THE TEACHEX PROJECT – GUIDING ISRAEL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS TEACHING EXCELLENCE

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Abstract

This paper presents the TeachEx project http://www.teachex.eu/, an Israel Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education project. The project started in November 2015 and will end in October 2018. The aim of the project is to promote teaching excellence amongst Israeli Higher Education institutions. The project consortium is led by the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, and includes the following Israeli Higher Education Institutions: Ben-Gurion University, Beit Berl College, Belazel Academy of Arts and Design Jerusalem, Gordon Academic College of Education, and the Oranim Academic College of Education. The consortium also includes the following European Universities and Higher Education Institutions and Organizations that act as consultants: University of Brighton, University of Jagiellonian, University College Cork, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Groningen, University of Nicosia and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). Finally, as student involvement is extremely important in improving teaching, the National Union of Israeli Students (NUIS) participate in the consortium, providing significant input to teaching excellence, especially as perceived by students.

In order to aim at teaching excellence, the project has identified five thematic areas pertaining to teaching excellence. These thematic areas have been matched to five training/learning modules, namely: (i) Diversity and Accessible Instruction, (ii) Active/Reflective Teaching and Learning: Learning from Art and Design, (iii) Mobile Learning, (iv) Lecturer as a Producer, and (v) Problem/Project-based Learning (PBL). The five modules will be used as training material for faculty members in order to help them improve their teaching effectiveness so that they can aim at teaching excellence and will be available as open educational resources through the on-line web-based repository, available through the projects web-site. The modules will be delivered to the faculty members by other faculty members (hereafter referred to as the trainers) who will be trained by the module developers. The trainers are members of the Centres of Teaching Excellence (CTE), which have been established in the Israeli institutions as part of this project.

The paper is organized as follows. Introduction briefly introduces some recent developments with regards policies and practices in teaching and learning excellence and sets the framework within this project was developed. Section 2 explains the project’s main aims and objectives. Section 3 presents the five modules that have been developed within the project and underpin the main aim of the project, namely training of faculty members in teaching excellence. It also discusses their interconnection and how they provide support for teaching excellence. Finally, Conclusions summarize our work and findings and report on our future actions.

Keywords: Teaching and Learning Excellence, Erasmus+ Capacity Building Project.

1 INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions in Europe, including now many Universities, which have been so far very much research focused, increasingly acknowledge teaching quality as a main pillar of their vision mission and strategy. In order to achieve the strategic aims of the Higher Education Modernization Agenda [1], the commitment of institutions to teaching quality is of paramount importance. With this strategic aim in mind, the report “Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe’s higher education institutions“ [2] has been prepared by a group of prominent academicians, following a request by the European Commission. This report comprehensively addresses teaching quality and suggests various ways, in which the European Commission (EC), the member states and institutions of Higher Education can promote, support and enhance teaching quality. The report provides sixteen (16) recommendations for improving quality of teaching. It also provides case studies and best practices from various EU countries to exemplify how these recommendations can be met. Some of these recommendations (1,13-16) are addressed to the EC and the member states and address the need for financial support, the promotion of initiatives, methods and methodologies for quality
teaching, the creation of a European Academy for Teaching and Learning, the availability of Structural Funds for supporting related activities, and in general, the framework, policies and support mechanisms at the European and national level for achieving the strategic aim of teaching quality. The rest of the recommendations (2-12) are addressed to the institutions of Higher Education and concern the strategic directions, policies, processes, supporting mechanisms, monitoring and quality auditing practices that can be adopted at the institutional level. These recommendations address amongst other things, issues related to the strategy and supporting funds at an institution, teachers’ professional certifications, training courses in teaching and learning, recognition and award for good teachers, student involvement in curriculum development and the learning process, multi-disciplinary approaches in teaching and internalization of teaching.

Numerous books and articles have been written at policy level to address quality issues in teaching and learning. A sample of such resources can be found in the published work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [3,4,5].

In the rest of the paper we refer to teaching in the more general form and “modern” interpretation of teaching and learning as encompassed in the learner-centred learning model, according to which, the learning process should be built focusing on the student and not the teacher and the teaching process (teacher-learning model). Learner-centered learning moves away from traditional teaching environments through which students are spoon-fed with information provided by the teachers, and thus utilizes “modern” teaching/learning methods/techniques, through which students assume an active role and teachers become facilitators and co-coordinators of the student learning process, rather than information providers. Such methods/techniques include amongst others, problem-based learning, simulation exercises, group projects, research work, etc.

We would like to point out that the learner-centred model and the change of focus on teaching/learning techniques can be blended very well with the learning pyramid of Figure 1 [6], though we need to point out that both the percentages and the pyramid itself have been questioned in the literature [7].

![Learning Pyramid](image)

Finally, we want to point at one recent initiative that relate to the emphasis given lately on teaching and learning. U-Multirank [8] is a recent initiative (supported by the European Commission), that aims at developing a new University ranking system. It provides a new multidimensional, user-driven approach to international ranking of Higher Education institutions and caters for 5 different clusters of Universities, moving away from the traditional research-based ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education Ranking and the Shanghai Ranking; Universities are able to apply and be placed in these 5 clusters, namely Teaching and Learning, Research, Knowledge Transfer, International Orientation and Regional Engagement.

## 2 THE TEACHEX PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The TeachEx project [9] is consistent with most recent international trends, EU policies and pedagogical methods, as the ones addressed in the Introduction section of this the paper. It therefore builds on the strong basis provided by extensive research and applied methodologies in teaching and learning.

The project aims at pushing Israeli Higher Education Institutions towards teaching excellence and focuses in the domain of in-service training for improving the competencies and skills required for
excellent teachers. In doing so, the project aims at promoting and implementing innovative teaching methods and approaches that help faculty members teach more effectively. Its main goal is therefore to retrain faculty members and push for professional development in teaching/learning to become an element in the Israeli Quality Assurance System.

In order to train faculty members, the project aims at establishing or reinforcing existing structures for academic staff development at each institution, to be renamed as Centers for Teaching Excellence (CTEs). These centers will operate in accordance with standards of quality of student centered approaches and experience, while promoting continuous professional development of faculty members, instilling skills, knowledge and understanding related to their complex and challenging roles as teachers.

Another project aim is to compile in a handbook best practices on particular areas for teaching development, related to learning and teaching methods, with special emphasis on active education (providing entrepreneurial skills to students, problem-based solving, project-based solving, case scenarios), ICT-based learning (e-learning, m-learning, flip teaching), diversity in the classroom and multi-cultural approaches to teaching and learning and the digital (and generation) gap between faculty and students.

As per above, the project has identified five thematic areas pertaining to teaching excellence. These thematic areas have been matched to five training/learning modules, namely: (i) Diversity and Accessible Instruction, (ii) Active/Reflective Teaching and Learning: Learning from Art and Design, (iii) Mobile Learning, (iv) Lecturer as a Producer, and (v) Problem/Project-based Learning (PBL). These modules will provide the basis for the training that will be provided by the CTEs. CTE members will be trained by the project members to become the trainers in each institution that will deliver the aforementioned training modules. A digital repository will be created to collect all training materials developed during the project and will provide access for registered internal and external users.

Finally, the project aims at developing a digital portfolio for faculty members and a tool for their self-performance evaluation, as part of the quality assurance system.

3 THE FIVE TRAINING MODULES OF TEACHEX

As pointed out before, the training will be delivered using the five modules, namely (i) Diversity and Accessible Instruction, (ii) Active/Reflective Teaching and Learning: Learning from Art and Design, (iii) Mobile Learning, (iv) Lecturer as a Producer, and (v) Problem/Project-based Learning (PBL). We herein briefly explain each module and how it supports teaching excellence and discuss their interrelation and synergies.

i. Diversity and Accessible Instruction

Addressing diversity in higher education is part of a global social trend. The module's main goal is to provide tools for faculty members to advance their teaching-learning processes through discovering how to work with diversity in their classes. The module aims at making faculty members become aware of their responsibility and accountability to diverse students. Through this module, faculty members are expected to become familiar with the principles of Universal Design in Learning (UDL), and learn how to use different teaching methods and materials in order to ensure that all students are engaged in the learning process.

ii. Design Thinking for Meaningful Learning

One of the qualities of art and design teaching-learning processes is their active and reflective character. The module's main target is to provide tools for faculty members to reflect in action and on action, in order to map, conceptualize and share their tacit knowledge of teaching. Faculty members are expected to become aware of the practice of teaching as creative, active and meaningful, and develop their capacity for engaging in common ongoing and continuous professional development, gaining a sense of community of practice and belonging.

iii. Mobile Learning

Mobile Learning (M-Learning) refers to the use of mobile devices for teaching and learning providing and supporting active, authentic, constructive, cooperative, personalized, and intentional learning. The use of mobile learning calls for faculty to emphasize learning outcomes and support students' learning processes, while constructing knowledge through appropriate pedagogy and technology. The module will help faculty members gain skills for integrating
mobile devices into their teaching, based on M-Learning’s unique characteristics. The activities will focus on gathering and organizing data, creating digital products, reflecting, and constructing new knowledge.

iv. Lecturer as Producer
This module aims at training faculty members to become independent producers of simple explanatory videos, planning a presentation or script and using various self-production methods, including presentation-based videos, screen capture videos, and writing board videos.

v. Problem/Project-based Learning (PBL)
Active learning, centering on projects and dilemmas, involves learning by doing and collaboration of faculty members and/or students towards the preparation of a project, aimed at solving a real-life problem. The students engage in independent inquiry learning. Problem-based Learning (PBL) offers students opportunities for meaningful exploration. The PBL approach has therefore numerous advantages. First of all, it promotes the development of life-long learning skills. These include, among others, communication and interaction skills, research skills, as well as the ability to handle problems and work in groups. The fact that PBL challenges students to learn through active engagement in problems makes students retain the knowledge they gain for much longer. The process of experiential learning that students engage in, also allows them to reflect on their very own thinking process, and this makes them understand the problem better, since they are more dynamically involved in the problem-solving procedure. All of these aforementioned effects of PBL contribute towards raising the motivation of students and gaining more interest in their subject matter.

Although all the five the modules can be utilized independently of each other, ideally faculty members should be trained in all of them so that they can produce learning objects that integrate the modules’ underpinning pedagogical concepts and methods. For example the “Lecturer as Producer” module will enable faculty members produce their own recordings learning objects. However such objects should be for example utilizing problem-based learning, address diversity and accessibility and be available as a mobile application.

4 CONCLUSIONS
This paper has presented the TeachEx project, a capacity building project aiming at teaching excellence in Israeli higher education institutions. We have presented the five training modules that will be used to train faculty members in order to aim for teaching excellence. We are currently in the process of evaluating the feedback received during the training of the trainers sessions that recently took place in Israel, in order to enhance the modules but also further improve the process of training the faculty members in the use of the modules.

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REFERENCES


[8] U-Multirank www.u-multirank.eu