

EUNIS 2013: E-Learning -Challenges of the Next Phase

Steffi Engert¹, Sandrina Heinrich², Anke Petschenka³

¹⁻³University of Duisburg-Essen
Forsthausweg 2
47057 Duisburg

¹steffi.engert@uni-due.de

²sandrina.heinrich@uni-due.de

³anke.petschenka@uni-due.de

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1. ABSTRACT

In our presentation at EUNIS 2013 we want to share our views and reflections on e-Learning perspectives in Higher Education from the point of view of practitioners in a European non-elite university. As inner-University consultants we are mediating and translating e-Learning concepts, strategies and technologies to the everyday needs of teachers and students. Our statements reflect the views and experiences of different generations of e-Learning experts: Steffi Engert is about to end her career, which covers twenty years of conceptional and practical work in Higher Education, SMEs and non-profits. Sandrina Heinrich has recently earned her diploma and transited from supporting students as a student assistant to working full-time as an academic consultant for learning technologies. Anke Petschenka represents „the middle“: she is representative of (e-Learning) age, when the first wave of early adopters was followed by the first extension of the user base amongst teachers and students.

We see e-Learning in Higher Education at a crossroad amidst a new wave of development. The time of „idealist“ experiments of pioneers of the first and second waves - the first looking for the „virtual university“ (ideally world-wide) and the optimal technical learning environment, the second committed to merging technology and didactics in an intelligent manner - are definitely over. E-Learning is no longer disputed, but has turned into an everyday feature of teaching and learning, albeit still too often on the basic level of electronic distribution of learning materials. In turning into a matter of course, it no longer has to justify its *raison d'être*, but instead it has to live up to the real world demands of the mass-university. It has to prove its worth in helping the universities to cope with the growing number of students and their increasing diversity, undermining traditional models of learning and teaching, under conditions of massive pressures to be cost-effective and part of the global competition.

2. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The present situation is characterized by tendencies of consolidation, a strong „objective“ drive towards opening up to exchange, integration and cooperation. At the same time the global education market is reorganizing into a new division of labour, implying massive changes to the university as a provider of learning and research. Some say (most famously Bill Gates), that the university as we know it will become obsolete entirely. Its replacement is evolving in the global offerings of e-Learning consortia made up, mostly, of elite universities, occasionally cooperating with commercial content and/or technology providers. These offerings include Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) from some of the world's leading universities and research institutions, such as the MIT and other leading US universities. Self-learning, then, is complemented by assessment centres on the one hand and global coaching offerings on the other as an alternative way to an academic education/degree - without necessarily visiting a university.

In many ways this looks like a sweeping solution to the problems which seem to overrun present day universities: overpopulation of lecture halls and libraries, the requirements of personally tailored offerings to take care of the increasing diversity of the student population, the Sisyphus work (and

expense) of massively extending local E-Learning offerings. On the other hand, this road seems to liquidate the university outside the rare breed of elite institutions.

From our vantage point, that of daily practitioners with students and lecturers in a non-elite, non-English speaking university, we would like to comment on the „feasibility“ of studies through 100% self-learning and on how non-distinguished „bread-and-butter“ institutions might positively make use of the changes underway.

The vision of Bill Gates and others is based on the technology-savvy, highly motivated, self-learner, capable not only to organize him-/herself, but also to organize their studies out of a practically limitless ocean of course offerings, repositories, discussion forums, etc. Our daily experience shows us that self-learning is an important and for many students highly welcome component of learning and academic achievement, but as everything this in itself has to be learnt. The glib talk about the „digital natives“ coming to the university fully equipped in every sense of the word to tackle academic education is not borne out by our experience. No doubt, for today's and tomorrow's students ubiquitous computing comes more or less naturally, but this is not the same as the expertise to use these technologies for academic work and effective learning.

This is the first task, then, for the universities: to develop the competencies and the inner understanding of academic work and how digital media and technologies are used within this framework.

From the very beginning of E-Learning, volumes have been filled on the need to change the role of (university-)teachers: to be moderators, facilitators, mentors of students. So far, this has not happened in a structured and organized way. The present day organization of teaching and learning in average universities a) views E-Learning as an add-on to class-room teaching and b) does not teach E-Learning as a skill-set at the very outset of study courses to enable students to work effectively from the very beginning. To go forward on this path involves understanding that cost-effectiveness must not mean saving money no matter what. To set up viable E-Learning offerings throughout the university including effective central and faculty-level support costs money up-front. This applies also to recording lectures, which is at present seen as the best way to cope with large numbers of students. Recordings and podcasts are fine, but they have to reflect a decent level of quality technically and didactically and the time, which lecturers “save” should be invested in discussions and collaboration with students.

Furthermore, the individual university (and sometimes each faculty within it) is still very much a world by itself. Ubiquitous computing and learning is largely understood as the „digital campus“ and (technical) access everywhere. Cooperation, teaching, exchange of courses etc. between universities is still more the exception than the rule. This „divisionism“ has to be overcome by opening up to cooperation on all levels. What is happening on the global level, i.e. developmental (and commercial) consortia between universities and enterprises should also be actively sought on lower levels. It is crucial to take into account models and requirements from the students' future employers to match their E-Learning and that in the universities. The seamless integration begun technically and on campus has to be extended in this way to achieve a new level of practically rooted quality. It will become obvious, then, that often these educational offerings, intelligently augmented by those from the global consortia, such as are a better match for the regional/national/macroeconomic labour market than global “one-size-fits all”.

3. REFERENCES

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4. AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES



Steffi Engert, M. A.; Academic staff member, Centre of Information and Media Services at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Consultant for E-Learning, E-Learning support and “Trendscout”. More than 20 years experience of project management, mostly in projects focused on information technologies for innovation and learning, including a number of EU projects. She lived and worked in various countries, esp. Russia and the UK. She studied History (focus: Eastern Europe and Social Sciences in Cologne and Düsseldorf (M. A. in 1976). She worked also as a freelance journalist, researcher, editor and author, event manager, and small company owner/manager. Since 2007 she is a member of the EUNIS E-Learning Task Force (ELTF).



Sandrina Heinrich: Academic staff member of the Centre of Information and Media Services at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany and a consultant for E-Learning and E-Learning support. Her main subjects are learning management and e-portfolio systems, the development and configuration of OER (open educational resources) and MOOCs (massive open online courses). She studied education and pedagogy at the University Duisburg-Essen, with a focus on media didactics and knowledge management and won her diploma in 2012. While studying she was working as a student assistant in the E-Competence Agency (2009-2012) and completed an internship at the chair of media didactics. Since 2013 she is a member of the EUNIS E-Learning Task Force.



Dr. Anke Petschenka: Academic staff member of the University Library at the University of Duisburg-Essen, consultant in the E-Competence Agency. She studied pedagogical studies at the University of Education in Freiburg, Germany, specialised on adult education and communication science. 2000-2005 she worked as a scientific assistant in a number of e-learning projects at the Chair of Media Didactics and Knowledge Management at the University of Duisburg-Essen and at the Chair of Media Didactics at the University of Education in Weingarten. In 2005 she finished her doctoral thesis on communication structures in newsgroups of e-learning based courses. Since 2008 she is a member of the DINI task force Learning Spaces. In May 2013 she finished the Master of Arts in Library and Information Science at the University of Applied Science Cologne.