

ESIB Policy Paper on e-learning

Preamble

ESIB The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 50 member organisations from 37 countries.

Introduction

The online provision of education, e-learning, has been growing in scope and importance during the past few years. E-learning can be defined as a form of formal or non-formal education aimed at attaining set learning goals, in which direct interaction between teachers and students as well as among student groups is facilitated by information and communication technology.

The development of e-learning is one of the big challenges for higher education providers in the future. New pedagogical solutions and new teaching, learning and communication methods will have to be developed to make e-learning an attractive, open and beneficial arrangement. Also, the question of access to technology has to be resolved, not to widen the digital divide both within a given country and between the developed and developing countries.

ESIB notices that the majority of e-learning courses are inspired by market-driven forces, of which the cutting of costs and the provision by for-profit education institutions are the most important. Instead, ESIB considers that these reasons should not be decisive when providing e-learning. As for any other form education, self-development, the added value for society and individual, preparation for life as an active citizen in a democratic society etc. should be primarily taken into account.

The increase of e-learning in higher education may provide opportunities for widening access and study possibilities in higher education for under-privileged groups in societies as well as under-privileged societies as a whole. Exploiting fully the pedagogical possibilities of new learning technology may help conferring new skills needed in the rapidly changing information society. However, depending on the implementation of higher education policies and the role of e-learning in them, increasing of online provision may at the same time create problems related to the same issues. E-learning is provided both as partly traditional, partly on-line education, as well as completely on-line courses or degrees. E-learning is provided both by higher education institutions operating under the public regulations framework either individually or in co-operation with other universities and by commercial providers. E-learning courses are provided both locally, regionally and nationally as well as globally. This varied field of e-learning complicates the role of e-learning in the benefiting societies and calls for responsible implementation of higher education policies related to e-learning both by the states as well as higher education institutions providing e-learning courses.

ICT (information and communication technology) provides the possibility for an ongoing global flow of information which contributes positively to the individual's possibility to get background material from different sources and perspectives. This gives the individual a more qualified base for understanding democratic decision-making and for participation in political debate. A wider distribution of crucial information guards the population against the abuse of power by political, cultural

and social elites. For these purposes, the possibilities of e-learning may be utilised to the full benefit of societies.

Access

ESIB stresses that it is the responsibility of the state to provide its citizens with free, high quality higher education and life long learning education. The increasing of e-learning should not be seen as a means for evading this responsibility. ESIB stresses that free and equal access to both e-learning and education delivered in traditional ways must be ensured. E-learning must neither become a privilege for the affluent few, nor should it become the only form accessible for the majority of students with traditional learning environments being a privilege reserved for an elite. ESIB further believes that education is a public good, which fulfils important functions for the social and economic development of societies and states. ESIB strives for creating an inclusive higher education system, which creates equal opportunities for students from different social backgrounds. ESIB also views education as the main instrument for ensuring human rights, democracy, peace and sustainable development.

Given that certain preconditions are met, ESIB sees e-learning as providing a flexible way for widening access for higher education for non-traditional learners and contributing to life long learning. Properly implemented e-learning can help solve problems related to limited time resources as well as help combining work and studies. E-learning can also contribute to overcoming physical boundaries, such as physical disability of students, distance between the student and the higher education institution as well as the physical limitations such as classroom size especially for lectures and other large teaching group education. However, in order to ensure qualitative, student-centered pedagogical method, learning groups should be small and allow for interaction between participants. E-learning can potentially also diversify the student body and thus contribute to a more diversified learning experience for all participants both individually and as a group.

ESIB stresses that e-learning must not be seen as a means to cut costs of higher education. Increasing provision of on-line education must not turn into an excuse for the states to evade their responsibility to provide education for all. The costs of e-learning must not fall upon a student for example in forms of raised tuition fees or lowered quality. Instead, for e-learning courses provided within the national higher education framework, costs related to both tuition and investment in infrastructure must be fully covered by the states. In case of national e-learning schemes, the given state must provide higher education institutions with adequate resources for implementing e-learning policies.

An increase in e-learning provision should not lead to dominance of a few common languages in teaching. Governments and multinational bodies such as the European Union should help institutions build the technology infrastructure required. Special attention should be paid to bridging the technological gap between developed and less developed countries in building relevant and up-to-date e-learning facilities and related ICT infrastructure.

Regionally unbalanced provision of e-learning is a concern. One way to address this unbalance could be by affluent higher education institutions cooperating with higher education institutions in transition and developing countries to transfer technology in an equitable manner.

E-learning, such as all higher education, must contribute to building of democratic society, strengthen participation in society and in higher education, and provide means for critical self-reflection of societies and citizens.

Skills

ICT can at its best contribute to new innovation in learning and also facilitate making use of the skills and experiences of life long learners.

However, e-learning should only be used where this method of delivery offers qualitative and quantitative advantages over traditional teaching, such as providing access to new groups. E-learning can be seen as conferring ICT skills needed in the modern labour market as well as reflecting the modern society of which technology is a big part. Special attention should be paid to offering information society skills of non-traditional learners so that the increasing of ICT in all areas of society does not create a new underprivileged group of those lacking the necessary skills. However, e-learning must not project the image of a completely technological society.

An integral mission of higher education is to foster critical thinking and reflection as well as facilitate learning on how to construct new knowledge. The socialisation into the higher education community is an important precondition of this learning process. The problems caused by e-learning are especially related to these aspects. As a mode of studying, e-learning does not necessarily promote the same intensive socialisation as face-to-face learning environments. This personal contact aspect of studying provides for many of the benefits of higher education study. The lack of face-to-face communication among students as well as between students and teachers may make it more difficult for the students to get feedback of their studies and to establish a student community or to integrate into the larger higher education community. E-learning courses are sometimes also constructed as inflexible packages within which the student has little freedom for choice. E-learning might also result in inadequately developed oral presentation skills, as face-to-face interaction is limited or missing. These shortcomings of e-learning need to be solved in order for e-learning to contribute to a meaningful learning experience.

ESIB does not believe that e-learning can be used as a sole method of provision in all fields of study. In fields requiring extensive practical training (such as medicine, psychology, teacher training, certain natural sciences etc.) the e-learning approach can never fully substitute face to face teaching and training. However, e-learning may supplement traditional learning and in certain fields possibly even substitute it to some extent in the future. However, at present both the technological and pedagogical requirements are not yet met for the e-learning to be the sole method of learning.

E-learning may contribute to the internationalisation of individual studies by networking individual students and researchers in virtual, international higher education communities. Inter-university partnerships, both domestically and internationally, and the sharing of courses between universities will benefit from an e-networking approach and can thus contribute to the efficient use of scarce resources.

Benefits of international interaction can to a certain extent be conferred also by e-learning, although the cultural experiences related to everyday life in a foreign

culture are missing. Physical mobility still remains a key tool for intercultural interaction. However, interaction among people coming from different cultural backgrounds can create an international experience also in a virtual setting.

Pedagogy and infrastructure

The pedagogical goals of higher education remain the same in both traditional and virtual learning. However, the pedagogical and didactical demands placed on these forms of study differ markedly. E-learning invites a change in the way that the roles of students and teachers are perceived and if implemented properly, may lead to enhanced learning experience. ESIB stresses that e-learning is not a way for reducing costs of tuition, as in order to provide a meaningful learning experience certain requirements need to be met. The learning groups need to be small in order to ensure efficient teaching, tutoring and interaction. Adequate personal tutoring and guidance needs to be available for every student.

ESIB emphasises that adequate pedagogical and technical support for the teachers need to be in place. Groups consisting of people with expertise in all the different aspects of e-learning, including students, should be involved in designing e-learning courses. Teachers need training in general ICT skills as well as online tutoring and also for the students there should be adequate support in "learning to learn virtually".

ESIB stresses that a strong emphasis should be placed on assuring adequate student counselling, guidance and information systems. The institution providing e-learning must provide adequate technological infrastructure, including network connections and computers, and technical support for both students and staff. The absence or inadequacy of infrastructure is a barrier to access especially among students coming from less developed countries or from less privileged backgrounds. To ensure that these students can access this infrastructure at home, financial programs should be offered to help them to obtain necessary ICT-means.

The pedagogical aspects of e-learning are widely undeveloped. Placing existing course material into the web is still often considered as constituting e-learning, although this does not take advantage of any of the pedagogical opportunities presented by ICT. Future technological development, however, may present answers to some of these shortcomings. Adequate pedagogical and technical support for teachers must be provided. If teachers are willing to develop e-learning courses, this should be taken into account when assigning their workload. Intellectual property rights related to e-learning material, as well as current problems related to privacy protection need to be solved. Open source software should be chosen in order to counter trends for commodification of education. Also, content and delivery platform should be held separate.

E-learning gives institutions the possibility to share their courses. While this is a positive development, the student must know at all times which institution originally produced the course they are currently taking and who is responsible for the content.

Issues related to recognition and quality assurance of online provision need to be solved urgently. Quality assurance mechanisms are the responsibility of the HEI conferring virtual courses as well as the state. In case of transnational virtual

learning arrangements, both sending and receiving countries should take responsibility of quality assurance. Special attention should be paid to rule out degree mills and bogus institutions operating on-line.

ESIB stresses the need to urgently solve issues related to recognition of e-learning, both for transnational e-learning as well as between national higher education providers and for degrees consisting of courses provided by higher education institutions from different countries.

Student representation

As in all forms of higher education, student representation must be ensured in e-learning arrangements. ESIB stresses that students need to be involved at all levels of e-learning implementation, from the design of national initiatives to encourage ICT usage and e-learning in higher education to design and usability tests of individual courses and modules.

A regulatory structure, integrated into the national system, for e-learning providers needs to be established. It should address content and quality issues as well as the surrounding social support issues and student representation. The regulations must also include detailed instructions on what students who feel that their e-learning provider is not following these regulations should do. Where this regulatory structure would be inappropriate a code of good practise should exist, for instance in the case of non-formal education.

Student representation related to transnational e-learning is a particularly complicated issue. Student unions both in sending as well as receiving countries respectively are responsible for representing e-learning students. In any case, in each e-learning course at least the election of student representatives must be guaranteed. They would be the best contact for higher education institutions and national student unions to get information and to give answers to e-learning students' problems. Higher education institutions, local student unions and national student unions are called to co-operate in solving the problems related to student representation. The requirement of student representation should be a legal prerequisite for accreditation of e-learning institutions.

Conclusion

While e-learning brings many promises, there are a number of issues that remain to be addressed before e-learning will be a useful addition to traditionally delivered courses. Pedagogical innovation and acquisition of useful skills need to be stressed in e-learning courses. Problems related to access and recognition need to be solved urgently. Democratic models for student participation and representation need to be developed and implemented in all e-learning.

Finally, ESIB stresses the need to address issues related to e-learning as a part of a wider higher education policy framework, keeping in mind the general pedagogical, social and cultural aims of higher education in building up democratic societies.