



# The impact of eTwinning on initial teacher education: Placing teacher educators and student teachers in the spotlight

Full monitoring report 2023

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Full monitoring report

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## Executive summary

The 2023 monitoring report focuses on initial teacher education and specifically on the initiative 'eTwinning for future teachers', with the aim of exploring the impact of eTwinning <sup>(1)</sup> on student teachers, teacher educators and initial teacher education institutions. The data were obtained through focus groups and interviews conducted with student teachers and teacher educators from seven institutions nominated for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education in 2022.

The report shows that, in various countries, **eTwinning has been integrated into undergraduate, postgraduate and master's degree courses and in school placements**. The majority of the institutions design and implement short collaborative eTwinning projects with teacher educators and student teachers from other countries, rather than with school pupils, due to lack of access to schools, time constraints and impoverished networks with teachers and schools, which are obstacles that teacher educators struggle to overcome. The main practices that teacher educators use while introducing eTwinning to student teachers include platform demonstrations; mentoring; presentations of previous eTwinning projects; and training sessions delivered by eTwinning teachers and Ambassadors, and former student teachers who are now schoolteachers.

In terms of the impact of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative on initial teacher education institutions, the data collected indicate that **eTwinning contributed to internationalising institutions, thus promoting transnational collaborations, inclusion and openness**. This was demonstrated by the institutions developing closer relationships with the local schools, establishing eTwinning partnerships with other institutions, expanding the Erasmus+ network and progressing to Erasmus+ projects. Moreover, eTwinning was reported to offer distinct advantages in comparison with other programmes such as Erasmus+, since eTwinning **enables more individuals to participate by overcoming any travel constraints**.

Concerning **student teachers, eTwinning was reported to have positively affected their intercultural, digital and pedagogical competences** in their online collaboration with peers across Europe. In addition, eTwinning allowed them to work with in-service teachers,

1 - eTwinning is the community for schools in Europe, providing opportunities for European collaboration, peer-learning and upskilling. Further information can be found on the European School Education Platform website (<https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/etwinning>).

an experience that resulted in them feeling more confident and useful by allowing them to apply in practice what they learned during their studies. Several student teachers emphasised that they had learned new instructional and pedagogical strategies and tools in a practical way, thus moving beyond the aspects of traditional teaching. In this regard, eTwinning was said to have helped them **gain a better understanding of teaching, which in turn increased their motivation and the attractiveness of the teaching profession**. Moreover, some student teachers reported that eTwinning broadened their horizons in terms of becoming more curious about other educational systems, pursuing studies in other countries and even working in schools with more international profiles.

**Teacher educators also reported that eTwinning has positively affected their professional development** in the context of their interactions with their peers in the eTwinning community, the implementation of eTwinning projects and the professional development activities that they have attended. These benefits range from learning new tools and becoming aware of new teaching approaches and ideas to developing international collaborations with teacher educators across Europe. As well as enabling teacher educators to carry out projects in a practical way, eTwinning was said to have helped them overcome their reservations and gain confidence. In addition, several teacher educators said that eTwinning has been instrumental in enriching their research interests, developing deeper connections with other colleagues and student teachers, and bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Regarding the **recently introduced 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education**, findings suggest that the award has been accepted by teacher educators and initial teacher education institutions, since it piqued the interest of the academic community and constituted a form of appreciation for the work completed. The award contributed to raising the visibility of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, suggesting that it might facilitate embedding eTwinning in initial teacher education.

Overall, the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative is perceived as an innovative learning experience that has demonstrated significant potential for enhancing the effectiveness of initial teacher education. However, to further improve eTwinning, the focus group members **proposed a set of recommendations in relation to community features** (e.g. ensuring face-to-face interactions), **resources and professional development activities** (e.g. kits, tutorials, self-teaching material), **platform features** (e.g. additional collaborative tools, email notifications) and **promotion and dissemination** (e.g. social media, student teachers as multipliers inspiring other teachers to join).

## 1. 'eTwinning for future teachers'

eTwinning is the community for schools in Europe, which engages teachers and other school staff from early childhood education and care up to primary and secondary school, including initial vocational education and training. In the context of eTwinning projects, teachers design and implement online and/or blended learning activities with their pupils, along with colleagues from other countries who are participating in the Erasmus+ programme.

In 2012, under the 'eTwinning for future teachers' pilot, eTwinning initiated European projects that bring together initial teacher education institutions from several European countries and their National Support Organisations to include eTwinning in initial teacher education. After 6 years, in 2018, the eTwinning for future teachers pilot was formally mainstreamed as an eTwinning activity. The National Support Organisations provide initial teacher education institutions with training, technical support and assistance to connect with teacher educators and student teachers in other countries. In terms of engagement, the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative involves teacher educators and student teachers through the following:

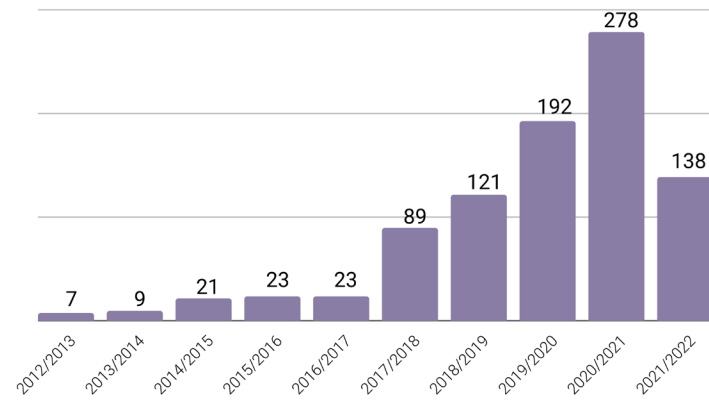
- Curriculum:
  - dedicating an introductory module to eTwinning;
  - integrating eTwinning into the curriculum of a course;
- eTwinning projects:
  - creating small, collaborative eTwinning projects with teacher educators and student teachers at local, national and European levels;
  - creating small, collaborative eTwinning projects with school pupils when student teachers are on school placements.

The main goal of introducing eTwinning to initial teacher education is to support teacher educators and prepare student teachers with the necessary competences that will support their actual teaching

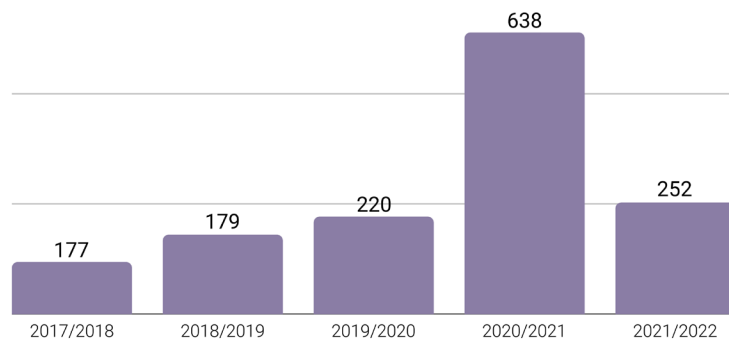
practice in future. For instance, when student teachers are involved in the process of designing and implementing eTwinning projects, they usually deal with curricular knowledge and cross-curricular teaching. They cultivate or enhance their digital and linguistic skills, and gain experience through European collaborations, therefore promoting their intercultural competences. In addition, they may reflect on teaching practices related to instructional design, online learning and assessment; engage in exchanges with student teachers from other education systems; and develop transversal skills such as goal setting, teamwork and time management.

In this context, two eTwinning Groups, one aimed at teacher educators and the other student teachers, have been launched. In these eTwinning Groups, members can discuss specific subjects, themes or topics, providing them with a space to share ideas and connect with like-minded peers to carry out eTwinning activities in the future. The group for teacher educators is moderated by the Central Support Service and provides information on how to participate in eTwinning, describes the different models of introducing eTwinning into initial teacher education, illustrates examples of eTwinning activities, showcases presentations from online and face-to-face workshops, and includes a partner-finding forum. The group for student teachers registered with eTwinning is moderated by eTwinning Ambassadors who are active in initial teacher education. It offers opportunities to gain hands-on experience, participate in interactive discussions, and share experiences and insights with peers. The activities in the group are curated to support the professional growth and development of student teachers, and are designed to foster a sense of community and collaboration among members.

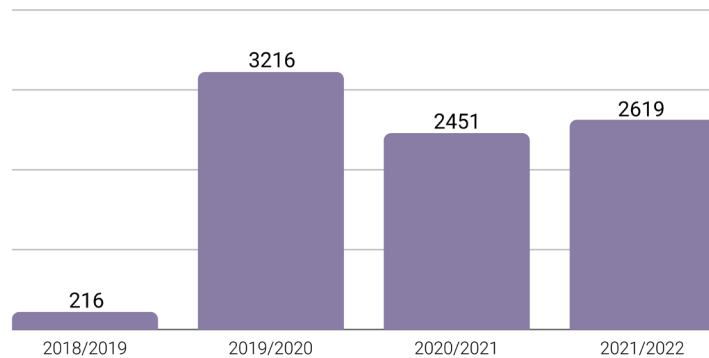
Based on data collected by the National Support Organisations, the following figures illustrate the number of initial teacher education institutions (Figure 1), teacher educators (Figure 2) and student teachers (Figure 3) involved in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative per academic year, and the number of student teachers validated per country and academic year (Figure 4). It should be noted that these numbers are not cumulative, and Figures 1, 2 and 3 reflect the number of active initial teacher education institutions, teacher educators and student teachers respectively. Moreover, as shown in Figures 2 and 3, the numbers of teacher educators and student teachers have been monitored since 2017/2018 and 2018/2019. Student teachers are removed from the platform every year, since some of them may have passed their course that eTwinning was integrated into or may have completed their study programme. However, this was not the case in 2021/2022 due to the development of the European School Education Platform.



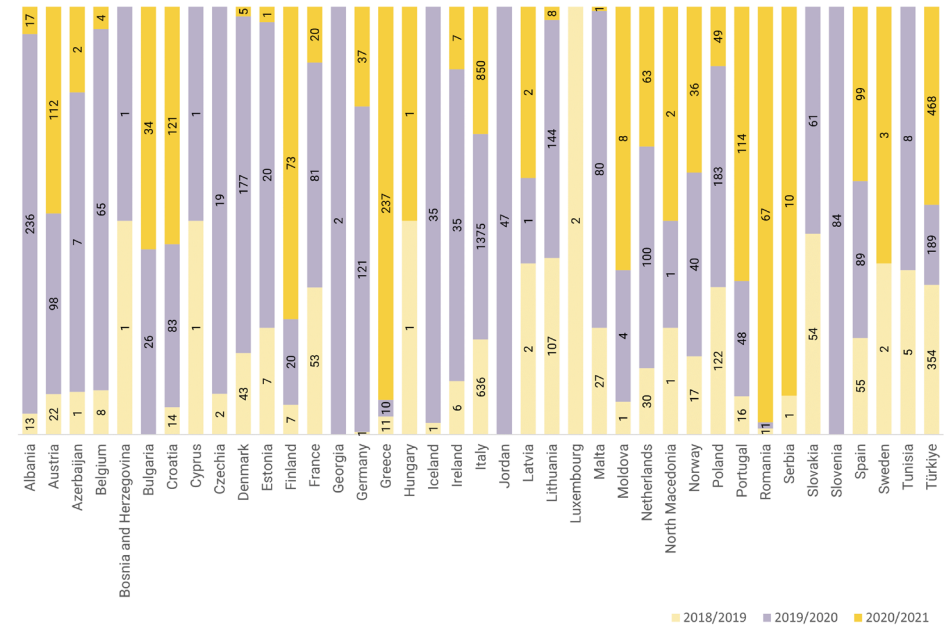
**Figure 1:** Number of initial teacher education institutions per academic year



**Figure 2:** Number of teacher educators per academic year



**Figure 3:** Number of student teachers per academic year



**Figure 4:** Number of student teachers validated per country and academic year (bars have been stretched to show the proportions of the total in each country between school years)

*NB: The data for the number of student teachers validated per country in 2021/2022 could not be obtained due to the technical developments of the new European School Education Platform.*

As an attempt to further acknowledge the work completed by teacher educators, student teachers and the institutions involved in eTwinning, the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education was introduced in 2022 with the aim of recognising the most active institution in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative. The objective of the European award is to identify, celebrate and promote the work and activities that institutions have carried out. The initial teacher education institutions that were interested in participating submitted their applications, which were then evaluated based on nine criteria grouped under three main areas.

- **Curriculum integration.** This area includes any action that the initial teacher education institution has taken to share information about its commitment, the inclusion/integration of eTwinning in the curriculum, and the provision of support to other teachers and student teachers.

- **Project implementation.** This area includes the involvement of teacher educators and student teachers in the eTwinning project process.
- **Research outputs.** This area includes any eTwinning-related research activity that the initial teacher education institutions have engaged with in the following indicative disciplines: curriculum integration, information and communication technologies, pedagogy and didactics, innovation, initial teacher education, professional development, initial vocational education and training, and early childhood education and care. While acknowledging research and scientific production, this area emphasises the notion of collaboration at local/institutional, national and international levels.

Thirty-two applications from 12 countries were evaluated via a thorough procedure at national and European levels. During the first round, the National Support Organisations evaluated the applications at national level and, if all criteria were met, they awarded a national label to these institutions. The national label displays the areas in which the institution has developed its work within the eligible period. Institutions were acknowledged for their work in one, two or three of the aforementioned areas. Then the National Support Organisations nominated the institution with the highest score for consideration for the European evaluation. Based on the 12 institutions nominated, the Central Support Service and the Steering Committee, acting as the grand jury, selected the winner of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education.

The award-winning initial teacher education institution received congratulations from the European Commission, a trophy and a video on the winning institution in which the key players of the institution were interviewed. In addition, the teacher educators of the institution received certificates and attended the award ceremony during the annual online conference for initial teacher education 'eTwinning for future teachers'. The institution was also featured in an article in which teacher educators and student teachers described their experiences of eTwinning.

## 2. Methodology

Each year, the annual eTwinning monitoring report aims to highlight eTwinning's key accomplishments and milestones in relation to various topics, while also identifying areas for improvement and growth in order to advance eTwinning and effectively support pupils, teachers and schools. In this context, this year's eTwinning monitoring report focuses on initial teacher education, and specifically on the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, with the aim of exploring the impact of eTwinning on student teachers, teacher educators and initial teacher education institutions.

The data in the report were gathered from five focus groups and two semi-structured interviews that were completed online in March and April 2023. Focus groups can be considered a form of group interview based on a discussion among participants that generates qualitative data through group interaction, allowing the elicitation of participants' views (Creswell, 2009). As a method, it provides vivid and rich descriptions due to the ongoing interaction of focus group members, it allows for a wide range of information to be gathered in a relatively short time span and it does not require complex sampling techniques (Krueger and Casey, 2014).

The focus group discussion is framed by a research tool, the focus group guide (see Annex 1), which covers the topics to be discussed, further specifying these through more concrete questions. However, additional questions not included in the focus group guide may be asked by the researchers based on participants' responses (e.g. clarifications, examples, suggestions, additional questions). The majority of the focus groups consisted of at least three people: a teacher educator and two student teachers from initial teacher education institutions that were nominated for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education in 2022. These are based in Croatia, Germany, Italy and Spain. The French initial teacher education focus group consisted of a teacher educator and one student teacher, while interviews were conducted with one teacher educator from Poland and one from Finland. It was difficult to find student teachers for these groups given that they had already completed either the course related to eTwinning or their studies in general.

Table 1 provides the research questions covered by this report.

Area	Research questions
Current eTwinning activities	How is 'eTwinning for future teachers' integrated into initial teacher education?
	What are participants' suggestions to further develop 'eTwinning for future teachers'?
Impact of eTwinning	What is the perceived impact of 'eTwinning for future teachers' on teacher educators?
	What is the perceived impact of 'eTwinning for future teachers' on student teachers?
	What is the perceived impact of 'eTwinning for future teachers' on the initial teacher education institutions?
Recognition in eTwinning	What are participants' views in relation to the recently introduced 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education?
	What are participants' recommendations for future developments?

**Table 1:** Research questions by area

With participants' consent, the focus groups and interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the researchers so they could be analysed with qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014, 2022). Using a clean read / smooth verbatim transcript, the researchers transcribed the recordings word for word, resulting in a coherent text that is easy to comprehend and represents the original wording and grammatical structures used. Each focus group / interview was considered a context unit, given that the profiles of the focus group / interview members (e.g. country, being a teacher educator or student teacher, being a more experienced teacher educator or a newly appointed one, being a new or older student teacher) might reflect differences in cultural or social background. The answer to a specific question was chosen as the recording unit, determining which parts of the text were categorised within the system of categories. Finally, the coding unit, the smallest component of material that can be assessed and the minimum portion of text that can fall within

one category, was agreed as a sentence. Data analysis has been performed based on inductive category formation, meaning that the researchers had previously established the themes of the categories and processed the transcribed material line by line. As soon as material that fitted the definition of a category was identified, a category was constructed, and a term or brief sentence that accurately described the material was used as a category label. If a passage fitted into an existing category, it was subsumed under this; if not, then a new category was created. Researchers had stopped identifying new categories by the time they had processed half of the material, resulting in a review of the entire category system to ensure the logic of the categories, as proposed by Mayring (2014).



## 3. Results

This chapter presents the results of the focus group discussions conducted with teacher educators and student teachers from the initial teacher education institutions that were nominated for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education in 2022. The focus group discussions aimed to investigate teacher educators' and student teachers' perceptions of the impact of eTwinning on their teaching practices and professional development. The analysis of the data from these discussions provides insights into the experiences, challenges and opportunities associated with eTwinning in initial teacher education. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the data collected during the focus group discussions and identifies the key themes and patterns that emerged.

### 3.1. Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Croatia

The focus group consisted of the following members:

- Ivana Milkovic, teacher educator
- Elena Babić, student teacher
- Petra Kardum, student teacher.

The Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb<sup>2</sup> is one of the institutions in Croatia that train teachers to work in primary schools and preschools. It has three locations: the main branch in Zagreb and additional branches in Petrinja and Čakovec. Overall, the faculty has approximately 3 000 students enrolled across its various programmes, including undergraduate, graduate and integrated university study programmes, postgraduate specialisations, doctoral programmes in educational sciences, and professional development programmes for in-service primary teachers. In the focus group discussion, it was reported that primary teachers can also choose a specialism or a foreign language (e.g. maths, arts, educational sciences, English, German), leading to dual specialism: 'Kind of a dual diploma or let's say a diploma with two majors, basically.'

According to the teacher educator, the initial **decision to join the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative** was made by the **dean of the faculty** with the aim of broadening the institution's horizons and

2 - Further information can be found on the faculty's website (<https://www.ufzg.unizg.hr/en/faculty-of-teacher-education/>).

establishing international collaborations. The faculty's participation in the initiative required someone to implement eTwinning in teaching and the teacher educator saw this as an opportunity to increase her own skills: 'I realised I had the chance to open up and expand. Well, perhaps broaden my horizons because I wanted to **establish international connections**.' It should be noted that the teacher educator also expressed having previously felt hesitant about establishing international collaborations. However, eTwinning provided her with a platform to overcome these reservations and meet people who were 'phenomenal in helping and pushing towards goals'. She explained that collaborating on projects through eTwinning was exactly what she needed in terms of **gaining the confidence to meet other teacher educators across Europe and collaborate with them**: 'It was beneficial for my confidence, professionally speaking. I was surrounded by people who inspire me ... so many connections.'

Regarding the **curriculum areas** that eTwinning was embedded into, it was reported that, overall, eTwinning has allowed for a **combination of didactics and practicum**, resulting in a well-rounded link to the curriculum. Specifically, the teacher educator mentioned that several topics and curriculum subjects have been linked with eTwinning. Initially, an elective course was introduced with the aim of promoting international collaboration with other teacher educators and student teachers. This course was flexible, as it was open to any topic and focused on practical activities based on the **content and language integrated learning (CLIL)** approach in teaching English to young learners. In addition, themes in children's literature were utilised to create projects in digital storytelling, a task that became obligatory for the student teachers attending the course. Soft skills were also incorporated into the teaching practice course, which focused on projects using picture books. The integration of **literature, pedagogy, soft skills and ICT skills** proved to be successful, something that was also evident during the pandemic. Specifically, the teacher educator acknowledged the challenges posed by the pandemic, how it affected the implementation of projects, and the support eTwinning provided to maintain and offer an interactive way of learning. She explained that, throughout the entire course, it was mandatory for prospective English language teachers to complete activities in preparation for their school placement. Yet, **due to the pandemic, it was not possible for the student teachers to physically attend schools and apply what they had learned in practice**. As a result, the focus shifted to designing storytelling and other activities, which were carried out with other student teachers in the absence of real-life application with school pupils: 'The teaching practice is obligatory for future teachers of English language and, since we could not go to schools, I turned it around and they had to prepare activities in case they could get to schools and try them out ... but we were stuck. We were stuck.'

So, we did the storytelling in theory and all these activities with the student teachers.'

From the student teachers' perspective, **participating in the eTwinning for future teachers' initiative was mandatory**, given that it was part of a course that they had selected. However, they stated that they enjoyed participating in eTwinning to such an extent that they would have enrolled in the course even as an elective course: 'The thing was that it was obligatory for us. But other than that, I enjoyed it very much. I think that I would enrol in eTwinning as an elective course. Yes, I would do it for sure.' The student teachers described their initial experience of eTwinning as somewhat daunting and overwhelming, given that they were not familiar with it. One student teacher stated, 'Well, I'm not going to lie, it was kind of overwhelming because we were not familiar with eTwinning at all. And it is more of a concept than anything else. So, it was difficult.' **The student teachers were also sceptical about the online format.** However, as they progressed through the semester and became more acquainted with eTwinning, they contacted fellow student teachers from Spain and Italy, resulting in a more enjoyable experience. Indicatively, one of the student teachers stated, 'But as we went through the semester, each week it was easier and easier. We also got to know our colleagues from Spain and Italy. It became fun and I was sad when it ended. I wanted to have another course on it.' **Despite the initial challenges, the student teachers agreed that eTwinning provided them with a new and interactive way of learning** that they had not experienced during their time at school or university. As one student teacher added, 'We'd never had something like that before. It was really new and fun and interactive, which we didn't experience during our time in school, nor our time at the faculty. So, I liked how challenging it was. You know, it is not a bad thing.'

Based on their descriptions, it seems that the student teachers appreciated the opportunity to meet and collaborate with student teachers from other European and non-European countries, allowing them to develop multicultural skills and a network with other future teachers. One of the student teachers reported, 'It is a great way to allow teachers to learn together and feel like we are a part of a community.' The student teachers also believe that **participating in eTwinning has elevated their digital and pedagogical skills**, such as 'observing autonomous learning'. One said that eTwinning 'improves information and communication technology skills, which I think are really important for the 21st century'. In addition, the student teachers emphasised that **eTwinning benefits not only student teachers, but also school pupils** by broadening their horizons: 'It's good to start early with broadening your horizons.'

So, when pupils get older, it is not something new to them. They will have already experienced intercultural activities.' They went on to say that eTwinning provides a valuable platform for teachers and school pupils to collaborate and exchange ideas with their peers across Europe, which is an effective way of promoting their intercultural competences. Overall, the student teachers confirmed that **eTwinning is becoming more popular in schools and is seen as a valuable tool for teaching.** One student teacher stated, 'I would definitely incorporate it [eTwinning] into my teaching.' They also noted that many schools are already participating in eTwinning and that they would suggest incorporating it if the school they work at in the future is not already involved.

**eTwinning was also reported to have affected student teachers' learning experiences.** One of the student teachers stated that, in methodology classes, they were able to practise their teaching during their school placement, and the other noted that eTwinning gave them the opportunity to work with various people from different countries, allowing them to experience real-life situations and learn how to overcome any unexpected challenges that may arise. They said, 'You just work with random people in your team from different parts of the world that function differently, you know, and you're put on the spot, so it gives you that experience of real life where you have to overcome things that you have not seen coming.' In addition, one student teacher mentioned her attendance at the annual online conference for initial teacher education 'eTwinning for future teachers', where she was able to interact with other participants and speak publicly. When asked about the impact of the experience, she stated, 'Yes, this was the first time I participated in something big like a conference. I was really nervous, but it definitely helped to boost my confidence and my public speaking in front of a lot of people. I've really opened up since that conference. I am more confident in my classes after that conference.' However, it is important to note that both student teachers stated that they **did not have the opportunity to fully engage with all aspects of the platform or the professional development opportunities due to their study commitments**: 'We had our hands full with projects that we had to do and basically I don't think that we were part of any student teacher groups.'

Based on student teachers' accounts, eTwinning seems to have also affected **their perspectives on teaching and their future career aspirations.** One student teacher stated, 'I definitely opened up and considered not working in our state schools, but instead working in schools with different curricula like British schools in Zagreb or American schools', highlighting how eTwinning has **broadened her horizons and exposed her to alternative educational approaches.** Another student teacher shared her experience of collaborating with

students from Denmark, pointing out, 'I loved learning about their system and how their curriculum works, and I started investigating it', demonstrating how eTwinning has **sparked her curiosity and inspired her to learn more about different educational systems**. Concerning the impact of eTwinning on student teachers' future career aspirations, the same student teacher expressed a desire to 'go over there one day to maybe get some education, further education or something like that', showing that eTwinning has opened up new possibilities for her professional development and encouraged her to **pursue further education in other countries**.

Overall, the responses of student teachers suggest that eTwinning has had a positive impact on their personal and professional growth. As one student teacher aptly put it, 'It's broadening your horizons, but at the same time, it makes you curious to find out more about other educational systems and perhaps also studying in these countries.' They both expressed their belief that **more student teachers should have the opportunity to use eTwinning in their teaching**: 'We think it would be really great if every future teacher got the chance to use it'. They emphasised that having a supportive leader or mentor is crucial. Their **professor played an important role in supporting the student teachers** and helping them overcome challenges. One student teacher stated, 'The main thing is to have a supportive environment that your professor offers, showing the significance of having a mentor who is willing to help and provide guidance throughout the project.'

The student teachers **emphasised that eTwinning can be used in a variety of subjects** and can be a valuable tool for promoting a cross-curricular approach and fostering a sense of citizenship at both national and European levels. One student teacher said, 'I would [use eTwinning], and our professor said that a lot of other professors who are not in an English department are afraid of using it. I would definitely use eTwinning with other subjects too, not just with English. It is great for any subject really, not only English.' Another said, 'I would like to incorporate eTwinning into my teaching because it fosters this sense of citizenship at both national and European level[s], which I think is really important for future students.' It was also mentioned that, while they **were familiar with pedagogical concepts such as active learning, blended learning spaces and the use of open educational resources in theory, they had not had many opportunities to apply these concepts in practice**. Therefore, eTwinning has provided an important opportunity for student teachers to gain practical experience of applying key pedagogical concepts that they had previously only encountered in theory. One student teacher stated, 'We would mention these types of learning in our pedagogical courses, but we only use it in theory, apart from

maybe in some seminars where we had to act out a classroom situation. But we never use it. This was the first time that we actually used some of these things in practice.' It was in the context of eTwinning projects that the student teachers were able to develop a better understanding of how these concepts can be applied in practice and were able to gain confidence in utilising them in their future teaching careers.

Along similar lines, the teacher educator highlighted the benefits of eTwinning, including the opportunity that student teachers have to communicate in English with their peers from other countries and improve their communication and soft skills. This was further emphasised given the **importance of providing future English language teachers with opportunities to interact in English during their university studies**: 'It is particularly important while trying to teach future teachers of English as a foreign language, so I am glad that we established these kinds of connections [through eTwinning]. Our teachers have to communicate in the English language with other future teachers and other student teachers from Europe, which I find important.' The teacher educator also stressed the **value of multidisciplinary projects in eTwinning**, as they allow student teachers to try out various didactic methods and techniques that they can later apply in their own classrooms. She noted that **eTwinning provides a safe space for student teachers to experiment and practise in**, which is essential for gaining valuable experience. In particular, she said, 'Projects are always multidisciplinary, it is important that they have this mixture of different themes, techniques and didactics, which they will have to do with their pupils once they become teachers. But they have a chance to try it out while they are students, so basically, they do not have to be afraid that something will go wrong. You cannot fail in this. You just have to get experience. So, this is really important. It is a kind of safe space, let's say, to experiment and practise.'

In terms of the **eTwinning community**, the teacher educator expressed her appreciation for its supportive nature, stating, 'The support that you get, just for being interested in something, is probably the most important thing to me.' She also noted that she has received support in the form of the **professional development opportunities** offered by eTwinning, such as conferences, partner-finding fairs<sup>3</sup>, events from the eTwinning Group for future teachers and some courses on the eTwinning platform: 'I have attended a lot of conferences and partner-finding fairs and webinars in the group.'

<sup>3</sup> - Partner-finding fairs are short events where teacher educators meet to present their project ideas, find partners and network. They are organised centrally by the Central Support Service of eTwinning and are open to all eTwinning-registered teacher educators.

I also did some short courses on the old eTwinning platform. I just enrolled in something in the new platform, but I never came back to the course, unfortunately<sup>4</sup>. **When asked what could be improved**, the teacher educator suggested creating smaller subgroups based on themes or disciplines, which would increase interaction among the teacher educators in the eTwinning Group for future teachers. In this regard she said, 'Perhaps it would be better to make smaller groups of people who are interested in the same topic because it is a bit too broad when we are all together in an initial teacher education group. And also make the groups more interactive; we cannot contact each other easily on the new platform.'

Another issue raised by the teacher educator was the **confusion surrounding the partner-finding fair**, with some uncertainty over who was meant to attend. In particular, she said, 'I thought it was kind of confusing whether it was meant for future teachers or secondary teachers.' This difficulty in properly understanding who the target audience was could impact the success of future projects. Regarding this aspect, the teacher educator expressed a strong appreciation for the online meetings and partner-finding sessions, as they allow for collaboration and the exchange of ideas with other teacher educators, but she pointed out that it would be more beneficial to make those sessions more specific and targeted towards future teachers: 'I really value these online meetings and partner finding. They can be great for checking out what ideas other people have and how they are working on eTwinning. It would probably be better to make them more explicit, concrete and targeted at future teachers.'

According to the teacher educator, the experience with eTwinning presented some challenges, but not in a negative way. From her perspective, eTwinning was a learning experience, since she **gained insights about her own students, herself and the cultural differences of other students and teacher educators from other countries**: 'I actually learned a lot about my own students and myself. So, the way that I react, perhaps some cultural differences that we have with other students and other professors from other countries, the way that we expect things to work and the expectations that we had and so on.' In addition, **working in a team was perceived as the most challenging aspect of eTwinning**, as it required the teacher educator to work with people whom she did not know, emphasising the need to be flexible and positive, even when there were setbacks: 'I think, the most challenging thing about

4 - The 'new platform' referred to is the European School Education Platform, which integrates the former platforms and services of eTwinning, School Education Gateway and Teacher Academy. As of 2022, the eTwinning community has been hosted in a restricted area within the European School Education Platform.

eTwinning is that you're forced to work in a team. Just like in real life, you don't always get to choose your peers, right? So, you have to work with people and be very flexible and positive about the whole thing, and sometimes you may feel like that there is no way that we are going to do this on time, and we made so many mistakes ... but it is an amazing learning experience.' Overall, she believes that **being involved in eTwinning is important for future work environments** such as schools or faculties, where individuals are not always able to choose their peers: 'I think you have to have this experience because when you start working, wherever you work, whether in school or at a faculty or anywhere else, you're going to work with other people and you have to know how to work in your team; you are not able to choose your peers. So, I think that is the biggest challenge and learning experience that you get from eTwinning.'

Regarding research, the teacher educator acknowledged that **eTwinning was presented initially as a teaching tool, which might not be the most appealing approach for universities that prioritise research careers**. However, she perceived it not as a negative experience, but rather as an opportunity to further develop her teaching skills: 'But I did not see it as a negative moment in my career, because I had to work on my teaching. Teaching is part of my job, so we need continuous development, and I found that in eTwinning.' The teacher educator **discovered that eTwinning can also be used as a research tool** and a way to connect with other researchers. She found it exciting to work with project partners who have great ideas, and this connection may have a significant impact on including eTwinning in faculties. She said, 'Basically, what I discovered really quickly is that eTwinning can also be used as a research tool and to connect with other researchers because basically our jobs are split into teaching and research, so why not connect it, and see ... I mean, there are a lot of things that you can research through eTwinning.' The teacher educator **highlighted that eTwinning is not just a teaching tool**, and some of her colleagues from other countries have already published research papers, something that facilitates the dissemination of information and encourages others to use eTwinning for research. Based on her account, eTwinning affected her research interests, which had previously focused solely on children's literature and translations of it; she now covers more pedagogical components. She explained, 'My research has become more interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, so I basically did my research in children's literature and translations of children's literature and now I also include more methodology that involves intercultural competences.' Similarly, one of the student teachers noted that eTwinning has altered **her final thesis topic and encouraged her to get more involved in the eTwinning community**: 'It definitely did increase my motivation. It

sparked my interest to write my final thesis on eTwinning and to get more into the eTwinning world, in that sense.'

Concerning the **impact of eTwinning on the initial teacher education institution and the faculty**, the teacher educator reported that, although internationalisation and transnational collaboration have been significant aspects, eTwinning has also contributed to **inclusion and openness within the institution**. However, she noted that changes in this regard are happening slowly, as some colleagues still perceive eTwinning as suitable only for departments focusing on the English language. The teacher educator believes that **it is possible to use eTwinning effectively as long as it is adapted to fit the specific environment**, stating, 'You just have to know how to use this tool in order to get what you want.' She also emphasised the importance of being open to change and new ways of doing things, saying, 'When things are done for a long time in a certain way, then you're kind of blind to all the opportunities that could open to you and things that could be changed, you know. [It is] kind of a new way of doing things.' Nonetheless, she described some positive developments: 'There are some changes, but they are happening really slowly. Because, well, a lot of my colleagues still think that eTwinning is only for the English department at the faculty. I still have to convince others to try it out, regardless of their level of English or German or whatever.' The teacher educator shared an inspiring example of how eTwinning was used to connect another branch of the university in a smaller town with a local nursery: 'Two faculty teachers from Petrinja branch, a smaller town than Zagreb ... they went to a kindergarten in the area and they did a huge project with fabulous results. They connected preschool teachers and pupils with student teachers, and it is just amazing how much work they did, how well they connected their studies with the local school community.'

Finally, the teacher educator had positive feedback regarding her decision to get involved in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education. She reported that there was **acknowledgement from her National Agency and recognition from the faculty, and the recognition also raised the local academic community's interest** in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative. The teacher educator described this recognition as a 'great input' appreciating and acknowledging the effort that she and her student teachers put into their work. In particular, she said, 'It is a great thing just to be kind of acknowledged, you know. Yes, it is a lot of work and effort. But it is not yet visible in my career.' In terms of further disseminating the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative among other institutions, she believes that **having a designated person or office for eTwinning communication** would be beneficial for creating better connections between institutions. Given that universities in Croatia have a certain autonomy, the

teacher educator mentioned that having a designated contact point for eTwinning in each institution would be valuable for establishing communication between them, with the support of the National Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes and of the Ministry of Education: 'The faculty has an international relations office that helps to establish communication between the Agency for Mobility [and EU Programmes] and other agencies from Europe if needed. I guess eTwinning could be somehow linked with the activities of these offices.'

### 3.2. Philosophical Faculty, University Teacher Training School, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

An interview was conducted with Merja Kukkonen, teacher educator at the institution.

The Philosophical Faculty<sup>5</sup> provides high-quality education and conducts research in various fields, including educational sciences, modern languages, cultural studies, psychology, home economics and theology. The faculty is one of the leading providers of teacher education in Finland, offering diverse opportunities for students to become class or subject teachers, or specialise in early education, special education or career counselling. As part of its mission, the faculty emphasises interdisciplinary collaboration and international partnerships to promote the impact and renewal of research and education. In the interview, it was also explained that there are 10 university-affiliated teacher training schools in eight universities in Finland, one of which is the University of Eastern Finland. **Each of those universities has a specialised affiliated school called a 'university school' where student teachers can practise their skills by teaching children from the nearby area.** As the teacher educator noted, 'Student teachers are trained in practising teaching. So, these are normal schools. They have children who are not selected in any way or anything like that. They just come from the nearby area. It is a combination of teacher training and real teaching in that way.'

The teacher educator interviewed is an English teacher working in one of those university schools, teaching English to primary students. She usually supervises approximately 20 student teachers per year, assisting them in preparing lessons, observing their teaching and providing feedback. In the words of the educator, 'We do the same work as teachers normally do. And at the same

<sup>5</sup> - Further information can be found on the faculty's website (<https://www.uef.fi/en/philosophical-faculty>).

time, we have the student teachers doing their practice periods with our guidance, so to speak. I help them to prepare the lessons beforehand, and then I observe the lessons, and afterwards I give them feedback and that's how we go on.' In terms of the main reasons for joining eTwinning, the teacher educator mentioned that **she wanted to start using eTwinning to implement the Finnish core curriculum**, which focuses on teaching children **wider and bigger themes, and generic and transversal competences** across seven areas that can be applied to any phenomenon or context. She also stated that, as the Finnish core curriculum promotes the cultivation of those competences within **multidisciplinary learning units**, they can be developed in an enjoyable and meaningful way through eTwinning projects. The teacher educator explained, 'Learning units combine different school subjects, and for this eTwinning, it was a very good tool because it combines everything together. In the Finnish curriculum, we also have these broad-based competences, the seven areas that should be promoted within these multidisciplinary learning units. When I thought about what things we actually do and how we do them within an eTwinning project, I realised that every single one of these seven areas can be included.'

Therefore, the main innovation that eTwinning has brought to the teacher educator is **an alternative way of implementing the Finnish curriculum**. She said, 'eTwinning is an innovative way of implementing our national curriculum, so it is not the traditional way of teaching. It provides a different perspective and approach.' As a result, the use of the internet to connect virtually with other pupils, teachers and schools has been considered a direct outcome of eTwinning, contributing to a **shift in both her and her students' perspectives on teaching**. She explained, 'This connection via the internet is something new ... Getting together with pupils and teachers from other countries in that way has broadened my perspective on teaching, and also the student teachers' [perspectives]. It's so much more than the traditional way.' She exemplified her statement by **focusing on pedagogical considerations in terms of ensuring coherence in pupils' learning, and in tutoring/mentoring student teachers**: 'eTwinning has affected my perception of how I organise my work and the things that children learn. When I think about how I tutor my student teachers, it's also about thinking bigger, so we wouldn't do minor single things just in a row, we tie things together much more.'

When asked to further describe **the way that eTwinning is linked with the school placements**, the teacher educator explained that student teachers need to complete three periods of teaching practice in the university-affiliated schools, supervised by the university teaching staff and the teachers at the university schools,

and then a fourth practice period that is not monitored or supervised. Specifically, she said, 'During their teacher education, the student teachers have three periods of practising in these university-affiliated schools. And then they have one in a school that they can just pick up anywhere. It could even be abroad. So that is the only teaching practice period that is not supervised.' Regarding the duration of these practice periods, she said, 'For example, primary teachers have the first practice period in their first year, it is just an orientation. It only lasts a month. And then, after they have finished a certain amount of studies, they come back, usually in their third year and they spend 3 months at that time, and then they do their final teaching practice period in their fifth year usually, or maybe the fourth year because there's quite a lot of choice for how they want to arrange their studies.'

In this context, the teacher educator stressed that her university school is currently limited in its ability to fully integrate eTwinning due to time constraints and other commitments. However, given that student teachers are required to complete **a multidisciplinary learning unit during their final teaching practice period**, the teacher educator said, 'eTwinning is the perfect way to achieve this goal. Why not do it with eTwinning? So, it's a perfect way to do it because it really combines all these things that we want to achieve in a natural way, and it has worked well.' When she was asked to explain how eTwinning is embedded into this teaching practice, she initially said that **some student teachers have heard of eTwinning during their university courses, while others are unaware of it**. However, given that approximately one third of the teachers in her university school are involved in eTwinning projects, the school introduces eTwinning to student teachers in a practical way: 'We gather them together and introduce eTwinning. What it is, what it's for, what are the benefits of it, and so on.' The next step is for each student teacher to **develop an eTwinning project based on a specific theme that is already part of the Finnish curriculum**. Given that the student teachers have limited time, the teacher educators help them with the planning and teaching process by offering some options to help them get started; however, the ultimate decision lies with student teachers. The teacher educator stated, 'We give them some guidelines, but then they must think about what and how and when they will do it, and then the children can pick it up. For example, let's make a video on saving water when we wash our hands or something like that.' This shows that the student teachers are encouraged to think creatively and involve the pupils in the project, considering practical aspects of the project such as selecting the learning resources, introducing the theme and collaborating with the pupils on how to carry out the project.

When the main eTwinning project is ready, under the supervision of the teacher educators and in collaboration with their eTwinning partners, student teachers implement the project with the school pupils. According to the teacher educator, it would be unfortunate if student teachers only collaborated amongst themselves and did not implement their project with children, since 'that is the wow factor when we really see the children working together, having wonderful experiences, and getting so enthusiastic. So, student teachers should not miss this experience.' In the teacher educator's school, **one of the most significant experiences for student teachers is the opportunity to witness first-hand how excited pupils are when they collaborate in a multinational classroom through eTwinning projects.** The teacher educator explicitly said, 'In our school, the children always work together as well and I think that's has been one of the biggest experiences for the student teachers, that they really see how children can work together, how eager they are when working together and how they enjoy it and how they feel that they have succeeded, the joy of working together in a multinational classroom. That is the thing about eTwinning and that is what I really like.'

As far as the perceived benefits of being involved in eTwinning are concerned, the teacher educator claimed that traditional teaching is outdated and **eTwinning allows teaching to go beyond the four walls of the classroom.** She believes that future teachers need to understand a 'classroom that is virtual. It is a wider perception from what we think now. Of course, it might happen within four walls, but it is a wider thing and eTwinning is a practical way of doing this. So, as future teachers, they need to realise that school is everywhere in that sense, and they need to realise that their colleagues are not just in the same school or same city or same country. They are all over the world if they choose.' She also noted that **eTwinning provides a practical means for future teachers to gain the skills they need for their job by emphasising international collaboration, community features and collegial support:** 'eTwinning covers a lot of things that a future teacher needs to be qualified for really to do their job. So, I would focus on international collaboration for teachers, the community features and the collegial support and becoming aware of the connections that they can forge with other colleagues, and in terms of pupils. You have this open window in your classroom.' She therefore believes that **eTwinning provides a unique opportunity to work in a multinational and diverse learning environment, promoting intercultural competences.** She explained, 'We can help teachers and help our pupils realise that the people we work with are similar. We have something in common. We have our differences and when we work together, we get to know each other and learn about each other.'

The teacher educator expressed her belief that eTwinning supports student teachers in **acquiring new skills, particularly in ICT, learning to think about broader learning units, and promoting higher values** that they may not have explored otherwise, such as interculturalism. Based on interactions with her student teachers, the teacher educator sees eTwinning as a valuable tool for them in supporting the creation of well-designed, multidisciplinary learning units. She believes that her student teachers appreciate **working with teachers and pupils from elsewhere in Europe:** 'The important thing is implementing the curriculum and eTwinning really widens their perspectives on the teaching community. And they have the opportunity to work with teachers and pupils from other parts of Europe.' She highlighted that working with teachers and students from different countries provides an opportunity for **mutual understanding and acceptance of differences:** 'When we know more and learn about each other, we accept differences, and with accepting the differences, we come to understand each other better. Then we do not end up in confrontations. We can promote peace. So, I think it's really wonderful that we can do it in a very simple way and gain so much.'

Moreover, the online nature of eTwinning provides a **realistic yet international experience that offers much more than the traditional way of teaching.** The added value of eTwinning is that it enables student teachers to 'see the whole area of education in a different way and start thinking more globally, more internationally and see all these possibilities with eTwinning.' She emphasised **the importance of eTwinning in equipping student teachers with skills and helping them use them,** stating, 'It's also about preparing them with the future skills they need and using the many skills that they have, for example ICT skills. Of course they have them, but now, they can use them in a completely different way. It enables them to do so much more.' When asked about student teachers' experiences with eTwinning, she stated that they had a positive experience, even if some initially did not like it. She noted, 'These projects have been an experience for them, a positive one. I remember only one student teacher who did not like eTwinning. But when they see the joy of the children, then they realise that it is something worth doing'. This highlights the positive impact that eTwinning can have on both student teachers and pupils. Overall, the teacher educator expressed the opinion that **eTwinning has a multiplying effect and can inspire other student teachers, schoolteachers and pupils who are not involved yet to get engaged.** For this reason, she believes that it is important to introduce eTwinning to student teachers during their placement, as it can have a **positive impact on their motivation and increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession.**

The main challenges that the teacher educator has faced while implementing eTwinning are mostly related to technological infrastructure and online meetings. In terms of technological equipment, she mentioned that **some schools in other countries are not well equipped, which affects the pedagogical practices and activities of the projects**. As she explained, 'One problem has been the equipment, I mean the technology that different schools might have, and this causes problems. For example, it would be wonderful to divide children into different rooms on the platform so that they could really talk with each other. But if there is only one computer somewhere, and for example, in our school, each child has their own iPad or Chromebook, then it is impossible to do these kinds of things. So of course, it is about resources in each country.' According to the teacher educator, this resource variation from country to country sometimes shapes the perception that eTwinning activities tend to be more focused on producing and sharing materials rather than working together collaboratively. Regarding online meetings, she acknowledged that **finding a suitable time that works for everyone can be exceedingly difficult, especially when some meetings take place at short notice**, such as partner meetings for an eTwinning project. She commented that, 'In the university schools, we have a very tightly scheduled timetable. So, we cannot react very easily. For example, if a partner said, "Listen, could we have an online meeting tomorrow?" We cannot do it at the last minute.'

In terms of improvements, the teacher educator suggested that it would be beneficial to create resources such as **tutorials for student teachers that focus on the process of designing activities rather than outputs**. However, the educator also raised the concern that these resources may not be of interest to student teachers if they do not relate to real-world scenarios. As a solution, she suggested that **it would be more effective to have eTwinning kits** with themes that are relevant to initial teacher education, showing how to design qualitative projects in a practical way. In addition, the educator believes that **practical examples of successful eTwinning projects could be condensed into short videos**: 'If there was a very good project, it would be nice to see it in a shortened version and how it has been done and that might inspire and help others.' She also explained that, although she has not yet explored the platform fully, she feels that the **partner-finding process could be improved by adding filters/parameters that could facilitate a more targeted search for partners**. In particular, she stated, 'It would be wonderful to find partner schools with student teachers ... As I said, the platform is quite new. I have not really gone through all possibilities, maybe it is there already, I do not know ... But usually, partner finding seems to be sooo difficult. Maybe we could have more parameters, so we can find partners more easily.' However, other than those suggestions, she feels that the **eTwinning community offers**

**multiple resources and possibilities**, and that almost everything has been taken into account already.

In terms of the application process for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education, the teacher educator argued that the application process was **challenging and demanding, given that it required information and evidence that they did not have ready beforehand**. However, with the help of the National Support Organisation, she was able to complete the application. At a practical level, she said that, based on the institution's participation in the European award, it became evident that **there is a lack of research in the field, but the aim is to encourage and further strengthen this area**. She stated, 'We would like to promote research as well.' She said that they are now considering starting research into eTwinning, given that **the university staff and the university school staff are encouraged to conduct research**. She also described that one concrete way to achieve this is by 'encouraging student teachers to include eTwinning in their master's thesis by focusing on eTwinning and ... It's just ideas at this point, but it would be quite easy.' Nevertheless, **the European recognition and national label that the institution received were a pleasant surprise**. As she put it, 'So, in that sense, I was far from disappointed. Just the opposite. It was wonderful that this work was appreciated at European level.' She also pointed out that, **despite the recognition received from the headmaster, there was no tangible reward, just some visibility among the university community**. The educator stated, 'The headmaster said congratulations, great work and so on, but otherwise it's nothing tangible. So, no pay rise or anything like that. Some articles have been written on it, for example a university publication, which is seen by quite a lot of people.'

She also noted that **this recognition contributed to raising awareness of eTwinning among her colleagues** who were not fully aware of eTwinning and therefore were not able to comprehend the context of the recognition. She explained, 'Although we have informed our colleagues about this award, it does not really mean anything to a lot of them. So, we have been explaining what it is about and what a big thing it is.' In this context, the teacher educator stated that it is important to further disseminate eTwinning, emphasising the need to **prepare other student teachers to use eTwinning in a practical way, especially those in teacher training schools where the programme has not yet been implemented**. The educator stated that a seminar took place with other university schools to address this gap in knowledge and provide an opportunity for dissemination. As the educator noted, 'We had this seminar with the other teacher training schools in April. That's another thing [presenting eTwinning] that we must do, because I know that



eTwinning is done in some of them, but not during the teaching practice.' When asked for further comment on this event, she explained that **there is an ongoing attempt to introduce eTwinning to each of the 10 teacher training schools affiliated with universities.** Specifically, she said that there is a common body, similar to an assembly, that has been established to bring schoolteachers and mentors together twice a year for a seminar. In this seminar, she, along with her colleagues at the university school, will present their experience with eTwinning and discuss how eTwinning can be embedded across the school placements that student teachers must complete as part of their university studies. She recalled, 'It is a seminar where we are going to talk about our eTwinning actions and this recognition, and then we are trying to bring one person from each school together so that they can try eTwinning in their teaching practice periods. We have created a working group for that already, so that they will start doing the same thing that we do. We will try to have it as a part of each Finnish teacher training school. So, this is something new.'

### 3.3. National Higher Institute of Teaching and Education, Amiens, France

The focus group consisted of the following members:

- Helene Claeys, teacher educator
- Andrea Vidoni, student teacher.

The Network of Higher National Institutes of Teaching and Education<sup>6</sup> was established in 2013, as a union of 32 higher national institutes of teaching and education (INSPÉs) and the École Nationale Supérieure de Formation de l'Enseignement Agricole, the higher education institution serving training, research and support for agricultural education. INSPÉs serve as professional institutes for training teachers and educational staff, teachers in middle and high schools, and principal education advisors, providing a master's degree in teaching, education and training. INSPÉs offer both initial and continuing education programmes that focus on training and education, including teacher training, digital education, health promotion, cultural mediation and early childhood education. In addition, INSPÉs play a role in linking research and training by producing scientific knowledge, mainly in the field of educational research.

<sup>6</sup> - Further information can be found on the network's website (<https://www.reseau-inspe.fr/>) (in French).

The teacher educator said that she was originally hired as an English teacher educator, but gradually gained more responsibilities, including the coordination of the institution's international relations and becoming an eTwinning Ambassador. She mainly teaches English, but also focuses on plurilingualism and interculturality in the classroom. She is also involved in a Teacher Academy project for pupils whose mother tongue is not French, supporting their inclusion in the classroom. In terms of the **curriculum area in which eTwinning has been integrated**, the teacher educator noted that the master's degree includes the *International Plurilinguisme et Interculturalité* course, an elective course that focuses on international multilingualism and interculturality. She further explained that **eTwinning is presented during the first lesson and then they use it throughout the course to 'create eTwinning projects** where the content is worked on by some students autonomously, and some students collaboratively.' In this context, the student teacher commented that, although the course that eTwinning has been integrated into was elective, she chose it since she would be **able to grow both personally and professionally by interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and practising with tools** that she can use in the future. She noted, 'Well, it is interesting for me as a person because I like to travel and learn about different cultures, so I thought that it was an interesting way to do so online. But it is interesting for me professionally because it will help me with tools and ways to implement all those things in my teaching when I'm a teacher.' The student teacher also revealed that she has a keen interest in **implementing eTwinning projects when she starts working in schools**, saying, 'I will definitely implement projects with my classes when I get the opportunity to do so. I want to keep doing it because I think that it's interesting for both the students and the teachers.'

Overall, the teacher educator stressed that **the aim of using eTwinning in her teaching is to encourage student teachers to create something concrete that can be used in the future.** Specifically, she explained that, in the current year, student teachers were required to create activities, lesson plans or even whole courses across different curricular areas such as maths, games and crafting, while also focusing on inclusion and interculturality, with the aim of implementing these items in the classroom or during school placements abroad. For instance, the teacher educator stated that her student teacher 'will implement the lessons that she created during her internship. She is going to Bulgaria, I think, in April. But she will work with 15–17 pupils. It is not that many, but we thought it is better to focus on a small group and do something nice than trying to involve a lot of students, which may create problems with time. You know, it is not always easy in terms of time.' The student teacher noted that she worked with a peer from Germany to draft a

lesson plan targeting cultural diversity and language awareness by promoting student-centred and active-learning-based pedagogical activities: 'So I worked with another student teacher from Germany, and we decided to work on a way to implement diversity and different languages with all pupils. And we crafted this lesson plan called "diversity detective", in which we try to get people involved in different languages by making them investigate all the languages that they can find in their daily life, and to document them. And the second part of the activity was to get the children to choose one of the languages that they found in their surroundings and prepare and give a presentation about the language and the country or countries that is from, to teach those cultural facts to their classmates.'

The teacher educator emphasised that through eTwinning **student teachers are exposed to plurilingualism and interculturality as means to broaden their perspectives**. She argued that eTwinning offers opportunities to connect and collaborate with other student teachers who have diverse cultural backgrounds and ways of thinking, thus making student teachers aware of the existence of the 'Other, something that is **particularly important for student teachers who lack the financial means to travel abroad**: 'Because for most of my students that do not have the financial means to travel abroad, they still need to contact what exists beyond borders. So, eTwinning provides this opportunity for them.' According to the teacher educator, this type of exposure contributes not only to practising English, but also to broadening students' horizons and **providing them with a global perspective. This perspective should be provided early in their initial education**, providing student teachers with the tools and resources needed to engage in international collaborative projects, since 'If we wait, I think it might be a bit too late for most of the teachers, especially for primary education teachers.'

In this regard, the teacher educator highlighted that the **main reason for participating in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative is the importance of open-mindedness in education**, particularly in her region, which 'is quite deprived, and we have probably the lowest success rates in terms of academic skills.' Therefore, she considered it her responsibility to use programmes such as eTwinning with the aim of 'opening the window' and exposing student teachers to different cultures and perspectives: 'If we do not open the minds of the pupils and even some of their teachers, the citizens of tomorrow will be even more narrow-minded.' Along similar lines, **the student teacher mentioned that, through the course, she had managed to learn new things about other school systems, and promote her digital and intercultural competences and her collaborative competence in online settings**. Specifically, she noted, 'I am part of the course, and I have studied other countries' school systems, and it was really interesting because it makes us more aware of

what we should be doing and how things are taught in different countries. We learned a lot about interculturalism and digital tools and collaborating online, and it is a nice way to help children, and also future teachers, make connections across the world, and it is also a way to cultivate diversity and, well, teach cultures, basically.' She recalled planning a collaborative activity, which she described as a valuable opportunity to exchange techniques and pedagogical tools with other student teachers. She went on to say that she **really enjoyed the collaborative process of creating a tangible output, discussing and exchanging approaches to preparation, resources and ways of anticipating future needs**. This allowed the student teacher to become familiar with new instructional strategies and tools, and gain a better understanding of the teaching profession. She noted, 'Since we had to create something together and plan and listen together, we really talked about the tools that we were using, like how we prepare things, which documents to use, how we think ahead, and it helped us to get a better grasp of what is expected from us as teachers.'

Regarding the **challenges that the teacher educator faced** while implementing the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, she argued that, while several student teachers who had participated in the eTwinning projects were rather committed and devoted to it, there were still **some student teachers who did not engage in the process**. She remarked, 'The students really participated in the projects. They honestly produced wonderful things; they had great ideas and they worked really hard. But what I find frustrating is that some of the students are not as involved as they should be, and there is no way for the teachers, professors and trainers to control this.' The teacher educator also highlighted the challenge of working with a platform that does not currently have all the necessary features and tools, resulting in using external tools such as WhatsApp and Google Docs, which are not compliant with the general data protection regulation. She explained that, aside from the **risk pertaining to users' data, this situation adds another layer of complexity** since, 'We've got to create links and we post them on the platform and the children and students can access it, but most of the time what I end up doing is that I copy the links and send them via email.' **Despite these challenges, though, the teacher educator finds eTwinning meaningful and impactful, as it is one of the best ways to create international projects** and have student teachers work together. She cited examples of some student teachers who 'have worked together to create amazing lesson plans, activities and reflections, which showcase their growth from being students at the beginning of the year to becoming real teachers at the end of the year.'

In terms of the eTwinning community, the student teacher **appreciates the creativity, freedom and support that is evident among the members of the eTwinning community, and that she has the opportunity to meet and interact with like-minded people.** She said, 'I really like how creative people can get on the platform and how much freedom we are given and also the fact that it's pretty widely known, and people help each other. We can easily find people who are interested in the same thing as us.' Similarly, the main benefit that the teacher educator perceived was being part of a community. In particular, she mentioned that eTwinning has allowed her, along with her student teachers, to meet and collaborate with partners from all over Europe, providing added value to her professional experience. However, she expressed her concern regarding the online partner meetings and seminars since 'this constant online partner finding and partner meetings and seminars ... it kills the community spirit'. She therefore emphasised **the importance of meeting partners in person**, adding that this is the main reason that she has kept the same project partners, thus implying the **formation of more sustainable collaboration links**: 'And we need to meet the people we work with in person. And that is why we have kept the same partners and the Turkish partners and the Dutch partners and so on. Because we met them in real life and we could work together. So that was fantastic.' She also highlighted the benefits of eTwinning for sharing experiences and expertise with other colleagues who are not involved in eTwinning yet, and the sense of legitimacy in relation to showcasing her work in seminars and organising courses on European projects. In particular, she said, 'As ambassadors and teacher educators, we could participate and help other colleagues from all the teaching institutions in France to use eTwinning ... and I am also part of a taskforce organising courses on European mobility programmes, and we worked with a colleague of mine and presented that to a member of the European Parliament'. So, if we were not involved in eTwinning, I would not have been able to do that. So, it gives you some sort of legitimacy.'

The teacher educator also talked about **the benefits of the eTwinning professional development activities**, such as becoming an eTwinning Ambassador, and participating in seminars, courses, workshops and conferences where she learned about other people's work, met like-minded colleagues, and learned about new tools and developments. The teacher educator emphasised that learning is not just about theoretical exchanges, but also about creating new practices together: 'We learn ... nobody can deny that, but we exchange and we create things, and that's what is most important.' She explained that eTwinning helped her meet other teachers, trainers and students from whom she gained many skills, and it also **boosted her self-confidence**. This empowerment led her **to take part in other European programmes, and she has reported that she**

**even felt capable of teaching an entire course on trilingualism.**

Specifically, she stated that 'the fact that I started with eTwinning naturally led me to take part in other European programmes like the Teacher Academy on the non-native French-speaking students or other eTwinning projects, and even implement it ... To undertake the task of teaching the whole course on trilingualism, this was not something that I was feeling certain of at the beginning, when I was in the institution first, so, and I learned that thanks to eTwinning really'<sup>7</sup>.

In relation to the **area of research**, the teacher educator commented that, since she is not a professor, her tasks solely involve teaching. Nevertheless, she mentioned that she has participated in a research study conducted by her Turkish colleagues, which focused on eTwinning and its application to plurilingualism and interculturality. She also pointed out that through eTwinning **she and her student teachers were able to approach things from a different perspective, which was more innovative and efficient**. She exemplified her statement by adding, 'The new thing is that we learn to use things differently, like collaboration between students, training student teachers in another way, providing them [with] feedback and organising online collaboration. So now we just think differently and more efficiently.' The student teacher mentioned that she is already using various tools and techniques to enhance student learning, but is open to trying new approaches with eTwinning: 'We are already doing those things ... so it's not new to me, but I understood how they worked in practice and I got to see other ways that those tools work in different contexts.'

According to the teacher educator, the perfect **learning community would be international and open-minded**, consisting of friends who are similar to a family. She noted that eTwinning in general, and the eTwinning Groups specifically, are examples of this ideal community where members support and care for each other, even in difficult times. In this context, she described an emotional moment during an online meeting when a Turkish teacher, who had recently experienced a devastating earthquake, described her situation and the group demonstrated the true sense of community in eTwinning: 'I will give you an example. Some of them are Turkish, remember? And because of the earthquake, they have been through a very, very hard time and when we had the closing online meeting, one of the teachers, she still had the guts to participate, she explained the situation to us, and she brought us to tears. And before that, during

<sup>7</sup> - Further information about the project on teaching non-native French-speaking students can be found on the Academy of Amiens website (<https://www.ac-amiens.fr/article/academie-eramus-des-enseignants-un-projet-de-la-region-academique-retenue-122075>).

the previous weeks, we had sent messages and she said that our support had been very important for her. And this is why this is an ideal community.'

In terms of **how eTwinning could be improved further**, the teacher educator mentioned that 'the new platform is simple and easy to use since it only has one page and is rather straightforward, but more apps should be integrated into the platform'. She highlighted the importance of making the online platform more user-friendly, and addressing the lack of collaborative tools that respect personal data protection requirements. In her account, the teacher educator reiterated **the importance of creating bonds within the community and meeting in person to solidify their relationships, highlighting the importance of trust**, which is the foundation of the community. She recalled that, 'last year, the Turkish colleagues created the projects and we agreed to meet and create something new. Something nice. It started online and then we met onsite, and it gave something really beautiful at the end.' Nevertheless, she recognised the need to **find a balance between the benefits of meeting people in person and the environmental impact of travel**: 'I understand it is very expensive and it is not eco-friendly ... all these people travelling by plane. But we need to find a middle ground between these eco-friendly issues and the need to meet real people and not just faces online.'

The teacher educator shared her thoughts on the **national label that the institution** recently received in the context of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education. The teacher educator expressed great pleasure and pride in the work that they have completed at her institution, given that it was one of the first institutions to join the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative. She explained, 'It gave us more visibility and it is a way to convince our colleagues in France that what we are doing is meaningful. From that point of view, it gave us more visibility.' Furthermore, the teacher educator emphasised that the recognition the institution received as one of the nominees for the European award has helped to form the institution's European identity, which may also prove beneficial for the institution itself. However, she believes **that a badge, similar to the one that eTwinning schools have, should be used for the initial teacher education institutions as well**, with the aim of promoting the action across countries and other institutions, and providing them with a more tangible identity that could increase visibility. Specifically, she said, 'We just thought that it would have been nice if there was a little badge next to the name of the institution ... because it exists, the badge exists for eTwinning Schools. So having something similar would be nice. It would give us a sort of

coherence to all our different actions and make it clear that we are involved in eTwinning.'

Finally, the teacher educator has observed that there has been **increasing interest in eTwinning among her French colleagues thanks to blended learning mobilities**. She mentioned that she has presented eTwinning to her colleagues several times over the past 2 years: 'So in France, we are working on it, and we are seeing the results right now. So, we have more and more institutions that are interested in eTwinning thanks to hybrid mobilities.' In fact, the educator believes that eTwinning is the 'best tool to organise the virtual part of a blended learning mobility Erasmus+ project, as it is data protected, a safe platform and it can be interesting because it is part of Erasmus+.'

### 3.4. Professional School of Education Stuttgart-Ludwigsburg, Stuttgart, Germany

The focus group consisted of the following members:

- Richard Powers, teacher educator
- Baanujah Kanesamoorthy, student teacher
- Barbara Pfeife, student teacher
- Marie-Luise Munz, student teacher
- Saffet Calisal, student teacher.

The Professional School of Education Stuttgart-Ludwigsburg (PSE)<sup>8</sup> was founded in 2016 as part of the *Lehrerbildung PLUS* joint project. The PSE combines five teacher training universities: Ludwigsburg University of Education, University of Stuttgart, University of Hohenheim, the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart and Stuttgart State University of Music and Performing Arts. Through the PSE, these universities work together to improve teacher training for lower secondary schools by combining their expertise in subject sciences, subject didactics and educational sciences. In the focus group discussion, the teacher educator commented that the German school structure includes several types of schools, each one requiring specific teacher training, which can be completed at different universities. Therefore, while all teachers need some core learning elements, some aspects of their training will be more specific to the type of school in which they will be teaching. For

<sup>8</sup> - Further information on the school can be found on the PSE website (<https://www.pse-stuttgart-ludwigsburg.de/>) (in German).

instance, teachers in vocational high schools will require a different kind of training from those in regular high schools, since their learners will move on to practical, dual credit programmes. In this context, he noted, 'There are certain things that all the teachers need, and that's what's great about the PSE. The PSE is an umbrella organisation for about 4 000 student teachers who can take classes from the master's [degree] in education.'

The teacher educator said that he had recently undertaken a 4-year project from 2019 to 2023 that aimed to create blended learning courses for teachers on topics such as digitalisation and internationalisation. In this project, he created courses on universal design for learning and accessibility, and instructional design and teaching online, and a third course. He stated that 'the third one, which I am really proud of, is called **'Project-based learning with eTwinning Erasmus+ for interculturality'** and this was the first one that we did. So, I've been running this probably for seven semesters now.' He went on to say that **this course addresses differentiated teaching methods and it is 'so popular among students because they must complete an eTwinning project** as part of their three-credit requirement. This results in many eTwinning projects at the PSE.' One student teacher expressed her enthusiasm for eTwinning and shared her experience, explaining that she first learned about eTwinning through a course on project-based learning. She added, 'It's super easy to just get it started in university and get this introduction that I did. Otherwise, it would have been such a struggle to learn it from the beginning ... because you have so much going on.'

In this context, the teacher educator **emphasised the importance of individual student teachers' projects rather than large-scale projects involving many institutions**. He said, 'It could just be two student teachers from Stuttgart working with two student teachers in France, whereas a lot of my eTwinning colleagues are looking at the big picture, doing like a huge project with seven institutions and that takes 4 or 5 months to do. Our projects tend to be short and intense, lasting from 3 to 6 weeks, but do not involve pupils.' In this regard, he reported that his **main challenge is that student teachers in Germany do not have access to schools until they complete their degree and undertake in-school practice**, whereas in other countries student teachers can participate in eTwinning projects with pupils. Therefore, eTwinning projects are implemented among student teachers without involving school pupils: 'I would say 95 % of our projects have been student teachers with student teachers, with no pupils.' However, the teacher educator expressed his desire to integrate the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative into the postgraduate seminar, where student teachers can have access to pupils and participate in eTwinning projects. He also noted that he

hopes to be able to continue incorporating eTwinning projects into the bachelor's and master's degree curricula so that student teachers can familiarise themselves with eTwinning before entering the postgraduate seminar phase, allowing them to collaborate with other student teachers from different countries during their initial teacher education. He commented, 'That's where we're moving.' Overall, he highlighted that **integrating eTwinning into courses should begin with the technical aspects**, such as introducing students to the platform, **before moving on to more pedagogical and instructional design considerations**. The teacher educator also noted that integrating eTwinning into the curriculum can be challenging, and emphasised the importance of framing it in a way that aligns with existing curricular requirements. He explained, 'When I asked my superiors for a class on eTwinning, they all said no. So, the only way I could get it in the curriculum is when I started thinking about where it fits. They only said yes when the title changed to "Project-based learning with eTwinning for interculturality", because then you have to look in your curriculum. Where can eTwinning fit?'

At practical level, the educator explained that he **usually introduces student teachers to eTwinning, demonstrates the platform and then asks them to sign up by creating an EU Login account**. Given that his course is taught in a blended form, he usually does this in online sessions, since he realised that providing written instructions by email was ineffective. Completing the sign-up process as a group and practising using various functions of the platform together also make the platform easier for the student teachers to understand. He stated, 'We talk about what eTwinning is, I demonstrate the platform and then we all, as a group together on Zoom, get the EU number first and then we sign up. What I found before is when I am just sending emails of instructions, they could do it, but it is easier to do it together, taking an hour of class time. Everybody signs up and then [I] demo the platform and then have a short practice exercise.' Once registered, student teachers are **involved in a 'pre-project' process that involves organising students into groups within the classroom**. This internal grouping allows students to practise the group's functions, which operate similarly to a TwinSpace<sup>9</sup>, and to engage in various collaborative activities, such as posting discussions and sharing files, before embarking on the project. The educator emphasised the importance of having students generate a project idea in a small group before seeking partners, stating that 'That's always a good model', and that having a clear understanding of what they are looking for is 'key'.

<sup>9</sup> - TwinSpace is an online safe space offered by eTwinning. All registered etwinning projects have their own TwinSpace where teachers (or teacher educators) and school pupils (or student teachers) can communicate, collaborate, plan, create and share the activities of their project.

Regarding the main reasons for registering for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, the teacher educator noted that **international exchanges and multinational learning experiences** are highly valued. In this regard, he acknowledged that German universities have a reputation for being open to collaboration, but most of the time this collaboration lacks an international scope. As he mentioned, **eTwinning is highly democratic**, enabling student teachers to become international and European teachers, and further supports them with additional resources: 'The course makes them think, "No, I am an international teacher. I am a European teacher and there [are] so many assets coming out and resources with the EU Academy." I do not know where else they could get that.' Moreover, the teacher educator expressed the view that the professional development activities available are highly regarded and useful, saying, 'I love them. They are great. They help me and I enjoyed the new training programme that we went through. They are a wonderful part of our course.' He went on to say that he sends **links to webinars, partner fairs and courses to his student teachers**, and that some of them also attended the new platform's introductory course: 'They took a 2-week introduction [course] to the platform when the new platform was there and it was really great and helpful. It explained everything really clearly and concisely.' One student teacher shared his experience of this course, describing it as valuable since it provided a comprehensive, step-by-step approach which was 'particularly enlightening'. Nevertheless, the student teacher added that the time was not convenient for him, and was probably inconvenient for other student teachers who had academic commitments. He argued, 'But it was also the time frame again ... it was not so good because of my studies. It would be better to do it in summer when semesters are free, or between March and April. I think in those time frames would be better.'

From student teachers' perspectives, webinars about topics such as universal design for learning and project-based learning were particularly useful. They mentioned that **eTwinning's potential goes beyond mere platform usage and extends to making teachers more competent in digital learning**. One student teacher remarked that attending classes on instructional design and universal design for learning proved to be a valuable experience for her, given that these tools were instrumental in dealing with different types of technologies and provided support in her eTwinning projects. The student teacher's opinion was that these tools 'would be also good for all students and all teachers, so they can manage and learn how to use them. It will help a lot, I think.' Another student teacher pointed out that she has already participated in some pedagogical seminars for her master's degree and that there are a lot of other seminars offered by eTwinning. She also added that **attending conferences with participants from other countries and carrying out eTwinning**

**projects** proved to be instrumental in her learning, saying, 'What helped me a lot is that I attended a lot of webinars and conferences. When we started the project with different countries and people from Germany and the Netherlands, that was also great.' A third student teacher agreed with his peers and said that he has also joined Facebook groups to participate in various events related to eTwinning, mentioning that there is a wide range of options.

Overall, the teacher educator explained that the **main benefit of eTwinning for student teachers is that it helps them understand various aspects of the teaching profession and it raises the profession's attractiveness**, since it provides new approaches beyond traditional teaching. He said that their involvement in eTwinning is driven by its direct application of theories; this is particularly significant for German student teachers, as they do not typically engage in practical projects. Therefore, through their participation in eTwinning, student teachers are required to collaborate and create lesson plans that are linked to the curriculum in an alternative way, enhancing their teaching experience. The teacher educator stated, 'It makes them better teachers because they're focusing on the curriculum and they're focusing on lesson plans and how they use these new technologies to do that. So, it opens up their minds.' He commented that **this experience opens them up to new possibilities as teachers**, and eTwinning helps the student teachers to understand their role in the learning process and how people learn: 'Usually, teachers in Germany are very focused on text and homework. So, what happens with eTwinning is they suddenly go, "Wow, that is learning too." So, it helps them understand their role as teachers. It helps them understand how people learn, that they just don't learn from memorising, but there is also learning from experience.'

Similarly, the student teachers say that participating in eTwinning provides them with an **opportunity for an international learning experience**, which they consider to be of great importance. Despite being in a transitional phase between university and school, one student teacher said that **she finds herself constantly endeavouring to motivate school staff and pupils to participate in eTwinning**. She noted that some teachers and pupils perceive eTwinning as complex, although it is not. She stated, 'eTwinning is not as complicated as it may seem, and it offers a valuable opportunity for international learning. They just need a push to do it and then they will be as excited as I am.' This suggests that eTwinning could be an effective tool for engaging pupils in learning and that schools should be encouraged to explore its potential benefits. Gaining knowledge about eTwinning during university studies has been considered really effective, as it **proactively prepares student teachers for their**

**future teaching roles in schools.** She added that receiving training on eTwinning while studying can also **facilitate the process of convincing schools to participate in eTwinning, as future teachers may act as multipliers, inspiring other teachers to join:** 'I think it's a good opportunity because we have the chance to learn more about eTwinning in advance. And it's better to learn it at university because then it's easier to convince schools to do it as well.'

When asked to describe eTwinning and its role in the **transition from university studies to actual teaching practice** in schools, the student teachers pointed out that eTwinning has helped them a great deal. In particular, one student teacher mentioned that with the help of the course she was able to connect with a school in Italy and collaborate with pupils on a project centred on diversity. This experience **allowed her to work with pupils and gain their perspective on what is important to learn.** She found this to be a valuable addition to her teaching experience, noting that, 'I mean, of course, we learn it all in our bachelor's and master's [degrees]. And how should we create a lesson? How is it supposed to be done? And of course, you bring this with you. But it's also very interesting to really get their perspective.' Another student teacher mentioned that it is the eTwinning platform makes it simpler to connect with like-minded individuals, asserting that **opportunities to connect with others who share similar interests are particularly beneficial:** 'I would say it's easier to connect because you have the platform and there you can meet all these people who share the same interests. That's really valuable because you don't have to randomly ask people, "Hey, do you want to do this?" or consume valuable time to convince them. They are ready to do it.'

When student teachers were asked to indicate whether eTwinning has also affected their perception and/or motivation regarding the teaching profession, one student teacher claimed that **eTwinning's collaborative approach definitely gave her a wider perspective:** 'Through eTwinning, you have the opportunity to collaborate with different cultures and different ideas and with digital tools and all these bring you a broader mindset. That is what I think.' Another student teacher further commented that **eTwinning offers a valuable opportunity for both teachers and student teachers in relation to learning about diversity and stereotypes.** He explained, 'Not only teachers, but also students can learn more about other cultures and how to interact with them, and reduce or avoid stereotypes.' He further pointed out that eTwinning provides a **convenient and cost-effective way to learn about other cultures:** 'And it's a good opportunity to do that without travelling to other countries or doing it afterwards ... travelling to countries that you have already visited.'

One of the student teachers said that eTwinning provides ample opportunities for growth and learning for all participants, emphasising that this experience can have a **profound impact on the way groups or teams collaborate and the way in which they structure their learning.** She said that eTwinning 'is super nice. It offers a new way of collaborative learning that has not really been there before and that can really help. It has therefore definitely given me a new view on teaching methods.' She further commented that eTwinning is an **excellent way to introduce students to international collaboration and, at the same time, it can encourage national cooperation.** She remarked, 'Every student should have at least one eTwinning project during their time in school. This would allow them to explore different ways of learning and studying.' Another student teacher further highlighted that, **through eTwinning, she can now understand the importance of student engagement and active participation in the learning process:** 'eTwinning has given [me] a new insight into how we can create interesting and different lessons that engage students. Therefore, it also makes them more interested and engaged, because they can actively do something themselves and not just listen.' Another student teacher explained that the use of eTwinning is unique and provides a sense of motivation to student teachers, expressing her excitement about having learned about eTwinning during her studies: 'I love that we got to learn about it during our studies because I've never heard of it before, and I have never seen or heard of it being used in schools.'

Regarding research, the teacher educator revealed that the German National Support Organisation has strict policies regarding research on eTwinning: 'Our NSO [National Support Organisation] will not allow us to do research about eTwinning with data. They are rather careful with that.' As a result, this has made it challenging to conduct research and gather data related to eTwinning. However, despite these challenges, he said that **there are three ambassadors for initial teacher education who are planning to conduct their own individual research projects this year.** He also added that he remains interested in conducting research on eTwinning and that he has collected basic aggregate data from his course: 'But I am super interested in it. I have taught this course now for 4 years, eight semesters. I have data for each course [from a questionnaire] that just had basic questions.' In addition, he highlighted that, based on the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education, two out of three areas (namely curriculum integration and project implementation) were successful, but **the research area was underdeveloped.** Therefore, his current objective is to produce better research and produce scholarly articles based on the findings: 'We got the curriculum, and we got the project, but we did not get the research. So that is our goal now to improve research and draft articles on eTwinning.' Another challenge reported by the teacher

educator concerning the research area is that **several student teachers are interested in writing their theses and dissertations on eTwinning**, but their proposals were turned down, since eTwinning is not considered an acceptable topic; he noted that this situation is frustrating for students who are interested in exploring new and innovative topics. Nevertheless, he believes that 'This will change in a year or two. It is just too new.'

In terms of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education, the teacher educator revealed that his distinction at national and European levels was appreciated and resulted in a press release that increased eTwinning's visibility. He mentioned that an interview conducted regarding his distinction in the European award **led to increased awareness and interest among other teacher educators who were previously uninterested or unaware of eTwinning**. The educator noted that some teacher educators had previously treated eTwinning as an Erasmus exchange programme and did not realise its full potential for student projects and accessing EU funding for mobility projects. As a result, he observed that he has received a high volume of inquiries and requests for guidance on eTwinning, which 'has become a full-time job. I cannot tell you ... Every week there are 10 to 20 emails inviting me to talk about eTwinning. So, it is becoming like a full-time job.'

He also believes that the recognition received through the European award has **helped to validate his approach to introducing eTwinning into the curriculum, leading to increased support from his superiors**. He commented, 'What the award did for us is that it validated what we have done and that we are doing the right thing with eTwinning and the curriculum. So that helped my superiors say, "Wow, that is an important course, keep it in there."' **The award has also opened up new opportunities and raised awareness of their work among peers in Europe**. Despite not winning, being nominated for the European award was a significant achievement and has provided motivation to improve the area of research. The educator noted, 'Oh my gosh, just to be part of the top 12, the nomination was everything. It was just an amazing thing. And then as we said, this process showed that we had those two things that we did well and the one that we need to improve.' Considering his superiors' appreciation, along with the fact that research was not the strongest area of the institution, the teacher educator suggested that 'This will help me say, "Hey, you are not letting students draft their papers. Look, we were nominated for these two this year. We want to apply again, and we want to have all three areas at the PSE."'

Regarding the impact of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education, he claimed that eTwinning

has had a significant impact on both his student teachers and his professional development. One noteworthy outcome of his involvement in eTwinning was his **nomination for and subsequent win of the Teacher of the Year award, which included a grant to continue his work. The teacher educator credited eTwinning for this recognition**, as his students voted for him based on his promotion of international collaboration, not solely on his teaching performance. He explained that eTwinning 'had a supreme impact because the students nominated me based on my belief in international collaboration, not just because I'm a nice guy or a good teacher, but because it was eTwinning and international collaboration that really energised their studies, it made it interesting and practical for them as students.'

To further improve the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, the teacher educator mentioned that, in the past, **self-teaching modules** were used, and he believes that similar resources should be incorporated into the new platform: 'In the old days, there were these self-teaching modules. Maybe you remember them; they were these videos with little quizzes. They were an important part of my class, and the students loved them. They were short, and each week I could say, "Read this and then take the quiz, read this, and take the quiz." So, I think they're going to probably come back with the new platform because that helped them understand the platform and how it works.' Another concrete proposal for improving the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative is to **build a continuum for European collaboration by starting with eTwinning projects and then transforming them into Erasmus+ projects that use eTwinning**: 'Another idea would be Erasmus+. I mean pushing towards that direction. "Ok, now you have done your eTwinning project, enrich it, turn it into an Erasmus+ project with eTwinning."' He also pointed out that **it might be interesting to present the student teachers' projects to schoolteachers**: 'And perhaps another idea would be the projects that student teachers do ... to share them with teachers and perhaps the latter would be interested in implementing them. So, all of this work that is being done by student teachers will be fully utilised.'

However, according to the teacher educator, **many students do not possess the skills necessary to navigate the platform effectively**: 'Most of the students don't know what the advantages of eTwinning are, and many don't know how to handle it.' He further commented that, **despite its future-oriented approach, eTwinning's potential is largely unrecognised by the majority of students**, claiming that student teachers need more exposure to the platform to understand its capabilities, since 'We just scratched a little bit off the surface of what eTwinning is.' Similarly, one of the student teachers highlighted that it is essential for **student teachers to connect with others and**



**actively promote eTwinning to increase its visibility.** The student teacher noted that many individuals within the teaching community are unaware of eTwinning, and she shared an example of discussing eTwinning with colleagues: 'Last week I was in a workshop with my professor, and I talked to different people, and they did not know about eTwinning. So, I started explaining ... and I was surprised that they did not know, even though they are also in teaching.' She also highlighted that **eTwinning is potentially relevant to all teachers:** 'I think it's not only important for English teachers, but also for other foreign language teachers. And maybe beyond language teachers. Yeah.' In this regard, one student teacher suggested that **eTwinning should make further use of social media** such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, placing emphasis on students' awareness of those channels and groups to further disseminate eTwinning.

At technical level, one student teacher explained that she checks the platform once a week and sees notifications from people who want to contact her. However, the student teacher reported not receiving any email notifications and was unsure if this was a normal occurrence, asking 'Is that normal or is that just a filter that I didn't mark?' Another student teacher expressed her interest in continuing to attend the professional development activities available and **suggested that receiving emails about upcoming conferences would be helpful:** 'But right now I don't know if there are still some conferences and how we can attend those. Can we receive emails? That would be a very good thing to continue ... also to find out when there are conferences in different European countries.' Moreover, it seems that there is a high level of interest in attending webinars. One student teacher noted that he finds them 'very interesting' and has participated in some webinars; he suggested introducing **a feature where users can receive recommendations for webinars related to their interests.** The student teacher proposed the idea as follows: 'Maybe if you add filters on what I'm interested in, then they can maybe give us some ideas automatically.' Another student teacher suggested allowing student teachers to interact with different teachers from different educational levels, since 'You can learn so much from primary schoolteachers, in my opinion, with all the kind of excitement they have to transfer all of these to first graders and second graders.' Therefore the student teacher recommended establishing **a support group where teachers from various levels can convene to discuss and provide mutual assistance in getting started.** The student teacher suggested that having this kind of support group would be greatly beneficial, as it would help alleviate the fear associated with starting a project: 'We don't all have to do a project now, but let's come together. Let's talk about it, support each other and kind of help to get these first steps done, in a way, because in my opinion, that's kind of the most frightening thing to get started

and then to have a group to fall back on, to get support and to help each other, that would be really helpful.'

In addition, the teacher educator reported that **student teachers should be given the opportunity to compete for awards and quality labels as part of their initial education,** suggesting that it would be beneficial for student teachers to gain practical experience in documenting their projects and applying for awards. In particular, he said, 'ITE students do a project, but then they do not get that whole awards part because they cannot get into the school. That is a big part of the experience. The documentation and applying for an award.' The educator also suggested that **certificates could be automatically generated for student teachers** who successfully submit proposals for awards. He felt that this recognition would be a valuable addition to the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative. He stated, 'It would be kind of fun if there was at least some kind of certificate that was easy to produce, automatic. They do the whole proposal for the award and then the system just sends them a certificate.' Furthermore, the teacher educator highlighted that there is a need for a space on the platform or an event for **student teachers to showcase their projects at international level:** 'I wish there was a way ... maybe on international level, to have student teachers presenting their projects three times a year.' He further suggested a potential solution to this need, proposing an **event similar to 'speed dating' in which 20 projects would be presented for 5 minutes each.** This event would allow students to showcase their projects and network with others who share similar interests. For instance, he indicated his preference for promoting eTwinning in the form of virtual conferences, similar to the annual eTwinning conference, emphasising the importance of bringing teacher educators and student teachers together to show their work and students' work in particular. He suggested that teacher educators and ambassadors could perhaps take the lead or support the Central Support Service in organising these events, arguing, 'That might be something that you can give to us and say, "Hey, who wants to do this and volunteer?"'

At institutional level, he emphasised that **having a designated person for eTwinning at each initial teacher education institution** would be crucial to its success, as peer-to-peer communication has been instrumental in promoting the initiative. He pointed out, 'I think that's what kind of support is needed at each college. You need a person for eTwinning. You know, it's all about visibility and disseminating by word of mouth.' Moreover, the teacher educator expressed that there is a need for more webinars and workshops in eTwinning, mentioning that there are currently three German ambassadors for initial teacher education, but no events are scheduled. Therefore, he

emphasised the importance of scheduling events in advance and suggested that the programme needs a push to be more proactive in this regard. In particular, he stated that they need 'More webinars and workshops. We have three ITE ambassadors, and right now there is nothing on the schedule for us to do individually ... and we probably need to put our events on the schedule like every December, saying I am planning five webinars for next year at national level.'

### 3.5. Science of Primary Education, University of Florence, Italy

The focus group consisted of the following members:

- Laura Innocenti, teacher educator
- Ilaria Giachi, teacher educator
- Camilla Corsi, student teacher
- Clarissa Cataldi, student teacher.

The University of Florence<sup>10</sup> is an Italian public university with a strong international outlook. It fosters cooperation with academic and research institutions all over the world and welcomes foreign teaching staff, researchers and students to promote cultural and scientific internationalisation. It traditionally devotes particular attention to the development of collaborative relationships with foreign universities and to the process of internationalisation, which has become a strategic and dominant aspect of the life of the university in terms of research, teaching, the organisation of study programmes, and the mobility of teachers, researchers and students. Based on the focus group discussion, it was noted that the teacher educators are involved in a university programme that trains future teachers who will work in primary schools and preschools. According to the teacher educator, **the integration of eTwinning into their university programme is multidimensional**. One dimension involves integrating eTwinning into the course curricula: 'For instance, the professors integrate the eTwinning topics within their lessons.' Another dimension involves implementing eTwinning projects, 'which requires patience and careful planning, taking place in the traineeship course'; the third dimension involves research that aims to develop and further improve teacher competences. The educator cited **a professor who has conducted extensive research to explore the importance of eTwinning in facilitating student teachers' competence development**, noting, 'We also have

10 - Further information can be found on the university website (<https://www.formazioneprimaria.unifi.it/changelang-eng.html>).

the research outputs side, which has shown the importance of the eTwinning training in the competences of future teachers.'

The teacher educators explained that **eTwinning is integrated into various aspects of the curriculum, including the traineeship course, English labs and sometimes the ICT course**. Both educators are mainly responsible for the traineeship course, which takes place from the second year of the 5-year programme. During the second and third years, student teachers are introduced to the eTwinning platform and its collaborative tools. However, during the fourth and fifth years, student teachers have the opportunity to participate in additional eTwinning activities and follow a special, optional path alongside their normal traineeship course. The teacher educators have been working with each other to oversee these additional eTwinning activities and provide student teachers with different tasks; however, they highlighted that 'the eTwinning path offered by the university is an optional and additional opportunity for students to enrol in. So, students choose to be involved in applying and enrolling in our path and, of course, completing it.' One teacher educator pointed out that **student teachers have the opportunity to earn an additional point towards their degree mark** by completing these tasks. In the final 2 years of the course of study, student teachers are required to carry out tasks within both their TwinSpace and their schools during the traineeship. At the end of each year, student teachers are interviewed and their performance is documented. The final step requires student teachers to upload the completed tasks to the eTwinning platform, where they receive a certificate upon successful completion of all the tasks. The teacher educator explained, 'If they manage to perform all the tasks, they get the certificate. So, if they get the two final certificates, they get additional points for their thesis.'

Based on the focus group discussion, it was mentioned that **student teachers must join the eTwinning platform, and specifically a designated TwinSpace, which has been tailored for them**. Over the years, the teacher educators have established various TwinSpaces within the platform, with the aim of offering a collaborative environment where student teachers introduce themselves and work together in groups to create 'hypothetical' and 'real' projects with schoolteachers. The projects are undertaken in the fifth year. As the teacher educator stated, the projects take place then because, by fifth year, student teachers 'have improved their knowledge, they know how to create projects and have more hours for their traineeship. So, it is possible ... because we need time to find a partner ... to find some other student teachers and some other teachers from Europe or sometimes from Italy.'

In terms of their motivation to join the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, one of the teacher educators mentioned that eTwinning provides immense value in connecting educators across the globe. As she put it, 'It [eTwinning] is an excellent tool to connect teachers, enabling them to collaborate and exchange methodologies while working towards a common goal.' She further noted that **this collaboration not only benefits the teacher educators but also extends to their student teachers**, who have the opportunity to progress their competences through various projects and activities. The educator highlighted that a unique advantage of eTwinning is that it allows student teachers to be 'far but very, very close, simultaneously. **It is an extraordinary opportunity for student teachers, which enables them to anticipate the skills they will need in their future careers.**' According to the teacher educator, one of the key benefits of eTwinning is the ability to connect individuals from around the world. They stated, 'eTwinning is like an open window on the world.' This connection provides added value to users, as it allows them to **connect and meet people virtually without travelling.** This was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel was restricted; student teachers were able to continue with their eTwinning projects and connect with other student teachers from different countries despite the crisis. In this context, the other teacher educator argued that the act of embracing new realities is crucial for student teachers, since it allows individuals to gain insight into different cultures and ideas. She said, 'We need to know other cultures and ideas in order to really teach and learn, to be tolerant, to be human', highlighting the importance of cultural awareness and its role in promoting empathy and understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Regarding the benefits of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, the same teacher educator highlighted that eTwinning provides an important opportunity for student teachers to develop competences that would be useful for their future roles as teachers. The educator emphasised the significance of the opportunities eTwinning provides: 'eTwinning improves language skills and digital skills, and also offers the opportunity to develop and get exposed to new methodologies ... and also to develop an open understanding of what is happening in another country.' She further highlighted that eTwinning allows **student teachers to experiment with different methodologies** during their traineeship and receive feedback, which ultimately leads to their growth and development as future teachers. Along similar lines, the other teacher educator reported that eTwinning has facilitated the **improvement of communication skills in English and ICT knowledge through the use of various tools.** She stated, 'We improved our knowledge of some tools that we could use.' Furthermore, eTwinning has provided an opportunity for students to **collaborate on projects** and has encouraged the

creation of student-led projects, thereby enhancing their skills in these areas. The teacher educator also noted that eTwinning is an excellent way for **more pupils, teachers, teacher educators and student teachers to participate in learning programmes.** In the view of the teacher educator, this is eTwinning's distinct advantage over other programmes such as the Erasmus+ programme: 'You have to have the chance to involve more pupils, more teachers and teacher educators, student teachers ... whoever wants to join. It is different from Erasmus+ because you can't accept everyone on mobilities, so in eTwinning, everyone has the possibility and the chance to be involved.'

According to one of the student teachers, engaging in **eTwinning provided an opportunity for self-improvement and networking with other student teachers and schoolteachers.** She emphasised the value of collaborating with colleagues and the experience of implementing a project that she had originally designed: 'I had the pleasure to work with other colleagues and do a project with my teacher from the traineeship at university. It started as homework because we had to do some tasks on the eTwinning platform to validate our projects, but they were only hypothetical and then when I went to a school, I started the project ... it came to life. And so, it was a very beautiful experience for me.' Similarly, another student teacher explained that **eTwinning plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and shared purpose** among its users. She noted, 'eTwinning is very important because it promotes humanity, so we know we are all teachers, or we are student teachers.' This sense of shared identity is especially valuable given the geographic and cultural differences that often separate eTwinning users. The same student teacher observed that, 'If we are in different countries, we cannot communicate. We have different methods of teaching, different strategies.' However, the community facilitates collaboration and knowledge sharing across these barriers. As she put it, 'With this platform, we can share everything so it is possible to stay at the same level and reconnect with people who are our age or younger or older, but we all do the same job, and we all want the students to achieve something.' Ultimately, the student teacher argued that the ability to connect with other educators and share ideas is essential to eTwinning's mission: 'To me, the connection and the importance of humanity are the main functions ... it's the main meaning for me.'

Regarding the **benefits of participating in eTwinning**, one of the student teachers highlighted that eTwinning made her feel useful and capable within the classroom, despite not being the primary teacher. The student teacher said that she was often referred to as the 'teacher' by pupils and therefore it was important to make

a meaningful contribution to the class while also supporting the primary teacher. She stated, **'I wanted to be able to give something back to the teacher** that stays with us.' The student teacher also emphasised the importance of digital proficiency when working on eTwinning projects. She noted that her prior training had provided many opportunities to practise using various digital tools that are available on the platform, which helped to increase her confidence in explaining and involving other teachers and pupils in the project. She explained, 'Being able to evolve and involve the teachers who were also maybe on the platform but didn't use it very much was nice. We felt confident.' In this regard, the other student teacher said that **the schoolteacher with whom she was working was grateful for the opportunity to use eTwinning** in her classroom and expressed her appreciation for the support. In the words of the student teacher, 'She [the schoolteacher] thanked me for the opportunity, and it was a good feeling to do something that could help. Not just me, but the other teacher as well. It made me feel very useful and important.'

One of the teacher educators also noted that it is important to **provide student teachers with opportunities to work on projects**. The educator explained, 'What actually works a lot for us is giving students the opportunity to work on projects. By doing that, they actually acquire knowledge and competences that could be useful.' According to one of the teacher educators, eTwinning offers valuable benefits for student teachers, including the ability to view real projects created by eTwinning Ambassadors during online or in-person meetings. As the educator noted, these projects 'are not only inspiring for student teachers, but also for experienced teachers who are interested in expanding their knowledge and skills'. One Ambassador was reported to have created a 'wonderful project', in collaboration with colleagues from Greece, which focused on young children in preschools. The teacher educators said that the student teachers and schoolteachers who observed this project were impressed and gained new ideas to implement in their own classrooms. In addition, it was mentioned that an important benefit for the teacher educators is that they managed to **develop deeper connections** with colleagues and student teachers while working on projects through eTwinning. One of the teacher educators noted, 'I can actually say that we promoted a lot of personal benefits, like my relationship with student teachers. For instance, working with Camilla and Clarissa in eTwinning brought us closer ... and of course with Laura ... it was an extraordinary opportunity to share, to be together, to develop ... It is a strength not being alone. Being alone would never work.'

In terms of whether eTwinning has affected teacher educators' and student teachers' teaching and learning, one of the teacher

educators highlighted that eTwinning **allows teachers and student teachers to teach cross-curricular themes and further develop their competences**. She explained, 'We explore the topic and then we try to develop it and include it in several subjects, and this becomes easier with eTwinning.' Moreover, one of the teacher educators argued that **the role of universities should not be limited to knowledge transfer**, but rather should include helping student teachers 'to be organised and become confident in their knowledge. eTwinning helps us, as teacher educators, to do that, up to a certain extent, of course.' For instance, one of the teacher educators said, 'While student teachers are often native digital and skilled at using a wide range of tools, they may lack the confidence to apply these skills in a creative way in teaching.' To address this issue, she emphasised the importance of allowing student teachers to experiment and apply what they have learned. The educator noted that this is particularly important in the context of eTwinning, which **offers an 'extraordinary opportunity' to develop competences across subjects and contexts**: 'This is the main responsibility ... to provide student teachers with the opportunity to experiment and use what they've learned in practice ... and eTwinning offers this possibility.'

Based on the focus group discussion, it was also reported that eTwinning **increases student teachers' motivation, sense of responsibility and ownership**, especially when they are responsible for a project and support the teacher. As a result, completing this kind of project successfully instils a sense of accomplishment based on teamwork. The teacher educator emphasised that this type of collaboration is more than just a word and is valuable in preparing student teachers to collaborate in real-life situations. She stated, 'If you don't collaborate on a project, it's not going to be good. So, in the end, we are not going to have good feedback from the students. This means that it is crucial for student teachers to work hard and work well together to achieve success.' When student teachers were asked to indicate whether **eTwinning has affected their perceptions of the teaching profession**, they indicated that this is definitely the case, since their experience was positive and allowed them to challenge themselves, while also being able to actively participate in teaching, rather than just observing. One student teacher noted, 'We may [participate in some teaching], but we never really have the chance to do what we really want to do. eTwinning allowed us to do that, and it has definitely worked.' She went on to say that **through her eTwinning project she was able to take on the role of teacher and make decisions on what and when to teach**, with guidance from her tutor. The other student teacher stated that eTwinning improved not only her confidence but also her self-esteem in participating in and creating projects, believing that her experience with eTwinning has improved her perception of the teaching profession. She mentioned an example regarding the impact of eTwinning on teacher

and student motivation and clarified that, 'With eTwinning, you can engage in activities with other classrooms and schools, even those in the same city ... and this generates curiosity and excitement among the pupils to meet and collaborate with others. So, in that sense it changes the perception, not only the perception ... it changes teaching itself.'

In addition, the other teacher educator highlighted that the actual **implementation of projects is a manifestation of student-centred approaches**, which allows student teachers to 'become active teachers and not just student teachers'. Moreover, the motivation also comes from integrating **different topics and subjects** such as science, history, geography and English, which are usually taught separately in school, into the projects and from the fact that eTwinning provides an **alternative way of learning, creating a fruitful learning environment**. She acknowledged that 'It is a student-centred approach that integrates different topics and subjects, allowing students to have fun while learning. Without fun, there are no didactics, and in this way, we create a good learning environment that is both real and motivating for everyone.' Likewise, when student teachers were asked to indicate whether eTwinning has affected the way that they will teach in the future, they said that, despite not yet having their own classes to teach, they are familiar with the platform and eTwinning projects in general. They believe that they have the opportunity to explore the platform and see other projects, which is **different from the usual learning approach and will help them broaden their perspectives**. In the words of the student teacher, 'We have the opportunity to see the platform and other projects. It is different from what we usually do here, and this opens our eyes, and we can see many things. I will take something from that, but also maybe learn new methods and other strategies.' The other student teacher said, 'I agree and for what I have seen, I found very inspiring projects that I would really like to do in the future. In general, the platform is a good opportunity for every teacher, and I think that I will continue [using] this.'

In terms of improvements, the teacher educators suggested that **student teachers should be allowed to work on eTwinning projects without being constrained by the time limits of their traineeship**. Time was reported to be a significant challenge. Even when student teachers managed to convince their teachers to participate in eTwinning projects and collaborate with other student teachers from different countries, there were other issues: 'Student teachers may still face obstacles such as schools requiring permission to implement the projects.' This in turn might result in the project's time frame being far beyond the designated period of the traineeship, thus discouraging many student teachers from participating in eTwinning.

The teacher educator added that a possible solution would be **allowing student teachers to continue their work on the project even after their traineeship has ended**, 'allowing them to develop their skills and collaborate with student teachers from other countries'. Likewise, the student teachers stated that they would need more time to get involved with eTwinning, since the current time frames are rather short. They also suggested that more tutorials should be created for them, saying 'I really like the short video guides where there are some frequently asked questions and pieces of advice. Maybe more of those would be helpful on what to do, how to start a new project, what not to do.'

The other teacher educator commented on the process of finding partners for student teachers and suggested that there should be a **specific partner-finding function that allows student teachers to search for other student teachers**. They explained, 'It is easier for student teachers to be in contact with other student teachers instead of class teachers.' She also emphasised the importance of promoting more seminars on developing student teachers' competences: 'I would recommend you promote more seminars, e.g. how to develop the initial competences for student teachers.' In addition, eTwinning was described as having several advantages that can be utilised to promote ideas such as connecting with peers and exchanging information and experiences on diverse topics. However, one of the teacher educators suggested that **creating smaller groups would be beneficial to keep the conversation flowing and prevent individuals from feeling left out**. She clarified that this approach should be targeted specifically at initial teacher education to better support newcomers and perhaps 'this could be done with specific rooms, just to give student teachers the opportunity to talk about something that is happening in our society'. Moreover, the teacher educator emphasised the importance of promoting participation and idea sharing within the eTwinning platform. She noted, 'It could be an idea to launch a topic discussion and ask student teachers or teachers to enrol voluntarily to propose ideas and focus on something, just as a chat, not a presentation.'

Regarding **research**, the teacher educators believe that there is an opportunity to gain insights from research and collaboration with other teachers. In particular, they referred to a study conducted by a professor along with some researchers that aims to understand the impact of eTwinning on teachers. **This research allowed different realities and perspectives to be compared through projects with international partners**. The educators also mentioned a professor from Oxford with whom they discussed the importance of eTwinning as a means for internationalising their courses. This discussion focused on diverse topics such as soft skills and transversal

competences, and comparing the approaches of Italy and the United Kingdom. The educators highlighted the value of sharing ideas and improving practices without assuming that one approach is superior to the other: 'We try to compare our different perspectives and try to see this aspect, because we had different ideas, but of course trying to share ... and not say that what we do in Italy is the best practice. Just trying to see what we can improve, or they can improve and talking about, for instance, on how to improve soft skills and transversal competences.' Therefore, both teacher educators argued that **eTwinning has contributed to increasing their institution's internationalisation and transnational collaboration**. They emphasised the importance of opening up to other stakeholders, including public schools, regional authorities and local society. In the educator's view, these opportunities for collaboration are vital, and the recent European award they received allowed them to collaborate with numerous important institutions, including regional authorities and the institution responsible for overseeing teachers in Tuscany.

Regarding the '**eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education**, the teacher educators stated that gathering evidence of all the activities undertaken more than a year prior to submission for the award was a challenging task. The educator stated, 'It was difficult to summarise what we really have done.' Despite the difficulties, though, the educator noted that this process provided them with an opportunity to reorganise the group's website and **showcase their achievements to a broader audience**. In this context, the teacher educator emphasised the importance of documenting the activities undertaken in eTwinning, noting that it is necessary not only for showing the work done, but also for planning future activities. The educator stated, 'It is important to document what you are doing and not just for the group of students and the teachers who already knew this eTwinning pathway, but also for other external people who might not have any idea of what we are doing.' The teacher educators expressed gratitude for the recognition received and for their participation in the award ceremony during the annual online conference for initial teacher education 'eTwinning for future teachers'. They both acknowledged the **personal benefits gained in terms of competences and visibility**, and, although there was no direct impact on their career, they showed willingness to continue working with eTwinning. Moreover, the university published and shared several articles on Facebook, including information about a recent ceremony in Florence. The ceremony was a significant event for the whole Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology, and was attended by the former president of their course of study. The teacher educators said, 'We had some articles from our university on Facebook. And then of course there was this big ceremony for all the universities in Florence, so it was a big ceremony ... and of course, our ex-president

of the study programme was proud, very excited and she wanted to reward anyone who was involved.' The teacher educators also noted that the prize awarded at the ceremony was highly valued and has encouraged other teacher educators to get involved with eTwinning.

In terms of the **additional actions** needed to further promote eTwinning among other institutions for initial teacher education, the teacher educators stated that they would like to participate in meetings and showcase their projects to other institutions along with the student teachers who participated in these projects. In addition, they are set to host delegations from several countries coming to **complete job shadowing at their university**. The teacher educator explained, 'We will be also hosting French and Spanish eTwinning colleagues for job shadowing. Our National Support Organisation invited them to come to the university and we are really glad about this.' At national level, the teacher educators believe that the **recent national ceremony**, which was attended by individuals from different teacher education institutions, will help spread the word about eTwinning. The teacher educators also believe that their accomplishment can serve as an inspiration for implementing a similar pathway for future teachers in other institutions, emphasising the importance of **disseminating information about eTwinning to other institutions, such as the Ministry of Education**: 'So I think that this could be a way for other institutions, like the Ministry of Education, to understand that there is an opportunity to follow and to change something. Not this year, but for the following years, in the future.' Finally, one of the teacher educators suggested making eTwinning a **compulsory item in the Italian curriculum for initial teacher education, emphasising that all future teachers should at least be aware of what eTwinning is and what it can offer**, and highlighting that exposure to eTwinning at university level should not be limited to a few student teachers 'who were lucky to experience it'. In particular, she stated, 'the knowledge of [the] eTwinning platform and the opportunity to create a project should be compulsory. Because otherwise, if they do not know it, it is just a question of being lucky enough to find out about eTwinning and I think that these opportunities should be given to everyone. Of course, not everyone is going to continue visiting this platform, but if they do not even have the possibility, then they will not. So, I would suggest integrating eTwinning into the curricula.'

### 3.6. University of Lower Silesia, Wrocław, Poland

An interview was conducted with Barbara Muszynska, a teacher educator at the institution.

The University of Lower Silesia<sup>11</sup> is a private university that provides programmes in various fields including pedagogy, psychology, social communication and media science. The university has acquired 'Category A' accreditation, which allows tertiary institutions to offer studies preparing students for the teaching profession in various fields, including pedagogy, special needs education, and early childhood education and care. In addition, the university has international education programmes, and its students have successfully carried out international study programmes and apprenticeships in European universities and companies. The teacher educator teaches courses as part of a master's degree aimed at teachers who want to work in primary schools and nursery schools. She teaches storytelling, English language teaching methodology and CLIL to teachers who will teach young learners aged 3–9 years old. Therefore, her eTwinning projects mostly focus on storytelling, picture books, and learning English with technology. Sometimes internships are provided, depending on the available time. She said, 'We also have other courses, including game design, and I believe that eTwinning would be suitable for other courses as well. But we are not there yet.'

According to the teacher educator, **eTwinning is integrated into her main practice**, and she stated, 'Whatever is in my curriculum, I can do it with eTwinning. I do not mind. Whatever semester, whatever subject. Of course, I can do it with eTwinning. So, if we are doing storytelling or picture books, then we combine eTwinning with these topics.' For instance, she shared two examples of projects that she worked on, one in 2019 and one in 2021. The first project focused on using **storytelling as an educational tool in lower primary school and nursery**, and ran in collaboration with a university in Hungary. The second project was carried out in 2021 in collaboration with universities in Denmark and Croatia, and involved **teaching English through picture books and creating lesson plans**. The teacher educator also emphasised that the eTwinning projects were integrated within her courses and all tasks were planned and organised beforehand. Working with two other universities in the second project resulted in a **valuable learning experience for her as a university teacher**. In particular, she noted that all tasks were planned and brainstormed before the semester began in January. As she worked with two other universities in the second project, the

11 - Further information can be found on the university website (<https://www.dsw.edu.pl/english/>).

teacher educators were able to do more than just plan educational modules for their student teachers: 'Not only did we plan educational modules for our students, but we also learned as teachers, as university teachers while working together.'

When discussing her collaboration with colleagues from other universities and countries, the teacher educator highlighted that eTwinning improved **teacher educators' teaching based on cultural exchanges and witnessing processes that other teacher educators adopt**. In particular, she explained that, when she was discussing some project plans with a colleague from Copenhagen, she realised that her Danish colleague emphasised collaborating and consulting with her students. This was surprising to the teacher educator, who had assumed that the teacher educators would be the ones making the decisions: 'She said that she would ask her students and then we could proceed when they answer. And we were like, "What? You are going to wait for an answer from your students about whether they want to do it?" We were shocked.' In addition to improving teaching practices, **eTwinning also provides opportunities for professional development and collaboration among teacher educators**. The teacher educator noted that, while face-to-face visits through programmes such as Erasmus+ can be valuable, **eTwinning's long-term partnerships allow for ongoing communication and the development of strong relationships**: 'I have been in touch with the teacher ... for a semester, for example. That, I would say, is very important in terms of my professional development. I would say this is much more efficient than short-term face-to-face visits.'

As far as integrating eTwinning into her teaching goes, the teacher educator described her approach as starting with some **initial presentations on what eTwinning is and then presenting some of the digital tools to her students, emphasising the importance of using eTwinning in real life contexts**. She said, 'So every time, I emphasise that you can create this content for your pupils later because you will know how to use that tool already, right? So, it is not just a project for their university course, but it is also a learning experience on how you can use it later at work.'

This is further supported by the fact that eTwinning is officially part of the school curricula, so the courses taught by the teacher educator encourage the use of eTwinning: 'I always say that this is in the core curriculum, look at that. eTwinning is literally written in there, so you will work with that when you become schoolteachers ... and they are impressed.' She went on to say that she begins each class by checking the platform for any updates, comments or answers, and asks her student teachers to assess their progress and plan the next steps of their project. She added that she **also**

**assigns tasks for them to complete outside class time, but reserves some time for learning and exchanges during her class, reflecting a blended-learning approach.** The teacher educator has also successfully integrated eTwinning into postgraduate courses, which are intended for individuals who have completed a master's degree and are seeking additional qualifications. She explained that the learners enrolled in these courses are professionals who are learning how to teach English to younger learners, and she managed to include eTwinning in these courses too. However, her approach with the postgraduate students is different from her approach with other students. She said that she usually invites 'an eTwinning Ambassador to make it more serious, and the eTwinning Ambassador would arrive, do the course, register everybody ... and train them, show them the tools used, etc.'

Regarding some more practical aspects of **embedding eTwinning into the undergraduate courses**, the teacher educator explained, 'Each task is assigned a separate page, and I try to incorporate different multimedia formats to keep students engaged and actively learning. I use the platform to introduce new digital tools, demonstrating how they work and giving them the opportunity to experiment.' She noted that her approach is designed to encourage independent learning and foster a sense of community and collaboration among student teachers. The teacher educator also stressed the importance of **providing regular feedback to her student teachers**, giving the following example: 'I use TechSmith Capture to give video feedback. And I asked them, "So, how did you feel about this feedback?" So, they can continue working because I then copy the link for the video, and I put it on [Microsoft] Teams for them so they can watch it in their own time.' She also emphasised the importance of the digital tools of eTwinning, pointing out that she encourages her student teachers to use these tools to create content for their future pupils, though still highlighting the value of human contact in eTwinning. As she acknowledged, 'Digital tools play a crucial role in facilitating communication and collaboration.'

According to the teacher educator, eTwinning is fully integrated into the courses and is not viewed as a separate entity. When introducing eTwinning to student teachers, she emphasised the importance of understanding the platform and its potential use in future teaching endeavours. To do so, **the teacher educator highlights previous successful projects and encourages her previous student teachers who are now schoolteachers to present their projects.** She noted, 'I show them successful projects. I have many, many friends who are doing eTwinning at school in nursery and my previous students. So, I am fortunate in that respect. And they want to share... so, that is fantastic.' In this regard, the teacher educator was asked whether

**eTwinning helps her to develop and maintain collaboration with schools where her former students work.** In response, she confirmed that, indeed, eTwinning helps to sustain these relationships with those who express interest in doing so. She explained that they have established a support group with former student teachers who are currently schoolteachers, where they can share ideas and provide feedback. Specifically, she reported that 'There are [a] few teachers that used to be my students. All of them do eTwinning projects and we are now friends. So, we even have a group, a support group and, for example, when they are writing a project or they want to enter a competition, they send a text and all of us comment.'

The teacher educator said **she intended to implement eTwinning among student teachers and school pupils, but it has not yet been successful.** She stated, 'Yeah, I wanted to do that. That was my plan, but I never did that successfully. I need to find schoolteachers, which I now have because they are my student teachers. So, this is the direction we are going in. But yes, this would be my next step to evolve, definitely. It makes sense and it is a nice thing to have them working with people during internship.' She also remarked that she had previously conducted a course on CLIL, during which she and her student teachers worked on developing the conceptual aspects of implementing eTwinning in the context of the CLIL methodology, spending the entire semester working on this concept, developing materials and content. As she recalled, on completion of the degree programme, two of her five student teachers remained in touch and expressed their desire to publish an article in a teacher magazine and implement the eTwinning project they had developed with pupils from 11 countries. In addition, two other **student teachers implemented eTwinning projects and included eTwinning in their masters' theses.**

The teacher educator also pointed out that eTwinning is an enjoyable and uncomplicated way to bring people together and facilitate learning, which can combat burnout and bring new life to routine teaching. She commented that **eTwinning can be rather useful for those who have been teaching for several years and may be feeling burnt out** or lack inspiration, since it can create new possibilities, thereby 'injecting new energy into their practice'. Finally, she acknowledged that, while there may be a learning curve at first, as teacher educators become more confident with using eTwinning, they can develop their teaching practices and design new and interesting learning processes. In particular, she said, 'We first started with Hungary and we were all wondering what eTwinning is, we did not know ... Or how to do it ... And so, we were holding onto the tools. But then, when we learned about the tools, we started working more on the methodological and didactic part of the content



of the courses. Then, when we learned that, we decided to plan the courses. So, the more confident you feel, the more you evolve. It is never the same.' The teacher educator also believes that eTwinning provides an **invaluable support network**, given that 'sharing ideas and ongoing professional development is crucial in the field of education'. She stated that 'the most important profession in the world' requires collaboration and learning together. This sentiment is evident in a recent example shared by the teacher educator, in which a teacher involved in an eTwinning project with kindergarten students went above and beyond by inviting elderly individuals from a local club to share traditional Easter foods with her students. She said, 'This event garnered attention from the local newspaper and highlighted the international aspect of eTwinning.' This emphasises that these types of projects should be shared with the world to highlight the value of education and the positive outcomes that can be achieved through collaboration.

When asked about her **reasons for participating in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative**, the teacher educator expressed a profound enthusiasm for international collaboration, with a particular interest in languages, people and cultures. As a person with responsibility for subjects involving foreign language teaching methodologies, she considers engaging in international projects to be 'an obvious choice to go for ... whatever language you speak, it becomes real, meaningful, personal and motivational', adding that **eTwinning helps you connect with real people who speak a language, thus making students more motivated to learn the language regardless of their level of education**, whether they are in nursery or university. In addition to the benefits for student teachers, the educator identified two significant advantages she gained from participating in eTwinning. Firstly, she noted that eTwinning provides her with **opportunities for professional development in the long term through collaborating with teacher educators from diverse countries**. She is inspired by sharing ideas, experiences and perspectives, which contributes to her feeling more confident and motivated in her work. Secondly, she particularly values the **mutual learning and cooperation that is inherent in eTwinning**, appreciating the chance to learn from her partners. This aspect of eTwinning, according to the teacher educator, is very motivational, as it helps her work collaboratively with others, implement innovative ideas and feel appreciated. She stated, 'I get a bigger picture and also feel more confident in my work. This is thanks to eTwinning because I can say, "Oh, that was a clever idea", and somebody did not know about that. And we discuss and, you know, that is very motivational for me as well.'

To improve the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, the teacher educator suggested that **providing targeted information to certain institutions** would be necessary to 'spread the word'. She recommended that research be encouraged, given that it is an important aspect of teacher educators' work, adding, 'You should better align "eTwinning for future teachers" with the role, duties and tasks of teacher educators in that sense. So, people can understand the relevance of eTwinning within their role.' In this context, she noted that **promoting research that showcases the practical implementation of projects might result in increased interest among teacher educators**. She also suggested promoting eTwinning in master's and bachelor's degree programmes in a way that reflects real-life situations, helping teacher educators to integrate eTwinning into their courses. The teacher educator also highlighted the **importance of writing theses on eTwinning projects**, 'which can be challenging but motivating, as it provides an opportunity to implement the project with learners'. She mentioned that two of her student teachers who wrote their theses on eTwinning projects received special recognition at her university, highlighting that eTwinning can 'provide a brilliant aspect to their work'.

In terms of the benefits that the teacher educator has perceived as a direct result of being involved in eTwinning, she highlighted **the significance of continuous collaboration with former students, who have now become her peers. This is a direct outcome of engaging in eTwinning projects at university level**, emphasising that this continuous cooperation between them is crucial, as it helps to foster a network of friends and mentors leading to a unique form of collaboration that benefits their professional development. In the words of the teacher educator, 'And that is actually very important, because we network, we are friends and everybody is working for the benefit of the children and they also have a mentor, a friend. I think this should be mentioned as the most important impact of eTwinning.'

When asked whether eTwinning affects student teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession, the teacher educator mentioned that eTwinning **offers practical examples for the classroom, ensuring that student teachers can effectively apply the skills and knowledge they acquire**. She believes that eTwinning also offers student teachers the chance to evaluate whether the activities designed for the classroom are appropriate for younger learners and to modify them accordingly. She said, 'Definitely on practical examples, because in the classroom you will be able to do this or look at the task we are designing. So, you are going to be doing that. Would children be able to do that? How can you change that activity for a group of younger learners?' She added that she

is confident that her methodology courses equip students with practical skills and digital competences, since, as she says, 'Every task is an opportunity to gain experience on a new digital tool, and that simply writing on the chat is not sufficient.' In addition to student teachers' competences, the educator highlighted the importance of assessment, and noted that feedback is provided by both the teacher educator and the student teachers' peers. She provided an example of a project where student teachers from different countries collaborated to design picture books for younger learners and received feedback from one another on how they could improve their work: 'They were designing a module and then everybody from different countries was reading it and commenting on it. So, they saw whether what they thought was proper or a very good idea was being understood by other partners.' The teacher educator expressed her belief that **eTwinning has affected the way that student teachers will teach in their future classes**. Based on her current network with former student teachers who are now schoolteachers, the teacher educator has observed that several of them are actively engaged in eTwinning activities: 'I see examples of former students who are teaching. Yes, they are doing eTwinning. They do it every semester, they go to conferences, they go to seminars. Oh my God, one of them, the one from nursery, has become an ambassador this year and she is going to Portugal ... life changing, you know?' The teacher educator sounded thrilled with these developments and is convinced that many of her student teachers are now participating in eTwinning activities.

The teacher educator highlighted eTwinning's contribution to **increasing motivation and the attractiveness of the teaching profession** by emphasising that throughout her courses she highlights the benefits of international collaboration and how it leads to engaging activities for both teachers and pupils. In addition, she encourages student teachers to **explore eTwinning's links with Erasmus+ and further inquire about what other opportunities they will have when they work in schools**. She believes that 'eTwinning and Erasmus+ are windows that open people to new possibilities, for educators and students alike.' In this context, she also commented on **the professional development opportunities currently offered by the Polish National Support Organisation, explaining that the online courses for teachers have also been expanded to student teachers**, allowing them to access these courses<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the teacher educator requires her student teachers to take one professional development course from eTwinning per semester, based on their preferences: 'They choose the topic. I am like, "Whatever you want. You want special needs, do it. You want Class Dojo, do it. You

12 - These courses can be accessed on the Polish eTwinning website (<https://etwinning.pl/szkolenia-etwinning/kursy-internetowe>) (in Polish).

want Google tools, do whatever you want. But you need to do one and you need to show me a certificate.'" As a result, the teacher educator encourages her student teachers to **attend professional development activities and add their certificates to their portfolio** so they can 'start to professionalise ... I mean the important thing is that, in this sense, we are building this culture of continuous professional development during their initial teacher education. So, it is amazing.' Encouraging student teachers to engage in ongoing learning, she believes, will better equip them to continue their professional development even after they begin teaching, thus becoming more independent and confident in their role as teachers. She observed, 'They know where to go for support. Because we use the websites already, they will know where to look for courses, help and support. This is so important. I am like, "You have to go through this path because I will not be here later."

In terms of eTwinning's contribution to her own practice, the teacher educator noted that she learned lots of new digital tools and that she managed to **promote internationalisation in a more practical and pedagogical way**. She commented, 'While it is true that the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled us to use online platforms such as Teams, this does not necessarily entail internationalisation, communication, collaboration and active learning.' In the teacher educator's opinion, these are crucial components of eTwinning, and without them her courses would have been entirely different, since 'It is not just about me teaching in the classroom, but about the students learning from one another across borders.' In addition, the teacher educator argued that she conducts research on eTwinning and, while the eTwinning platform has contributed to her research, it has not caused a significant change in her approach. However, **eTwinning has provided her with a fresh perspective and a new direction for her research**. She explained, 'It kind of shed a different light onto my research practice ... It's just a development. It's like a new path, but that's about it.'

Regarding the impact of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative at institutional level, the teacher educator said that **her colleagues still view eTwinning as taking up too much time**. She explained, 'A lot of teacher educators at my institutions still see it as a time-consuming task ... as something that brings an additional workload.' Therefore, to promote eTwinning further, she suggested starting by dispelling this notion. She also **highlighted that some teacher educators are not confident in their language competences**: 'I think a big issue is their feeling of insecurity ... a little bit ... when it comes to language competence.' Therefore, she believes that the impact of eTwinning has not been big enough, but **she aims to make it more systemic by proposing that eTwinning becomes a regular part of**

**the institution's curriculum, included in every course.** She added, 'We will have somebody responsible for internships, but I cannot approach her and state that I need one school to do eTwinning. But maybe we could promote and/or even advertise and say that we need schools or ask who does eTwinning? So, they can then work with students who can take that workload from them and help them.' Moreover, the teacher educator expressed her belief that **other initial teacher education institutions would be encouraged to join the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative,** highlighting the great amount of work that other Polish universities have completed. In this regard, she mentioned that the teacher educators at three Polish universities have collaboratively written and submitted a chapter in a book prepared by Italian colleagues who are active in eTwinning. She noted, 'Some people may already be convinced of the benefits of eTwinning, others may require more information on the topic and this work can contribute to this need.'

In terms of improvements, the teacher educator argued that the issue of communication presents a significant challenge. She said, 'You get to write to everybody. I do not get the notification. I do not have time to go onto the platform to check. Have I received an answer? No. No chance.' She commented that, given the fast-paced nature of today's world, **individuals expect prompt responses, noting that effective communication is critical, particularly in exchanging ideas and messages.** In addition, she proposed the creation of an open group where experienced members such as herself could answer questions from people from other universities. In her own words, 'I mean groups where people like me could answer questions from other people in academia. Because we have the National Support Organisation, but maybe if people from other universities would like to ask some technical questions or practical questions, they could do this in the open group. There's a lot of promotion there as well for the programme, I think.'

She also noted that some functionalities on the new platform are not user-friendly, which can be discouraging. For instance, she encountered difficulties in connecting on the new platform with her friends who are schoolteachers, due to their differing roles. She emphasised **the importance of establishing networks that transcend different education levels to effectively carry out collaborative projects.** In particular, she stressed, 'If I am to do a project with them, for example, that is my intention. How am I going to do that? So, this is particularly important ... cross-sectoral partnerships as well. Do not create this divide if we do not want that, right? I do not want to be separated from my teachers.' Despite these challenges, she highlighted the importance of having a supportive community, especially for teachers in primary schools and nurseries, given the

demanding nature of their work. In her words, 'We need each other's support.' In this regard, the teacher educator also expressed the view that **the ideal community would be one in which there is a prominent level of sharing, in terms of both materials and ideas, and where individuals support each other.** She believes that this type of community can be fostered through various means, such as organising conferences or seminars, creating small discussion groups, or simply meeting and talking.

Regarding the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education, the teacher educator suggested that the application process was well designed, with the form being divided into sections. However, she said that **the promotion of eTwinning could be improved:** 'I think maybe a little bit more promotion. It would be useful if somebody is nominated and for the university as well and for other people to feel encouraged.' To do so, she **suggested creating short stories or videos to showcase successful nominations, and targeting academia by promoting research:** 'So if you do a story, then at the end, you could link articles that were written by them ... also for other people to read ... I think maybe promoting research would be an incentive for people in academia to join.'

Regarding the recognition received, the teacher educator emphasised that it was a form of appreciation for the work that they have been doing. She stated, 'We're kind of increasing the level of quality of education at our institutions thanks to eTwinning. So, for this reason, that recognition is important for me.' In addition, she mentioned that the recognition had had a **positive impact on her career in terms of the professional development opportunities** with which eTwinning had provided her. She noted that eTwinning had allowed her to collaborate with other teachers, educators and experts in her field: 'We have published together, and we have thought about eTwinning and how to do projects that actually have an intercultural learning aspect.' She also highlighted the **importance of networking through eTwinning,** since working on projects allowed her to meet other people so she could stay up to date with current trends. She noted, 'It helps you get to see and observe what they are doing subsequently. Are they publishing or which direction is this evolving in? So, it's also very important.'

Regarding the actions needed to better promote eTwinning in initial teacher education, the teacher educator believes that assistance would be required at primary school level or in nursery. The teacher educator mentioned that her university has project offices and international offices, and she does not see any issues with travel or combining eTwinning with other projects. However, she noted that

the administrative process of Erasmus+ is complex, and several schoolteachers lack either the English language proficiency or the expertise in writing proposals required for this. She explained, 'But schoolteachers have a problem because mostly either it is too difficult for them to get it or to write to Erasmus+ because of English. That should be more available, because with Erasmus+, it is too complex in terms of administration ... and schools in Poland do not want to do it.' Another important aspect is that **the profiles of the stakeholders involved do not always correspond to the capacity and interests of those stakeholders**: 'Universities can apply for eTwinning and Erasmus+ more easily, but they [eTwinning and Erasmus+] are not that attractive and relevant because they do not promote research. And then in terms of school education, they are attractive and relevant, but teachers face difficulties in preparing applications. So, there is this mismatch'. She added that this issue should be investigated at national level.

### 3.7. Faculty of Education, University of Castilla-La Mancha, Albacete, Spain

The focus group consisted of the following members:

- Isabel López Cirugeda, teacher educator
- Sara Lan Jiménez Moya, student teacher
- Mar Martínez Celda, student teacher.

The Faculty of Education at the University of Castilla-La Mancha<sup>13</sup> offers four undergraduate programmes: one in early childhood education (3–5 years old), one in primary education, an English-taught programme in primary education, and a double degree in early childhood and primary education. The faculty also offers postgraduate programmes such as a master's degree in educational research and innovation, a master's degree in physical education and sport for school-aged children, and a master's degree in bilingual teaching and ICT for early childhood and primary education. As explained during the focus group, while the institution has a long history dating back nearly two centuries, it did not become a university until the 1980s. It comprises many faculties, such as medicine and chemistry, across its four campuses; education is integrated into all the campuses for historical reasons, and because these studies are so in demand. The teacher educator is responsible for training students at all levels, with a particular focus on preparing future English teachers and teachers for bilingual programmes,

13 - Further information can be found on the university website (<https://www.uclm.es/albacete/educacionab>).

'which have gained popularity in Spain and many other European countries'. When referring to bilingual programmes, the teacher educator clarified that the teaching at the faculty is in Spanish and English, and that she covers 'English language ... English research and innovation, and teaching English to very young learners'.

According to the teacher educator, the notion that universities are solely theoretical is a stereotype that no longer holds true. She argued that universities have evolved significantly over time, becoming much more practical. In fact, in her experience, **most teacher educators have made a concerted effort to enhance the practicality of university education**. For instance, she stated that developing closer relationships between schools and the faculty has caused a significant improvement, and eTwinning has helped her achieve this bridging: 'I think most of us have made a lot of effort to think about how to bring the school to the faculty ... how we can make our courses more practical, and eTwinning has helped a lot in this.' In this context, she explained that eTwinning offers a platform for **practically applying skills, which she deems essential for professional development**. She believes that during training it is crucial to become adequately self-assured of your abilities, and eTwinning provides an avenue for confidence building. As she put it, 'For me, eTwinning is real practice; I'm always searching for real practice; something that can be valuable for your future.' In addition to eTwinning, she also engages in service-learning projects, which promote an experiential approach by designing and implementing projects in a school setting and the community. She expressed the belief that service-learning projects are an alternative practical experience that complements eTwinning. Moreover, she views **eTwinning as an avenue for internationalisation, which is an essential skill in the current age, especially for teacher educators and student teachers**.

Similarly, one of the student teachers revealed that she is currently collaborating with a school in Sweden through eTwinning. She expressed **her gratitude for the opportunity to work with individuals from other countries and learn from them**. She explained that this experience had helped her become aware of the concepts of globalisation and collaboration, further adding that the chance to **interact with people from diverse cultures has enabled her to be more open-minded and collaborative, and work effectively within a team**. As she aptly put it, 'Through eTwinning, I am able to keep an open mind, to be open to new things and meet other people and work with them on projects.' In addition, the student teachers expressed their thoughts on the ideal eTwinning community, and highlighted the benefits of collaborative learning between service teachers and student teachers. They both emphasised the **importance of learning**

**from real experiences and gaining insights into potential challenges that may arise, particularly during the initial years of teaching.** One of the student teachers suggested that in-service teachers could provide valuable advice. In her words, 'They can give us advice about the important things to take into account. At least for the first few years when we don't have experience ... they can give us advice.'

The teacher educator reported that eTwinning has been integrated into undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and it is **compulsory for student teachers, given that their eTwinning projects contribute to their final grades.** Nevertheless, she pointed out, 'While student teachers may not have a choice in the matter, I believe that many of them enjoy the experience.' In this regard, she explained that the degree of engagement may vary depending on the group dynamics, but she emphasised that **eTwinning fosters real practice and international collaboration, and develops soft skills through teamwork.** The educator acknowledged that working with individuals who have different levels of commitment can be challenging, but it also provides a learning opportunity for student teachers: 'Maybe at the beginning it was hard when some student teachers were not really dedicated. But at the same time, you learn to work with people who are different.' Furthermore, the teacher educator explained that she and a colleague have **incorporated eTwinning into their teaching both as a standalone course and as a component of other courses, such as pedagogy and didactics.** She explained that they have a theoretical component that has been integrated into a larger course, and they also offered a separate course comprising three sessions to provide more in-depth information.

The teacher educator and her colleague have also designed a separate unit, which includes theoretical content. **The course had to be approved by a national board to ensure its official status,** given that the educators made eTwinning a mandatory part of their syllabus. The teacher educator said, 'A percentage is devoted to project work, and in our case, this is eTwinning, but other colleagues may decide to do other kinds of projects.' She also noted that having eTwinning officially integrated into the curriculum has been a significant achievement, since getting a university curriculum approved is often difficult. In her words, 'It took a long time because it had to be approved by a national board. But if I have a project, they do not comment on how I should do the project. So now it's officially like that; it has to be eTwinning or service learning.' Regarding the ways that eTwinning has been embedded into these courses, it is evident that the **eTwinning projects are primarily carried out with student teachers from other universities, rather than with school pupils.** While the educator has attempted to develop a project with school pupils in the past, it required a lot of work. She explained, 'I've

done it just once, but it requires a lot of coordination. It is easier with just student teachers. Otherwise, it's more demanding in terms of resources and time.' In addition, she reported that accessing schools can be a challenge: 'I had access to a school with pupils, but my [eTwinning] partner didn't have any access to [a] school.'

The teacher educator highlighted that eTwinning has several benefits regarding international collaboration. She explained that **working in multinational groups requires frequent communication and English as a common language:** 'When you are working in eTwinning, you are working in groups. So, you have to stay connected with the others, and for sure, you have to use English.' Collaborative work also develops student teachers' teamwork skills, as they learn how to work together and allocate tasks effectively. The teacher educator emphasised the importance of cooperation and planning: 'You have to all work together to get a good result.' Organising and dividing project tasks among team members was considered crucial for successfully completing eTwinning projects. Similarly, a student teacher reported that working in groups is a crucial aspect of eTwinning, and mentioned the same requirements as the teacher educator: constant communication and English as a common language. The student teacher emphasised the need for effective teamwork, stating that, while some individuals may be skilled in working independently, others tend to procrastinate until the last moment. Therefore, cooperation and collaboration among team members is essential for achieving successful outcomes. The student teacher recommended adopting organisational and planning strategies: 'I would really recommend organising and planning a project by dividing it between the different members of the team.'

One of the student teachers also highlighted that there are certain aspects of eTwinning that she finds appealing, such as the **platform's organisation of files into different folders for each group.** However, she also cited a few shortcomings that she encountered while using the platform. For instance, she noted that sometimes **the platform can be quite slow, making it difficult to upload documents, which can be frustrating.** In addition, she expressed her concern about the size of files and the limitations on uploads, which can prevent users from uploading large video files directly onto the platform. She stated, 'I think that it would be very positive if there was not a limit to the size of the files ... because if we want to add a video, sometimes it is very large.' The student teacher mentioned that her experience with eTwinning was initially tough due to technical issues that prevented her from accessing the platform. While she enjoyed the experience, she acknowledged that the platform can be difficult to navigate at times, requiring some effort to understand how it works. Nevertheless, the student teacher believes that **eTwinning is**

**a beneficial tool for student learning, especially for those who have not engaged in similar activities before.** She found the eTwinning experience to be ‘very motivating for students because they are very different from regular lessons’. This was particularly the case because eTwinning involves writing and communicating with students from other countries. Both student teachers commented **that there is a significant advantage in already being trained in eTwinning during university studies.** When asked to explain this advantage, one of the student teachers stated, ‘For sure, at least, we have been trained a little bit and the others haven’t. So yes, we have an advantage, and we know how to do eTwinning projects at least a bit.’

**Exchanging life experiences** was also reported to be an additional benefit of eTwinning for student teachers. Specifically, it was mentioned that, in the context of an eTwinning project, there was a difference in terms of the appreciation for higher education opportunities. The teacher educator acknowledged that this **variation in life experiences and levels may affect student teachers’ attitudes towards higher education.** In particular, the teacher educator recalled an experience from her participation in an eTwinning project with Swedish partners, where there were significant age differences between Spanish and Swedish student teachers: ‘Every time that they work with us, they mention that our students are young; but for Swedish people it is normal to work for, I do not know, 8–10 years and then go to university. With that experience, you can appreciate that it [attending a university] is an opportunity for you to get a better job, or something like that. But when you are younger, you just do not appreciate it.’ Along similar lines, the student teachers revealed that, during their collaboration with a university in Sweden, they had the opportunity to **compare and contrast educational systems.** They were able to identify some differences between the systems in Spain and Sweden, allowing them to learn about situations in countries other than their own: ‘Thanks to eTwinning, we are learning how other educational systems work. Not just the Spanish one.’ As part of their involvement in eTwinning, they were assigned a task to compare the school curricula in Spain and Sweden, with a particular focus on inclusion. They said, ‘We were able to identify the differences between the areas and topics that each country is more focused on. So, that was really interesting.’

Overall, the teacher educator expressed great enthusiasm for eTwinning, highlighting that the only drawbacks are related to the new platform. Despite occasional difficulties, the educator believes that **eTwinning is a productive and effective environment for collaborative project work,** providing a central place for educational resources and streamlining communication: ‘I think it’s a very good

environment and you have everything together on the platform: communication, collaboration, resources ... it’s really nice.’ The educator noted that eTwinning has facilitated the formation of **valuable connections with colleagues from other faculties and even resulted in personal friendships.** The teacher educator also noted that implementing eTwinning has brought about changes in the way teacher educators and student teachers teach. As stated, eTwinning has resulted in the **integration of project-based and task-based learning into their teaching practices.** She also mentioned that the use of the eTwinning platform to facilitate the process of task-based learning has provided an interactive learning experience, allowing for collaboration and feedback from others. The teacher educator believes that this approach is quite interesting and beneficial for student teachers’ learning, saying, ‘You can do tasks with your class all the time, but the good thing is that this is also interactive; you can collaborate with someone who is also committed to the same practice and then wait for the others to complete theirs. There is this problem of synchronisation’, but I think that is quite interesting.’

According to the teacher educator, eTwinning has had a noticeable impact on her teaching practices. She explained that implementing eTwinning projects requires you ‘to coordinate your time with many other people’. **The allocation of time is a crucial aspect of effective teaching.** Moreover, she provided an example of a current project (involving four countries, with two distinct teams) focusing on English language and ICT. This ambitious undertaking requires **specific coordination, making it an engaging and worthwhile experience.** The teacher educator noted, ‘I think it’s very interesting for everybody.’ In addition, concerning the **professional development opportunities available,** the teacher educator mentioned that she has participated in some, noting that they provide valuable ideas that participants feel motivated to implement. In her words, ‘They provide you with ideas and then you feel that you want to do everything ... and now you have more and more things to do.’ Regarding research, the teacher educator mentioned that she has **written academic papers on eTwinning and has supervised bachelor’s and master’s degree theses.** Nevertheless, she proposed that further research into eTwinning should be encouraged and promoted, especially in the context of master’s degree theses and dissertations, and that the new platform should perhaps have a dedicated place to showcase relevant research conducted by student teachers and teacher educators.

From the student teachers’ perspectives, participating in eTwinning has positively affected their learning experiences. One of them pointed out that most students are not enthusiastic about online collaboration. However, **eTwinning has helped them to learn how**

**to work in groups and use online platforms effectively.** They have also gained proficiency in using various applications and software for editing and creating professional presentations. In particular, she said, 'I think that eTwinning has helped us learn how to work in groups. We have mentioned before how to work online ... because most students, for example, are not keen on working together online. So, it was great to learn new applications for doing projects or preparing more professional PowerPoints.' Moreover, both student teachers noted that eTwinning has helped them **better understand the demands of the teaching profession and increased their motivation.** One of them said that eTwinning has encouraged her to collaborate and bring ideas to life, and work to become the teacher she aspires to be. In particular, she explained, 'It is an international platform. So maybe you have a funny idea, but you do not know how to create it. But there might be another person from another country that has the same idea, and they know how to create it. So, I think that it [eTwinning] encourages our motivation and encourages us to keep studying to become the teachers that we want to be.' The other student teacher expressed the belief that working with people from diverse cultures is beneficial, as it provides different perspectives on education, and emphasises the importance of cooperation and collaboration. The student teacher stressed that **eTwinning is a way of enriching learning and teaching, that differs from what is usually covered in their university studies,** explaining, 'But in the end, everything that we have to do in class, we are not really aware of how we can apply it in practice. So, thanks to eTwinning, we can contact others and try things in practice.'

At institutional level, the teacher educator identified an increase in Erasmus+ destinations and the submission of Erasmus projects. **The expansion of the international network and the progression from non-funded initiatives to Erasmus+ projects are noteworthy outcomes of eTwinning:** 'One [outcome] would be growing our international network and also it offered a starting point for Erasmus+ projects.' The teacher educator also supported her statement regarding the expansion of the institutions' network by highlighting that **a doctorate student she supervises was able to quickly obtain a letter of acceptance to a programme in Croatia based on connections made through eTwinning.** She commented, 'I have a PhD student and he said, "I need to visit a university this summer", and I suggested visiting Croatia. He sent an email to my Croatian eTwinning colleague and the very same day he already had a letter of acceptance, so that was great. Usually, it takes a lot of time.'

The teacher educator expressed her opinion on **the ideal eTwinning community, highlighting commitment, flexibility and a sense of**

**togetherness as crucial factors.** She noted that, at the outset, participants may have doubts regarding the efficacy of the community's collective efforts; however, she emphasised that a strong team dynamic can emerge from the experience, resulting in a shared sense of accomplishment. The teacher educator acknowledged that not all eTwinning collaborations are successful, but pointed out that this is also true of other settings. As she put it, 'And then you can sense that at the end, most of the people feel like they are a team, if they've had a good experience, which doesn't always happen.' In this context, she suggested **incorporating a visual representation of students' progress into student teachers' profiles to showcase what they have accomplished** and allow them to track their eTwinning activities. The educator also suggested **using badges**, such as those offered by Google, to visually represent achievements and quantify learning: 'I'm just going to mention, in case it can be done, adding a pie chart in the profiles that shows progression or something like that ... or badges like the ones you get on Google.'

Regarding the European award for initial teacher education, the teacher educator said that there were several positive outcomes of her participation in the award, believing that it **validated the work completed in terms of enhancing the quality of future teachers' education.** Although the process demanded considerable time and effort, she found the experience to be gratifying. She acknowledged that the role of a teacher educator is labour intensive, requiring them to perform multiple tasks; however, **she perceived the recognition of her work as outweighing the challenges.** She stated, 'It took time and effort, but like everything else ... it's rewarding.' Being members of one of the 12 institutions nominated for the European award, all those involved felt the impact of the nomination was felt. The teacher educator noted that numerous messages of congratulations were received, including from colleagues at the university. However, she was concerned that many of them may not have fully understood the work: 'I don't think they know exactly what we're doing, and this is the sad part.' Regarding institutional appreciation, the teacher educator indicated that there was also visibility among and recognition from higher-level officials.

In terms of the additional actions needed to further promote eTwinning among other initial teacher education institutions, the teacher educator **described the importance of research and 'transference' in their work.** For instance, she mentioned that they have recently launched a special journal issue focusing on eTwinning, suggesting that this would be a valuable tool for connecting research and transference. She believes that this initiative will be received well by the eTwinning community, as it

**aligns with their teaching and research goals.** The educator also noted that, although they have several tasks on hand, the monograph should be an integral part of their work, especially when it comes to recognising the importance of transference: 'If it's recognised as transference, I think everybody is going to be interested in joining eTwinning.' When asked to explain the concept of transference, the teacher educator clarified that this refers to the dimension of their work that evaluates the 'impact of our work on our society, or the help you offer to schools'. The teacher educator believes that their **training programme with eTwinning is a genuine method of developing teachers' abilities, it should be acknowledged as their contribution to society, and, if their work were to be officially recognised as such, then there would be a high demand for teachers in the Faculty of Education.** Overall, she proposed that eTwinning should be aligned with and should 'feed into a requirement that teacher educators need to fulfil, either in terms of teaching, research or transference'.

## 4. Concluding remarks

This monitoring report explored the impact of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative on student teachers, teacher educators and initial teacher education institutions. The data were obtained through focus groups and interviews conducted with student teachers and teacher educators from the seven institutions that were nominated for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education in 2022. This chapter summarises the main points that emerged, and discusses them in conjunction with European policy recommendations that are relevant to initial teacher education.

### 4.1. The integration of eTwinning in initial teacher education

The **integration of eTwinning in teacher education curricula has been implemented in various ways in different countries.** There are cases where eTwinning has been included in undergraduate, postgraduate and master's degree courses related to English, pedagogy and didactics, and in school placements. In terms of the eTwinning projects, **most of the institutions design and implement short collaborative projects with teacher educators and student teachers from other countries,** since being granted access to schools is often a challenge for them due to legal arrangements (e.g. Germany), time constraints (e.g. Spain) and impoverished networks with teachers and schools (e.g. Poland). However, the teacher educators reported that they were **capable of overcoming some of these obstacles with proper planning and coordination,** through personal contacts with former student teachers who are now schoolteachers, and with the support of eTwinning teachers and Ambassadors, and the National Support Organisations.

More specifically, the following approaches have been identified at country level.

- In Croatia, **eTwinning has been integrated into an elective course that combines didactics and school placements,** in which student teachers are required to complete activities in preparation for their internships.
- In Finland, **eTwinning is directly linked to student teachers' school placements,** which take place in the university schools during



their final teaching practice period. Student teachers are required to complete a multidisciplinary learning unit, which is carried out with school pupils, and eTwinning is a great method to complete this. This is further facilitated by the fact that several elements that relate to topics eTwinning touches on, such as digitalisation, project-based learning and multidisciplinary and cross-curricular teaching, are in line with the Finnish core curriculum for basic education (EACEA, 2021).

- In France, **eTwinning is integrated into the *International Plurilinguisme et Interculturalité* master's degree course**, an elective course focusing on international multilingualism and interculturality, where student teachers create eTwinning projects with other student teachers.
- Similarly, in Germany, **eTwinning is integrated into a dedicated blended learning course** titled 'Project-based learning with eTwinning and Erasmus+ for interculturality', where student teachers design and implement eTwinning projects with other student teachers from different countries.
- In Italy, **eTwinning is integrated into various aspects of the curriculum, such as English labs, the ICT course and the traineeship course**. During the final 2 years, student teachers are required to carry out tasks within both their TwinSpace and their schools during the traineeship.
- In Poland, eTwinning is integrated into a **master's degree course on storytelling, English language teaching methodology and CLIL** for future teachers who will teach young learners aged 3 to 9 years. This integration has been further facilitated by the fact that eTwinning has been formally included in the new curriculum for teaching modern foreign languages. In addition, **eTwinning has also been integrated into postgraduate courses**, which are intended for individuals who have completed a master's degree and are seeking additional qualifications in teaching English to younger learners.
- Finally, in Spain, eTwinning has been integrated into **undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and it is compulsory for student**

**teachers**, given that their eTwinning projects contribute to their final grades. eTwinning has been integrated into teaching both as a standalone course and as a component of other courses, such as pedagogy and didactics, and has been officially included in the university curriculum.

The **main practices adopted by teacher educators** include initial presentations on what eTwinning is and the benefits that it offers, followed by discussion of the technical aspects, such as acquiring an EU Login account and registering on the European School Education Platform, which is the home of the eTwinning community. **eTwinning has been reportedly approached as a hands-on practice**, where teacher educators demonstrate the features of the platform, and allow time for student teachers to experiment and eventually complete some predefined tasks and activities. This process aims to get student teachers familiar with the platform's interface and fluent in using the tools available. Some teacher educators also mentioned that during this phase they usually **invite experienced teachers who are active in eTwinning, former student teachers who are currently schoolteachers and eTwinning Ambassadors** to deliver training sessions and present successful eTwinning projects, with the aim of emphasising the potential uses for eTwinning in future teaching endeavours. After this initial phase, **teacher educators mentor the student teachers while they design eTwinning projects** and activities that will be implemented either with other student teachers or with school pupils during their placements. During this process, it is important to note that mentors can support new teachers to 'move beyond an identity which is connected to teaching as a routine profession to an innovative identity in which teaching is considered as an inquiring and innovative profession' (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2015, p. 17).

## 4.2. The perceived impact of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative

The main reason for participating in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative is the **perceived impact of eTwinning on initial teacher education institutions**, student teachers and teacher educators. eTwinning has had a significant impact on the initial teacher education institutions in terms of **internationalisation and transnational collaborations**, emphasising eTwinning's contribution to **inclusion and openness within the institutions**. For instance, eTwinning connected a branch of the Croatian university from a smaller town with a local nursery, which resulted in an increase in the number of Erasmus+ destinations based on eTwinning partnerships, and an increase in the number of Erasmus+ project applications.

**Opening universities up to the local schools, expanding their international networks and progressing from non-funded initiatives to Erasmus+ projects were identified as noteworthy outcomes of eTwinning.** These findings suggest eTwinning has had a positive impact on the initial teacher education institutions, especially when it is considered that initial education programmes for teachers often display a weak international dimension and low levels of study and traineeship mobility in comparison with study programmes in other subject fields (Council of the European Union, 2020). Moreover, the recognition the French institution received as one of the nominees for the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education has helped to create an identity for it, which could eventually prove beneficial. Most teacher educators noted that international exchanges and multinational learning experiences are highly valued in their institutions, and that eTwinning feeds into that priority by enabling student teachers to become international and European teachers. In addition, another teacher educator pointed out that universities have evolved significantly over time, becoming much more practical, stating that **developing closer relationships between schools and the faculty has been a significant improvement, to which eTwinning has contributed.** This finding suggests that the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative directly contributes to the identified need for schools and initial teacher education institutions to be supported in opening up so that they can benefit from engaging in networks, professional learning communities and other partnerships (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2015).

Several **student teachers** indicated in the focus groups that the initial experience with eTwinning was daunting and overwhelming due to their lack of familiarity with it. Nevertheless, as they progressed, they became more acquainted with the interface and started working with their peers from other countries, resulting in a more enjoyable experience. Despite the initial challenges, **eTwinning provided an alternative, engaging and interactive way of learning,** which they had not experienced during their time at school or university. While working with other European student teachers, they **developed their multicultural and digital skills, and improved their communication and soft skills by interacting in English with peers** from other countries. These findings further support the view that cross-border mobility, in either the short or the longer term, and in physical, virtual or blended forms, can be a valuable resource for developing student teachers' social, intercultural, multilingual and interpersonal competences (Council of the European Union, 2020). In addition, it was acknowledged that the student teachers improved their intercultural competences through online collaboration with peers across Europe, and that they have **established a network with other future teachers in a cost-effective and green way.** However, eTwinning also allowed student teachers to **work with**

**experienced teachers and eTwinning Ambassadors, contributing to their professional development.** This finding is rather interesting, given that close collaboration with in-service teachers is considered a compulsory element of induction for non-experienced teachers (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2021), along with the fact that teachers who received some kind of induction tend to feel more confident in their teaching abilities and more satisfied with their jobs (OECD, 2019).

Collaborating with other student teachers allowed for the creation of tangible outputs, discussions, and exchanges of approaches and resources, leading to **familiarity with new instructional strategies and tools, and a better understanding of the teaching profession.** In this regard, both student teachers and teacher educators highlighted that eTwinning may have had a **positive impact on their motivation and increased the attractiveness of the teaching profession, given that it provides an alternative, innovative and attractive approach to teaching.** Other student teachers mentioned that they were able to understand various aspects of the teaching profession through eTwinning, since it provided **new perspectives beyond those of traditional teaching, thus making the teaching profession more attractive.** In some cases, eTwinning was reported to provide student teachers with the opportunity to exchange life experiences with other older student teachers, **affecting their overall attitudes towards higher education and the teaching profession.** In addition, eTwinning was said to promote international collaboration and community practices, such as sharing ideas and examples and asking for and providing support to colleagues, elements that support the professionalism of future teachers and affect their **'feeling of readiness for teaching'** (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2017).

eTwinning was also reported to have broadened student teachers' horizons by exposing them to alternative educational approaches, affecting their future career aspirations. For instance, some of them said that **eTwinning had sparked their curiosity and inspired them to learn more about different educational systems.** Others reported that they would like to **undertake their future studies in other countries,** and some mentioned that they **would like to work in schools with more international profiles, and get involved in Erasmus+ projects.** This finding is in line with the fact that transnational mobility as part of initial teacher education can benefit prospective teachers, since it may also increase participation in mobility at later stages of their careers (Council of the European Union, 2022). There have also been cases where eTwinning was reported to **offer an international experience of collaboration to student teachers who cannot travel.** Therefore, these findings are

particularly important, since they relate to European policies. They suggest that teachers, especially those who are unable to travel abroad on their own, may also benefit from transnational teacher mobility projects using innovative ICT-based technologies (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2017).

In terms of teaching, the student teachers emphasised the **development of their pedagogical competences, mainly regarding cross-curricular teaching and competence-based approaches**, stressing that eTwinning can be used in the context of various school subjects. One of the areas that was most appreciated by student teachers was the opportunities that eTwinning offered them to **practise teaching during school placements and work with people from different countries, allowing them to learn from real-life situations**. This is particularly important considering that student teachers also need to incorporate knowledge they gain from practical experiences in the classroom (Guerriero, n.d.). Student teachers were able to **actively participate in teaching, rather than just observing**, therefore improving their confidence and self-esteem. This active engagement allowed them to take responsibility for a project and support the schoolteacher, instilling a sense of accomplishment and ownership. As reported, **student teachers felt useful and capable in the classroom** despite not being the primary teacher, and schoolteachers were grateful for the opportunity to use eTwinning in their classroom. Therefore, eTwinning was perceived as a **supportive lever that ensured a smooth transition from student teachers' university studies to teaching practice** by allowing them to connect with schools and collaborate on projects. In this context, some student teachers explained that they were able to witness first-hand how excited pupils were when collaborating in a multinational classroom through eTwinning projects.

Moreover, eTwinning has allowed student teachers to **gain practical experience of applying key pedagogical concepts that they had previously only encountered in theory**, for example project-based learning, blended learning and universal design for learning. Some of them were even motivated to write their bachelor's and master's degree theses on eTwinning. As highlighted, **eTwinning projects have helped them experiment and practise various didactic methods and techniques**, thus developing a better understanding of how these concepts can be applied in practice, gaining the confidence to use them in their future teaching careers. In this regard, several student teachers stated that they would incorporate eTwinning into their teaching if their future school was not already involved in it. In addition, several student teachers shared the belief that **more student teachers should have the opportunity to use eTwinning in their teaching**, and said that it was necessary to

introduce eTwinning in initial teacher education, acknowledging that this might facilitate the process of convincing other schools to participate in eTwinning. Findings suggest that **the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative could serve as a campaign to enhance the image of the teaching profession from within** (European Commission, 2012), contributing to increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession to student teachers, especially given that initial teacher education is an integral part of the broader policy objective to raise the attractiveness and quality of the teaching profession (Council of the European Union, 2014).

Regarding the eTwinning professional development activities available, **several student teachers pointed out that they had attended webinars, courses and workshops at national and European levels**. These activities were perceived to be valuable for student teachers, as they contributed to facilitating the pedagogical considerations of digital and blended learning. Some of the student teachers even reported that **attending the annual online conference for initial teacher education 'eTwinning for future teachers' allowed them to interact with other participants and speak publicly**, something that they had not experienced in the past. However, several student teachers noted that they had had limited engagement with the eTwinning professional development activities due to other study commitments. Overall, though, as noted by a teacher educator, **the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative allows student teachers to build a culture of continuous professional development during their initial teacher education, so that they will be better equipped to continue learning even after they begin teaching**. Therefore, it can be inferred that eTwinning shapes a culture of collaborative learning that is consistent with a continuum approach that sees future teachers develop their abilities through their initial education and continuing professional development (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2015).

eTwinning has been perceived to positively affect teacher educators' professional development. The focus groups discussed the fact that eTwinning **allows teacher educators to implement new ideas and tools** that have been presented throughout the professional development activities that they attend. These activities include conferences, partner-finding fairs, workshops, courses and webinars, and are **highly regarded and considered useful for their professional growth**. Moreover, eTwinning provides opportunities for ongoing professional development and collaboration among teacher educators, leading to the **development of strong relationships and friendships over time** on the basis of sharing ideas, experiences and perspectives. In this context, eTwinning has been perceived as a valuable tool that can facilitate the development of international

collaborations. The data suggest that eTwinning has helped these educators **overcome their reservations and gain confidence in collaborating with other teacher educators online**. In addition, eTwinning has allowed them to connect with like-minded partners from across Europe and engage in a supportive community that encourages creativity, freedom and mutual support, and in which educators can share their experiences, ask for feedback and receive support when needed. It was also emphasised that eTwinning allows teacher educators to work in multinational groups, communicate frequently with their European peers and use English as a common language. **Compared with other Erasmus+ activities, eTwinning offers distinct advantages by enabling more individuals to participate and overcoming any travel constraints**. This finding directly feeds into the recent Council conclusions, which highlight the benefits of teacher and trainer mobility through eTwinning with the aim of promoting further transnational cooperation (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Furthermore, eTwinning has been **instrumental in providing teacher educators with the opportunity to develop deeper connections with other colleagues and student teachers**. eTwinning helped them form valuable connections with colleagues from other faculties, through which they could **share knowledge and resources with their peers, gain valuable insights into different educational systems and broaden their horizons by encountering new pedagogical approaches**. These findings further support the argument that European mobility helps develop teacher educators' sense of belonging to a European teaching and learning community through the bonds that are forged, contributing to the development of a European dimension in the activities and projects of their education and training institutions (Council of the European Union, 2022). In addition, it allowed teacher educators to **get to know their current student teachers better due to their closer collaboration, and to maintain relationships with former student teachers who are now schoolteachers, enriching their professional networks**. These networks help teacher educators develop collaboration with the schools where their former student teachers now work, shaping effective partnerships between the initial teacher education institutions and host schools (European Commission, 2012). In addition, these networks are **beneficial for student teachers and newly appointed schoolteachers, since they also have access to an immense network of peers** that can provide support and feedback regarding their work and queries. Therefore, this eTwinning network can be considered an alternative way of supporting teachers' induction into the profession, in addition to others such as mentoring, courses and seminars, and collaboration with other schools (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2017).

Overall, the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative was perceived as an innovative learning experience that has demonstrated significant potential for enhancing the effectiveness of initial teacher education. In terms of teaching, **eTwinning provides an opportunity for teacher educators to experiment with innovative approaches**, facilitating the implementation and promotion of competences across different areas. In addition, eTwinning has proved to be a valuable tool for enhancing practicality in university education and **bridging the gap between theory and practice**, as it enables student teachers to teach cross-curricular themes and further develop their competences with a view to their prospective roles as schoolteachers. In this regard, eTwinning was reported to have led to a shift in perspective within teaching, since it **enables online collaboration between pupils, teachers, student teachers and teacher educators**. Teacher educators commented that, as a result, eTwinning has improved their communication skills and ICT knowledge through the use of various digital tools, which in turn has led to improved teaching practices. For instance, eTwinning was reported to have benefited teacher educators in relation to **the way that they tutor and mentor student teachers during their school placements**. In this regard, it should be noted that the Council of the European Union emphasises the importance of establishing mentoring schemes in initial teacher education to provide support and guidance to novice teachers (Council of the European Union, 2020). In addition, it was reported that **eTwinning provides an alternative, more innovative way of teaching at university**, which can be quite beneficial for teacher educators who have used the same teaching practices for years. eTwinning was also said to have affected teacher educators' research interests. Specifically, some teacher educators indicated that their **research interests became more interdisciplinary, and that the initiative provided a fresh perspective and a new direction for research**, given that research into eTwinning is currently limited. Other teacher educators mentioned that eTwinning provided them with the opportunity to collaboratively write manuscripts for journals, magazines and books, and supervise master's degree theses and dissertations on eTwinning.

### 4.3. Challenges and recommendations

Teacher educators also discussed the challenges that they have faced, which mostly depended on the local context.

- Some **partner schools may not be well equipped** in terms of resources, which **can affect the pedagogical practices and activities of eTwinning projects**. This variability in resources

sometimes leads to the perception that eTwinning activities are more focused on producing and sharing materials than on collaborative work.

- **Finding a suitable time for online meetings** is another challenge, especially when requests for meetings are made at short notice. In France, the teacher educator explained that, since the current platform does not have all the necessary features and tools, they **use external tools, which are not compliant with the general data protection regulation**, thus increasing the complexity of her work.
- The German teacher educator said that the main challenge is that **student teachers do not have access to schools until they complete their degree and undergo in-school practice**, resulting in eTwinning projects being primarily implemented among student teachers without involving school pupils. An additional challenge is the fact that **eTwinning is not considered an appropriate topic for inclusion in student teachers' master's degree theses**.

To tackle these challenges and further improve the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, the focus group participants have proposed a set of recommendations related to the community features, the resources and professional development activities, the platform features, promotion and dissemination, and the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education.

Regarding **community building and nurturing**, the importance of **creating opportunities for face-to-face interactions**, while considering the environmental impact of travel, was highlighted. These interactions were said to lead to more sustainable and enduring collaborations. Moreover, **forming smaller subgroups based on themes or disciplines** might enhance interaction among teacher educators, promoting more targeted and meaningful collaboration on specific topics and projects. Another crucial aspect is **making partner-finding fairs more concrete and specific** by clearly indicating that these events are exclusively for teacher educators and student teachers. **Adding filters or parameters to facilitate a more targeted search for partners** in initial teacher education, such as adding disciplines or pupils' ages, was suggested as beneficial. In addition, **establishing a support group where teacher educators from different educational levels** can meet to discuss and provide mutual assistance, and forming a **specific partner-finding fair to enable student teachers to search for other student teachers** have been proposed as elements that could improve the 'eTwinning for

future teachers' initiative. Furthermore, it was recommended that **student teachers be allowed to interact with various teachers from different educational levels** to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning, which would be valuable for their professional development. Similarly, **allowing teacher educators to connect with schoolteachers, overcoming any constraints related to different education levels**, can facilitate the implementation of collaborative projects with schools.

The focus group members also shared ideas about the resources and professional development activities offered by eTwinning and the European School Education Platform. Showcasing **examples of how eTwinning can fit any discipline is crucial to dispel the notion that eTwinning is only suitable for English language departments**. In addition, creating resources for student teachers, such as tutorials, that focus on the process of designing activities, based on real-world scenarios, can maintain their interest and engagement. Moreover, **eTwinning kits demonstrating how to design qualitative projects in a practical way, and short videos** showcasing successful eTwinning projects, can be used to enlighten and inspire those who are unfamiliar with eTwinning. Incorporating **self-teaching modules consisting of videos and quizzes** can also promote student teachers' learning, and offering flexible professional development activities that enable them to schedule attendance around their other academic commitments was considered essential. In this regard, it was also proposed that **users should be able to receive email notifications about professional development activities**, and should be informed about **social media channels and groups** that would increase their community engagement.

Concerning the **platform features**, the participants suggested integrating **more apps and tools that are both user-friendly and compliant with the general data protection regulation**, making the platform more accessible and secure for all users. In addition, both teacher educators and student teachers emphasised the need to **receive email notifications from the platform** when they receive a message or have a contact request, since that would improve communication and facilitate collaboration between users. Another recommendation is to **incorporate a visual representation of students' eTwinning work into student teachers' profiles, showcasing the progress that they have made** and allowing them to track their growth over time, and to **use badges** to visually represent student teachers' achievements. As far as promotion and dissemination are concerned, it was suggested that **creating an open group where experienced teacher educators could answer questions from people from other universities** would be an effective way to provide support and guidance to those who are new to the

platform. Showcasing the practical implementation of eTwinning projects would also help increase interest among teacher educators. **Targeting certain institutions and providing them with specific information to increase awareness of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative** was also suggested. In addition, **getting student teachers to actively promote eTwinning** would further increase its visibility within the teaching and academic community. For instance, promoting eTwinning in workshops and conferences and on social media platforms could help increase awareness and reach a wider audience.

#### 4.4. Curriculum integration, project implementation and research outputs

In terms of the three areas of the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative – curriculum integration, project implementation and research outputs – **the teacher educators proposed a strategic and gradual approach to integrating eTwinning into initial teacher education**. Regarding curriculum integration, it was suggested that introducing eTwinning to student teachers should start with the technical aspects of the platform and gradually introduce the pedagogical and instructional design considerations. This approach would help student teachers become familiar with the platform and feel confident in using it in their classrooms. Another recommendation was to **integrate eTwinning into undergraduate courses, providing student teachers with the opportunity to familiarise themselves** with the platform before entering their master's or postgraduate degrees to ensure that all future teachers experience eTwinning, not just those undertaking a programme that leads to higher qualifications. Finally, the teacher educators suggested **framing eTwinning in a way that aligns with existing curricular requirements**, since this approach can facilitate smoother integration of eTwinning into the curricula, and also suggested that teachers should use eTwinning to support and enhance their teaching, rather than perceiving it as an additional burden.

In terms of project implementation, it was suggested that **students should generate project ideas in small groups before seeking partners** so that they have a clear understanding of what they are looking for. In addition, it was recommended that the **projects designed by student teachers should be presented to schoolteachers who might be interested in implementing them in their classrooms**. Another recommendation was to build a continuum for European collaboration, starting with **eTwinning projects and transforming them into Erasmus+ projects**. This could create a clear path for teachers and students to progress from smaller projects to larger, more extensive international

collaborations. It was also suggested that **student teachers should be allowed to showcase their projects at international level** during an event such as 'speed networking'. This could enable them to share their ideas with a wider audience, potentially leading to new partnerships and collaborations. Regarding research, the teacher educators stressed the need to **promote research into eTwinning and encourage its inclusion in master's and bachelor's degree theses**, with the aim of creating a body of knowledge on eTwinning that can be used to improve and disseminate eTwinning and validate its impact. To further support research into eTwinning, it was suggested that a **dedicated place should be included in the new European School Education Platform to showcase relevant research outputs** of people involved in the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative, allowing for the dissemination of knowledge and insights generated through research.

In terms of future actions needed to **further disseminate the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative at national and European levels**, the teacher educators concluded that there should be **targeted dissemination with relevant stakeholders** (e.g. the common body of university schools in Finland, the designated university staff in charge of European projects in Croatia, the regional educational authorities in Italy) to better raise awareness of eTwinning's contribution to initial teacher education. This approach should **take the contextual factors and needs of each country into consideration to increase the relevance of eTwinning**. For instance, in France, there was a big increase in interest from teacher educators when eTwinning was presented in conjunction with blended learning mobilities and Erasmus+ funding. Similarly, the Polish teacher educator acknowledged that promoting research and offering incentives for academics to participate would increase the attractiveness of eTwinning, while the Spanish teacher educator added that communication about eTwinning should be aligned with the needs of teacher educators with regard to teaching, research and transference, which refers to the university's contribution to the local society. Moreover, eTwinning could be further promoted through **peer-learning activities implemented among teacher educators, such as the job-shadowing initiative** in Italy, and by **creating a badge specifically for teacher education institutions, similar to the one for eTwinning Schools**. This badge would provide a more tangible identity for the initial teacher education institutions, increasing their visibility and promoting the 'eTwinning for future teachers' initiative across countries and institutions.

**In conclusion**, the report shows that **eTwinning is integrated into the initial teacher education curricula in diverse formats**, allowing for adaptation based on the institutions' and teacher educators'

needs, and contextual factors (existence of school placements, time constraints, integration into research publications, etc.). Overall, **eTwinning provides the same benefits to teacher educators and student teachers as those provided to the general eTwinning population**: internationalisation, competence development, new knowledge of pedagogical methods, peer support and community engagement. Nevertheless, **the added value of eTwinning in initial teacher education relates to**:

- encouraging student teachers to **gain practical experience** of applying key pedagogical concepts, which they have previously only encountered in theory, while working with school pupils or other student teachers;
- **interacting with in-service (eTwinning) schoolteachers** and eTwinning Ambassadors, thus benefiting from their practical experience and increasing their '**feeling of readiness for teaching**';
- increasing student teachers' **motivation** by enhancing their **understanding of the teaching profession**, and increasing teacher educators' **motivation** by offering an **alternative approach to university teaching**;
- offering the benefits of **European collaboration** to student teachers who are unable to physically travel;
- allowing **student teachers to build a culture of continuous professional development** during their initial teacher education;
- **developing closer relationships** between student teachers and teacher educators, and the initial teacher education institutions and schools;
- promoting the **European dimension** by encouraging student teachers and teacher educators to pursue the further **European opportunities offered by the Erasmus+ programme**.

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## Annex 1: Focus group guide

Area	Research questions	Research questions	Focus group questions
Introductory questions		General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What does 'eTwinning for future teachers' mean for you?</li> <li>What is the main reason for participating in 'eTwinning for future teachers'?</li> <li>Which elements of eTwinning provide an added value to your work?</li> <li>In what topics / curricular themes have you integrated eTwinning?</li> </ul>
Current eTwinning activities	What are participants' views in relation to the models and activities of 'eTwinning for future teachers'?	Teacher educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In what ways do you integrate eTwinning in your teaching?</li> </ul>
		General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What elements do you like (and do not like) in the current models and activities of 'eTwinning for future teachers'?</li> </ul>
	What are participants' suggestions to further develop 'eTwinning for future teachers'?	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What would you suggest to improve 'eTwinning for future teachers'?</li> </ul>
Impact of eTwinning	What is the perceived impact of eTwinning on teacher educators, student teachers and initial teacher education institutions?	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Given your participation in 'eTwinning for future teachers', what benefits have you perceived as a direct result of being involved in eTwinning?</li> <li>Do you think that eTwinning for future teacher contributes to increasing the understanding of the teaching profession? If so, in what way(s)?</li> <li>Do you think that eTwinning for future teacher contributes to increasing the motivation and/or attractiveness of the education profession? If so, in what way(s)?</li> </ul>
		Student teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has eTwinning influenced the way you learn? If so, could you describe in what way(s)?</li> <li>Has eTwinning influenced the way that you will teach in the future? If so, could you describe in what way(s)?</li> </ul>

		Teacher educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has eTwinning introduced innovation in your teaching and learning? If so, in what way(s)?</li> <li>Has eTwinning impacted your research focus? If so, in what way(s)?</li> <li>How would you illustrate the impact of eTwinning on your initial teacher education institution, if any?</li> </ul>
	How can eTwinning further support teachers' initial education?	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What would the perfect eTwinning community look like to you?</li> <li>What elements are currently missing or could be further deployed to better support teachers' initial education?</li> </ul>
Recognition in eTwinning	What are participants' views of the recently introduced 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education?	Teacher educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What strengths/weaknesses and threats/opportunities have you identified in relation to the 'eTwinning for future teachers' European award for initial teacher education?</li> <li>As one of the 12 nominated initial teacher education institutions of the European award, has this recognition had any impact on your career?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If yes, can you please describe in what terms?</li> <li>If no, do you foresee that this recognition will impact any areas of your work?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
		General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In terms of recognition, what additional actions/steps should be taken to promote eTwinning among initial teacher education institutions?</li> <li>What synergies could be established or what actions should be implemented to better promote eTwinning for future teachers at national level?</li> </ul>

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## Contact us

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**Launched in 2022, the European School Education Platform is the meeting point for all school staff (from early childhood education and care to primary and secondary education, including initial vocational education and training), researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders in the school education field.**

The European School Education Platform is a single platform that integrates the former platforms and services of eTwinning, School Education Gateway and Teacher Academy. As of 2022, the eTwinning community has been hosted in a restricted area within the European School Education Platform. This area is only accessible to school staff validated by the National Support Organisations. Since its launch in 2005, eTwinning has grown from a grassroots initiative into an active school community, and has involved more than 1 053 000 school staff working in more than 233 000 schools, across more than 40 countries. eTwinning provides a safe digital platform where teachers are engaged in various activities from designing and implementing European collaborative projects to networking, and from participating in virtual groups to professional development and peer learning. Through its platform, which is available in more than 30 languages, eTwinning provides a range of resources and learning opportunities for teachers. The topics of these resources include the benefits of engaging with eTwinning, 21st-century skills, the use of ICT in education and project kits for inspiration and guidance. Registered teachers have access to the restricted area of the platform, called eTwinning Area.

The European School Education Platform and the eTwinning community are funded by Erasmus+, the European programme for education, training, youth and sport. They are initiatives of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. The platform is operated by European Schoolnet (providing coordination, content and services) and Tremend Software Consulting SRL (providing technical infrastructure), both under service contracts with the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The eTwinning community also exists thanks to the support of the National Support Organisations, funded by Erasmus+ under grant agreements with the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, and the Supportive Partners.

