

EKT, a trans-national platform to support school placement.

Alison Egan
Marino Institute of Education
Ireland
alison.egan@mie.ie

Elena Revyakina
University College of Teacher Education
Austria
elenarevyakina2014@gmail.com

Janet Georgeson
University of Plymouth
United Kingdom
janet.georgeson@plymouth.ac.uk

Beatrice Cebreiro López
University of Santiago de Compostela
Spain
beatriz.cebreiro@usc.es

Carmen Fernández Morante
University of Santiago de Compostela
Spain
carmen.morante@usc.es

Enrique Latorre Ruiz
University of Santiago de Compostela
Spain
enrique.latorre.ruiz@usc.es

Thomas Strasser
University College of Teacher Education
Austria
thomas.strasser@phwien.ac.at

Abstract: This research reports on Phase One of an Erasmus + EU Project, Educational Knowledge Transfer (EKT), where an online platform was devised. The EKT platform supports school placement mentors, tutors, and pre-service teachers during their practicum in school. The design of the EKT platform is unique as it is based on the outcome of extensive consultation with academic and technical partners. The details of this consultative phase are reported here. Early results indicate a strong need for such a platform across all partner institutions, and for all members of the school practicum triad. The requirement for such a platform was brought into sharp focus during the Covid-19 crisis, where online tools were urgently required by all partners to the project.

Introduction

This research study explores the need to innovate in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to support pre-service teachers during their school placement and sustain co-operation between multiple actors involved in school placement. It introduces an online environment and e-learning solution (Educational Knowledge Transfer (EKT) platform) that was devised for school placement and was built based on a transnational school placement needs

analysis of five European teacher education partners (Austria, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and England). The project is funded by Erasmus +, from 2019 to 2022.

The research is focused on whether this EKT platform, as built by the project technical partners, provides adequate support for the actors involved in school placement, in the five countries. The paper starts by examining the complex nature of school placement practices in the five countries involved in the project and then presents the methodology chosen to create the EKT platform, and whether such a platform can meet the complex and diverse requirements of placement in each of the partner countries.

Literature

School Placement (also known as ‘Teaching Practice’, ‘Teaching Placement’, and the School ‘Practicum’) is long recognised as a critical component of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes for the professional and personal growth of pre-service teachers (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Flores, 2016; MacBeath, 2011). This crucial period is when pre-service teachers require much support and guidance from their ITE tutors and school ‘mentors’ (Boag-Munroe, 2007, Caires, Almeida & Vieira, 2012; Orr, 2012; Smith & Le-Ari, 2005). The provision of such support is often challenging due to the various demands on pre-service teachers and the geographical distance between all the parties involved in placement.

It is argued that there is the need for effective and supportive communication between pre-service teachers, their ITE tutors and school mentors, as well as between ITE tutors and school mentors. This is particularly evident in administrative support of the pre-service teachers while they are out on placement, but also a need arises for continuous communication between all actors involved in the “triadic relationship” (Hall et. al. 2018). These communication channels are used to support teacher students’ reflection on-in-for action, especially in terms of support, advice, guidance, and feedback for the pre-service teacher.

Indeed, the level of cooperation between the key actors involved in school placement, and the expectations from pre-service teachers during the practicum are determined by the conceptualisation of school placement, as influenced by policy, conditions and traditions (Darling-Hammond, 2017; European Commission 2007, Tatto & Mentor, 2019). Recently, due to Covid-19 restrictions on travel, teacher educators and colleges had to reimagine placements and learning practices during lockdown. Arguably, these challenges could be transformed into opportunities to rethink the types of support provided by ITE tutors and school ‘mentors’ in the post-lockdown time to support their pre-service teachers. Information and communication technologies, and in particular their communication and collaboration affordances, have been the subject of attention in ITE in Ireland (Donlon, 2019). This new EKT platform can be considered as a comprehensive e-learning support for all the actors involved in school placement support, delivery, and teaching.

Methodology

The EKT project used a mixed methods research design, based on previous work by Egan, FitzGibbon & Johnston (2019), and phase one of the three-year project is reported in this brief paper (Figure 1).

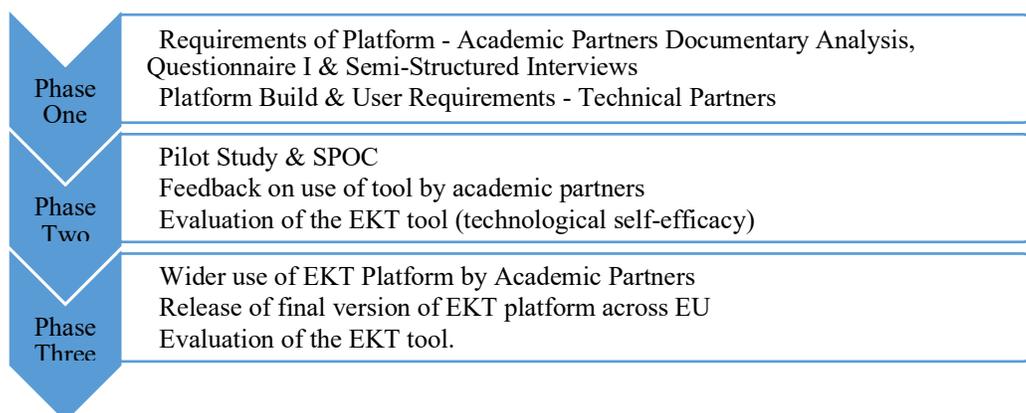


Figure 1 Phases of mixed methods approach to data collection for EKT Project

Phase one of the EKT project was focused on gathering the varied and plentiful criteria for school placement, from each academic partner institution. Documentary analysis of each academic partners' school placement criteria would then inform the creation of the online platform by the technical partners, to support all members of the school placement 'triad' in each of the member countries. As such, the involvement of academic and technical partners at all stages of the project ensures the requirements of all members of the 'triad' are met, in a timely fashion, and is a unique feature of this funded project (Figure 2).

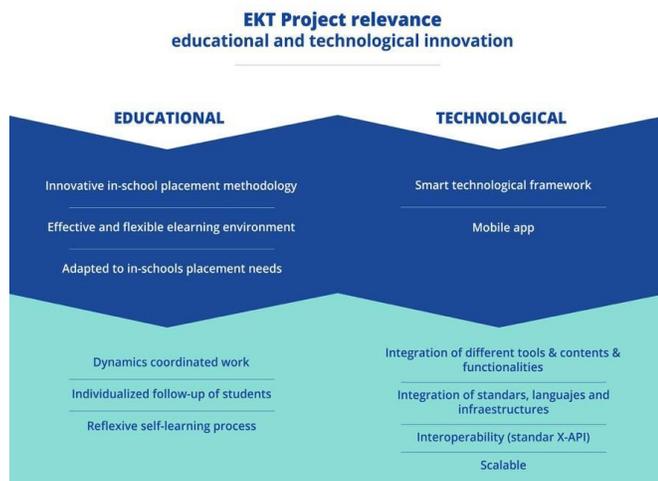


Figure 2 EKT Project Objectives

Each academic partner provided their full 'school placement' requirements to the lead institution (University de Santiago de Compostela (USC), Spain) and documentary analysis was conducted on those module specifications. For example, in Ireland school placement blocks are conducted on-site in schools (pre-Covid) and pre-service teachers are supported by an in-school mentor (teacher) and ITE tutor (supervisor). In the UK, there are different patterns of school experience depending on whether the student is following an HEI (Higher Education Institute) or school-led route into teaching. In the context of a three-year Bachelor in Education degree, as offered by University of Plymouth (UoP), future teachers have either distributed placement blocks across the year (Year 1) or one longer sustained block (Years 2 and 3). Pre-service teachers are supported by either an in-school mentor or a university-employed visiting mentor. They also build close working relationships with the class teacher, who may or may not also be their school-based mentor. Campus-based ITE professional tutors are also available to preservice teachers throughout the course for day-to-day guidance and advice, while all placement mentors have regular contact with the ITE lecturer team for updates on expectations and technical requirements. In Spain, school placements are carried out on site in schools under the supervision of an academic tutor (university lecturer) and a professional tutor (school teacher.) Prospective teachers have two cycles of placements throughout their initial training with a duration equivalent to 20% of their initial training. In Portugal, all initial teacher education studies include two periods of work experience in schools. In Austria, throughout the entire ITE programme, pre-service teachers teach in 'practice' schools a certain number of practice days in each semester under the guidance of experienced, specially certified teachers - mentors, and ITE tutors. These form part of so called 'pedagogical-practical studies' that combine theoretical, instructionally relevant content and pedagogical practical parts.

In particular, the documentary analysis stressed the need to enhance communication channels between academic tutors and school mentors, as well as the necessity for collaborative tools to ensure better coordination of action, planning and follow-up with students during school placement. Time issues and geographical dispersion of the training centres, or schools was also highlighted. The analysis indicated the need to develop a real culture of collaboration between the ITE faculties, the training centres (schools) and the teaching staff also. As a result of this documentary analysis, the school placement methodological framework was developed for use in the first questionnaire. It sought to respond to all the commonalities and differences of each country's requirements for school placement and included a detailed description of key phases of school placement: preparatory activities,

activities in the training centres or schools with follow-up and support of pre-service students, their reflection and evaluation of their work. As such, there were four parts to the devised questionnaire.

Section one commenced with a brief section asking about participants' demographic identifiers, such as age, gender, and location. Section two queried the nature of the communication between university and school tutors. Items in this section included questions such as "which technological resources and tools could be useful to improve the level of coordination of work between university and school tutors" and "how do the university tutors communicate with the school tutors currently", where participants could choose from a list of pre-populated responses. Section three asked participants to outline the different current communication channels used with pre-service teachers, and asked participants to identify what these communication channels were used for. Items in this section included "during school placement, what function is the school tutor involved with the student teacher" where respondents could choose from a list of options presented in tabular form. The final section asked participants for their thoughts on the requirement for a self-reflection tool built on the EKT platform, that could be used by pre-service teachers during practicum, and how the EKT platform might facilitate this in a safe and secure GDPR compliant manner.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were then held in each of the academic partner institutions, during March 2021, to gather qualitative data to supplement the responses received in questionnaire one, during phase one. The data gathered during the focus group interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and the results of a small sample of that dataset are now reported.

Findings

Table 1 outlines the number of respondents to questionnaire one administered in each country between January and March 2021. While the total number of respondents (N = 196) is of interest, it is worth noting the effect of Covid-19 on responses in each country where the impact of the pandemic on data collection for all participants was relevant. In Ireland schools were closed from January 2021 to the beginning of March 2021, and no school placement occurred, thereby affecting the involvement of school and ITE tutors, as a result. The impact of the pandemic has also meant difficulties in England and Austria and consequently in the data collection process. Student teachers in the UK were able to complete placements under Covid restrictions, including during lockdown as vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers were still attending school, and online learning was also being provided for the rest of the school population. The intense demands on teacher' and tutors' workloads meant, however, that they could not be approached to complete questionnaires until Covid restrictions had eased somewhat. As a result, the data collection period for this reason was extended and is still open today, pending obtaining a sufficient sample in all pilot countries to allow for a full transnational analysis to define the needs and challenges to which the EKT system will respond. However, the results are of interest, nonetheless.

	Ireland	UK	Spain	Austria	Total
<i>School Tutors</i>	0	0	149	5	154
<i>ITE Tutors</i>	2	0	36	4	42
<i>Total responses per country</i>	2	0	185	9	196

Table 1 Phase One Questionnaire Responses per Country

Semi-structured interviews were held in Ireland, UK and Austria early in March 2021. The objective of these interviews was to elicit further detail from participants about their requirements for an online platform. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, and the data transcribed into MS Word for thematic analysis. A coding frame was used to search for themes in the dataset and this coding frame was based on the four thematic sections present in the first questionnaire. As such, responses from participants to both phases of data collection could be then be combined during phase II and III of the research study, at later phases of data collection.

Themes such as the need for an online platform and that this platform be multi-browser and multi-device compatible emerged. For example, Tutor A (Ireland) wondered "how would I be able to access this platform, can I just get it on the internet" to "I wish we had this already, it sounds like something I could use tomorrow with my

students, whereas now I'm using my own mobile phone and I don't know how to capture the conversations we are having". Some concerns were expressed by participants as to where the data was stored and who might have access to it, "I do wonder if something like this would be GDPR compliant, as we're living in a world where everyone is a bit scared about who has access to any content created by students especially if it's about results and other reflections that could be personal" (Tutor A, Ireland). Tutors in the UK were concerned about how the platform might connect with the institution's existing administrative "parallel platform shared with the nursing and midwifery placement teams", and the associated eportfolio recently developed in-house as an "electronic evidence gathering system ... where [students'] evidence against the UK teachers' standards is recorded quite systematically so that they can monitor their own progress on there and set targets based on a visual representation of where they are" (Tutor B, UK). Tutor B acknowledged that the current platform does not, however, include any facility to enable forum discussions or peer-to-peer support, which currently happens informally via social media groups (and which can be problematic, dominated by personal grievances and occasional misinformation). While the current system is beginning to work well as an evidence-gathering tool, it is heavily focused on final assessment. Finding a space for students to reflect openly on difficulties and uncertainties is not so easy and would lead to additional concerns about confidentiality and separation from the demonstration of professional competence, similar to the concerns raised in Ireland.

Interestingly, despite differences in the organization of school placement in all partner institutions, there was one common feature of responses: school placement seeks to contribute to enrich prospective students' experience and knowledge in three key areas: prospective teachers' engagement in the school community, professional knowledge, and teacher identity (the role of teacher as an innovative, investigating and reflexive agent). This commonality provides an opportunity to support prospective teachers' reflexivity in these areas mediated on the EKT platform.

Discussion & Conclusion

As competencies related to ITE are locally defined and contextually shaped, future teachers must 'feel their way' into becoming successful practitioners through interaction with more experienced colleagues and reflection on their own practice. Capturing the subtleties of this relational reflective learning should relate to local requirements as well as personal learning - with the opportunity for confidential critical commentary. The findings from the initial data gathered demonstrates how an online resource might offer a space, where pre-service teachers, mentors and tutors can interact confidently to track and shape pre-service teachers' professional development as well as promote discussion of difficulties and tensions. We anticipate finding "critical moments" (Mc Intosh, 2018) when support from tutors and/or mentors moves pre-service teachers to new understandings about the 'how and why' of educational practice, mediated in this online EKT platform.

However, the timing of this study and the impact of the pandemic on data collection cannot be underestimated. Any recommendations for the requirements of this EKT platform must be based on a larger sample than that already collected, and the requirements should not be seen as a reaction to the 'lockdown' nature of the pandemic classroom, or current school placement experience. The pandemic has also brought new challenges to ITE aimed at digitising education and improving the digital competencies of future teachers. Previous experience of introducing new technologies (eportfolio) at University of Plymouth has demonstrated the need to tailor training for the use of new platforms to different levels of digital competencies among teachers, external mentors and students. Indeed, as previously noted by Egan et.al (2019), confident use of 'new' technologies after their initial introduction, is not a precursor for competent use of those digital tools. Further, those involved in all parts of the placement 'triad' may not be experienced users of digital technologies, and must be trained in their use, before a new EKT platform can be introduced to ITE institutions. Time to "have play with it by themselves" is also important "making sure they have time to access, log in, just have a nose around is the way that some of these students get to feel comfortable" with new software on their own devices (Tutor B, UK). When face to face workshops are not possible (either because of Covid restrictions or the wide geographical reach of placement), reviewable online support for the technicalities of registration/logging in and the underlying purposes of the EKT platform usage became even more important. However, the initial results of this study indicate a strong need for this EKT platform to provide a safe, secure, online space to mediate all aspects of the school placement practicum, to manage the relationships and provide a space to allow for reflection by pre-service teachers, in a digital manner.

While the initial results are informative, further phases of this research project will be reported at future SITE conferences. The limitations of this work at this time include the small sample size reported and the early stage of the EKT project. However, we are hopeful that EKT has provided an opportunity to collaborate and create something unique to the teaching profession, and the project team will report on this fully next year.

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