

# FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY OF FACULTY PERSPECTIVES IN A GLOBAL ERA

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*ABSTRACT:* This paper describes a component of a larger cross-national comparative study on faculty development for teaching international students. Here we describe the study and report preliminary findings that offer analyses of the informal and formal means by which Italian and US university instructors enhance the knowledge and skills they find necessary to teach international students successfully in this era of educational globalization. We also offer insights and challenges of conducting cross-national adult educational research and explain why such studies across international adult and higher education contexts are essential in understanding how the world of academe is learning to adapt to globalization and international student mobility.

*Keywords:* faculty professional development; teaching of international student populations; cross-national adult education research

## Brief Literature Review

In the current era of higher education, universities are focusing on internationalization of their campuses and educative experiences. For example, the European Union posited that internationalization “must move into the very centre of the university or college strategy and development” (2013, p. 50). Correspondingly, with the trend of international student mobility increasing worldwide, international students are expected to enroll in institutions of higher education at record rates (European Union, 2013; Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). These increases now require instructors of adult and higher education (AHE) to consider their work in ways that may transcend their own cultural influences (Coryell, 2013). This change is required not only because of the diversity of their learners but also because knowledge is transformed through global intersections of society, the workplace, politics, economics, and lifelong learning (Altbach & Knight, 2006). While we know that international graduate students come to universities with different ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political, and religious backgrounds, this diversity in the student population poses benefits and challenges for instruction as faculty seek to provide meaningful and effective teaching for internationally diverse student populations (Trice, 2003). As such, Green (2007) suggests teaching in a global era must focus on student learning in a manner that draws knowledge from diverse situations, cultures, and languages, while using integrative skills in problem-solving and decision making, and identifying the

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cultural influences that shape our lives.

We understand that professional development involves a professional and the development of that professional--with development defined as “the continual deepening of knowledge and skills” (Pate & Thompson, 2003, p. 126). We also know that faculty professional development can happen through a variety of formal and informal ways (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Nathan (1994) posited that faculty development can no longer be optional or superfluous for institutions of higher education. Of late, a shift in professional development for university faculty has moved away from a focus on teaching to centering on facilitating student learning through social constructivism (Lieberman, 2005). Faculty development is now concentrated on the “process of enculturation into a community of practice by means of social interaction among learners and between learners and teachers” (Tiberius, 2002, p. 30). While the literature on the experiences international students face on campus is increasing, unfortunately, scant research has been dedicated in the field of AHE to investigate how professional development can occur for instructors of international students (Stevens, Emil, & Yamashita, 2010; Tran, 2013; Trice, 2007). And, now with the increase of international student enrollments, extension and expansion of knowledge and skills for instructors must be an integral element of both the faculty development and international education movements.

Our cross-national team thought to address this gap in the research by employing a comparative study across international AHE contexts to investigate how faculty worldwide are learning to adapt to globalization, international student mobility, and appropriate instructional practices. The study was designed to examine experiences of faculty development regarding the motivations, preparations, challenges, and personal learning AHE instructors in the US and Europe have when teaching international students. We aimed to ascertain the ways in which university faculty individually and collaboratively go about their own intellectual, affective, and professional development in order to facilitate learning with diverse international student populations. Additionally, as an international comparative study, it was designed to provide context and insight to inform the future of faculty professional development that can transcend national borders. As such, we employed a broad definition of faculty development to include the (non)formal and informal means by which faculty members enhance their knowledge and skills through research, teaching, personal wellbeing and growth, and the management of one’s career (Mathis, 1982; Schuster, Wheeler, & Associates, 1990).

Our research team included professors and research assistants in adult education from the Università degli Studi di Padova (University of Padua, UoP), Italy, and Texas State University (TXST), USA. Monica (UoP) and Joellen (TXST) have conducted research and published together over the last two years, and an MOU between our universities was signed in spring of 2015. Our MOU establishes future collaborations in research and teaching. The earlier research collaborations were essential in setting up the processes and procedures of the current cross-national research project. Here, we offer an overview of the study with preliminary findings. We then conclude the paper with reflections on the complexities and benefits of conducting research in multiple international locations and collaborating across academic cultures, long distances, and time zones.

## Methodology

### Theoretical Framework

This research was framed by situated cognition, and more specifically, viewed through the lens of communities of practice. Situated cognition considers the context and influences inherent in the educational environment. Central to the theory are *communities of practice* which Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as “a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Within this framework, learning and professional development is viewed as a function of the context, actions, behaviors, and culture in which they occur. In the educational context, the community of practice consists of instructors, other experts, students, learning resources, and other influences that all bear on the learning and engagement of the participants. Development within this framework is not located exclusively within the individual; instead, it is situated communally and involves the differences of perspective among co-participants (Hanks, 1991). Learners, in this specific case, faculty, therefore, are considered members of a community of professional practice which represents attitudes, behaviors, and values to be attained.

### Research Design and Research Questions

University instructors participate within a variety of communities of practice that may (or may not) help them to prepare to teach students from another culture and country. Johnson and Golombek (2002, p. 1) assert that what instructors understand about teaching is “largely socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which [they] have come,” and therefore recommend conducting qualitative research eliciting professional and personal stories in understanding instructor professional development. Therefore, a qualitative interpretivist research methodology was employed in the current study. The lived experiences of university instructors who teach and mentor international graduate students provide meaningful insight into the complexity, benefits, challenges, and perspectives of what it means to teach in this global era. As such, this study explored faculty members’ lived experiences to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What personal and professional learning may faculty have gained as a result of teaching/mentoring international students? And,
- 2) How might these experiences inform future faculty development in the current era of university internationalization?

### Contexts and Participants

Purposeful sampling, a non-randomized procedure used to recruit informants who are reflective and observant members of a community of practice, are knowledgeable about the community culture, and can share their stories and insights, was utilized (Patton, 2002). Professional development trainings on teaching/learning strategies for the global era were offered across three universities in the US and Italy. These universities were data collection sites. Instructors who attended the workshops were contacted for possible participation in the study. The research team believed that faculty members who have

volunteered to attend professional development on university internationalization and instruction were likely to have a unique set of experiences and understandings regarding teaching and learning with both international perspectives and international students – making them ideal participants for the current study. Inclusion criteria included individuals who have taught/mentored international students at their respective universities, attended an above mentioned training seminar/workshop, were employed by their university with full-time teaching status, and had teaching experience of one year or more. Recruitment procedures began after TXST IRB approval with email messages to workshop participants to explain the study and request volunteers.

A total of eighteen professors, 11 from Italy and seven from the United States, participated in the study. Italian professors, seven females and four males, were all Italian and are fulltime instructors at one of two different universities in Italy. U.S. professors, six females and one male, are from the U.S. with the exception of one professor who is originally from Mexico; these professors currently teach at one university in Texas. The average university experience for the Italian professors was 14.2 years with the most university experience by one professor being 28 years, and the least experience being three years. Professors from the U.S. averaged 17.7 years of university experience with the most experience being 25 years and the least being 9 years. Overall, the average university experience of all participants was 15.5 years. All but one of the participants, a Spanish language professor from the U.S., reported currently teaching in English. The U.S. Spanish language professor predominantly teaches in Spanish as well as English whereas all of the Italian participants currently teach in their non-native language of English. One other U.S. professor currently teaches in English but has taught in Arabic while living and teaching outside the U.S. The remaining five U.S. professors currently teach in their native language of English and have not taught in a different country or in a different language. All of the participants' interaction with international students has been in English.

All Italian professors earned a Ph.D. with the exception of one professor who holds a DVM. Four U.S. professors earned a Ph.D., one has earned an MFA, one has earned two master's degrees, and one is currently in progress of obtaining her Ph.D. The departments that are represented in this study are: psychology, computer science, civil engineering, communication, business administration, law, business management, statistics, veterinary medicine, honors, geography, English, mathematics, modern languages and history.

### **Data Gathering**

Volunteers were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. During spring and summer 2015, participants were asked to recall experiences of when they had engaged in a) previous professional development (formal or informal) regarding learning about and preparing to teach international students, and b) actual experiences in teaching and mentoring international students in their programs. The semi-structured interview protocol was adapted from research on faculty development in international programs (Coryell, Alston, & Nguyen, 2012) and Trice's (2007) study on faculty perceptions of working with international students. Interview questions were developed to elicit

narratives about participant experiences and how these experiences may have influenced their current approaches/methods, understandings, beliefs, values, insights, and perspectives about teaching international graduate students. These interviews were conducted primarily in English (as the language of instruction in all of the professional development trainings was in English), while the Italian members of the research team provided clarification in Italian when necessary. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio/video recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed and kept confidential in a secure location in digital storage. We first listened to each of the interviews repeatedly to get an overall sense of the data. We created an analysis table template that provided a space to note responses to specific interview questions per interviewee. In this table we recorded their individual data as well as analysis observations. Next, we identified sensitizing concepts, “important features of social interaction” (Bowen, 2006, p. 3) and analyzed them for important features of the participants’ experiences. Then, constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed to identify common codes and ultimately themes across the data set.

### **Preliminary Comparative Findings**

Findings indicate that international students are enrolling in many disciplines and courses across the academy in both the U.S. and in Italy. Participating professors in this study do not teach or work in an international studies department, study abroad, or any other specific entity of the university that may traditionally facilitate learning for international students. Across the universities, professors were teaching international students in their respective fields of study where both international and non-international students attended the same classes together.

All but one participant speak or have some knowledge of more than one language, while 10 of the 18 reported knowing more than two languages. The languages that participants reported knowing were Italian, English, Spanish, German, French, Indonesian, Russian, Portuguese, Arabic, and Latin. Additionally, all of the professors in this study reported that they sought out personal and professional experiences with foreign travel suggesting they are interested in cultural and language learning. They all also specified their continued interest in teaching international students.

### **“What I Did, I Did Myself – Because I Wanted to Know”: Professional Faculty Development for Teaching International Students**

Across the data set, the participant professors overwhelmingly indicated a personal sense of responsibility to improve their teaching with international students. While some of the ways in which they augmented their knowledge and skills included non-formal learning (mostly in workshops and seminars), the majority of the methods of learning were informal and completed on their own time and often through personal finances. We also found that both the Italian and American participants genuinely desired to be effective teachers – for both international and domestic students. However, by examining the

content areas in which these professors explored in their professional development endeavors, we discovered that the focus was somewhat different in Italy than it was in the U.S. The most common professional development that our Italian participants identified having completed was for English language acquisition. In comparison, the most common professional development topic for U.S. professors was on internationalizing their teaching and curricula. Here we provided a thematic overview of the nonformal and informal professional development undertaken by our respondents by each country. In Italian universities, many of the Italian professors either chose or were directed by their department administrators to teach courses in English. This is an important skill to possess in the Italian academy as a trend in Italian universities is to offer degree programs fully in English in order to attract international student populations and offer Italian students an opportunity to earn their degrees in a global *lingua franca*. All of the Italian participants were currently teaching courses in English, and they assumed personal responsibility and accountability to become proficient in the language of instruction in order to teach effectively. Therefore, in regards to professional development, our Italian participants sought additional formal English language training at their home university, at language institutes in England, and/or in private English tutoring on a weekly basis. For example, one indicated she attended a “seminar for teachers at universities...teaching us about English medium instruction,” which sometimes included “some interactive [teaching strategies].” Others enrolled in summer intensive English language institutes. One participant explained,

Last year, [while] planning to start this international adventure in my university, I went to Oxford for 15 days, yes 2 weeks, and I started to study very hard English. And then after that, I’m taking private lessons of English here in Padova and still now I’m doing that. I’m leaving to Oxford next month, this summer, and then I want to continue to improve my English.

Another clarified her desire “to improve my fluency, my vocabulary... my formal [English teaching abilities].” A strong focus on professional development for these instructors is learning how to communicate in English and facilitate engagement in the learning process in a language which is not their mother tongue.

Informal learning, however, also comprised much of the professional development in which our Italian respondents engaged when preparing to teach international students. These professors described searching for and studying internet resources, learning from international colleagues, and reflecting on their own experiences abroad. Some sought online syllabi from foreign universities to compare and augment content with their own curriculum, while others found “lectures of academic English,” or attended to “how others teach...to see some [lectures on] YouTube video or TedTalk video,” or watched videos from the World Bank to obtain ideas and tools they felt were useful in their teaching. In addition to utilizing other external instructors’ and institutions’ resources, Italian professors also identified reflecting on previous study and international study abroad experiences as particularly useful in developing understandings and skills to be used in the internationally diverse classroom. Some suggested that they considered previous professors’ teaching practices. One offered, “I think about the best professors that I had, and I tried to recall the way in which they stimulated my interest, or they run a class, so I try to refer to that.” Many also had engaged in exchange programs in which,

themselves, were international students. These experiences helped them to consider the academic and emotional interactions they had had while abroad, and their subsequent reflections upon these times shaped their approaches to international students in their classes. They also suggested that through conversations, advising, and mentoring international students, they continue to learn about cultural diversity and the needs of foreign learners. Correspondingly, some posited through observing and learning from international colleagues, "talking to them and discussing with them openly" about their teaching styles, and "compar[ing] different teaching styles," they had at times learned to "steal" different teaching methods and communication techniques. Respondents also acknowledged, however, that "each of us has a specific personality, so you have to adapt the suggestions on your personality, on your topic."

In comparison, participants from the U.S. teach predominantly in English, their own mother tongue, with the exception of one professor who teaches in her heritage language of Spanish. Therefore, the focus of professional development was appreciably different for U.S. professors. The American instructors in this study primarily reported attending nonformal professional development workshops on globalization and internationalization of curricula, diversity training, or learning communities for globalization. All of the U.S. participants in this study had completed a workshop on globalization. Most recalled the workshop as helpful in "infusing the global" into one or more courses. Another suggested the workshop was "exposure to things many of which were simply asking the right questions about the material you were dealing with so that it was open to different perspectives that come from abroad." Along with the workshop, participants have also engaged in additional seminars on "cultural diversity" and training to teach English as a second language.

However, informal professional development was cited much more extensively than (non)formal training experiences for this group of participants. Similarly to the Italian respondents. American participants posited their previous foreign travel, teaching abroad ("in the "Fulbright Hays program") and in other foreign teaching experiences, living abroad, and interacting with and learning from international colleagues have been very important learning opportunities for these professors. Many mentioned that interacting with and teaching international students in the past few years has also been very instructive. One provided an example of how much she has learned through discussions with foreign students; she explained, "Conversations that I've had with a student who is from Guanajuato...just about what it's like for her family now. Just always trying to keep learning and asking questions. Hear[ing] it, listening to stories people have is helping." Others suggested that "you have to do a lot of reading" in order to learn more about international perspectives and diverse cultures. While the U.S. participants did not report using the internet as often as the Italian participants, instead, many of the American instructors sought books on various cultural viewpoints with regard to their subject matter in the hopes of learning more about "the history and politics" of certain countries from which international students hail, and of which the course content covered. Finally, corresponding with many of the Italian participants, some instructors in the U.S. indicated "being an international student, myself, was critically informative." Reflection on their own experiences studying abroad provided insight helpful in relating with and teaching international students in their classes.

Professors from Italy are more responsible for ensuring that they teach effectively in English, whereas U.S. professors concentrated more on international curriculum development and understanding different cultural perspectives. The motivations for professional development for Italian professors were to enhance teaching methods primarily through developing fluency in English. For U.S. professors, instructional development was to create conscious awareness around globalization and ultimately internationalization of their courses.

### **Perspectives on Future Professional Faculty Development Needs**

Data analysis suggested that the need for professional development specifically geared toward teaching in internationally diverse educational settings was universal across the participant sets. Professors in this study widely believed that university instructors would need to “invest in their own international development.” Respondents advanced that further training in “diversity,” “how to mediate cultural differences...and how to interact,” and infusion of international perspectives “specific to the subject that you teach” are fundamental to future faculty development needs. Moreover, the Italian professors continued to stress the importance of developing “a set of tools, to have a set of best practices” for teaching internationally diverse students that would include developing culturally sensitive “soft skills” and learning “how to teach in a foreign language.” Others were interested in pushing for better textbooks and learning resources that will help professors and universities to educate in this era of globalization. One Italian suggested,

I think that the books are not ready [for] this internationalization. I’m trying to find out books that allow me to show videos, movies, interactive exercises...but they are not free [and I cannot easily] see and check and decide if these books are suitable for my course.

Primarily, the analysis across the data suggested the need for development in cross-cultural communication, teaching methodologies, and language skills. An Italian professor proposed,

I think it’s fundamental [to learn] how to interact with [different cultures]. You know, Anglo Saxon protestant type of people for us in southern Europe – it’s an issue you know that most people don’t realize. It’s an issue. But I think there is much to be learned, and we end up dealing with these different cultures very often. And you know, likewise, meeting with people from the Far East, you know Southeast Asia, Japan. I think it would be very important for teachers that teach to these peoples to learn something about their culture.

Finally, an American participant posited, “We may have situations where we may be teaching nothing but international students through the internet and that’s going to, I think, open up a different dynamic, that...we’re not ready to engage.”

It is clear that this study’s participants acknowledge the complexities of teaching international student populations and content, and as such call for professional development opportunities that are meaningful in addressing these contexts and issues.



## Discussion and Implications

Our participant pool was comprised of professors who have experience not only with foreign travel but who also speak more than one language and seek out opportunities to learn more about diverse cultures and peoples on their own. Whether using online videos of lectures from other countries on specific topics delivered in English, discussions with international colleagues about active teaching methods, reflecting and learning through experiences abroad or in-class with international learners, or personal research on materials or aids that help with their own instructional development, these professors were actively engaged in their own professional instructional development. Much of the development practices required instructors to invest their own time and money to gain new knowledge, skills, and perspectives. They were grateful for opportunities offered on their own campuses, and they took advantage of these offerings frequently.

The analysis of their perspectives offer university administration and professional development specialists important insights. Implications for future faculty development in the current era of university internationalization include thinking broadly as well as specifically about the needs of current instructors regarding teaching skills and styles, language of instruction development, cultural sensitivity in instructional interactions, and internationalization of curricula. Future learning activities for faculty should be designed with nonformal and informal opportunities that connect with faculty needs as well as the cultural and ethnic make-up of the current and future international student population at each university, and the overall internationalization goals the institution may have for the near term and in future.

Faculty development concentrating on language acquisition should incorporate offering language training at different levels and with a focus on specific disciplinary vocabulary and skills education. As well, offering best practices for teaching courses that include both domestic and international students that aid instructors in fostering collaboration and interaction across the groups was recognized across the data set, as was instructional development that emphasizes active and engaged learning techniques. Our respondents also highlighted the importance of assisting professors in identifying online resources such as lectures offered around the world on specific content, syllabi, international curricula, textbooks and educational resources infused with global perspectives, books offering insights into different cultures' values, practices, politics, and history, and diversity and intercultural communications training opportunities. Finally, findings also stressed that professors interact with other colleagues and international students at their institutions to learn about different cultural practices, instructional methods, cross-national contexts, etc. As such, faculty development programs could offer opportunities for collaborative dialogues for domestic and international instructors, as well as between international students and faculty, to learn from each other about various topics of interest regarding instructional improvement through internationalization.

Likewise, it is essential to recognize that each institution encompasses and is influenced by unique contextual and human factors. Through the lens of situated cognition and communities of practice, we can see that each university's strengths and challenges lie in

the make-up of instructor experience and expertise, learning resources, diversity of international students' cultural and academic backgrounds, offerings of disciplines and programs, values, behaviors, practices, and the missions and goals of the institution regarding internationalization. It is clear that the professors in this study are personally and professionally committed to teaching and interacting successfully with international students. However, it is important to acknowledge that instructors with little or no international foreign travel experience, foreign language education, or interest in cross-cultural teaching and learning may have different motivations and require distinct professional development opportunities. Hence, faculty development specialists should design workshops/seminars on language acquisition, active learning methodologies, and cross-cultural communications. These FPD offerings can be made even more focused when they concentrate on specific international student populations attending classes. As well, gathering faculty input on their instructional needs specific to their disciplines and contexts are also imperative to meet instructors where they are in their own professional development trajectories.

### **Challenges and Benefits of Cross-National Educational Research Endeavors**

Here we offer our reflections on the complexities and benefits of conducting AHE research in multiple international locations and collaborating across academic cultures, long distances, and time zones. We immediately needed to identify appropriate cloud-based data storage, file sharing, and virtual collaboration practices that were readily available in both locales, and we were required to be flexible regarding the scheduling of meetings at varying hours to accommodate time changes and academic calendars and vacation schedules. We also needed to negotiate across epistemological differences and found that research methodology expectations contrasted between the countries. These issues offered opportunities to expand our understandings of academia and educational research in an international context.

Through our conversations, we also realized the benefits of such research collaborations in that we acquired new perspectives on academic and research cultures by learning about doctoral student and research practices in adult education programs, differing expectations/opportunities for matriculated graduate students, and nuances in course programming. This research endeavor offered us an informal comparative study of adult education research philosophies across nations and provides us potential opportunities to publish in multiple languages. Finally, the research helped us to gain insights into the different ways instructors across disciplines view international students and teaching. As such, we believe that cross-national research collaborations in international AHE investigations will not only result in important perspectives on global adult teaching and learning but will also offer essential new directions for faculty professional development focused on cross-cultural educational interactions, teaching and learning, research, and educational policy.

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