

An Introduction to EuNeOn - The European Network of Networks for Higher Education Online

by Paul Rühl, Managing Director of the Bavarian Virtual University

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Dear guests, dear colleagues and friends,

It is my pleasure and my honour to welcome you all to the founding event of EuNeOn, the European network of networks for higher education online.

We are very pleased that many officials of the relevant Directorates of the European Union take an interest in our work, and I welcome you all.

A special welcome goes to Morten Flate Paulsen from Oslo. Professor Paulsen of NKI Fjernundervisning is one of the key persons behind the MegaTrends project, a project set up by the European Union “to enhance public knowledge on sustainable and cost-effective large-scale e-learning by analyzing the trends and contributions to large-scale success and to identify laws and recommendations for success and failure in e-learning”¹. We are glad and we are proud, Morten, that you are willing to share some of the insights of this project with us tonight, with special regard to higher education online and the tasks of the networks cooperating in EuNeOn.

Finally, I would like to welcome all colleagues and friends of the national networks for higher education online who will take part in the Work of EuNeOn, namely

- the Estonian Virtual University,
- the Finnish Online University of Applied Sciences,
- the Finnish Virtual University,
- the Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education,
- and, of course, my colleagues of the Bavarian Virtual University.

¹ http://nettskolen.nki.no/in_english/megatrends/the_project.html

Among further Networks which have expressed their interest to take part in the work of EuNeOn, I would like to mention especially

- Forum New Media Austria,
- Norway Opening Universities, and
- the Polish Virtual University.

The two latter organisations have taken part in our discussions already, and we are looking forward to their further and closer participation.

My colleagues and friends of the networks cooperating in EuNeOn have asked me to coordinate the initial phase of our work. Therefore, I would like to give a brief outline of our ideas and plans. They are the result of many discussions among the representatives of our organisations, and I would like to thank all my colleagues and friends, especially Julian Lindberg and Eija Ristimäki of the Finnish Virtual University, for their valuable contributions.

When some of us met at this year's conference of EDEN, the European Distance Education and E-Learning Network, in Lisbon we felt that this was an excellent opportunity to give an extra thought to the Lisbon strategy. This strategy was 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"² by 2010.

The mid-term review held in 2005 showed that the results achieved so far had been "unconvincing"³. Therefore, the Lisbon strategy was relaunched in 2005, and in December 2007 the Commission communicated to the Spring European Council of 2008 its "Strategic report on the renewed Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs: launching the new cycle (2008-2010)" with the motto "Keeping up the pace of change"⁴. In this document it was again pointed out that

² http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/kok_report_en.pdf

³ http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/lisbon_strategy_en.htm

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/european-dimension-200712-annual-progress-report/200712-annual-report_en.pdf

“The Lisbon Strategy is the EU's vehicle for accompanying change. This makes it an essential part of the Union's response to globalisation, helping Europeans to shape this new set of challenges and opportunities.” (p. 2)

One of the means to reach the Lisbon goals is the creation of a knowledge-based economy. In this process higher education, the universities have to play a key role. In its communication cited above, 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.

The Lisbon Agenda has been the object of criticism, especially in the field of education. There are fears that the Lisbon strategy might lead to a growing economisation of higher education, to the dominance of economic needs over educational values, so that *Bildung*, that classical aim of the university, could be reduced to mere *Ausbildung*, that is, job-oriented training. The networks cooperating in EuNeOn take these fears seriously, and they are confident that by supporting the production of high-quality online educational resources they will make a valuable contribution to the necessary growth of the number of Europeans who are both well trained and highly educated.

In the field of higher education, we see 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.

While much has been accomplished by the EU and its member states since the formulation of the Lisbon strategy, other economies, e.g. China, have also quickened their pace. The development of the current economic crisis in several parts of the world could make the achievement of the Lisbon goals an even more ambitious task.

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. Once again: from our point of view this does not mean the subordination of university education to the needs of "Business". But we cannot 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. We are well aware that this fact is simple only seemingly, that actually in every case there has to be a careful (and often time-consuming) weighing of factors and arguments. We are convinced that 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 on 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.

Talking about the Lisbon goals and the Union's response to globalisation, we should not neglect cultural or environmental aspects of educational provision. International collaboration in educational provision makes it necessary to take into account pedagogical and didactic aspects in multicultural learning environments. International collaboration thus broadens our cultural understanding. Multicultural online learning environments can be a remarkable asset in the internationalisation of our universities' degree programs.

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 – and rightly so.

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 for 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, as the MegaTrends study has shown. 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 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.

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 we do 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. Up to now, most initiatives

seem to unite people and institutions engaged preferably in pedagogical and psychological research. EuNeOn will concentrate on practical, economic and management questions and will therefore bring together decision makers and top executives of the leading European organisations in e-teaching and -learning on the higher education level.

Which activities will EuNeOn carry out in the near future?

A key issue will be to find partners in further European countries. In addition to the five networks present, there are already contacts to organisations and institutions in further countries, e.g. Austria, the Czech Republic, Norway, Poland, France and Spain, and we hope to expand our network considerably in the years to come. We are confident that the aims of EuNeOn will be shared by organisations in all 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. A first step will be to suggest a special workshop on these questions during next year's EDEN conference in Gdańsk. Special workshops addressed to the specific needs of individual countries could be a second step.

The practical study of good practice of managing and organising higher education online will be a second field of activities in EuNeOn. Short-term staff exchange is an outstanding instrument for such studies. During the preparation phase of EuNeOn, the Bavarian Virtual University twice has been host for guests from other organisations. These "internships" have been extremely fruitful for all parties involved, and we will expand short-term staff exchanges in the coming years.

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. At this year's EDEN conference, the Finnish and

Bavarian Virtual Universities presented their first experiences in the common use of courses, and the first joint course production is well on its way.

The partners of EuNeOn have developed their strategic alliance with their own means, and they will continue to do so. On the other hand, I will not break any secret if I tell you that we would like to approach the appropriate and competent EU directorates for additional funding. Such funding would considerably enhance our possibilities to disseminate good practice and to support emerging networks in other European countries. We do hope that our partners in the European institutions will support our aims.

As you can see, EuNeOn sees its predominant task in practical activities 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.

Dear guests, dear colleagues and friends, I hope that these short remarks have given you a first idea of our goals and plans, and we are looking forward to discussing them with you in the second half of tonight's meeting and at later occasions.

Thank you for your attention.