teaching techniques in order to promote a better and more effective learning in students (Allen, 1988). As the majority of the innovations at their beginning, in different fields, Faculty Development did not take hold immediately in the universities, with the result that the programs were mainly took by interested teachers with an already solid training in didactics, while the most part of the teaching staff remained at their initial level. The absence of a common theoretic framework, moreover, made the sharing of strategies and approaches more difficult. In contrast with the past, nowadays Faculty Development is strongly present inside the majority of the higher education institutions with programs for teacher training, thanks to the existence of many fundings for learning and teaching. The first interest of having a Faculty Development



program has been pointed out in an American medical school, in 1950's, which autonomously requested a strong cooperation of its institution with researchers like Bloom and other educational experts. The work of this university started, then, with initial working groups, with the aim of analyzing requests, needs and feelings of teachers and students during the learning process. These activities immediately grew in conferences organizations and data publications, to share the resulting strategies with other medical universities (Lotti, Lampugnani, 2020). Actually, the interest of teacher training was already disclosed in the nineteenth century, like in Harvard where, starting from 1810, teachers had the chance to take advantage of a gap year to get trained in specific areas, organize conferences and make active research. A more specific attention and thought about possible methods that institutions could actively employ for teacher training, concretely started to be given after the Second World War. However, an investigation made in 1973 (Gerth, 1973), regarding the Faculty developments initiatives, revealed that the majority of the institutions which were implementing this way of work were mainly providing theoretical action plans instead of real and structured programs. This initial weakness has been soon replaced by many effective Faculty Development programs, suggested and put into practice by different organizations and institutions in 1977, even if the active participation of faculty and academic staff still had to wait for many years. Anyway, in this decade we can already find different models of Faculty Development that were primarily employed by many institutions (Allen, 1988):

- The problem-oriented approach. The predominant goal of this method was the constant research of problems an institution can present and to start from that, in order to find and try different possible solutions.
- The collaborative model. It was a kind of approach which strongly believes in the power of cooperation among the academic members. The choice of the subjects actively included in this cooperation was up to the single employee of the learning center.
- The three steps' approach. This peculiar approach directly came from the Howard University College of Dentistry and it included three main actions that a program of Faculty Development should provide: teachers' assessment, ongoing training and research in the educational area.
- The interinstitutional model. It was similar to the collaborative model, with the difference that, in this case, the academic staff cooperated with members with similar tasks but coming from different institutions, in order to make each other methods' observations and discussions to subsequently work together and share same strategies and goals.

Despite these different approaches that can distinguish an institution from another, in these years the majority of the universities were already sharing the same focuses of their centers' work. We can describe, indeed, all of them as hubs predominantly dedicated to the teacher training, with the aim of increasing knowledges and skills about the teaching area, starting from a common theoretical basis, social psychology, realized with seminars, workshops and many assessment strategies. In the following 1980's, we could identify four main categories related to Faculty Development activities:

- Traditional procedures
- Specific training programs promoted and carried out by expert members of the faculty, which is considered the prevalent method of those years, since 14 many training activities concerning the use of new technologies were promoted, with the participation as well of fellows from other prestigious institutions.
- Teaching support provided by specialists
- Teaching quality assessment

In conclusion, the 1990's and the following years have been characterized by a growing attention on students' learning and, in particular, on the assessment of their learning outcomes (Ewell, 2010), related to a rapid transformation of the teaching methods. We find a specific focus on new technologies and self-paced learning.

The Faculty Development process in Europe started to exist around 1970's, from the Anglosaxon world with the consequent birth of the first teaching and learning centers. The attention of the teaching and learning matters, however, did not always have the same focus, during the different decades. We can distinguish several and diverse periods (Lotti, Lampugnani, 2020):

- The school age. It was the prevalent 1960's approach and it consisted in the promotion of educational skills mainly by gap years, dedicated to studies and active research.
- The teachers' age. It started around 1970's, period in which we can find the first learning centers in Europe. The main conviction of this period was about the importance, for teachers, of not only dwelling on the theoretical knowledge of the subject of expertise but also on the teaching skills and strategies.
- The entrepreneur's age. In this 1980's decade, the teaching and learning centers represented more and more professional realities, composed by researchers and pedagogical experts, also thanks to the numerous fundings provided by the institutions. They also introduced and focused on learning assessment by students as a first way of engagement of these actors in the didactical quality achievement.
- The learners' age. For the first time, in 1990's, students started to be in the middle of learning centers' work and interest. Consequently, the teachers' work switched from a purely transmissive teaching approach to a sort of support and guidance given to all the students.
- The network's age. It is the most recent one (2000's decades) and it is marked by a widening interest and studies on new technologies, assessment and inclusion topics. In this period as well, we met the first Italian teaching and learning center, with the contribution of two main Italian associations, Asduni (Asduni, 2018) and GLIA (GLIA, 2016).

In the early years, moreover, many studies proved the efficiency of Faculty Development initiatives to promote teachers' professional development and support in their teaching academic career (Hassan et al., 2021). Especially in the medical education, indeed, we have evidences of the relevant impact of Faculty Development programs in changing faculty's behaviour in terms of teaching and learning, thanks to case studies (Stake, 1995) which analyzed, through questionnaires and pre/post tests, the changes in teachers' willingness and awareness on their educational role (Lee et al., 2018). In general, the most remarkable effects that these strategies bring to teachers' career are related to their personal professional development, thanks to the enhancement of their didactical knowledges and skills (Steinert, 2014), but also to the development and innovation of the entire institution (Jolly, 2014). An interesting meta-analysis conducted by Ilie and colleagues (Ilie et al., 2020) tried to gain a quantitative estimation on the efficiency of different programs focused on teachers' professional development, by comparing different studies made all over the years. Among the aspects considered in this research, they took into account the features of the Faculty Development initiatives, as the length and the structure, and the changes these actions brought on teachers, students and institutions' behaviour. The most common activities promoted for the trainings are workshops, seminars and individual consultations, short-term paths, students' feedbacks and observations. The longitudinal programs are, instead, less frequent and especially employed in the medical area (Steinert et al., 2016). Many studies confirmed the better impact of the collective programs on the participants, even if Ilie and colleagues did not find particular differences on the effect depending on the type of activities

proposed. Considering the length of the trainings, Henderson and colleagues (Henderson et al., 2011) found out, and these findings are confirmed by other studies as well (De Rijdt et al., 2013; McAlpine, 2003; Steinert et al., 2016; Stes et al., 2010a), that courses which last at least six months have a higher impact on teachers, and consequently on students' learning, than shorter ones. In this regard, however, Ilie's study brings out a different data. *Una tantum* or short courses, which were especially focused on the development of specific skills in teachers, revealed a superior effect than the others. This fact can be related to the lower and less complex cognitive commitment required in short-term initiatives, if we mention the cognitive load's theory (Schnotz, Kürschner, 2007), suggested by Emanuel in her analysis (Emanuel, 2022). Even if the impact on teachers' behaviour is remarkable and agreed by different studies, if we talk about the effects on the learners we cannot state the same assertion, due to the lack of studies focused on this aspect. A similar condition can be detected on the impact of Faculty Development programs on the institutions. What we know, however, is the influence that institutions can bring on the promotion of effective professional developments programs. The interventions' strategies should be global and shared by all the academic community, in order to provide teachers an efficient development and didactical activities focused on students' learning (Shadle et al., 2017). Starting from the findings previously mentioned, we can infer that the current research still needs to focus, among other aspects, on the identification of the specific and fundamental aspects of efficiency and on the monitoring of the efficacy of these paths in a longitudinal way, to understand their strengths in different contexts, today and in the future (Emanuel, 2022).

The first mention, instead, of the proposal to create European universities (Gunn, 2020) emerged in 2017, during the Gothenburg Social Summit (European Commission, 2017), as a valid solution to reach a European education area by 2025. Starting from this proposal, many documents have been signed in order to specify more and more the guidelines and necessary directions to make this intention be real and effective, with a consequent development of European approaches and values. The *European Universities Initiative* (European Council, 2017), for instance, strongly fosters the relevance of sharing European values among the different institutions, promoting student-centered learning strategies "jointly delivered across inter-university campuses" (European Commission, 2020) and encouraging the built of interdisciplinary teams across the different universities. To reach these values' acquisition, as we can read in the documents, it is fundamental to develop in all the members of the educational reality, from teachers to students and stakeholders, an active citizenship based on intercultural, civic, and critical thinking skills, at all the instructional levels. These directives have been consequently deepened and became more operational in a communication proposed by the European Commission in 2020 to the European Parliament and Committee on the achievement of a European education area by 2025 (European Commission, 2020). The guidelines provided a framework of six fields in which a future European education area would be expected to develop: from education quality, based on the achievement of digital, transversal skills and multilingualism, inclusion and gender equality, to green and digital transition, with concrete programs to promote the reach of a base level of digital skills for all the European citizens. A considerable attention is given as well to the teachers' role with a focus on teaching staff mobility, a special emphasis on the higher education level, through fostering more cooperations among institutions, easier recognition of abroad diplomas and a higher attention on digital learning, and geopolitics. Moreover, a more recent document, the communication on a *European strategy for universities* (European Commission, 2022) gave more practical support to universities to implement the previous directions.

In this regard, the existent alliances are currently working to promote new solutions and strategies to implement these directions and make the desired connection a concrete reality of

the future European Union. More specifically, we will now focus on the work of the UNITA Universitas Montium Alliance. It is a consortium of 13 European universities, 6 founders and 7 new partners, which are: Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy, which is the leader institution of the network, Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, France, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, France, Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara, Romania and Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain. The new partners are represented by Università degli Studi Roma 3, Italy, Università degli Studi di Brescia, Italy, Universidad Publica de Navarra, Spain, Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania, Instituto Politecnico de Guarda, Portugal, Haute Ecole Spécialisée de Suisse Occidentale, Switzerland and Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Ukraine. The initial institutions share some peculiar features as their location in border and mountaneous regions, roman languages and common research excellence in bioeconomy, circulary economy and renewable energies, as well as in cultural heritage and inter-comprehension programs. The aim of this alliance is to create an international virtual campus in which students, faculty and stakeholders can freely move around with the guarantee of taking advantage of high quality education and research. Another crucial aim to perceive is related to the development of European citizenship for all the partner institutions, even if located in border areas (Bruschi, 2022).

Among the different working group established inside the alliance, UNITA provides a working group specifically dedicated to one of the fields listed in the European Area Communicate: the teaching staff and its training in different topics. This focus results in the organization of work communities on different scientific fields and training sessions whose topics range from student-centered pedagogies and digital technologies to inclusive learning. This is the starting point for turning this reality into a formalized teaching and learning center of the UNITA Alliance, which will promote unique and shared training programs and tools for all the members, with a view of developing a European identity. In order to reach these increasingly necessary issues, it is needed to provide specialized centers able to ensure an effective action of Faculty Development in a European dimension to teachers belonging to the alliances which, for the first time, have to think their work not only at an institutional but at an international level too. This is the work that the Teaching and Learning Center Network of UNITA is already doing in a while. The new and innovative challenge of training teachers belonging to different universities but inside the same consortium, indeed, is to avoid the trend of adding together different existing approaches to give, instead, space to new dimensions of teaching owned by the alliance itself.

To provide more and more ad hoc trainings for teachers and creating a new and shared vision of teaching in the European universities, it is essential to start from teachers' needs and thoughts about the new topics they will handle in this new academical environment. For this reason, the UNITA workgroup has built up a common survey to investigate teachers' training needs, primarily focusing on the topics this alliance is dealing with. Its main features and administration conditions will be presented in the following sections.

2. Methods

The teachers training needs' analysis aims at understanding on a large-scale the most common interests and needs on the topics handled by the UNITA consortium, and other technical aspects on the ways academics prefer to be trained, in order to have a better awareness of the most compelling topics to face and consequently organize more ad hoc training paths and strategies. Since all the subjects involved in this investigation are teachers belonging to the same alliance, it is crucial to identify a shared way of training them, in order to consequently promote common learning paths among which students can choose from and

get prepared in similar ways, despite the university they are studying in. This transferability of teaching and learning will represent an incentive in undertaking mobility programs, thanks to the fully recognition by the institutions of the courses attended, where they will develop common values, endorsed by all the members of the consortium they are part of and where they will feel comfortable due to a place in which they will find a pedagogical identity and approach they are used to in their own institution. The feeling of being part of a same international campus will not be experienced by the students only but also and firstly by the teachers who will have the opportunity to compare their work with colleagues from the same disciplinary field but from different countries, interact with them and share part of their lectures as well with the creation of joint didactical programs. These are only few examples of the results that a common teaching and learning approach can bring inside a consortium as UNITA, and these need to surely start from the training.

Concerning the first section, the method we considered is quantitative, since we are going to statistically analyze the results gained by the survey's administration. We are talking about a non-probabilistic sample (Bailey, 1995), since we needed to take into account only teachers or researchers with teaching roles inside the six institutions of UNITA. The surveys have been spread through the UNITA offices, the agencies employed to disseminate information related to the activities organized inside the alliance. They presented the questionnaire with the request of filling it within a month, from the beginning of November to the beginning of December. The respondents, therefore, were allowed to voluntarily complete the survey or not. On the closing date, we counted 344 completed answers and 772 not completed ones. Since we considered this number too low to promote a real change inside the consortium, we opted for a second administration that we are currently carrying out, wishing for a more valuable outcome.

The survey has been developed through a cooperation among voluntary members of the Teaching and Learning Centers' Network of UNITA, a working group who operates to find and promote shared approaches related to teachers' training of the alliance's faculty members. The sub-group selected had three meetings in which they have been discussed the most actual and crucial topics to develop related to teachers' training, starting from the guidelines given by the European Union in terms of teaching and learning. After their identification, a first draft of the survey has been set up and spread to a preliminary sample of teachers from the different institutions for the validation. After making all the changes suggested by the sample and approved by the working group, the tool has been presented to the directory working group for the final approval and then spread to the population of teachers inside UNITA. The tool presents 34 questions divided into three sections: understanding the main features of the respondents, investigating teachers' needs and interest on the UNITA training topics and assessing their current teaching work. These sections aim at responding to the main research question that gave birth to this instrument:

- Which are teachers inside UNITA training interests and needs on some of the main topics promoted by the European Union in terms of university alliances and European Education Area?
- Which are teachers' training conditions in terms of time and modality of attendance?
- To what extent teachers in UNITA already use and implement these topics in their current teaching work with students?

The mentioned subjects are very actual issues that universities need to handle and interiorize, as main basis to make the achievement of European values and identity real and concrete. They go from inclusion, micro-credentials (Crow, Pipkin, 2017), collaborative international online learning (COIL) (Levin, 1995; Verdejo, 1996; Henri, Rigault, 1996) to inter-

comprehension (Blanche-Benveniste, 2009), assessment, soft skills (Pellerey, 2017), digital learning (Popova, 2018), and English as a medium of instruction (Ball, Lindsay, 2012).

Afterwards, it will be helpful to deep more specifically the results gained during the early part with the establishment of interviews (Chirban, 1996), *focus groups* (Barbour, 1998) or operational workgroups to verbally discuss the meaning of the answers given by the teachers. This would also represent a chance to brainstorm and give birth to new training strategies to be promoted as a unique alliance among European universities. The groups will be formed starting from the last question present in the survey, which gives the chance to the respondents to leave their email for being recontacted for further works. These details will be helpful for us to build up the groups for the qualitative part of our research. Since we received about 90 contact addresses from the teachers of all the six institutions, we will create 16 teams composed by 6 or 5 participants each, guided by the researcher who will act as an intermediate of the meeting; he will propose “sensor questions” (Trinchero, 2002) to start the confrontation. Each group will focus the discussion on the eight topics handled in the previous survey. The debates will be distributed in 3 moments, deployed inside the same session, which will last one hour and a half each, organized as follows: the first one will be dedicated to the observation of the survey’s data and the participants will be asked to interpret and motivate the analysis in order to understand the possible areas to improve and change, to better fit with the needs of the faculty staff. The second stage will represent the real action of the research: starting from the findings gained in the previous moment and the data analyzed, teachers will be asked to think together to new forms of shared and innovative trainings to propose to the entire community of the consortium. The last one will serve as a summary point in which the different groups will share and compare the results obtained. At this point, we will be able to observe convergences and divergences between the two teams which will be crucial to develop an as much ad hoc as possible training strategy proposal for everybody. These moments will be essential to really understand not only the interest of teachers in the presented topics but also their feelings related to the effective involvement in a European academic community. Starting from that, they will be able to think together to new trainings’ perspective in terms of an alliance vision which wants to promote transformation not from a top-down perspective but from a bottom-up one, with the active work of teachers and stakeholders that are directly involved in the teaching and learning process.

To have an as much as possible inclusive and generalized results of this second qualitative part, the group components will be heterogeneously distributed depending on their institution’s provenance, their age, their teaching experience, and their disciplinary field. We assume that this discrepancy of context and background will be beneficial for the discussion stimulation and to try making correlations among the thoughts expressed by the participants and their academic/life features.

3. First data analysis and final expected results

Considering that the topics brought by the questionnaire are quite new and not so deepened yet, we expected to receive a high level of interest in exploring new topics and approaches, especially if the subjects have never had the chance to be implemented before, in the current teachers’ teaching career. The explanation of the proposed topics through the presentation of specific approaches for each theme, then, surely contributed to let them better understand the issue presented in the survey and sensitize the respondents about their importance and currency. As we mentioned before, we received only 344 completed answers, a too low number to try thinking about didactical solutions to propose to such a large population as the UNITA alliance. We opted, then, for a second administration of the survey, which has just

started, with the help of the teachers who left us their contact details. They will act, indeed, as spread helpers with their colleagues.

Concerning the qualitative phase, we will proceed with the recording of all the interventions made during the discussion sessions, after asking their consensus, and we will listen what emerged, in order to write down more precisely all the details highlighted in the focus groups. The data analysis will try to corroborate, at first, the correlations reported during the quantitative data analysis. Moreover, we will compare all the teams together to investigate whether there is the existence of common pedagogical innovative strategies proposed for different issues and from different participants.

By consequently building up specific training groups based on the main interests and needs, we expect to have a more considerable involvement in the training process that will hopefully be seen not only as a passive moment to learn something new but as an active interaction and promotion of changes directly coming from the teachers themselves.

The second part of the investigation, the qualitative one, will be helpful to clarify potential misunderstanding detected during the survey's filling and to use the comments as a starting point to the building up of new training strategies of the alliance.

We assume, then, to have the final achievements from March 2023, as far as the quantitative data are concerned, in order to share them with the UNITA teaching community and move right away on with the second and more operational section of this research.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The survey we just described could surely be the very starting point to create a new perspective about teaching inside a European alliance. To promote change and cooperation among different contexts, it is fundamental to understand the current situation and awareness of the people involved in this process. This preliminary investigation, indeed, will let the chance to the alliance's teachers to really feel part of a shared and unique community of work and research. The innovation will start, indeed, from the teaching staff itself thanks to the motivation and interest that we hope to inspire through personalized initiatives. The resulting consequence will be the addition to the already existent and effective workshops and initiatives proposed by the single universities to all the alliance members of new concepts that come from the active cooperation of teachers from the different countries involved as a single institution of Europe in which all the members can really and operatively be part of.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project pursued within the PhD project included in the UNITA Universitas Montium university alliance, in which work the University of Turin, Italy, University of West Timisoara, Romania, University of Zaragoza, Spain, University of Beira Interior, Portugal, University of Savoie Mont Blanc, France and University of Pau et Pays de l'Adour, France.

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