Internationalisation in Higher Education: A Virtual Adult Education Academy in Times of COVID-19

Jennifer Danquah, Vanessa Beu, Regina Egetenmeyer

Abstract:

COVID-19 calls for new ways of approaching internationalisation in adult learning and education. Based on experiences gathered during the 2021 virtual Adult Education Academy, this paper identifies challenges in international virtual learning settings in higher education. Such settings involve different levels of digital literacy among participants and moderators, limited access to high-speed internet, different time zones, and difficulties in social interactions. The article presents the didactical and methodological conceptualisation of a virtual setting to overcome these challenges. The concept involves facilitating exchanges between moderators, providing technical support, implementing (a-)synchronous sessions, and establishing a virtual space in which learning materials are created.

Keywords: Adult Education Academy; Adult Learning and Education; COVID-19; Internationalisation; Virtual Learning Setting

1. Introduction

Adult learning and education is embedded in international contexts. Various international collaborations between European countries have been established in the field of adult learning and education during the last years (Egetenmeyer 2017b). These collaborations lead to the deconstruction of the dualism between national and international perspectives and the emergence of interwoven perspectives in relation to internationalisation (Egetenmeyer 2017b, 2).

According to Egetenmeyer (2017b), this phenomenon also exists in adult learning and education as an academic discipline. Internationalisation processes thus not only take place in adult learning and education itself but also in higher education. This is also put forward by the German government, which emphasises the importance of internationalisation in higher education and teaching (BMBF 2016). Given that internationalisation and globalisation also involve new ways of exchanging, learning, and communicating, new technologies have to be taken into account.

Jennifer Danquah, Julius-Maximilians-Universität of Würzburg, Germany, jennifer.danquah@uni-wuerzburg.de, 0000-0003-3811-2561

Vanessa Beu, Julius-Maximilians-Universität of Würzburg, Germany, vanessa.beu@uni-wuerzburg.de, 0000-0002-6234-8841

Regina Egetenmeyer, Julius-Maximilians-Universität of Würzburg, Germany, regina.egetenmeyer@uni-wuerzburg.de, 0000-0001-8907-5583

In the policies of the European Union, digitalisation is seen as an opportunity to make education efficient and fair (European Commission 2014, 6). The policies aim to integrate digital technologies to foster social inclusion, better living conditions, and higher economic growth (European Commission 2005).

Digital elements have been considered in the domains of both higher education and adult education for the past 20 years (Staab and Egetenmeyer 2019, 279). But 2020 saw a boost in the digital components regarding spaces of learning and teaching. The European University Association finds: «In this regard, 2020 was a year of change: There have never been so many students and staff exposed to online learning and teaching» (2020, 3). Due to the lockdown restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation saw great expansion in the field of education and training systems. The European Commission (2021a) observes that the integration of digital components in teaching settings was accelerated. Educational providers tried to keep the learning and teaching environment functioning with the help of digital tools (European Commission 2021a). According to the European Commission (2021b), the main challenge of COVID-19 was to mitigate learning losses, to deploy remote learning, and to not leave vulnerable learners behind, leading to an «accelerating transformation that was already taking place in the form of online learning and teaching» (European Commission 2021b, 6). Likewise, internationalisation in higher education was reconsidered because of the strict travel restrictions. New ways of internationalisation at home had to be fostered, an area that is still less developed in contrast to classic internationalisation (Brandenburg 2020, 11; Lecon 2020, 57).

The Adult Education Academy 'International and comparative studies in adult education and lifelong learning', hosted by the University of Würzburg, is one example of how to implement virtual learning settings to support internationalisation even during times of fundamental changes in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Adult Education Academy gives international master's students, doctoral students and practitioners the opportunity to pursue international comparative studies on topics in adult learning and education as well as lifelong learning. Run by a consortium of eight European universities, the academy is conceptualised as a joint module[1]. The joint module aims to embed internationalisation in academic curricula. Furthermore, it has helped establish structures for combining professionalisation in higher education and practice institutions in adult learning and education. This creates the possibility of teaching practitioners, doctoral and master's students together and to build professional networks between students and practitioners.

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[1] The partner universities are the University of Florence, the University of Lisbon, Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg, the University of Pécs, the University of Ljubljana, the University of Padua, Dublin City University, the University of Belgrade, Bayero University Kano, West Liberty University, Obafemi Awolowo University, the International Institute of Adult and Lifelong Learning in Delhi and the University of Delhi. Partners from practice are DVV International and EAEA.

In this paper, we discuss how the 2021 Adult Education Academy contributes to internationalisation in higher education despite the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we address the challenges arising from the changed conditions and outline the experiences gathered. In a first step, we present the core structure of the Adult Education Academy as the basis of the virtual learning setting (Chapter 2). Next, we introduce the virtual setting of the 2021 Adult Education Academy (Chapter 3). Subsequently, the challenges arising from the switch to virtual implementation are addressed (Chapter 4). Finally, we focus on future perspectives on virtual learning settings and opportunities in relation to internationalisation in higher education.

2. The Structure of the Adult Education Academy: International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

The Adult Education Academy is designed for master's and doctoral students studying a subject related to adult learning and education and for practitioners as international professionals from the field of adult learning and education from all over the world. Since 2014, the Adult Education Academy has taken place in February each year. So far, around 70 to 90 participants have joined the academy each year. Most participants are enrolled at one of the partner universities of the Adult Education Academy, which means that both students and their professors travel to Würzburg, Germany, to study together in an international group.

The Adult Education Academy is divided into three parts. It consists of a virtual preparatory phase, a two-week intensive phase at Campus Würzburg and a virtual follow-up, which includes the possibility for doctoral students and practitioners to publish an international comparative paper in joint authorship in an international group of authors (refers to Fig. 1 – Adult Education Academy: International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education).

Figure 1 – Adult Education Academy: International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education joint module. Source: INTALL 2021.

2.1 Preparatory Phase

The virtual preparatory phase starts in November and takes place via a Moodle platform provided by the University of Würzburg. In addition, some partner universities offer on-campus preparation. All participants are prepared with online tutorials and preparatory readings to build a common knowledge base for the first week of the Adult Education Academy in Würzburg. In preparation for the second week of the Adult Education Academy, master's and doctoral students write a transnational essay and practitioners prepare good practice presentations linked to the topic of their comparative groups. Students and practitioners are guided on a Moodle platform by the moderators and co-moderators of their group.

2.2 Two-week Intensive Phase

In the first week of the Adult Education Academy in Würzburg, participants are divided into two groups:

Group A: In the option 'Lifelong Learning Strategies in Europe', participants focus their analysis on questions of international policies in adult education and lifelong learning, work from a perspective of policy analysis and practice.

Group B: In the 'International Theories in Adult Education' option, participants focus on the development of a theoretical-analytical perspective based on readings and discussions of selected texts by Paulo Freire. The aim is to develop much more specialised theoretical knowledge to be able to synthesise different perspectives systematically and theoretically.

The theoretical insights and perspectives are accompanied by joint field visits to adult education providers in and around Würzburg (e.g. Frankenwarte Academy, Kolping Academy, Public Fire Fighting Academy, Caritas Frankfurt, DRK Language School Frankfurt, Volkshochschule Hassberge). Presentations and discussions with international stakeholders in adult education (e.g. ICEAE, DVV International, EAEA, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning) round off the first week and serve as case studies for practicing the analytical models and theories addressed in the classroom.

During the second week, the group is divided into around ten subgroups working with international colleagues on the comparison of selected topics in adult education and lifelong learning (e.g., learning cities, professionalisation in adult education, national lifelong learning policies). The second week ends with an open space presentation on the last Friday, showing the results of the comparison.

After successfully participating in the Adult Education Academy and submitting a transnational essay or good practice example, students and practitioners can receive a certificate of attendance and ECTS. Recognition formats have been developed for that purpose, giving students and practitioners the possibility of having their learning activities recognised in both university curricula and in professionalisation programmes in adult education practice.

2.3 Follow Up

Following the principle «from studies to researcher» (Egetenmeyer 2017c, 166)[2] doctoral students and practitioners have the option to publish a co-authored paper about the results of their comparative groups in internationally published anthologies under the guidance of their moderators and co-moderators (Egetenmeyer 2016, 2017a; Egetenmeyer, Schmidt-Lauff and Boffo 2017; Fedeli and Egetenmeyer 2018; Despotovic and Popović 2020a, 2020b; Egetenmeyer, Boffo and Kröner 2020). An online tutorial and a virtual meeting are provided to guide the international author group in writing their international comparative paper.

3. Virtual Adult Education Academy

After seven on-campus editions of the Adult Education Academy (2014-2020), the 2021 edition was conducted virtually due to COVID-19. The switch to a digital format called for adapting the programme to continue the possibility to provide international learning experiences even if students or staff are unable to travel. These changes led to a set of challenges regarding communication and organisation methods, such as the implementation and didactical conceptualisation of synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning settings as well as the use of media platforms. This resulted in a modified didactical structure for the academy, which is presented in Fig. 2 – Virtual Adult Education Academy 2021.

Figure 2 – Virtual Adult Education Academy 2021. Source: INTALL 2021.

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[2]   Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

3.1 Joint Didactical Preparation of the Virtual Adult Education Academy with All (Co-)moderators

During the first and the second week of the Adult Education Academy, moderators from the partner universities were involved in facilitating an online learning environment for the participants. As most (co-)moderators had little experience implementing an online event, they conducted four online meetings in November 2020, December 2020, and January 2021 to share their ideas, plans and experiences with online teaching and to introduce each other to different collaborative tools. One of the four meetings was a Mahara staff training led by ePortfolio expert Lisa Donaldson from Dublin City University, Ireland[3].

3.2 Preparation Phase

As in previous years, self-study phases during the preparation phase were implemented as part of the didactical concept. Again, a Moodle platform was used to prepare participants for the Adult Education Academy. Additionally, in 2021, the self-study online tutorials and self-study readings were supplemented by synchronous virtual sessions for reflecting on and discussing the tutorials and readings. Synchronous virtual sessions were also held in the comparative groups to prepare the transnational essays and good practice presentations. These online sessions helped participants get to know the moderators and other participants.

In their programme evaluation, participants of the 2020 Adult Education Academy expressed their desire to extent the comparative group work period during the second week and to have more time to talk about employability. In response to that feedback, and because virtual learning needs more time, the 'Employability in Adult Education' module was shifted to the preparatory phase[4]. In one of four virtual employment sessions, the participants were introduced to Mahara with the aim to prepare them for using the platform during the two-week programme.

3.3 Two-week Intensive Phase

Following the structure of the pre-COVID-19 intensive phase, in the first week of the 2021 Adult Education Academy, master's students, doctoral students and practitioners focused on educational policies, adult education in Germany and analytical models. Doctoral students and practitioners had classes on Paulo Freire's theories on adult learning and education. The theoretical insights were accompanied by virtual field visits to German adult education providers and presentations of international stakeholders. In order to enable participants

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[3] Mahara is an ePortfolio-software for learning programmes and learning results used at the University of Würzburg and, which was included in the two-week Adult Education Academy in February 2021.

[4] Evaluation results: <https://www.hw.uni-wuerzburg.de/intall/results/evaluation-results/> (2023-03-15).

to reflect on the theoretical input given and to discuss different thoughts and ideas, sessions in smaller virtual groups were implemented.

The second week of the 2021 Adult Education Academy focussed completely on comparing lifelong learning. Participants worked in nine different comparative groups with the (co-)moderators and presented their results to the plenary session. Each group met synchronously. Besides PowerPoint Presentations, participants used online tools to process tasks in smalls groups and to share the results with the other participants. For instance, digital metaplan boards, digital pin boards, interactive presentation software and query tools were used. Furthermore, each comparative group created its own page on Mahara, which was designed to activate and instruct participants to capture the process of comparison carried out in order to finally present the group results via Mahara in the open space presentation[5]. The 2021 joint module thus lead to the combination of Moodle as a preparation platform and Mahara as a joint website used for the virtual implementation of the programme.

4. Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities of a Virtual Adult Education Academy

Planning and implementing a virtual programme for the first time comes with increased requirements for organisers, students and moderators. However, this is not reflected in the evaluation, which shows higher ratings compared to the previous years. Nevertheless, the results point to challenges that arise in virtual learning settings. How participants assessed the 2021 virtual Adult Education Academy and how organisers and moderators addressed the emerging challenges is discussed in the following.

4.1 Experiences

Since the 2016 Adult Education Academy, the development of the joint module has been accompanied by an external evaluation that helps to assess and measure the development and the impact of the joint module. The questionnaire, which mixes qualitative and quantitative questions, was developed by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) (Lattke and Egetenmeyer 2017) and refined each year by the University of Würzburg and an external evaluator as the programme evolved.

The evaluations of the Adult Education Academy consistently showed good results. Participants rated the programme in an overall perspective with mean values of 4.39 (2019) and 4.33 (2020), with the 2021 Adult Education Academy earning an even higher score (4.68)[6]. This means that the virtual format

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[5]   <https://openwuecampus.uni-wuerzburg.de/moodle/course/view.php?id=139> (2023-03-15).

[6]   For presenting the following data, mean values 1 to 5 on the 5-point scales or the absolute number of respondents will be used.

was rated even better than the on-site intensive programme in Würzburg. Respondents' feedback regarding the organisational, academic and didactical quality of the various programme components shows higher results compared to the 2020 evaluation. Additionally, compared to 2020, participants in 2021 believed the various programme parts were more useful for their own development. The synchronous virtual sessions during the preparation phase were rated very positively. The reason may be that the various topics could be addressed in more depth, allowing participants to clarify questions and uncertainties directly. Likewise, discussions with other participants helped participants internalise the contents. Low ratings were given to exchanges and networking opportunities during breaks. This may be attributed to the fact that the entire programme required sitting in front of the screen, meaning participants may have preferred to spend time away from the screen during breaks.

As in previous years, the results show positive effects on the academic, personal and professional level. The participants name a positive impact on their thematic interest in adult learning and education (2021: mean values from 4.31 to 4.56; 2020: 4.04 to 4.29; 2019: 4.16 to 4.31), on their future academic, career and mobility plans (2021: mean values from 3.72 to 4.60; 2020: 3.72 to 4.32; 2019: 3.57 to 4.37), and on the development of competences and skills (2021: mean values from 4.00 to 4.52; 2020: 3.76 to 4.37; 2019: 4.05 to 4.42). Before participating in the 2021 Adult Education Academy, 70% of respondents had a strong interest in trans- or international adult learning and education, a higher rate than in 2020 (64%). Whereas interest in international adult education and the positive impact on participants' thematic interest increased, the 2021 Adult Education Academy saw fewer participants who were previously involved in trans- or international topics in their study or work context than in 2020 (2021: mean value 3.18; 2020: mean value 3.44). Likewise, in comparison with 2020, fewer respondents had previously undertaken international academic travel (2021: 49%; 2020: 39%). This is shown in the different types of international mobilities undertaken by the respondents, such as international conferences, exchange semesters, study excursions abroad and intensive courses abroad[7]. This means the higher ratings indicating a positive impact on making future plans for mobilities in 2021 might result from fewer previous mobilities. This, like the other differences listed above, may be traced back to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has led to travel restrictions and a lower number of international learning opportunities.

Regarding the virtual implementation, some 2021 participants stressed an increase in their digital skills as a result of using interactive online tools. In addition, the respondents reported having better knowledge of digital applications

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[7]   Differences can be seen by type of mobility: international programmes (2021: 15 respondents; 2020: 13 respondents), international conferences (2021: 10; 2020: 20), exchange semesters (2021: 7; 2020: 14), study excursions abroad (2021: 5; 2020: 5) and intensive courses abroad (2021: 4; 2020: 11).

that can be used in the context of their own work. Some participants, however, found there was too much variety, suggesting more intensive moderation in group works and a shorter programme with more breaks.

It can thus be assumed that the Adult Education Academy was successfully transferred into a virtual concept. Given that a reduced number of learning programmes – especially international programmes – are offered in times of COVID-19, the increased mean values compared to the previous years may be attributed to participants' gratitude for having the possibility to attend an international online programme. This made attendance possible for students and practitioners who, for a variety of reasons, would not normally be able to participate in face-to-face international programmes. Thus, these persons also had the opportunity – through the developed recognition model – to obtain a formal university certificate with grades and ECTS points.

4.2 Challenges and Opportunities

Taking these results into consideration, the need for international programmes in adult learning and education, even in a virtual format, has become clear. In order to provide an international learning environment and thus raise participants' engagement in international settings in higher education during a pandemic, the organisers faced multiple challenges while conducting the virtual Adult Education Academy. In the following, we present the challenges faced and the strategies implemented to tackle these challenges.

Preparation of (co-)moderators for digital teaching: As the Adult Education Academy was implemented virtually for the first time, most (co-)moderators had little experience in planning and conducting an international virtual programme. This presented the (co-)moderators with the challenge of familiarising themselves with different online platforms such as Mahara, video-conferencing systems, digital pinboards or digital polls in a short period of time. The preparatory meetings of the (co-)moderators can be considered an important way to share ideas, plans and experiences with online teaching and to instruct each other in using different collaborative tools. The meetings created a learning community between the (co-)moderators of the Adult Education Academy. This led to a very open atmosphere between the (co-)moderators, who learned from each other's ideas and experiences.

Participants' individual digital preconditions: Getting familiar with Mahara also helped to overcome obstacles such as time differences between participants (from Brazil to Siberia in Russia), which are hard to overcome in synchronous virtual settings. The recordings of the online sessions during the intensive programme, made available on Mahara each day, created a certain degree of flexibility. This made it possible for participants with personal or professional obligations to participate in the programme from all over the world. Besides using Mahara to give participants the possibility to create and capture their own learning process, all teaching and learning materials were collected on Mahara and made freely accessible via Moodle. Therefore, the materials can be used beyond the

programme as good practice examples of how to implement educational programmes digitally at universities and in practice and as an information tool for students to work on international theories and comparative topics in adult education and lifelong learning.

Creation of a learning community: Furthermore, as participants did not have the possibility to see each other face-to-face in Würzburg, it was important to already create a sense of community and belonging during the preparatory phase of the Adult Education Academy. Thus, a didactical concept of synchronous and asynchronous online sessions was created. To that end, the self-study online tutorials and self-study readings were supplemented by synchronous virtual sessions. These sessions helped participants to get direct feedback on their thoughts and to get in touch with each other in an early stage of the programme, thereby improving cooperation and preventing possible dropouts.

Technical support tailored to individual needs and knowledge: In addition, in order to keep participants from dropping out because they lack digital skills, extra resources were provided by the organising team of the Adult Education Academy to support participants less familiar with digital tools. The low dropout figures in the preparatory phase, compared to previous years and the highly rated synchronous virtual sessions during the preparation phase, indicate participants' satisfaction with these offerings. Additionally, during the Academy's intensive phase, networking opportunities were implemented during breaks to facilitate exchanges between the participants. Also, working in small groups helped to create a familiar learning environment.

The online setting featuring synchronous and asynchronous sessions may have led to a stronger sense of community and therefore to higher self-commitment in the Academy. It may also be responsible for the high degree of personal growth and the development of skills and competences shown by the evaluation results. According to the respondents, the programme can help participants increase their digital competences and their knowledge of digital applications. However, not everyone found it easy to deal with the digital learning setting. During the intensive programme, internet connectivity emerged as an obstacle for some participants. Not all participants had access to a stable internet connection or even to a device that allowed full attendance. Several participants took part via their smartphone, restricting their ability to participate in group works using online tools. This led to increased moderation in group work and in the use of easily accessible online tools to prevent participants from being excluded. On the one hand, virtual teaching and learning may require actions regarding participants' individual needs and knowledge; on the other hand, it means allowing for more time to guide everyone through the process. A high degree of flexibility is required.

In conclusion, beside the challenges faced during the implementation of the Adult Education Academy, virtual learning settings also offer opportunities in relation to internationalisation in higher education. For example, the virtual Adult Education Academy made it possible for students and practitioners to attend an international programme who, for a variety of reasons, would

not normally be able to participate in face-to-face international programmes. Likewise, the virtual setting is an opportunity for participants to expand their digital competencies and knowledge. What is more, international topics in adult learning and education are included in the curricula of the partner universities as a result of the joint module.

5. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

The Adult Education Academy is an example demonstrating that it is possible to offer internationalisation in academic adult learning and education even in times of COVID-19, when physical mobility is not possible. The joint module, in which the Adult Education Academy is embedded, provides a clear structure that may be flexibly adapted to changing needs. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous virtual sessions, self-directed learning phases and discussion sessions in larger groups connects different teaching and learning settings, leading to high levels of satisfaction among learners. In addition, the preparatory phase helps create a sense of community and prepares participants to take part in the intensive programme with a shared set of knowledge and theoretical background before the short intensive programme begins. During the intensive programme, participants are highly engaged in the courses offered. Participants' interactions are supported by ice breaker games, which were used during the introductory session and in the afternoon sessions. In addition, the moderators encouraged the participants to switch on their cameras. This helps to create a virtual space of trust and community. Also, frequent methodological changes between lectures and group work, as well as permanent technical support, are important. The moderators and organising team patiently offered technical support, creating an inclusive and respectful learning environment. A wide range of teaching and learning methods and trust-building between participants leads to strong interactions and thus constant engagement.

Furthermore, the Adult Education Academy offers the possibility to create a set of resources on adult learning and education, such as videos, literature references and group presentations accessible for an audience working and studying in the field of adult learning and education. In this way, it helps to address inequity issues regarding the accessibility of knowledge. The open access enables other universities and institutions in adult learning and education to be part of the learning experience. As a result, the Academy facilitates a sustainable exchange of good practices and professionalisation standards regarding adult education. The publication option gives doctoral students and practitioners the opportunity to become part of a professional network in adult learning and education.

In conclusion, the concept of the Adult Education Academy carries the potential of constructing new learning and teaching environments, which emphasise the possibility of internationalisation without traveling. By accompanying learners through various online platforms, ensuring technical support and providing a clear structure, the Academy has produced a complex virtual education concept. The virtual Adult Education Academy shows that it can contribute to the

internationalisation of universities and the field of practice if learners' needs are met and limitations such as high-speed internet, different time zones, different levels of digital skills and the importance of social interactions are considered.

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