
HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES ACROSS NATIONAL BOUNDARIES: BAVARIAN AND FINNISH VIRTUAL UNIVERSITIES COOPERATING TO EXCHANGE ONLINE COURSES AND WEB-BASED LEARNING MATERIALS

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Introduction

Promoting the shared use of online courses and educational materials in higher education across institutional boundaries is the overarching aim of both the Bavarian Virtual University (VHB) and the Finnish Virtual University (FVU). In 2006, the Virtual Universities of Bavaria and Finland concluded a co-operative agreement¹ to promote the exchange of ICT-based education and related competencies among universities in the regions. The framework agreement marked the take-off for the exchange of all kinds of online courses, course modules and online learning materials produced by both the FVU's and the VHB's member institutions². In the workshop, the unique exchange model adopted by the two consortia and the experience gained so far from facilitating international virtual mobility will be introduced and discussed with the participants. The workshop will highlight how the exchange is planned to take place in an organized manner making sure that the exchange studies meet the study plans of the students of the two consortia's member institutions, and how quality issues are taken care of. It will also introduce the initial steps taken to expand the cooperation in the context of a new European network for Higher Education Online (EuNeOn)³.

Contractual exchange model of online courses

The online course exchange between the VHB and the FVU is based on an agreement that both parties coordinate the exchange in their respective countries making sure that accepted exchange students meet the requirements set by the course provider, and the chosen subject fits the student's study plan. Also the teachers can rely on the fact that their courses will not end up into a completely open "wild" market and they will have a say in what kind of students would enrol on their courses. Also the economical issues have been solved before the exchange takes place. In general, the overall aim is to find procedures that are safe for all parties and that save time and effort in the member institutions both in Bavaria and in Finland.

Marketing and registration

Marketing of the courses is mainly done using centralized course catalogues maintained in Bavaria by the VHB and in Finland by the FVU. The VHB offers a course catalogue which includes the descriptions of some 170 courses in various fields of studies. For both the course catalogue and for students' registration the VHB uses a "FlexNow!" system developed by the IHB-institute of the University of Bamberg. The students of the VHB member institutions are free to choose the courses they would like take.

¹ Agreement of cooperation between the Finnish Virtual University (Suomen virtuaaliyliopisto) and the Bavarian Virtual University (Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern). 2006. http://www.virtuaaliyliopisto.fi/data/files/sopimukset/Agreement_VHB-FVU_2006-05-18.pdf.

² The member institutions of the Bavarian Virtual University (VHB –Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern) include all of Bavaria's 9 state universities and 17 universities of Applied Sciences plus 10 "non-state" universities. The Finnish Virtual University is a network of all the 21 universities of the country.

³ The following networks and agencies have been planning the principles for the EuNeOn Network: Bavarian Virtual University, <http://www.vhb.org/>, Estonian e-Learning Development Centre / Estonian e-University, <http://www.e-uni.ee/main.php>, Finnish Virtual University, <http://www.vy.fi>, Norway Opening Universities (NOU), <http://www.norgesuniversitetet.no/>, Polish Virtual University, <http://www.puw.pl/english/>, The Swedish Agency for Network and Cooperation in Higher Education (NSHU), <http://www.nshu.se/>, Swiss Virtual Campus, <http://www.virtualcampus.ch/>.

In Finland, the application process is based on procedures developed in the context of the Finnish national JOO agreement for flexible study rights⁴. For example, enrolment in the course is conditional on endorsement by the student's home university.

Pilot courses

Preparations for the first pilot courses to be exchanged started in the autumn 2006. Both the VHB and the FVU collated a set of course descriptions of the English language courses offered by their member institutions and announced to be suitable for exchange. Information was passed on to the member institutions with a request to announce their interest for exchange. On the basis of the announced interest, the online course "eBusiness and e Commerce" offered by one of the VHB's member institutions was chosen as a first pilot exchange course. The course provider in Bavaria (Friedrich Alexander University in Erlangen-Nuremberg) announced his willingness to take ten Finnish students on the course. As it was a pilot course, no fees were asked for.

In September 2007, based on a prior notice from the Bavarian side Finnish students had the opportunity to apply for the web course 'E-Business and E-Commerce'. FVU's electronic application system JOOPAS specifically further designed for and expanded to cater for the needs of international mobility was used in the application process. The system is using federated identity management⁵ across university boundaries so that students and student administration officers in different universities can sign into the system using their home university's usual IT user account, and no new user account is needed. Basic information in the application form is automatically pre-filled from the student record system of the student's home university.

Ten Finnish students were selected for the course which is running from October 2007 till the end of February 2008. A similar kind of pilot where Bavarian students have an opportunity to apply for and study on the FVU course is planning to take place in spring 2008. The successfulness of these two pilots will be carefully monitored and the experiences gained will be used for planning more extensive exchange activities between the VHB and the FVU. At the same time a new European Network of Networks for Higher Education Online (EuNeOn) is being constructed to enhance organized virtual mobility in between even larger number of European higher education institutions.

Challenges to be tackled

For further development of the above described, unique exchange model, there are still a great number of issues to be dealt with before extensive and more established exchange activities can start taking place. One of the issues which have to be tackled is how to organize the examinations of online courses across national borders. Another major issue is standardization of student data and study information which is a prerequisite for information exchange between different databases used in different institutions in different countries. Furthermore, language issue is something which needs to be solved both in the application process (the exchange of information) and in studying itself. Also asynchronous academic terms in different countries is an issue which has to be dealt with. On top of these, other kinds of cultural differences can be expected to appear later on when working in multicultural environment.

Quality Management Systems

The workshop will also discuss both VHB and FVU approach to quality management of eLearning and how these approaches can be taken into account in the cooperation.

⁴ Following the spirit of the Bologna Process, the nation-wide agreement on flexible study rights (the JOO agreement) entered into force in Finland in August 2004. A central aim of the agreement was to provide students the opportunity to design for themselves a versatile and personalized study plan. The agreement increases the options available for students, allowing them to complement their home university's curriculum with courses from other universities.

⁵ User identification and information transfer across university boundaries is enabled by the national Haka infrastructure (<http://www.csc.fi/english/institutions/haka>) and Shibboleth technology (<http://www.csc.fi/english/institutions/haka/technology>)

The Quality Management of the VHB

Quality is a key issue in the VHB operations. Quality management of the courses is implemented at various levels: Proposals for the development of new courses are reviewed by experts from Bavarian and other universities. The course development is monitored alike by experts and by delegates from member universities who applied for the funding of certain courses they are going to integrate into their programmes of study. VHB-boards accredit new courses after the academic and pedagogical quality has been assured by experts. In addition, every course is evaluated again after five semesters, i.e. 30 months, by experts. For evaluation a catalogue of quality criteria is applied. The students evaluate their courses every semester. If the maintenance of quality requires additional investment in either content or software, the VHB grants the necessary money, provided that the course is still in sufficient demand. As far as the quality of tutoring is concerned VHB provides e-tutor trainings to meet the specific requirements of online-teaching.

FVU: Quality assurance of web-based learning materials integrated in the publishing process

As promoting shared use of educational materials is one of the strategic goals of the FVU special attention has been paid to quality issues and the development of tools for managing the quality of eLearning materials. Based on the results of the Vopla project⁶, the work has been continuing in the FVU's Referee Service project from 2007 onwards. The aim is to develop a quality management service for web-based learning materials which can be integrated in the publishing process.

The Referee Service project applies four kinds of quality criteria to learning materials: public use criteria, pedagogical criteria, content criteria, and instrumental criteria. Eventually the Referee Service would form an integral part of a publishing process which is being developed in a Publication Channel project. The idea of this project is that digital materials can be published locally in publication repositories based on the open source Dspace programme. In addition to the Referee Service, the repository will also feature a copyright management program. The materials can be searched in a centralised manner via the national NELLI portal, the National Electronic Library Interface⁷. The peer review data provided by the Referee Service will be included in the descriptors of the material. Thus, users searching the repository will have access to a peer evaluation of each learning material.

Workshop design

Target group

The workshop is targeted to those who want to learn about various aspects of virtual mobility and the exchange model designed by the Bavarian and Finnish Virtual universities. Networks and agencies who would like to join the EuNeOn Network are welcome to discuss these aspects.

Content description

The workshop will introduce the results of the pilot online course exchange as well as the VHB's and FVU's quality management systems. Pedagogical, technical, organizational and quality issues in international virtual mobility and in multicultural learning environments will be discussed.

Workshop programme

1. Plenary: Presentation of the pilot online course exchange and the quality management systems.
2. Subgroups: Different aspects of virtual student mobility and shared use of online courses and study materials in multicultural environments will be discussed.
3. Plenary: Conclusions from the subgroups.

⁶ http://www.vopla.fi/in_english/

⁷ <http://www.nationallibrary.fi/libraries/nelli.html>