

THE ROLE OF eTWINNING IN INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING

EL PAPEL DE eTWINNING EN LA FORMACIÓN INICIAL DOCENTE

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The primary goal of European teacher initial education systems is to nurture proficient educators with expertise in technology use, innovative teaching methods, and the promotion of European values, multilingualism, and global citizenship. eTwinning, established in 2005 by the European Commission, supports these goals and has engaged over a million European teachers since its beginning. Traditionally, it has always focused on in-service teachers, allowing them to interact, exchange practices, experiment together and take advantage of many tailored training opportunities. Since 2012, with the eTwinning ITE (Initial Teacher Education) initiative, the European Action has started to pay close attention also to the initial education of teachers, understanding the importance of investing in future teachers and in the continuity of the training offer during a teacher's career.

Over the past decade, the Initiative has significantly expanded at the European level. Starting as a pilot phase in 2012, involving a minority of countries, it has recently spread to new countries and proven stable and fruitful in the old ones. In these years, thanks to the work of some National Support Organizations (NSOs) and the Central Support Service (CSS) and to the contribution of many experienced ITE Institutions, an ITE model has been elaborated, trying to draw some guidelines and capture recurring traits from the many different and variegated local experiences. Many best practices have been shared and disseminated, enhancing the initiative's visibility and transferability.

Having grasped the relevance of the Initiative, the European Commission decided to strongly invest into eTwinning for Future Teachers: in 2018 the Initiative became compulsory for all countries and in 2019 students were allowed to register in the platform. These two turning points marked its complete integration into the eTwinning Action and gave a new boost to the Initiative.

As the Initiative has evolved, it is crucial to reflect on the outcomes achieved so far, and on the difficulties and success factors revealed by the practice observation, in order to find sustainable ways to implement it effectively. While a positive correlation often exists between years of experience in eTwinning ITE and curricular integration depth, also other factors play significant roles in the development and establishment of the initiative: the modalities of its introduction,

the key actors that first endorse it and their commitment in time, internal dynamics and political support by the university's management, the quality of trainings and relations held by eTwinning Ambassadors, Local Authorities and NSO representatives. And of course, the intrinsic structure of the Initial Teacher Education System in each country. By studying the correlation among those concurrent factors, we can try to identify those characteristics that can indicate a mature model and facilitate their dissemination.

Despite variations in organization, modalities, and objectives across countries and even among institutions from the same countries, the involvement of universities in eTwinning ITE mainly consists of two activities:

- eTwinning modules integration into the future teachers' training Curriculum, in ways that can vary considerably from institution to institution, either compulsory or on a voluntary basis, spanning from introducing eTwinning within a specific subject or in technology and/or English language laboratories, to becoming part of students' internships. Trainings are generally provided by experienced Ambassadors but in some cases, they can be delivered also by other Teacher Educators previously trained on eTwinning.
- Participation of students in eTwinning ITE projects. Those can be either students-to-students eTwinning projects founded among different universities, either national or international, whose students collaborate remotely based on shared interests and objectives; or eTwinning projects with pupils, initiated by students during their placement at school, in collaboration with their school-tutor.

In all over Europe more than 150 institutions, 250 teacher educators and 10,000 student teachers took actively part in eTwinning benefitting from its many contributions to initial teacher education. The inclusion of eTwinning in initial teacher education provides:

1. the **opportunity** to foster project-based teaching and learning and inter-/multi-disciplinary work and to develop linguistic and digital competences.
2. the perfect **environment** for European openness and internationalisation, which promotes intercultural competence.
3. the **context** for the development of professional skills, such as project management, setting goals, planning, teamwork, as well as the reflection on professional practice through the exchanges with teachers from other education systems.

The participation in eTwinning goes beyond the project and partnership opportunities. There is also the space for participating in professional development opportunities, local and central events (online and face to face), workshops and support, central online seminars, and annual conference.

The Online groups at ESEP are an important part of the life of the eTwinning for future teachers as it is specifically aimed at teacher trainers working for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) institutions. The featured group provides information on how to participate, the different models of introducing eTwinning in their work, examples of ITE activities, showcase presentations from the face-to-face workshops, and partner finding forum. Moreover, a set of regular activities are promoted to foster the networking and cooperation.

A lot of work has been put into place throughout the last 10 years of eTwinning for future teachers and in 2022 it was decided to acknowledge the work of the institutions, teacher educators and student teachers involved at national and European levels. The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Institutions Awarding Framework was launched and consists of three areas titled

Curriculum integration, Project implementation and Research outputs. Each area includes three criteria.

1. **Curriculum integration:** This area includes any action that the Initial Teacher Education institution has taken to share and inform about its commitment to include or integrate eTwinning in the curriculum and to support and strengthen other teachers and the student teachers' competences through the eTwinning tools.
2. **Project implementation:** This area includes the involvement of teacher educators and student teachers in eTwinning project process.
3. **Research outputs:** This area includes any eTwinning-related research activity that the ITE institutions have been engaged with in the following indicative disciplines: Curriculum Integration, Information Communication Technologies, Pedagogy and Didactics, Innovation, Initial Teacher Education, Professional Development, Initial Vocational Education and Training, Early Childhood Education and Care. While acknowledging research and scientific production, the area lays emphasis on the notion of collaboration at local/institutional, national, and international levels.

Several institutions across Europe applied for this award to see their work acknowledged both at European and National levels.

Supporting research activities and cross-country collaboration among key actors will assist new universities in finding their ITE pathway and guide future actions of NSOs to facilitate the initiative's integration into diverse environments.