Integrative Practicum Model (IPM) for good practices in staff qualification

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Abstract

The project is entitled *Integrative practicum model (IPM) for the research and consolidation of a network of schools of excellence for good practices in staff qualification*. Is has two overarching goals: first, to define the competences that students doing practices may develop in each of the schools bearing in mind the field from which they come; and secondly, to set up a network of outstanding IPM schools practices which, because of their characteristics, foster teamwork among students from a variety of degree programmes.

General area of interest of this innovation

The innovation is part of the practicum in the degrees in Social Education, Pedagogy and Educational Psychology in the Faculty of Education at the UAB, and it is linked to the underlying principles of the new EHEA (skills work).

1. Objectives

The goal of the project is to develop a network of schools of practices which, because of their characteristics, make possible an optimal implementation of the practicum for students studying Social Education, Pedagogy and Educational Psychology according to the underlying principles of the IPM project (interdisciplinary work, skills work, etc.).

2. Description of the project

The goal of the practicum courses associated with the different degree programmes in education is to create a space of training in which the future professionals can put into practice the knowledge and skills acquired in the other courses and develop professional competences that, because of their nature, are difficult to acquire outside the place where the professional practice is conducted. Nevertheless, the traditional structure of the practice courses poses two major limitations on the training of our students:

1. The uni-disciplinary design of the practices makes it difficult to develop skills for interdisciplinary work.
2. The fragmentation of the educational roles within the practice course caused by the displacement of the training grounds outside the faculty and the introduction of the figure of practice mentor at the school.

This led the team to design an integrative practices model (IPM) based on previous funding to improve teaching quality (209 MQD 2002). The IPM model starts from an integrative concept which, in constant contact with the working world (in this case, the schools where the students do their professional practices), enables us to reconsider the generalist approach of the practices and therefore enable them to be linked to the particularities of each professional field. The backbone of the model is the creation of multi-profession teams of students doing practices that enable students to acquire their skills in multidisciplinary settings and a space of training-mentoring that is jointly spurred by the mentor at the school and the professor-mentor from the faculty at the school. This model of practices also aims to revolve around the acquisition of the kind of skills outlined in the plan for European convergence.

The first round of funding enabled us to design and experiment with the IPM model at three pilot schools. They were promising; however, there were a series of administrative and difficulties that had to be overcome. One of these difficulties was the excessive fragmentation of the range of practices available. There is an extensive networks of schools, but they had not been sufficiently evaluated and this spread students thinly among the different schools. This dispersion made it difficult to concentrate a multidisciplinary group of students at a single school, and at the same time the excessive number of schools that a given professor-mentor from the university had to keep track of meant that they could not frequently go to the schools where the practices were being held in order to conduct the mentoring and training jointly. Likewise, skills work means that there must be a sufficiently well-defined list of skills that students must acquire during the practices. Drawing up this list is a complex undertaking when the number of workplaces in Social Education, Pedagogy and Educational Psychology is so vast. In the aforementioned project, work had gotten underway on drawing up a list of skills by fields.

As mentioned above, despite the difficulties detected, the results of the first project were promising. The schools, professors and students participating in the practices had realised the vast potential of this model, and it was precisely this conviction that led

the IPM team to consider continuing the project by working on two fronts: creating a network of outstanding IMP practice schools, and validating the professional skills that students should acquire during their practices.

The creation of a network of outstanding IPM schools was meant to create the training environments needed for a model of practicum that aims to create inter-professional teams and sites of skills-based training and work. For this reason, the criteria and requirements for belonging to this network had to be developed, the schools had to be chosen and the first network had to be set up. In parallel, the lists of specific and transversal skills that the students had to work on for each field had to be completed, the expert schools had to be chosen, and in conjunction with them the significance of these skills had to be validated.

3. Methodology

3.1. Creation of the IPM network

In order to create the network of schools, we started with a series of criteria and indicators with which we made an initial short-list of 19 schools (of the 95 that responded to and returned the initial questionnaire) to make up the first network. The heads of the schools were interviewed by the research team in order to get the information that the questionnaires could not provide, to inform them about the project and to request their participation. All the short-listed schools agreed to participate in this first network, which started operating in academic year 2006-07.

At the end of the academic year we evaluated the functioning of each of the schools in the network of practices based on the input from the practice mentors from the faculty, as well as based on the assessments by the schools themselves. Based on these assessments, the network was modified and certain schools were eliminated if, for example, their organisation did not foster teamwork among the different students.

Along these lines, the schools in the IPM network had to draw up, in conjunction with the university, a protocol that was to be used to facilitate the entrance of the student into the school as well as, even more importantly, their stay at the school throughout the academic year. These protocols were aimed at more closely linking the schools and practice mentors from the schools to the universities and their mentors. This link and commitment leads to an improvement in the practices from the student's perspective.

3.2. Choice of skills

In order to evaluate the importance of each of the professional skills that the students had to acquire in the practice schools, we asked for the collaboration of the schools that hosted the students from the Pedagogy, Educational Psychology and Social Education degree programme in the Faculty of Education at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

The goal was for the professionals to assess whether certain skills could be worked on and developed by students depending on the field in which they work, specifying whether it was Pedagogy, Educational Psychology or Social Education. The questionnaires were handed out at the end of academic year 2004-05 and they were later fine-tuned.

Graph 1 shows the percentage of practice schools in each of the nine fields that participated in the evaluation:
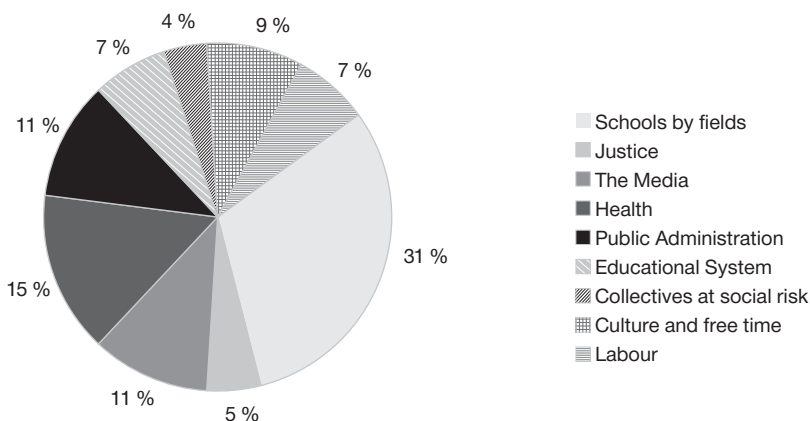
Graph 1. Percentage of experts' jobs.

Table 1 shows first the job occupied by the 82 experts who participated in evaluating the professional skills of students in Pedagogy, Educational Psychology and Social Education, and then it shows the percentage of degrees that these experts hold.

The experts were asked to help by expressing their opinions on each skill by means of a sliding scale. To do this they had to fill in charts of skills where they were asked to rate each skill from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very) important according to the professional role (educator, educational psychologist or social educator).

The variation coefficient was calculated as an indicator of the «centrality – dispersion» of the experts' responses to the skills. These calculations led to the results discussed in the next section.

4. Results

Based on the IPM, we believe that we have created a high quality model, as shown in the numerous documents and support materials for both professors and students that have been drawn up and based on the consolidation of a stable working team of faculty

Table 1. List of experts' jobs and degrees.

Experts' Jobs	Experts' Degrees
13.3% heads of primary social care	9.6% Diploma in Social Education
18.2% headmasters	16.8% Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy
10.9% heads of study	14.4% Diploma in Teaching
2.4% pedagogues	8.2% Bachelor's degree in Educational Psychology
16.9% coordinators	10.9% Bachelor's degree in Psychology
1.2% head of employment	2.4% Doctorate in Psychology
1.2% educator	3.6% Doctorate in Pedagogy
1.2% executive	1.2% Technical Telecommunications Engineer
1.2% member of management team	1.2% Bachelor's degree Chemistry with Teaching Certificate
2.4% teacher	
3.6% assistant headmaster	1.2% Bachelor's degree in Biology
1.2% president	1.2% Bachelor's degree in Law
1.2% teacher in hospital	1.2% Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Sociology
1.2% psychologist	
3.7% educational psychologist	1.2% Bachelor's degree in Social Work
6.0% heads of programmes/services	1.2% Bachelor's degree in Library Science
1.2% secretary	
2.4% technician	
1.2% mentor	

from the two departments in charge of running the practicum in the degree programmes mentioned. At this point we can state that:

1. There is a motivated working group that takes the job seriously and rigorously.
2. There is a model of practicum that works and can be exported and generalised, which has three main players: students, mentors at the school and professors from the faculty.
3. The areas of work of the students from the Faculty of Education have been defined, as have the skills to be developed via the practicum in each of these areas of work.
4. There are seminars designed that offset some of the shortcomings that students have when engaging in the practicum.
5. A series of materials have been developed in conjunction with the practicum schools such as orientation plans and evaluation grids, which support the entire process of the entry and the stay of the students at the institution.
6. The process of information exchange, follow-up and tutorials among the three players involved (students, mentors at the school and professors from the faculty) is defined.
7. The features that the schools considered as outstanding for IPM that may be included in the network must have are agreed upon.
8. There is a consolidated network of outstanding IPM schools which in the future should be expanded if we want more students to be involved in this model.
9. There is a consolidated network of practicum mentors that watch over the process following the IPM model.
10. Despite the fact that the work conducted to date is satisfactory, renewed efforts are needed to extend and consolidate the model and overcome the difficulties that arise.

5. Conclusions

Based on everything explained above, we can conclude that there are skills in which there is a high degree of agreement (averages between 4 and 5) and skills where there is a wide range of opinions among the experts. However, we cannot draw a direct correlation among the ratings of the *knowledge* skills.

It is also important to highlight the fact that most of the experts in a given field have agreed substantially on certain given skills, dovetailing in the three professional profiles (social educator, educational psychologist and pedagogue). This mainly took place in all the fields to a greater or lesser extent.

Having reached this point, we can claim that we now have the lists of professional skills organised by fields (the IPM team determined nine areas of action: the media, health, public administration, educational system, justice, labour, culture and free time, collectives at social risk and research) organised according to the averages earned in their validation (the rating between 0 – not at all important – and 5 – very important) conducted by the 82 experts. These results enable us to define the professional skills that students in social education, educational psychology and pedagogy must work on at the schools.

Below is a list of the difficulties that are currently arising as well as the future challenges to overcome them:

1. Difficulty in expanding the network of pilot schools for administrative reasons, internal procedures at the schools themselves, the organisation of the practicum within the faculty, and students' tendency to choose schools for their proximity instead of for their excellence. Therefore, we have to eliminate the technical and administrative hurdles from within the faculty that hinder us from expanding and consolidating the IPM model. The research team, the faculty and the schools plan to analyse and examine these difficulties in order find and apply solutions.

2. Difficulty in compensating the schools for their efforts, which are always voluntary and which we attempt to palliate by fostering cooperation, the exchange of knowledge and faculty-school innovation and research projects by getting the working groups inside the faculty and schools in touch with each other and showing their potential.

3. Difficulty clearly explaining the network to the faculty, the teachers and the students. The schools must be given more prestige and students must choose them for their prestige as opposed to for their proximity and ease. In order to resolve this difficulty, a tool will be devised, specifically a website, in which the model will be disseminated and the schools in the network will be listed, and the goal will be for it to become a working instrument for professors, students and the schools. Additionally, this resource will also be used to disseminate the research and innovation groups in the faculty, as well as the projects, requests and needs of the practice schools. Contacts will be promoted according to mutual interests. Likewise, informative sessions will be held for all the stakeholders involved in the practices.

4. Difficulty finding an applicable way to work on the skills. The skills that must be developed have been analysed, but now we must define how to hone these skills, including how to evaluate and structure them according to the ETCS model. In this vein, we shall study the adaptations that that IPM needs or does not need in order to be applied according to the new model of ECTS courses and the ultimate decision on the new degree programmes. We shall also study how to promote skills work for both developing and evaluating these skills. Technical seminars will be designed and held with each of the different specialities and fields of work of the future professionals in social education, pedagogy and educational psychology.

Spreading the IPM model properly requires constant efforts in two directions. The first is from the faculty in order to break with the current organisational structure and the entrenched culture among the faculty. As for the second direction, efforts must be made with the schools so that we can consolidate a sufficient network that has the characteristics needed to host at least three students from different degree programmes; so that they are open to designing orientation processes and following up with students; so that they are willing to engage in skills work; and of course so that they can offer sound professional models and have a sound pedagogical capacity.

The future challenge of the IPM team is to extend and consolidate the implementation of the model to the majority of practices in the pedagogy, educational psychology and social education degree programmes, bringing this model closer to the requirements of the ECTS courses and the new degrees, as it appears that the practicum will have major significance in the formulation of these degrees' curricula.

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Presentation of the working group
The MPI working group is made up of teaching staff from the Department of Systematic and Social Teaching and the Department of Applied Teaching of the Faculty of Education and receives support from professionals is different teaching experience centres and the students who carry out their Practicums there.

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