

INCREASING TEACHERS' PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COURSES THROUGH A PERSONALISED SUPPORT OFFER

Evidence from the TeachUP policy experimentation

THE CHALLENGE

Teachers face an increasing number of complex challenges in their daily work in the classroom, in a context of changing trends in society and education reforms. They therefore need more training opportunities that relate to their daily practice and that they can combine flexibly with teaching duties. Scalable online courses can provide a solution. Yet, evidence shows that only 36% of teachers across OECD countries have undertaken online training (OECD, 2019). Moreover, completion rates in such courses tend to be low.

THE SOLUTION TESTED

The TeachUP project tested a possible solution to help teachers succeed in online training: **a personalised support mechanism consisting of emails with personalised guidance and an offer of 1:1 support** sent only to course participants who were likely to need support. The research question was:

Does such **personalised support** increase teachers' and student teachers' **participation in online courses**?

THE INTERVENTION

THE OUTCOME

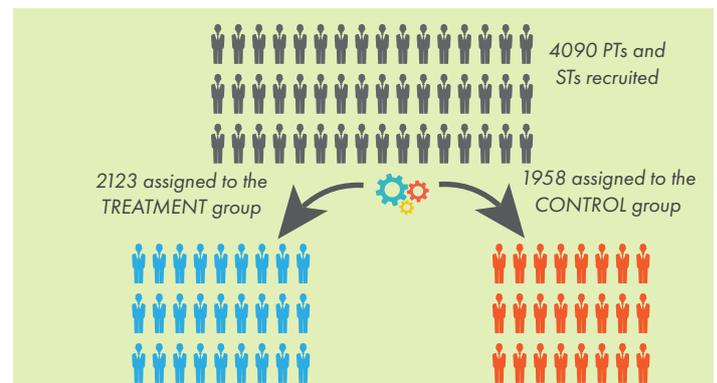


Figure 1: the TeachUP Randomised Controlled Trial Design

THE RESEARCH SETUP

1. **Schools and initial teacher training organisations in 10 countries** (Austria, Hungary, Greece, Estonia, Malta, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, Slovakia, Turkey) were randomly sampled.
2. Teachers and student teachers were invited to join **four online courses** on the topics of formative assessment, personalised learning, collaborative learning and creativity.
3. **4090 teachers and student teachers** accepted the invitation (= TeachUP sample).
4. They were randomly divided into a **treatment** and a **control** group.
5. Those in the treatment group identified as 'potentially in need' received the **personalised support offer**.



KEY FINDINGS

1. The **personalised support offer** increased the likelihood of enrolled teachers completing an online course by 10 percentage points. This impact is both statistically significant and substantial.
 - *This is a promising finding for policy makers looking for effective ways to harness the potential of online courses for teacher training.*
2. The **personalised support offer** increased the likelihood of student teachers enrolled on the course completing it only if they had past experience in online courses (i.e. completed more than one online course per year in the past three years).
3. There was no effect for teachers and student teachers in Turkey.
 - *Hence, the personalised support provided was effective. But why? And why did it not work for everyone?*

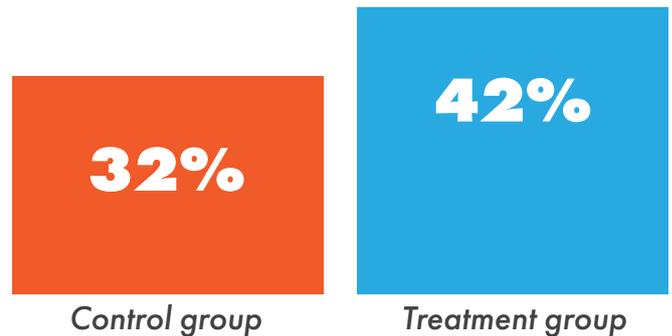


Figure 2: Overall impact on course completion among enrolled teachers

UNPACKING THE TEACHUP SUPPORT MECHANISM

The **personalised support** consisted of nine different personalised support emails. These emails contained guidance and resources to help the course participant address the areas of need which triggered this specific personalised support email (e.g. guidance on how to complete the work and where to find support for those that had not submitted their work two days before the deadline) as well as an offer of further 1:1 support if needed.

The overall impact of the personalised support was based on two different mechanisms:

1. A personalised support offer based on participant profiles which was triggered by information collected from students and student teachers via a baseline survey prior to the courses (e.g. low digital competence, no prior experience with online courses, low expectation to complete the course).
2. A personalised support offer which was triggered by behaviours on the course platform during the courses. These emails were only in place in courses 2, 3 and 4.

How did this work?

The support offer based on participant profiles increased teachers' likelihood to complete the first course

Based on the information from the baseline survey, around 38% were identified as 'potentially in need' in courses 1, 2 and 3 (54% in course 4 owing to updated qualification criteria).

The support offer which was based on participant profiles made it more likely that those teachers in the treatment group who started the first course would also complete it. The support offer had a major impact in course 1.

However, this support offer had no impact on course completion in courses 2, 3 and 4. A possible explanation for this is that the natural completion rates for these three courses were already very high, leaving less potential for the **personalised support** to have an impact.

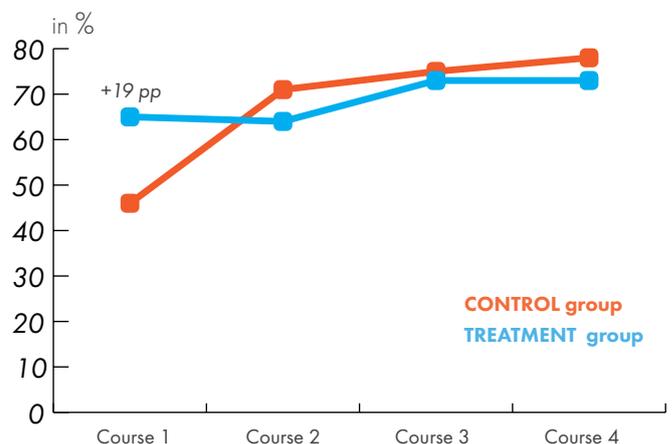


Figure 3: Impact of personalised support on completing a course

The support offer based on behaviour on the course platform increased teachers' likelihood to start courses 2, 3 and 4

In courses 2, 3 and 4, more than 90% of the teachers in the treatment group were identified as "potentially in need" at some point, mainly because they had not started the course(s) after 5 days. A personalised reminder email with an offer of further support sent to all those in the treatment group who had not started the course after 5 days increased the probability of teachers starting a course.

This personalised reminder email induced teachers to start courses 2, 3 and 4 who may not have done so otherwise. The teachers who started the courses as a result of the personalised reminder email had on average less prior experience in online training.

The impact of other emails based on behaviour on the course platform was negligible and some were rarely triggered.

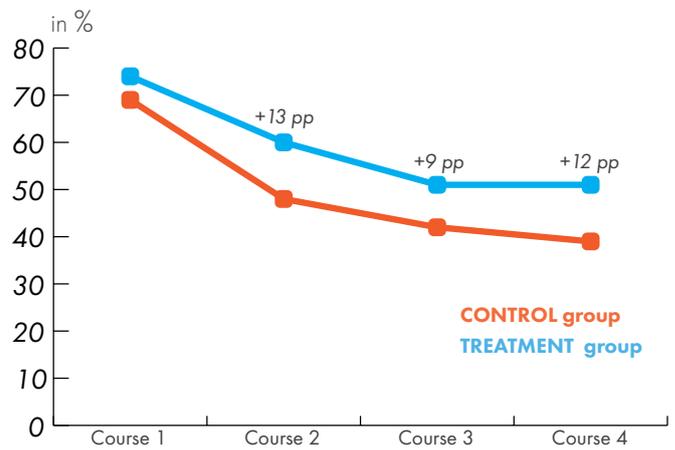


Figure 4: Impact of personalised support on starting a course

HOW DID THE PERSONALISED SUPPORT OFFER WORK?

Some of the personalised support emails also contained the offer to book a 1:1 online session with a personalised support agent. Very few teachers and student teachers accepted the offer for an online 1:1 session (57 in total), and few also replied to the more general offer of support made in all personalised support emails. Nonetheless, the **personalised support** had an impact.

It is not possible to offer a conclusive answer to how the personalised support actually worked but qualitative evidence from, for example, the focus groups at Country Dialogue Labs¹ suggests that a set of different dynamics was at play, working in combination and affecting different users to different extents:

1. A sense of **"feeling observed"** – The fact that course participants received emails which were clearly tailored to their respective situation resulted in a feeling of being monitored, suggesting that if they did not proceed/succeed someone would notice.
2. Acted as a **"prompt"** - At a more basic level the support offer might have simply acted as a reminder and prompt to do certain things which the participant had forgotten about – such as start the course, making time to do the course or reflecting on how to succeed on the course.
3. Acted as **"guidance"** – It is also likely that the personalised support offered genuinely addressed questions and needs of those contacted.

¹ To enrich this quantitative analysis, qualitative feedback from key stakeholders during three workshops ('Country Dialogue Labs') in each field trials country was collected. The full summary is available in the 'Cross-Country Dialogue Report'.

NUMBERS PARTICIPATING IN COURSES

The natural completion rates (i.e. the completion rates observed in the control group) provide a context to understand better the impact of the **personalised support**. The control group were not offered personalised support. Out of ten teachers and student teachers in this group, seven started at least one course and about three completed at least one.

The start rates among those enrolled dropped considerably from course 1 (58%) to course 4 (20%), while the completion rates of those that started increased continuously, from 48% in course 1 to 75% in course 4.

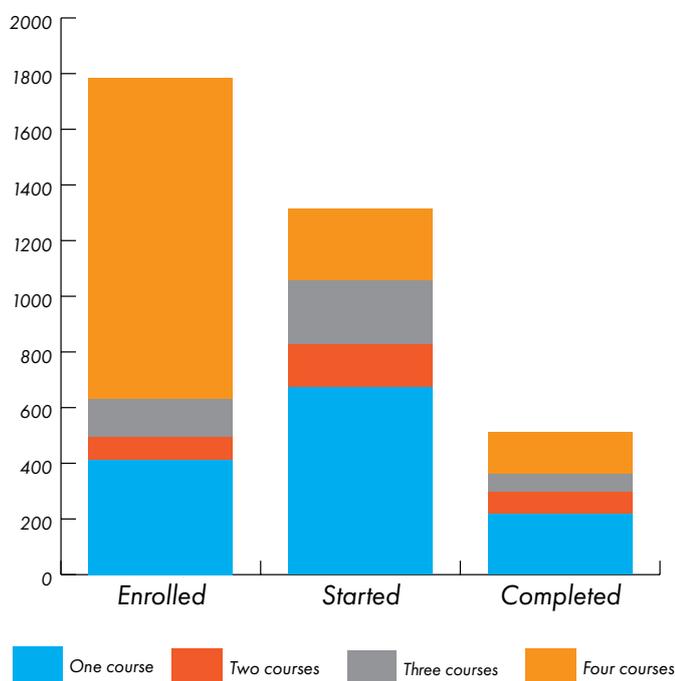


Figure 5: TeachUP course participation patterns (absolute number in control group only)

Why? These findings can be explained by the fact that only a “very self-selected sample” decided to start the courses 2,3 and 4.

Given the fact that these natural completion rates were already quite high, little room was left for the personalised support to have an impact on course participation.

WHY DID THE PERSONALISED SUPPORT OFFER HAVE NO IMPACT IN TURKEY?

The research results from the field trials do not provide conclusive answers why the **personalised support** did not work for student teachers and teachers in Turkey. Possible explanations are potentially relevant differences regarding participant profiles, course participation, as well as possible differences in the implementation of the personalised support.

- 1. Participant profiles:** Teachers and student teachers in Turkey overall had less experience with online courses, were more likely to expect a formal recognition of the TeachUP certificate, less proficient in English and less likely to have a Master degree. TeachUP student teachers in Turkey were less likely to have access to the internet, and good quality internet at school and at home.
- 2. Course participation:** The natural completion rates of teachers and student teachers in Turkey stood at 22% and 12% respectively. This was clearly below the EU natural completion rate of 32%. For teachers in Turkey, this lower completion rate seems to be mainly due to a sharp decline in starting rates from 60% for course 1 to only 19% for course 4. At the same time, Turkish teachers’ completion rates among those that started was higher than those of EU teachers in three out of four courses.
- 3. Implementation of the personalised support:** Some differences in how the courses were delivered in Turkey might have reduced the potential impact of the personalised support. Notably, the course moderator was particularly active and experienced. Furthermore, some contamination between treated and control groups cannot be excluded in Turkey.

WHAT WAS LEARNT FROM TEACHUP?

Three key recommendations for teacher education and policy making emerge from the TeachUP research results:

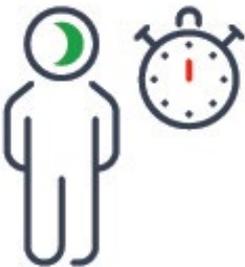
- **Send out personalised messages**



Personalising messages is likely to have played an important role in the impact of the messages on course participation. Accordingly, finding means to generate messages that include information about the

participants' profile and progress is likely to achieve positive results with regard to participation and completion. Personalising messages does not have to be a complex process requiring substantial data collection. In other words, it is not clear from the TeachUP evidence that a substantial degree of personalisation is required to achieve the results recorded.

- **Reach out to latecomers**



The TeachUP results show that contacting those who have not yet started a course can have a significant positive impact on course completion. Accordingly, finding a mechanism to reach out to those failing to start a course is

worthwhile.

- **Reach out to newcomers**



Research indicates that previous experience of online learning is a determining factor in non-completion and this was confirmed for teachers and student teachers in the TeachUP

experimentation. Reaching out to learners new to online learning therefore promises high returns with regard to participation and completion. The reach-out should include some personalisation and an offer of support (given that it is not possible to say if the result would have been the same without these two elements.)

The full list of recommendations can be seen in the report on [personalised support](#).

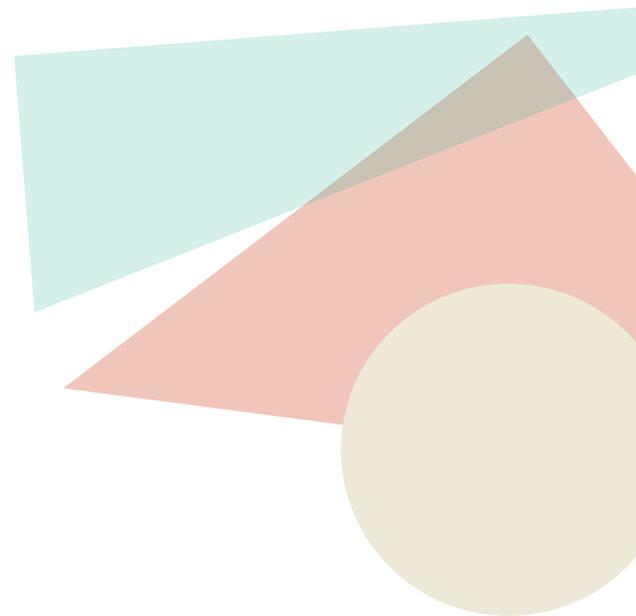
“What we did in this project was exactly to reproduce in a virtual class what happens in a physical class, having someone watch over you, taking care of you. And this seems to be the reason why the project succeeded.”

Enrico Rettore, Senior Research Fellow, FBK-IRVAPP

FURTHER INFORMATION

Do you want to implement personalised support in your online courses, re-use the TeachUP courses that are available in ten languages, or want to learn more about our research results?

Find out more on our website: teachup.eun.org



PROJECT COORDINATOR



RESEARCH ORGANISATION



PARTNERS



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