INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION HUBS: PERSPECTIVES AND REFLECTIONS ON A NOVEL APPROACH TO UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS, COLLABORATIONS, AND CROSS-CULTURAL ADULT LEARNING AND TEACHING

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ABSTRACT: In this presentation and conference proceedings paper, we discuss a pilot program for international education and examine the development and preliminary assessment of an international education hub between Texas State University (TXST), USA and the Università degli Studi di Padova (UNIPD), Italy. Launched in 2024, the TXST-UNIPD hub (henceforth called the hub) aimed to foster cross-institutional collaboration, student and faculty exchanges, and global learning. A survey conducted among the 32 participating students revealed themes of increased confidence, adaptability, and cultural awareness, while faculty feedback underscored the value of team-teaching and deeper student integration. A logic model guided reflection on the program's benefits, including enhanced cross-cultural communication and academic content application. Challenges included limited student interaction with locals and the need for structured collaboration. Moving forward, the hub will focus on enhancing cross-cultural engagement and refining curricular strategies to support both undergraduate and graduate education, ensuring sustainable and meaningful international learning experiences.

Keywords: international education hubs, higher education partnerships, cross-cultural adult learning and teaching

In 2019, Bates-Gallup conducted a national study titled, *Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work: The Role of Higher Education*. In this report, A. Clayton Spencer, President of Bates College, asserted, "For higher education, the accelerating rate of change means that it is no longer sufficient or even plausible to prepare our students for lives based on a notion of 'career' as a stable and well-defined pathway through working life" (p. 1). The report also suggested that most graduates were likely to hold more than 11 distinct jobs before the age of 50.3 years, and that growing global interdependence will require graduates to be "equipped to navigate a complex and highly competitive labor market and world…with agency and adaptability" needed to thrive (p. 2). As such, international cross-cultural learning and development is an important component of finding purposeful work and developing adaptability and agency in students' lives and careers. Learning and development opportunities for meaningful work in this era of change will need to be collaborative across institutions of higher education as well as communities, organizations, businesses, and governments.

International education hubs are an approach to inter-institutional partnerships and cross-cultural learning and teaching experiences in higher education. A hub is an access point to a world of potentially significant impact that can bring two or more universities' faculty, students, and local communities together in dialogue and joint activities to collaborate, to learn, to construct, and to discover. These hubs are opportunities to build a network of significant, enduring partnerships with peer institutions in strategic locations around the world that provide support for student interactions and exchanges, faculty collaborations, and potentially alumni integration (for an extensive discussion on international education hubs, see Knight, 2014). Further, they can build linkages to policymakers, non-governmental organizations, private sector actors, and local communities. In addition, international education hubs may support more faculty and students to go abroad to geographically diverse locales by reducing barriers to

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accessing quality programs and learning and research opportunities with local partners and communities (Global Cornell, n.d.).

We, the authors, first met at the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education in 2010 and immediately learned we had similar research and teaching interests. That began almost 15 years of research and teaching collaborations including additional faculty and students at our universities. Texas State University (TXST) in the United States and the Università degli Studi di Padova (UNIPD) in Italy have enjoyed partnership experiences beginning with a memorandum of understanding in 2014 and resulting in extensive collaborative adult and higher education research and student and faculty mobility between the two institutions. Given the long-running, highly successful partnership in scholarship and teaching, and our own current roles in higher education leadership, we believed an international education hub could be a natural next step.

In early fall 2023, TXST and UNIPD engaged in planning meetings to discuss an international education hub program. We were interested in identifying customized, valuable, and reliable support for study abroad courses and exchange programs between our universities and to engage in enhanced international, interdisciplinary, and cultural exchange. Using a logic model structure (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004) to identify the resources and inputs, potential pre- and on-going hub activities, likely outputs, aspirational outcomes, and envisioned impact, we planned a 3-week timeframe in summer 2024 for TXST faculty and students to travel to Padova to engage in coursework and to live and learn in the community and with UNIPD students and faculty.

Planning for a Cross-University International Education Hub

In summer 2023, TXST had recently hired a new Vice President for International Affairs and Online Learning. One of his goals was to develop international education hubs for more TXST students and faculty to engage in affordable international, cross-cultural learning than the university had in previous decades. Given the long-standing partnership already between the two universities, TXST invited UNIPD to discuss the possibility of developing an international education hub. Joellen, who would be directing the possible hub, began by constructing a logic model to identify and outline what each university had brought to the partnership in the previous 10 years, as well as potential hub activities, benefits, and impacts that both universities might enjoy if we added an international education hub to our partnership. In that initial meeting, Monica invited UNIPD leadership associated with internationalization and teaching, and Joellen invited TXST's leadership in international affairs to discuss the definition of international education hubs and a few examples of hubs from other university partnerships. Joellen then introduced the five areas of the logic model illustrated in Figure 1.

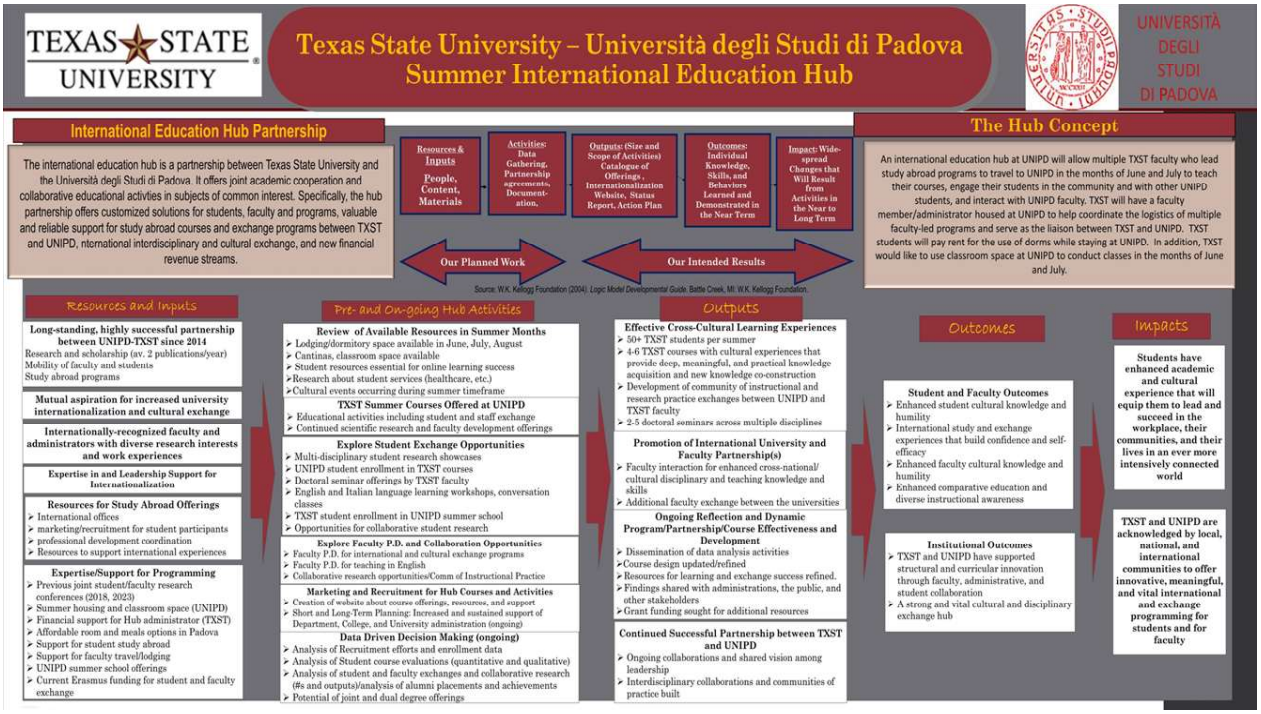
The conversation then moved to TXST's preliminary thoughts about a timeline to launch an inaugural hub the following summer. Finally, Joellen initiated discussions about what each university might hope/expect from these activities and future partnership approaches. TXST was interested in offering its students opportunities to study internationally at an affordable cost. UNIPD leadership voiced a strong interest in planning for student interaction between their students and those from TXST where possible.

Logistics and Partnership Negotiations

While Monica and Joellen had known each other for many years, the planning meetings included administrators and staff who were learning cautiously about each other, and

Figure 1

TXST-UNIPD Hub Logic Model



importantly, the processes and procedures that belied the organizational cultures present at both institutions. It was clear that we were building a team that spanned not only great distance but also cultural differences, semester and academic course offering variances, communication and language barriers, turnaround time and interaction formality expectations, and international office experience and expertise.

Initially, identifying lodging for TXST students and faculty; budgeting; and official approvals from varying levels of leadership, offices, and oversight. TXST opened a proposal process for faculty to submit a course they would be interested in offering in Padova, as well as why they felt the course would work in Italy, how many students they felt they could recruit, and the ways they would approach recruitment. Three faculty and courses from liberal arts and engineering were chosen. In order to schedule classroom space and connect with similar programs and faculty, UNIPD provided names and contact information for faculty in social-psychology, engineering, and British literature. A budget and student fees were established with the expectation that each course would enroll 10 students, for a minimum of 30 in total, creating the initial hub.

Preparations for Hub Teaching Activities

In late fall 2023 and early spring 2024, TXST faculty and its international office worked to promote the hub and its courses with a deadline in February for students to apply. The three TXST faculty members finalized their syllabi requiring class meetings three to four times/week and designing instruction that included the local context when viable. To keep the hub experience as affordable as possible, TXST's international office chose to omit required

excursions that would increase student costs. Given the rich learning experiences these kinds of activities can add to course goals, the decision to omit learning excursions concerned faculty and Joellen. Some faculty then offered optional excursion opportunities (e.g., a tour of the Ducati factory in Bologna for engineering students) or paid out of the instructor's own travel funds to offer required content-focused experiences in nearby cities.

TXST instructors also communicated with their UNIPD faculty counterparts to learn about classroom spaces, available daily timeframes for classes, and ways to involve UNIPD students. TXST agreed that up to five UNIPD students would be welcome to audit each of the courses without fees. Additionally, TXST faculty were encouraged to brainstorm how they might collaborate with UNIPD faculty for potential guest lectures and invitations for UNIPD students to join in specific class activities or optional excursions. While the initial goal was to house TXST students in UNIPD student lodging, differences in semester timelines between the two institutions and limited student housing options precluded that goal. Identifying classroom space, student interaction opportunities, and faculty collaborations also complicated the variations in semester course and examination timelines. Finally, only three UNIPD students engaged with the courses offered (engineering and social-psychology).

In advance of the hub activities in Italy, Joellen and representatives from TXST's Education Abroad office provided a student orientation to outline several matters including: (1) required documentation, (2) processes, (3) security, (4) tuition/fees, (5) behavior and engagement expectations, (6) lodging, (7) UNIPD history and layout in the city of Padova, (8) an overview of Italian culture and language basics, (9) roommates, and (10) deadlines. A final activity during the orientation session was a team-building exercise to help students across the three courses meet and work together on a shared activity. The individual classes also met separately to get to know each other and the expectations for participation. The two institutions negotiated contracts and payment processes, secured lodging, scheduled airport transportation, and determined TXST student access to UNIPD eating facilities (canteens) and libraries.

Designing for Instruction in Adult Study Abroad

Designing for instruction in adult study abroad should incorporate opportunities for students to develop cross-cultural and co-participant relationships that respect the cultural and geographical experiences of learning in an international context (Coryell, 2017; Coryell et al., 2014). A week before everyone traveled to Italy, the courses officially started in online modules to front-load content, outline learning products and grading parameters, and engage in personal reflection activities about their own culture and the cultural influences on the academic content. In June 2024, the hub courses began with 32 students, 3 faculty members and Joellen, and a few faculty family members. Students were sophomores, juniors, or seniors with ages ranging from 19 to 28. All of the students and two of the faculty resided in a pensione-type hotel that offered breakfast and two shared kitchens for meal preparations. The first two days in-country began with tours of UNIPD's historic buildings and academic departments and walks around the city to identify important goods and services. Students attended classes in the departments of the three content areas where learners could mingle with UNIPD students in public spaces and nearby cafés and university canteens. Class meetings were scheduled Monday-Thursday, and we encouraged students and faculty to explore Padova, nearby Venice, and other locations in Italy and southern Europe on the weekends, if their personal funds allowed. After the initial meetings between the two institutions, the 2024 Summer hub timeline of activities was as follows:

October 2023:	Presentation about hub opportunity to TXST faculty
November 2023:	Course proposals were due
November 2023:	Announcement of TXST faculty and courses for 2024 hub
December 2023:	Program details finalized (housing, dates, cost, marketing materials, etc.)
January 2024:	Student applications opened
February 2024:	Joellen visited UNIPD for ongoing information sharing; visits to lodging, academic departments, and classrooms; meeting with leadership and international office
February 2024:	Students accepted to programs after faculty application review
March 2024:	Students registered for hub classes
April 2024:	Pre-departure student orientation
May 2024:	TXST Education abroad/special projects visited UNIPD to prepare for TXST President visit and MOU addendum signing
June 2024:	Students arrived in Padova
June 8-June 30:	Courses held 3-4 days/week
June 30, 2024:	Students and faculty departed from Padova
July 8, 2024:	UNIPD Rettrice and TXST President sign MOU addendum for summer hub activities

Preliminary Assessment of the hub's Development and Next Steps

To gather data for initial evaluation and encourage student reflection on their learning and development in the hub courses and experiences, Joellen conducted an electronic survey in each of the classes during the final week in Italy. Surveys were anonymous, and all thirty-two students responded. Preliminary thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2009) of responses to, "In what ways may you have changed since arriving in this country?" themes of increased confidence, independence, patience, and a need to build and nurture new and existing connections. Example quotes include:

"I've learned how to be alone with myself and not be so scared of it."

- "I have learned to not be afraid of trying new things or doing thing alone, though I still get anxious I now ***feel more confident*** in myself."
- "Culturally, being more aware of the world and that there is more world to see and understand."
- "I think I have learned how to be ***more independent.***"
- "Living in Italy has brought about significant positive changes in me, particularly in ***how I perceive and practice patience***. The Italian way of life, with its emphasis on enjoying the moment and valuing human connections, has taught me to slow down and appreciate the present."
- "It has shown me the value of taking the time to ***build and nurture connections***."

Analysis of responses to "What new perspectives have you gained in your field of study while participating in the hub course?" resulted in themes including: (1) enhanced abilities to adapt, (2) excitement of seeing the academic content come to life, (3) understanding of the importance of interactions with professionals/students, and (4) that there is not only one truth when understanding and learning about a content area. Example quotes include:

"It ***brings the material to life***. It was ***also incredibly impactful to have Italian students join the class*** as well as have a ***guest lecture from our UNIPD counterpart***, who spoke about his area of expertise."

- "I've been able to ***see some examples of where my field of study can lead me in career choices.*** So, it's been eye opening to see what all can be done if I dedicate the time to it."
- ***"I got to see the Ducati factory which further reinforced that I want to go into motorsports."***
- "This class ***helped me understand the deeper concepts of social interaction***."
- "I've learned that ***we all have different perspectives and experiences in life, but there's not one 'correct' truth on a specific experience.*** We all see things and process them differently and that's a beautiful thing."
- "I've learned that there are so, so, so many different areas of psychology to study as well."

Learners were also asked to reflect on what they may have learned about themselves while abroad. Themes included increased resiliency and adaptability/self-efficacy. The following quotes offer a few examples:

- "***I'm capable of doing anything I set my mind to***. It was a difficult road getting here but now that's it coming to an end ***I feel so accomplished***."
- "I've learned that ***I'm a lot more resilient than I had previously thought***."
- "I have ***learned that I can adapt to certain situations***, they may be good or bad."

Learners also highlighted that cultural interaction is important in developing open-mindedness, valuing tradition, and a willingness to learn from others. Example quotes include:

"The ***importance of interacting with students from other cultural backgrounds***, and how participating in different learning approaches is an enriching experience and can help me use more study techniques."

- ***"One of the most profound lessons I've learned through cultural exchange is the importance of open-mindedness and empathy***. Immersing myself in Italian culture, with its rich history, traditions, and customs, has required me to step outside my comfort zone and approach new experiences with curiosity and respect. This process has ***highlighted my inherent willingness to learn from others and to value their unique viewpoints***. Whether it's understanding the significance of local festivals, appreciating regional cuisines, or participating in traditional practices, I've realized that genuine cultural exchange goes beyond mere observation—it involves active engagement and mutual respect."
- "I've also ***discovered a deeper sense of self-awareness***. Engaging with the Italian community has made me more conscious of my own cultural biases and assumptions."

Finally, students responded to, "Reflecting on your experiences with the hub and class, what would you like us to know for future iterations of this hub?" Learners expressed a desire to socialize and integrate more with other hub classes, local students, and professors. They also wished to learn more of the local language and culture to be respectful and polite in their

interactions. They appreciated the class structure and content, but wanted more interactive and applied activities, as well as more class excursions. They wished for a balance between coursework and cultural experiences. They also recommended having an earlier and stricter selection process, more meetings and icebreakers before departure, and more information on transportation and eating options. Example quotes included:

- "Get the classes ***more involved with each other*** before departure."
- "Classes should be [include more] ***language and culture***."
- "We should ***be more involved with local students/professors***."
- "…. ***more interaction with the university***."
- *"**I found the application process [to gain access to canteens] from the Italian university very complicated…few students participated**."*
- *"**Stricter age or class restriction**."*
- "I would've really enjoyed ***excursions and trips as a class***."
- "…***more class excursions***."
- "I would like the hub to know that they did a ***wonderful job with this trip and planned it out wonderfully***!"
- *"**It would be a shame if other students in the future do not get to experience this hub**."*

Along with the student survey, we asked participating TXST and UNIPD faculty members to provide their reflective insights. When asked if they would be interested in team-teaching a course in a way that would include a set of UNIPD students as well as TXST students, the responses were overall positive. Two of the three TXST faculty were very interested in this approach for the following year. UNIPD faculty indicated: "It would be very useful;" and "to collaborate again to this course or similar courses and to conceive and develop a 'team-teach' course with both UNIPD and TXST students" would be valuable to both universities. We also requested input on how to enhance the hub for future iterations. Both sets of faculty emphasized their desire for more structured involvement of UNIPD students, and the TXST faculty highlighted the possibility of including graduate students in stacked courses.

Benefits and Challenges

We turned to the logic model to reflect and assess the current status of the imagined outputs and outcomes of the initial hub. Reflection on the program, process, and partnership development continues. Eventually we will work to ensure that the hub will offer more students from both universities opportunities to interact. We will also support faculty teams to develop courses that enhance global perspectives and skills within academic content, skills for cross-cultural sensitivity and collaboration, and knowledge necessary for meaningful workplace capabilities. We are pleased with the preliminary survey evaluations which indicated learning outcomes related to overarching goals of international education and study abroad. These goals include: (1) increased cross-cultural communications, (2) increased subject matter knowledge, (3) enhanced appreciation for the foreign culture (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), (4) increased self-confidence, appreciation for diversity, and career and learning development (European Commission, 20150; Hartford, 2010), and (5) enhanced self and global perspectives, agency, and cross-cultural effectiveness (Ogden, 2010).

However, we are aware of some missed opportunities. While TXST students engaged in a learning environment that did not change from location to location like many short-term study

programs, much of the interaction TXST students had with locals and UNIPD students came from one or two UNIPD students who volunteered to join in classes. TXST students also had the opportunity to interact with local peers in social situations in the evenings, on weekends, and while students embarked on personal travel. Reflection and anecdotal data emphasize that hub courses will be much more successful with extensive collaboration and interaction embedded into the hub's activities.

Also linked with the logic model, we note that faculty partnerships across disciplines are being developed for future hubs. We believe cultural knowledge, cultural humility, and enhanced comparative education and diverse instructional awareness will result. Importantly, extensive communication, mutual understanding of cultural and organizational differences, and faculty and student interactions are – and continue to be – complex and areas for improvement. Ultimately, we feel there is much potential for supported structural and curricular innovation and vital cultural and disciplinary exchange in future hub activities.

Next Steps

A significant push for much more interaction between TXST and UNIPD students is at the forefront of what is next for our partnership and the hub. We believe interaction will require flexibility, openness, intellectual curiosity, and more nuanced cultural understandings about each university's processes, timelines, and communication preferences and methods. Acknowledging 2024 was a pilot year and that the partnership and hub activities were designed to continue each summer, the TXST-UNIPD hub is on its way to accomplishing its goals thanks to careful reflection, ongoing planning and cross-culturally sensitive communications, flexibility, and increased attention to both undergraduate and graduate student engagement and research collaborations.

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