

Models for European Network Universities for e-Learning

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Issue Editorial

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) shape the way we retrieve information, the way we communicate and open up access to education, training and learning resources, while also establishing avenues of lifelong open and distance learning, most often referred to as e-Learning. A number of open questions concerning policies, pedagogical, technical and organizational aspects need to be resolved so that ICTs may contribute to Europe's shift to a Knowledge-based society.

Over the past few years an overriding theme of discussions on issues regarding e-Learning in the European Union is that of forming alliances among institutions for the development of joint programs, mainly Master degrees, which are delivered by utilizing the latest developments in information and communication technologies. Several factors play a catalytic role in this respect:

- Education policy documents promote this kind of collaboration both at national and at the European level. It is among the main goals of the Bologna declaration for example “*to promote the European dimensions in Higher education particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research*”.
- Existing networks of institutions promoting student and staff mobility schemes, basically through the Socrates and Leonardo programs, are now extending their collaboration towards Open and Distance Education and e-learning.
- Access to resources over the Internet provides academic staff and students with opportunities that were previously beyond their reach. Computer Based Training (CBT) and Web Based Training in particular, when utilized wisely, facilitate the achievement of higher levels of learning through the use of simulations, games, decision making, collaborative project work, etc.
- New markets for higher education are emerging, both at the academia, where student populations constantly increase in most EU countries, and in industry where continuing education, corporate training and lifelong learning in general become a must.

The European Union (EU) has launched a number of policies and initiatives in order to develop integrated solutions of e-learning. The EU has funded a large number of projects to achieve this goal with beneficiaries, in most cases, various European universities.

The European Commission “eLearning Initiative” was launched in the year 2000 in order to speed up the effective integration of ICTs in the education and training systems of Europe, to improve our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of e-learning and to provide examples of good practice to schools and Universities. “*The eLearning Initiative aims to enhance the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration in order to modernize Europe’s education and training systems*” (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/education>)

One of the actions of the eLearning Initiative concerns the establishment of European virtual campuses. “*The priority here is to add a virtual dimension to European co-operation in higher education by encouraging the development of new organisational models for European universities (virtual campuses) and for European exchange and sharing schemes (virtual mobility). This action line will build on existing co-operation frameworks such as the Erasmus programme, giving them an e-learning component*”.

The mENU project (<http://www.hsh.no/menu>), funded by the *European Virtual Campuses* action of the *eLearning Initiative*, aimed at offering an integrated solution and a model for a European Networked University (ENU). The ENU is envisaged of a well-defined virtual network among existing traditional universities willing to share and exchange on-line courses in order to form and provide joined programs of study.

The papers presented in the current special issue are based on selected papers from the International Conference on Network Universities and E-Learning organized in the context of the mENU project (<http://www.upv.es/menuconf>). The latter were peer reviewed based on the JITI’s procedures.

The papers focus on a number of crucial issues regarding organizational, pedagogical, and technological aspects of Networked Universities.

- *B. Ask et. al.* present a model for establishing a sustainable European Networked University discussing organizational, technological and business strategies.
- *M. Christie & F. Ferdos* discuss the current trends and the mutual impact of educational and information technology issues towards a pedagogy for e-learning.
- *A.E. Bacon et. al.* present a generic framework for describing flexible study plans for networked universities using meta-data.
- *S. Retails et al.* discuss E-learning Recourse Brokers as a potential solution for provisioning of high-quality learning programs and courses.
- Finally *F. Buendia et al.* propose a Learning Management System (LMS) model, based on standard and open information technologies incorporating features that adapt the delivery of educational content to specific user profiles.

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