



EUNEON – THE EUROPEAN NETWORK OF NETWORKS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ONLINE

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Summary

EuNeOn, the European Network of Networks for Higher Education Online, is a newly established network of European university networks which organise and support cross-university online teaching and learning in their respective countries. For details, see www.euneon.eu.

By sharing their experience the networks of EuNeOn will enhance their future development and support other, emerging networks. They will stimulate virtual student mobility, and they will contribute to the discussions inside the e-learning community by focussing on the economic and organisational aspects of e-learning. ICDE members are invited to take part in the work of EuNeOn.

The workshop will be organised by Paul Rühl, Coordinator of EuNeOn and Managing Director of the Bavarian Virtual University, and other EuNeOn members.

Introduction

In several European countries university networks for higher education online have been established. It is their aim to make the best use of expertise, shared knowledge and sensible division of labour, thus combining the economic advantages of online education with its pedagogical and social benefits. In October 2009 five of these networks founded EuNeOn, the European Network of Networks for Higher Education Online. Through cooperation, by making available their experience to other networks and by supporting emerging networks these networks will contribute to the development of the European knowledge society.

Main Body

“Knowledge society” and “knowledge-based economy” are key concepts of the Lisbon strategy set out by the European council in March 2000 with the aim of making the European Union “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of

sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment”¹ by 2010.

The mid-term review held in 2005 showed that the results achieved so far had been “unconvincing”². Therefore, the Lisbon strategy was relaunched in 2005. Today, less than a year from 2010, we cannot be sure that its ambitious goal will be reached by 2010. The current economic crisis could make the achievement of the Lisbon goals an even more ambitious task. Europe’s competitiveness will stay on the agenda in either case.

What can actually be done to strengthen Europe’s position in world-wide competition with regard to higher education online?

In its communication the Commission speaks of the “Fifth Freedom”, the freedom of movement of knowledge, which should complete the four freedoms of movement of goods, services, people and capital. In the field of higher education there is a close link between the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process. Freedom of movement of knowledge and the freedom of movement of people – this means that we need freedom of movement of people to acquire knowledge. The mobility of students within Europe is highly desirable, and the EU stimulates this mobility with its ERASMUS programme. The networks working together in EuNeOn hold the view that there should be not only physical, but also virtual mobility of students: students should get the opportunity to use online educational resources from other European countries.

European virtual mobility presupposes virtual mobility at the national level. The degree of virtual mobility at the national level differs from country to country. In some countries there are national agencies to support virtual mobility. These agencies will be the core of the network EuNeOn.

If we want Europe to become the world’s most competitive region, we must pay due attention to questions of economy and efficiency in all relevant spheres, including education. This does not imply the subordination of university education to the needs of “Business”. But we must not ignore the simple fact that with limited resources there will always be the task of making the most of the financial resources at our disposal. It would be a serious mistake to reject questions of efficiency and economy in the field of university education as “unacademic”.

For building the European knowledge society additional investment in education at all levels is necessary. But in most European countries the financial possibilities to invest more money into education are rather limited. Therefore, it is more necessary than ever to explore and to exploit new ways of providing high-quality education to as many people as possible..

Flexible studies and lifelong learning have long become key issues for the formation of the knowledge society, and there is a growing consensus that online teaching and learning have to play a key role in this process.

In this situation, universities in several countries of the European Union have remarkably expanded educational co-operation on a national level by sharing common resources and offering their students more versatile curricula and by giving their students the right to take courses from other universities, as well. The importance of online teaching in this process is still increasing.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/kok_report_en.pdf

² http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/lisbon_strategy_en.htm

A number of discipline-specific and multi-disciplinary networks have been set up in many European countries to provide research-based education as a joint national effort of several universities. These networks have successfully been able to combine two aims which at first may seem incompatible: competition and collaboration.

Competition between universities is growing, and it can be very fruitful. Competing universities obviously can profit from cooperation at least as much as competitors in private enterprise. Many universities are able to expand or even to maintain the number of different degrees they offer only with the help of “imports” from other universities.

This is especially true for online teaching and learning. Therefore, the common aim of the university networks is to promote the shared use of online courses, educational materials and resources and thus to make the best use of expertise, shared knowledge and sensible division of labour. In this way, the networks make use of the economic advantages of online education as much as of its pedagogical and social benefits.

The networks cooperating in EuNeOn are no independent distance universities. Generally, our networks do not offer complete degrees nor do they employ teaching staff of their own. On the other hand, they provide more than just online elements as an add-on to face-to-face courses. To understand this approach of the networks of EuNeOn, we have to understand their concept of “blended learning”.

After the collapse of the initial e-learning euphoria, “blended learning” became the common concept for the integration of computer- and web-aided elements into teaching and learning. By “blended learning”, many experts mean the combination of face-to-face teaching and web-based teaching within a single course. We call this type of blended learning “micro-level blended learning”.

While micro-level blended learning has many pedagogical benefits, it does not necessarily make full use of the economic effects of e-learning. The teachers who use single e-learning elements in their courses do not necessarily gain additional teaching-time, and micro-level blended learning is hardly a remedy e.g. against the shortage of lecture rooms many universities face. For the students, this type of blended learning offers only very limited flexibility – and flexibility is a key success factor. In many cases, especially when the online elements are exploited only by one professor at one university, micro-level blended learning seems to offer higher quality or added value at additional costs.

By contrast, the networks cooperating in EuNeOn concentrate on macro-level blended learning with the purpose to offer high-quality teaching in a cost-effective way.

By macro-level blended learning we mean the integration of single online or e-learning courses into courses of study or curricula which otherwise (and for the most part) consist of “traditional” face-to-face courses. Thus, students can earn some credits in online-courses, but not the complete degree. This combination of face-to-face courses with courses that are delivered completely online (possibly with the final examination being held face-to-face) gives the students much more flexibility than micro-level blended learning. At the same time the students enjoy all the benefits of a traditional face-to-face university. Therefore, macro-level blended learning minimises the dangers of social isolation sometimes associated with e-learning.

Moreover, if online courses are developed once at one university, and then exploited at several universities, the comparative cost-effectiveness is obvious. Universities can “import” courses from other universities, including even the support of their students by tutors of the “exporting” university. By contrast to micro-level blended learning, this kind of import also helps universities to compensate a possible lack of teachers as well as room shortages.

Macro-level blended learning combines the social and pedagogical benefits of face-to-face teaching and learning with the economic and didactic possibilities of e-learning. It is therefore one of the responses to the challenge of having to provide more and better education in times of strained public budgets. Some European countries even expect a major growth in the number of students over the next years. Macro level blended learning is especially valuable for these countries.

The cost-effectiveness of macro-level blended learning, in turn, is a major motivation for ministries responsible for higher education and for groups of universities to finance the necessary structures and the development of new content.

However, it should be pointed out that EuNeOn does not see macro-level blended learning as a means to reduce the overall cost of education in the sense of a reduction of investments in education. On the contrary, investment in education will have to be raised considerably, and face-to-face teaching and learning will continue to be dominant in higher education, although the role of ITC will increase. Within this framework, macro-level blended learning is a means to limit the additional costs of better education for more students.

EuNeOn is the network of networks organising macro-level blended learning. By sharing their experience and by exploring ways to more intensive cooperation, the networks united in EuNeOn will make a significant contribution to the development of online teaching and learning in European higher education, including the shared use of online material. By focussing on the economic aspects of high-quality e-teaching without neglecting its pedagogical and social benefits, EuNeOn will contribute to the enhancement of European competitiveness in the fields of education and the development of the European knowledge society.

At the same time, EuNeOn will enhance cooperation between the organisations and initiatives within the European e-teaching community by paying special attention to the aspects of management and economy.

Which activities will EuNeOn carry out in the near future?

A key issue will be to find partners in further European countries. We are confident that the aims of EuNeOn will be shared by organisations in most European countries, namely: to contribute to the exploration and to the full use of both the economic and the pedagogic potential of online teaching and learning.

EuNeOn members will make available their experience in the country-wide organisation of online teaching and learning to partners in other European countries. The “study on the job” of good practice of managing and organising higher education is an outstanding instrument for such studies. Therefore, short-term staff exchange will be one of the key activities of the members of EuNeOn.

EuNeOn will promote the common use and development of study materials, courses and support services at the European level in an organised way according to the needs of both universities and students. EuNeOn aims at facilitating virtual mobility and flexible study opportunities at the European level. First practical steps have been taken already.

Conclusion

EuNeOn sees its predominant task in practical activities for virtual student mobility and in the dissemination of good, efficient management practice. We are confident that these activities

will complement the many valuable research-oriented activities of other associations, foundations and networks in Europe.

Networks and emerging networks from all European countries are invited to cooperate in EuNeOn. We would greatly appreciate cooperation with networks in other parts of the world. For further information please visit www.euneon.eu.