

Activities of an International Team – an Integral Part of the Modern University of the 21st Century in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The paper reflects the experience of an international team assembled in the Department of Education and Social Studies at the Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic. The team includes both European (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and non-European professionals (China, Indonesia). Teaching, project and publishing activities are realised within this team. The paper focuses on creating this international team and adapting individual members to the conditions of the university environment with regard to the specifics of Central Europe (education system, science system). The research team's activities are reflected as the results of a research survey in the given phases of the process with an emphasis on the sustainability of the international team and its activities.

Keywords

International team, intercultural education, academic staff, case study.

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1 Introduction

In terms of high employee turnover and technological developments in society with an emphasis on the market economy, Central European society is undergoing changes that are transforming it not only in the field of industry and services but also in the area of university education and personnel policy. The advent of Industry 4.0, the pandemic caused by Covid-19, and generally increasing diversity have pushed intercultural changes even further and streamlined the conditions for education, research, and changes in the university environment in preparing teaching staff. The third role of universities contributes to questions about the nature of the personnel policies of educational institutions focused on the adaptation, adjustment, and mobility of their staff. The mix of these changes affects the motivation or mobility of not only new applicants for positions in the field of university education, the offers to improve the quality of the educational environment and the creation of a stable environment for the personal growth of teaching staff and reflection of their activities.

The social perception of teaching staff in the university environment creates different ideas about relationships. The ambiguities portraying the current situation towards teaching staff and academics and their responsibilities in the field of education, teaching activities, and professional consultations, as well as their own research and other creative activities are perceived by society as myths and legends about a closed group of people. Reflection on the concepts of inter-culture and multi-culture, integration and implementation of international teams within a given region and university environment is also an essential part of this.

2 Defining the issue in the Czech context

The intensity of intercultural interactions in the Czech Republic is undoubtedly on the rise, both due to the increasing number of foreigners residing permanently or long-term in the Czech Republic and the growing number of Czechs who work or study abroad. According to the Czech Statistical Office, the number of permanently or long-term settled citizens in the country was 668,000 as of 30 June 2021, which is approximately 6.7 % of the country's population (in 1989, the figure was around 35,500; Cizinci, 2021a).

Foreigners make up a substantial part of the workforce in the Czech labour market (roughly 15 percent of employed persons in the Czech Republic, which is almost three times as many as ten years ago; in the same period, the number of Czech employees dropped by 63,000). In many sectors, foreigners accounted for a significant part of the workforce before the coronavirus epidemic (agriculture, forestry; accommodation, catering and hospitality; construction). Without their involvement, these industries would most likely not be able to function. Almost one-third of foreign employees in 2019 were Slovaks; nearly

one in four was Ukrainian. Seven percent of foreign workers came from Poland, another seven from Romania, six percent from Bulgaria, three percent from Russia, and two percent from Vietnam. While the number of employees from the EU is steadily increasing, foreigners from non-EU countries tend to respond to economic development – the numbers drop in a crisis and grow during a period of an economic upturn (Cizinci, 2021b; United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration, 2006).

In the environment of universities and other tertiary schools, the number of international students attending full-time programmes in the Czech Republic is also rising. In 2010, there were 7,000 such students, while in 2018, it was just under 45,000. Besides Slovakia, most of these students come from the countries of the former Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, and Asian countries (Cizinci, 2021a). During their studies in the Czech Republic, they may encounter various misunderstandings between each other and between students and Czech teachers, as well as in their communication with the administrative and technical-economic staff of the respective institution, in the use of study-related web portals and other information channels.

In the Czech context, people do not distinguish between the terms multiculturalism and interculturalism (or multicultural and intercultural education) in standard communication. But experts in these and related disciplines, including educational sciences, do not see them as synonymous. They attribute different meanings to both terms, and with them correspondingly different goals and the means to achieve them.

After 1989, the term “multikulturní výchova” started appearing in the Czech (or more accurately Czechoslovak) discourse, adapted from the English “multicultural education”. Multicultural education focuses mainly on facts, general knowledge, and characteristics linked to the traditions, history, and inner workings of a specific culture or group of people. These are often defined in terms of their difference compared to our own culture, making the “us” and “them” dichotomy more pronounced.

Since the academic year of 2008/2009, multicultural education is mandatory for all pupils in primary and lower secondary education (first to ninth year. It is one of the “cross-sectional” themes defined in the binding document regulating the content of education, the Framework Education Programme for Primary Education. The contents and objectives of cross-sectional themes may be implemented in the related subjects, typically through traditional teaching forms and methods, or quite often through project education; *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání*, 2021).

The concept of Intercultural Education is based on a dialogical process of exchanging knowledge, experience, and values between individuals from different cultures, i. e., their interaction. The starting point is the position *We – people*. The general aim of intercultural education is to both understand one’s cultural roots and to learn about – and eventually understand – other cultures, to respect the growing socio-cultural diversity

in society and to learn solidarity and tolerance (Tykvartová, 2007; Koťátková, 2009). If we achieve a level of reciprocity in which we can understand the other and accept them, there is no need to resort to defensive responses. Therefore, intercultural education needs different methods and forms to achieve its objectives, the most suitable of which seems to be interactive education and learning through experience that can influence individuals' personal and social development. An essential goal is to reduce or suppress the emergence and development of prejudices and stereotypes. These practices have not yet become commonplace in the Czech educational system, and the same applies to subjects that would provide sufficient opportunity for this kind of learning (e.g., drama education, ethical education, personal and social development; loosely based on Koťátková, 2009).

In summary, educational practice is somewhat lagging behind reality and the needs of "everyday life". The general level of open-mindedness in Czech society is extremely complicated and not yet sufficiently addressed by experts. It is, therefore, difficult to assess how appropriate the use of the term is for this specific situation. The term "multicultural education" is more widely used and appears in the curriculum; mainly because it has a long history, there is more literature written on the topic. We see the term "intercultural" as more complex and progressive and lately have seen an effort to spread it more widely in the expert community. Partly because of this ambiguity, we decided to describe for this text a team as "international" in order to reflect the diversity of the nationalities of its members regardless of other key factors, e.g., mother tongue, religion, etc., (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, Indonesia).

It is important and necessary to explore the intercultural interactions of cultures, i.e., how cultures mix and influence each other, how members of individual cultures respond to other cultures, how they adapt, etc. Cultural distance may be perceived as a negative aspect of intercultural interaction but also as an opportunity for intercultural learning and personal growth for each individual.

3 From today's situation to the future

In the context of globalisation and building a common international education and research area, the university community in the Czech Republic is based on the basic documents of the EU and state policy. They are subsequently adapted to the needs of the given institution and its focus, with an emphasis on cooperation in the field of research and, currently, also on cooperation in education (double joint programmes, etc.) and on increasing the internationalisation and reputation of the institution. The development of human potential in the university environment is transformed with quantitative changes, an increase in the number of international students in all study programmes and degrees, i.e., bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, a comprehensive educational offer and a qualitative contribution to their further employment in the Central European area

(e. g., processes of international accreditation in the AACSB system, MBA, MScT, MSA, etc.), interaction and dialogue between cultures, the principle of equal opportunities, labour market sustainability and social responsibility. This whole comprehensive process of change can be described as capacity building of university communities, without distinguishing their primary focus on research activities (research teams, groups, project teams, etc.) or education (hosting, long-term internships, programmes such as Fulbright, etc.). The university community is perceived as a long-term continuous development process involving all stakeholders. This includes ministries, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, experts, community members and others. Capacity building uses human, scientific, technological, organisational, institutional and resource potential in the cultural and international context of otherness. Capacity building of the university community aims at addressing issues related to education and methods of societal development, taking into account the potential limitations and needs of the people concerned in the context of individual, institutional and societal level, and at the level of professional training and further education. The whole process of building takes place on the given levels as follows:

- Individual level – creating conditions that enable individual participants to develop and extend their knowledge and skills. It also calls for creating conditions that enable individuals to engage in “a process of learning and adapting to social, cultural, and technological change”.
- Institutional level – assistance to institutions. This should not involve the creation of new institutions, but rather the modernisation of existing institutions and supporting these in shaping sound educational policies, organisational structures, and effective methods of managing and controlling educational, research and management processes.
- Societal level – encouraging the creation of a more interactive “public administration” that learns equally from its actions and from the feedback it receives from society as a whole. Capacity building must be used to develop public administrators responsible for regional policy and development. There is also a growing importance of “opening up” the university to the general public through activities such as the popularisation of science (science days, public lectures, etc.).

The quality of academic staff or an academic team at a specific institution is one of the key factors influencing the quality of its activities, which in the case of faculties of education is the quality of education of future teachers. In order to have or acquire such people, two areas need to be addressed very carefully:

- When selecting a specific employee (team member), take into account not only their professional competence, but also personal characteristics, in particular, interest in and passion for the given position, motivation, loyalty, and commitment, willingness to further educate themselves and work with others;

- When selecting future students in doctoral programmes – who, during or after their studies, often become academic staff themselves – not only pay attention to all the above, but also train them for the requirements of this profession. The Czech environment traditionally emphasises the scientific, research and publication activities of doctoral students, while their professional competences as university teachers are usually not developed in any targeted, systematic and long-term manner. Postgraduate students are thus left to find out which methods work best through imitation, intuition, trial and error, or personal connections to an experienced colleague. If the doctoral student comes from a different environment, i. e., a different educational system, their situation becomes even more difficult (the prestige of the position and the somewhat related position of the teacher and their authority; typical communication style used between students and teachers; forms of student evaluation; independence in conceptual work; approaches to problem-solving; character of relationships with colleagues and other, e. g., administrative matters).

Building and directing a team in terms of individual work with its members is a difficult task for any leader/manager (Peng & Chudý, 2021).

Academic employees are generally unenthusiastic about further education programmes (both one-time events and long-term courses) provided by their institution, linked to their project responsibilities, or externally. Their efforts are focused on fulfilling the requirements for career advancement and substantially less on improving their teaching activities, language competencies, or soft skills. A possible solution seems to be to create functional teams, ideally interdisciplinary within one faculty or university, in which people would naturally share their knowledge and experience and become more engaged in the fulfilment of shared tasks that are seen as meaningful and useful – i. e., where learning is a long-term process of actively shaping one's knowledge, critically thinking about tasks, of informal communication, mutual feedback, etc.; the result is a community of professionals in which even highly specialised experts feel the need to learn with and from others.

In education literature, much of the above is often expressed with the term social climate (or more broadly school climate), which can be measured by standardised or validated instruments.

A newly formed team should certainly be enthusiastic and motivated to perform its tasks, but many pitfalls must be anticipated. If we formulate them as questions that the team should be able to answer satisfactorily, its members will feel a more urgent and obvious “pressure” to focus on them. Here are the questions that we consider important and relevant to our subject:

- What is expected of the team? – what is the goal/purpose of its existence?

- Is this a stable team working together for a long time, or a one-time/single-purpose team?
- Does the team interact (or regularly collaborate) with other teams? Which ones? For what purpose?
- How are the team's working meetings conducted? In-person or online? Who convenes them? How often do meetings take place? Regularly or as needed?
- What is the climate at meetings? Who leads them? How do team members prepare for them?
- What are the communication rules during meetings? Is there any agreement on the language of communication?
- How are misunderstandings or conflicts on the team handled and by whom?
- Are roles on the team clearly defined and fixed? How was the team leader selected?
- Who assigns tasks to the team? Who is responsible for meeting deadlines? Who evaluates task completion?
- How is a completed task presented? How is praise/reward distributed?
- Who is responsible for a failure to complete a task or the low quality of completion (individual, team leader, entire team)?
- How is continuous mutual feedback provided?

4 Case study (life story of the team)

The international team established at the Faculty of Education of UP Olomouc integrates graduates of doctoral study programmes into the structures of the faculty and individual departments. It was created to explore the integration and adaptability of graduates to the working conditions of academics and researchers in the university environment. The main objective of the research investigation is to analyse the current state of the issue, to describe the basic factors of individual processes and to propose measures to improve and streamline the process of leading the junior employees within the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc.

The main objective was to carry out in-depth analyses of the state of affairs in the processes in question using sociological and psychological methods used in the field of human resources (from the perspective of human capital management), with a focus on the

adaptation, adjustment, mobility and stability of a junior academic employee in the environment of the above-mentioned faculty of education (Ševčíková, Plischke & Chudý, 2021). Methodologically, it is a mixed design of research, where quantitative design elements (used questionnaire methods – standardised, q-methodology and subsequent q-analysis – q-types, factor analysis) are combined with qualitative indicators (phenomenological analysis, narrative techniques, hermeneutic structure analysis). Data analysis will summarise the situation and help to propose measures to improve the situation. The initial analysis of the qualitative part of the research is the research conducted within the framework of the dissertation titled *The Identity Factor in the Professional Beliefs of Junior Academics* (Kropáč, 2020), which its author Jiří Kropáč, a graduate of the doctoral programme in pedagogy, defended in 2020 at the Faculty of Education of Palacký University in Olomouc.

The sub-objectives point out the possibilities and challenges of the future predictability of the development of specific activities and roles in the institution and the competencies of academic staff, their necessary (re)structuring of the dogmatic perception of changes in different areas of human interest, better profiling of academic staff for roles in the institution, and the elimination of the effects caused by psychological, personal and social changes in society or in the (re)organisation of the given institution internally.

4.1 Study design

We used semi-structured in-depth interviews with the co-researchers to determine their views of group dynamics and partnership during Ph.D. studies. The interview and data analysis process followed the deductive framework approach (Jůvová et al., 2015; Gale et al., 2016). The deductive framework approach collects and analyses data using a pre-defined model, theory or framework, and is not intended to produce generalisable results (Gale et al., 2013). Instead, the deductive framework approach enables researchers to systematically identify meaningful topics/patterns of a specific area of interest (Kropáč, 2020).

We asked sixteen broad questions aimed at determining the co-researchers' perspective on various aspects of group dynamics and team membership in the context of adaptability to the university environment, including questions concerning motivation, challenges, inclusion and interpersonal collaboration. In the interview, co-researchers also evaluated aspects of relationship dynamics and team interactions.

4.2 Co-researchers

The questionnaire part of the dissertation thesis involved seven informants who had started their doctoral studies or had completed their post-graduate studies and professional training programme and became academic staff in the last two years. The sample consisted of the recently appointed academic staff of the Faculty of Education at Palacký

University. The selection was partially deliberate due to the limitation of the length of professional training, normally four years, and the period after graduation of no more than two years. The nominal characteristics necessary for the selection of descriptive data were selected at random, i. e., without any preference for a specific age, study programme, gender, or graduation status.

Table 1: Nominal characteristics of informants

INFORMANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
COMPLETED PROFESSIONAL TRAINING	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES
AGE (AVERAGE)	>35	>35	>30	<30	<30	<30	>30
PREVIOUS WORK EXPERIENCE	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO
FORM OF STUDY	FULL-TIME	FULL-TIME	FULL-TIME	FULL-TIME	FULL-TIME	FULL-TIME	FULL-TIME
GENDER	FE-MALE	MALE	MALE	FE-MALE	FE-MALE	FE-MALE	FE-MALE

4.3 Conclusion of research and future steps

In the conditions of the Palacký University and the Faculty of Education, no similar model and methodology for supporting the professional learning of an academic employee (hereinafter referred to as an academic) in key processes such as situated learning or community learning has been developed, applied and empirically verified. This approach also requires innovation of the management system aimed at building the faculty as a learning organisation, engaging academics and motivating them in favour of the learning faculty, creating the conditions for the organisation to function. Possible barriers are visible in the limited content of institutional documents (accreditation files, etc.) or the specific focus of the faculty. However, by specifying the risks and barriers in question, we arrive at the basic elements and factors necessary to stimulate the levels of management, especially in the personal and organisational structure (active, reflective and critical (re)construction of the knowledge base of the academic, their interpersonal and organisational support from the faculty and the university). Given the above, with an emphasis on the fact that universities and faculties must currently cope with a variety of challenges related to reform and innovation requirements, especially by using their own resources, we consider the idea of supporting professional learning at the faculty to be highly topical.

We plan to address the issue of changing the concept of professional development of an academic, building faculty as learning communities, in three basic areas, especially on the theoretical level, on the level of empirical research, but above all on the level of application

directly to the educational environment of the faculty and in the framework of cooperation of faculties with each other in terms of defined goals:

- Preparation and discussion of strategic objectives for the development of academic staff in terms of promoting professional development – teaching excellence.
- Preparation and discussion of innovations for the development of academic staff in terms of research excellence.
- Preparation of analyses needed to make strategic decisions on issues of adaptation, adjustment, stability and mobility of early career academics.
- Collaboration in the analysis of the situation and creation of innovations of common courses and new DSP accreditations in coordination with the doctoral school of faculty.
- Promoting the quality of DSP students towards excellence in coordination with the doctoral school of the faculty.
- Development of the concept of sharing educational capacities of academic staff within the Bc. and Mgr. SP.
- Regular monitoring and assistance in evaluative aspects of the academic staff's work.
- Regular monitoring and analyses of teaching trends (online, etc.) and follow-up training and continuing education.
- Expanding the offer of “accredited” continuing education programmes based on our recommended methodology designed for the junior academic, discipline guarantor, study programme guarantor (Academic Educational Skills – Teaching Excellence Improvement, education module in cooperation between FE and FMD).
- Implementing education in modules: Academic Educational skills – Teaching Excellence Improvement
- Expanding the offer of “accredited” continuing education programmes based on our recommended methodology designed for the junior academic, discipline guarantor, guarantor of the study programme Academic Research Skills – Research Excellence Improvement in cooperation with doctoral school of faculty.
- Implementing the functional web platform AKADEMIK 21 as a space for the implementation of the proposed changes and as an “incubator” for future changes.
- Primarily to carry out lecturing, research and publishing activities in cooperation with departments and institutes at the FE of the PU and the PU.

- Cooperation in the creation and implementation of a system of practices and their methodological guidance – generally didactic basis.
- Linking the different levels of education in terms of the career growth of academic staff.

Table 2: Application model of academic staff training at the Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc

A-II Characteristics of module learning	
Name of study module	Academic Educational skills – Teaching Excellence Improvement
Type of study module	
Profile of study module	Module of educational skills in Ph.D. studies, lifelong learning
Form of study	Combination
Standard length of study	
Language	Czech, English
Academic title	no
Guarantor of study module	doc. Chudý
Focus on preparation for regulated profession	No
Focus on preparation of security experts in the Czech Republic	No
Approving authority	No
Fields of education and percentage share of individual fields in combined study programme	
It is a teaching education study module containing the following areas divided into some areas and optional lessons: Area 1) Quality Management of Study Programme (creation and implementation of the study program curriculum) Area 2) Quality Management of Study Subject (curriculum development of the study subject) Area 3) Effective Learning (realisation of study subject teaching) Area 4) Psychology of Learning and Instruction	
The aim of the study module	

The module of education of pedagogical (academic) staff will be structured into areas according to the needs of individual groups of academic staff (study programme guarantor, study subject guarantor, academic staff and DSP student in charge of teaching) and individual lessons, which will focus on the selected competence of the academic staff. Lessons can be chosen by academics or combined with each other according to their own individual needs.

Competences of the pedagogical (academic) staff member in charge of activities:

- a) the guarantor of the study programme;
- b) guarantor of the study subject;
- c) the teacher of the study subject;
- d) a doctoral student who, within the scope of their studies, implements educational activities within the scope of pedagogical activities.

Profile of the graduate

Competences:

Area 1) Quality Management of Study Programme – (creation and implementation of the study programme curriculum) – intended for guarantors of study programmes:

- Analysis of educational needs (analysis of valid legislation – Government Decree No. 274/2016, No. 275/2016, internal standards for accreditation of general medicine, and dentistry programmes).
- Rules for formulating a graduate profile by defining general and specific learning objectives.
- Determining the organisational structures of the creation and implementation of teaching – creating a curriculum, the effectiveness of organisational forms of teaching.
- Determination of verification of output competencies of teaching graduates (concept of state final exams).
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the study programme.

Area 2) Quality Management of Study Subject – (curriculum development of the study subject) – intended for guarantors of the study subject:

- Rules for formulating teaching goals with regard to general and specific goals of the study programme (graduate profile).
- Organisational forms of teaching – their effectiveness and the possibility of effective use.
- Determining the methods of verifying the output competencies of graduates.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the study subject.

Area 3) Realisation of study subject teaching – intended for all academic staff in charge of teaching activities

- The aim of the teaching unit.
- Presentation skills and use of information technology, effective learning, and virtual learning.
- Evaluation of teaching – the creation of didactic tests, oral examinations, evaluation of practical learning outcomes, and formative evaluation.
- Soft skills.
- Teaching group management.
- Self-reflective techniques in the work of an academic worker.
- Area 4) Psychology of Learning and Instruction – intended for all academic staff in charge of teaching activities:
- Learning process and its specifics and diagnostic possibilities.
- Motivation and its diagnosis.
- Developmental specifics of students and their diagnostics.
- Student with specific needs - diagnostics of needs.
- Self-management.

5 Conclusion

The intercultural environment in an organisation is created by the mutual interaction of employees from different cultural environments working with colleagues with a different mother tongue, religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds, and the corresponding behavioural patterns and communication styles. It is therefore necessary for the organisation's management to create working conditions that will be acceptable for all employees of the organisation. Understandably, not everyone will find it easy to identify with the system in place; there may be conflicts between the values of a particular person and the values set and required by the organisation. In such conflicts, it is important to communicate openly and seek compromises acceptable to both parties (cf. Pejková, 2012, p. 36).

In terms of the benefits of international teams, the first is the unique transfer of corporate culture and know-how from one country to another, another is undoubtedly the expansion of the horizons, knowledge, skills and experience of team members, their exposure to a more diverse and wider range of opinions, higher flexibility and usually also easier employment on the labour market. The participants significantly improve their soft skills and become more open-minded; they see the world in less black-and-white terms and obtain intercultural communication skills, which are crucial for multicultural teams.

Building a team of people from different cultures requires both money and time because it is a long-term process. The reasons include the need for language and cultural training, as it is necessary to work intensively on barriers arising from the personalities of team members and the resulting prejudices and negative attitudes that make communication difficult. It is necessary for members of a working group or team to respect differences (this applies to issues that are treated differently in various cultures – religion and family) and to accept the need to be open to other approaches.

Every institution that aims to build an international team must make the commitment to first carefully select its members and then work with them, systematically and in the long-term, support their education, develop the necessary soft skills (in particular intercultural communication) and organise tasks on the team in order to create a learning organisation. One possible model for implementing this education has been presented to the professional community for discussion in this text.

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