

THE EXPERIENCES OF COLLABORATION AND CRITICAL THINKING DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ASPECT OF A COLLABORATIVE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

Rasa Braslauskiene, Reda Jacynė, Aida Norvilienė, Sada Ramanauskienė, Gražina Šmitienė

Klaipeda University (Lithuania)

grazina.smitiene@ku.lt

INTRODUCTION

Introduction. A rapidly changing world and the challenges of global education call for a constant review of educational priorities, objectives, and organizational features at all levels of education. The didactics of higher education institutions are no exception, as a change in the organization and delivery of study programs, which are emerging to respond to the latest scientific discoveries, innovations that are constantly entering the labor market, the problems that arise in modern societies, and the personal expectations of students. Changes in higher education curricula are brought about by researchers, lecturers, students, social partners, etc. These changes need to be not only effective but also sustainable, so an important aspect of change management is the creation and development of a co-creative network involving all stakeholders in the change. Another important aspect is the possibility of sharing good practices, co-creating, discussing, and sharing the most effective didactical findings in the organization and delivery of studies. The Erasmus+ KA2 Capacity Building in Higher Education Project on Teacher Training in the specialization on life and information technology skills/21st TM (EAC/A03/2018) aims to develop transferring knowledge, best practices, and experience on innovative and ICT-based teaching methodology on 21st skills acquisition from HEIs. The project integrates those skills in the teachers' educational programs for the teachers to be effective in the 21st century. Developing or updating curricula requires a concentrated (joint) effort on the part of both the staff administering the studies and the teachers.

The research aims to reveal the characteristics of sustainable collaboration, and networking between teachers and administrators to improve students' collaboration and critical thinking skills.

The **objectives** are the characteristics of sustainable collaboration, and networking between teachers and administrators to improve students' collaboration and critical thinking skills. **The methods of the research:** the focus group interview was conducted with international project partner university teams during the meeting of one of the project partners (2023).

Theoretical background

Networking is increasingly important in today's education, not only for the design and development of business and scientific innovations, but also for the revision and updating of general education content and methodology, vocational training programs, and higher education didactics (European Commission, 2017; CHEGG&CHEPS, 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

Students, HEI teaching staff, researchers, and administrators are invited to collaborate in making the most appropriate HEI didactic decisions for each study program (CHEGG&CHEPS, 2020; Huisman et al., 2021). In the context of a single study program, this communion is sufficient. However, the support of a collaborative network (international collaboration network) is important when analyzing and modernizing the educational environments of multidisciplinary universities, and when introducing didactic innovations in HEIs (Chen et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

Some of the most common issues addressed by such a network of collaborating HEIs are: organizing student-centered learning, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, creating interactive environments in universities, implementing appropriate teaching, and learning strategies, and so on (Chen et al., 2019; Gravett, Yakovchuk & Kinchin, 2020; Laye et al., 2020; Crawford & McKenzie, 2022).

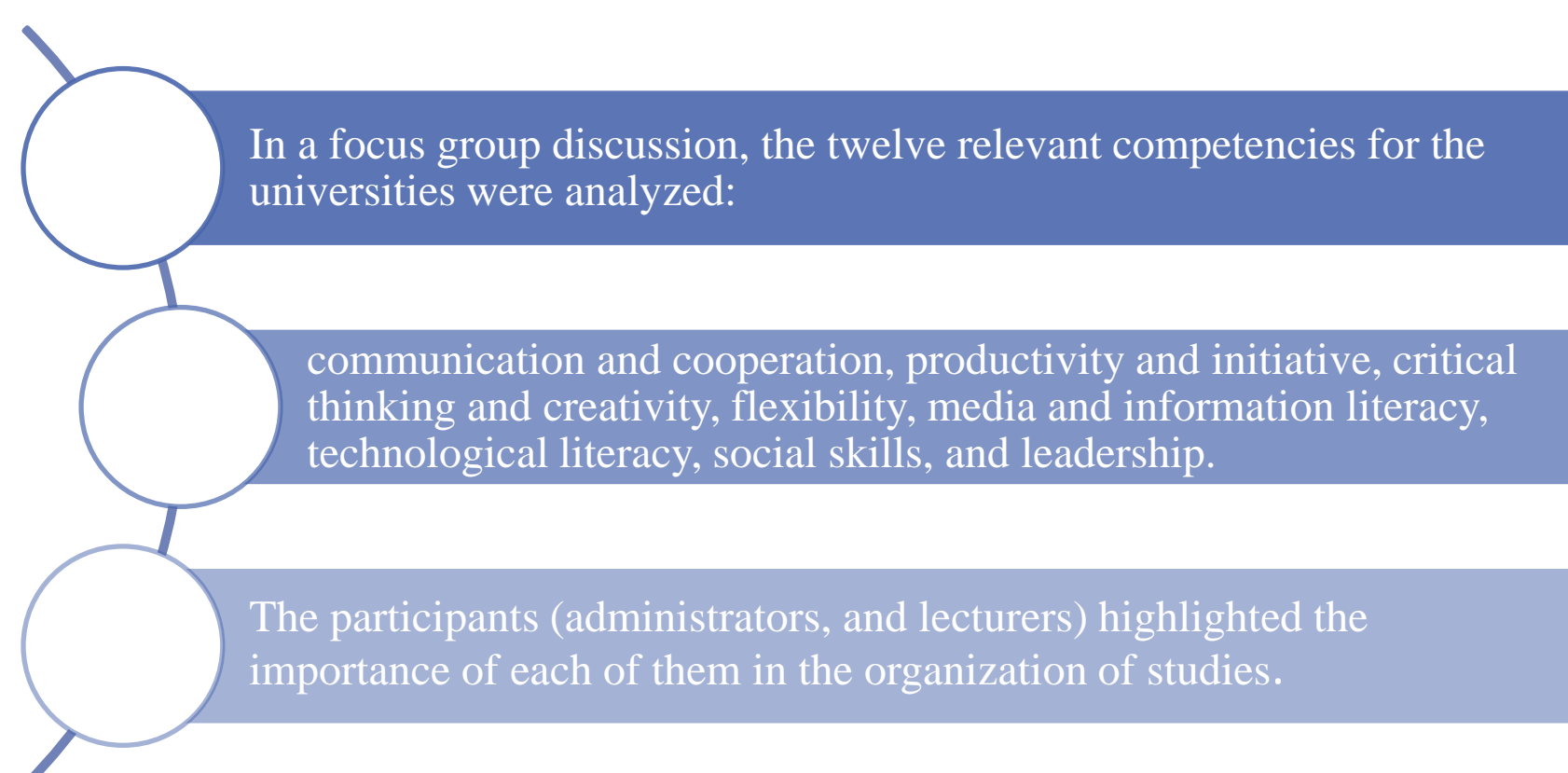
Significantly that the necessary changes in higher education didactics analyzed by researchers identify specific student abilities and competencies, the development of which must be ensured in higher education, for example, student's ability to create partnership networks and participate in professional networks, critical thinking, social engagement, and others (Hodgson & McConnell, 2019; Hortiguera-Alcala et al., 2019; Gravett & Winstone, 2022).

In higher education, when developing students' critical thinking, emphasis is placed not only on the content of study subjects, which encourages students to analyze, interpret, create, and reflect, but also on the university's co-creative, collaborative context, which can only be ensured by the university's created and continuously developed staff (administration, researchers, educators, social partners) network. A collaborative network of learners and the process of networking is as well as a prerequisite for the development of collaborative competence. (Van Waes, 2017; Ma et al., 2019; Hill, 2020; Frank & Meyer, 2020; Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Irvine, 2020; Davidson, A. B., Addison, C. J., & Charbonneau, J. (2022).

Methodology

During the implementation of the Erasmus+ KA2 Capacity Building in Higher Education Project on Teacher Training in the specialization on life and information technology skills/21st TM (EAC/A03/2018) focus group interviews were conducted with project partner university teams. The choice of this method was based on the desire to understand and explain the meanings, beliefs, and experiences that influence the feelings, attitudes, and behavior of individuals (Wilkinson, 2004; Nyumba et al., 2018). The focus group discussion took place during the meeting of one of the project partners (2023). 37 scholars, teachers, and administration representatives from 7 universities (two universities each from India, China, Cambodia, and Greece) participated in the focus group. Each international university was represented by university administration staff, teachers, and scholars. It should be noted that in this discussion, most of the participants represented the fields of technology, engineering, and social sciences (not pedagogic science). Only 2 university teams had competence in teacher training. During the discussion, the moderators invited representatives of higher education institutions to discuss and identify the most significant competencies of the 21st century in their university community, to identify the most important aspects of critical thinking and collaboration education in their higher education institutions, to discuss the challenges and achievements of their implementation, and to share an accumulated good experience. During each discussion, participants were introduced to the main topic of the discussion, an introductory question, and transitional and substantive questions, and the discussion was summarized and concluded (Nyumba et al., 2018). Qualitative content analysis was used to process the research data, which helped to cover the obtained information, divide the data into groups and categories and draw conclusions based on this (Creswell, 2009; Nyumba et al., 2018).

Main findings



The results of the study revealed that the following were important for the participants: close cooperation between the lecturers and the administration in creating modern educational environments; identifying didactic priorities for the implementation of the study programs; enabling lecturers to update the study programs, where students can analyze and discuss, investigate, and interpret and discuss with scholars on research data, prepare team-creative works and evaluate them in a reasoned way.

MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The participants of the focus groups emphasized the development of cooperation and critical thinking as the main competencies, the development of which should be given special attention in their universities. During the discussions, it was determined a few important conditions for the development of these competencies are to explain the structure of the study subject to the entire university community, to prepare a clear guide for the preparation of the study subject for teachers, and to specific methodological recommendations for the development of critical thinking and collaboration (methods, tools, etc.). It is important that the participants of the international cooperation project emphasized the importance of the cooperation network in universities in creating a sustainable and inclusive modern learning environment in universities.