NETBI: PROJECT EXPERIENCES IN DISTANCE LEARNING FOR INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

NETBI: PROIECT EXPERIMENTAL ÎN ÎNVĂŢĂMÂNTUL LA DISTANŢĂ PENTRU EDUCAŢIA SUPERIOARĂ ÎN PLAN INTERNAŢIONAL

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Higher Education needs in a globalized world a didactical and organizational offensive to develop the student's competencies and to use universities resources in an optimal way. For this need, the local project NetBi of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany gives experiences how a model of exchange and collaboration between universities can put in a process of management for an international educational network.

Keywords: *higher education, the NetBi project, structural offensive, network, didactical offensive, distance learning, evaluation, quality assurance, standards of curriculum, contract of cooperation, exchange model, didactic of blended learning.*

Într-o lume globalizată, educaţia superioară necesită o ofensivă didactică şi organizaţională pentru a dezvolta competenţele studentului şi a folosi optimal resursele universităţilor. În acest scop, proiectul NetBi (reţeaua în ştiinţa pedagogică) din Rhineland-Palatinate, Germania, prezintă noi experienţe ce ţin de schimbul şi cooperarea dintre universităţi care pot fi implementate în procesul de management pentru o reţea internaţională în domeniul educaţiei.

Cuvinte cheie: *educaţie superioară, proiectul NetBi, ofensivă structurală, reţea, ofensivă didactică, învăţarea la distanţă, evaluare, asigurarea calităţii, nivelul curriculumului, contract de cooperare, model de schimb, didactica învăţării integrate.*

Tendencies for a didactical and structural offensive in Higher Education

More than ever our society is facing a complex environment. The fast advances in information and communication technologies (TIC) and its confluence with knowledge, have led us to a globalized environment. Distance and territorial limits are not more a barrier to commerce, knowledge, contact people, culture exchange or to study. Globalization is no more an ideal, it is a fact. In response to globalization, institutions of higher education, national governments, regional and international organizations are placing greater priority on the international dimension of *higher education*. It is not a matter of developed countries, as we can see all around the world, *higher education* has a great demand, not only in access to, but also in quality, diversity, modern and accredited careers. To meet the increasing demand, new providers, new delivery methods, and new types of programs have to be developed. An increasing opportunity for a structural and didactical offensive in education programs of universities is challenging us.

This tendency is also increasing the opportunity to develop new ways to learn. In the case of *higher education* it is a strategy of each one who wants to be competitive. Following the vision of Bill Gates (2010),[1] the best education will come from the web in the next five years. Actually the scientific community agrees that the combination of various learning techniques can offer several quantitative benefits-faster, cheaper, and more scalable. Here arises the form of blended learning.

The NetBi Project – a German acronym for "Network in Educational Science" - has been an initiative of Universities in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany for teacher education. The main issue was to create a model to develop students' competencies and to use universities resources in an optimal way. The hypothesis was that a structural and a didactical offensive[2] was necessary to fulfill the expectations of the *project:*

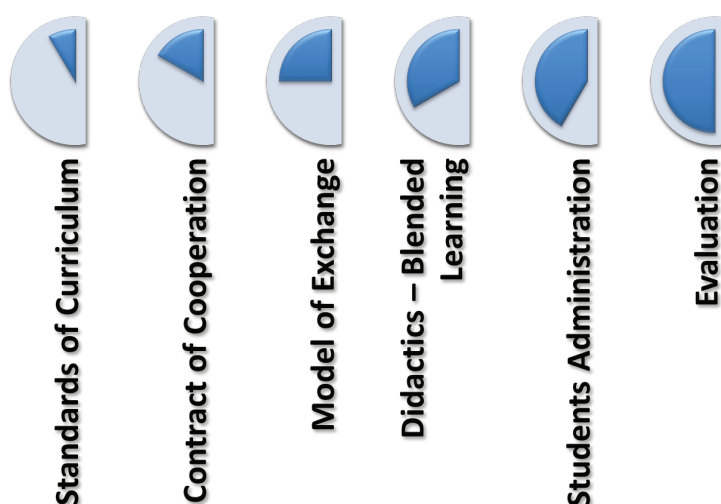*The structural offensive* should solve the problem of combining different universities on the com-

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1 Gates, B. (2010): In Five Years The Best Education Will Come From The Web. URL/AVL: http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/06/bill-gates-education/
2 Arnold, R. 2010. Selbstbildung oder wer kann ich werden und wenn ja wie? Schneider Verlag, Hohengehren. pp. 245.

mon use of modular trainings into a *network*. The great challenge for this network was the creation of common curricular standards and to find a mode of cooperation, administrative matters and a model of exchange.

The *didactical offensive* should create a new understanding of the learning culture in *higher education*, which combines the advantages of in-class-lectures and *distance learning*. The aim of the learning process was to create an approach for self-directed learning, the development of the students' competencies and to promote self-learning. For this, it was necessary to rethink the learning culture, by mixing forms of learning in institutions simultaneously with professional work and learning to learn into the web, which kills the illusions of universities, that knowledge causes competence.[3] Competence means in this setting, to link the knowledge with methodological, social and emotional competencies. For this aim it was a great afford to advocate the possibilities to improve the individual strategies of learning.

In this perspective *the NetBi* project was used as a model to create *higher education* for a special region of Germany. The main criteria were the following[4]:

Standards of Curriculum | **Contract of Cooperation** | **Model of Exchange** | **Didactics – Blended Learning** | **Students Administration** | **Evaluation**

Picture 1: *Criteria for the successful educational network NetBi.*

Standards of Curriculum are the most important fact, because universities have to fulfill the aims of the Bologna process for *higher education*. So it was important to develop a flexible way for workload and a system of grades, to find architecture of the study system, to get the commitment for a mission statement, to assure quality in education and the courses content. It implies a *Contract of Cooperation* to supply courses, to offer them in the local university calendar, and to achieve the common coordination of contents and students exchange.

Through the *Exchange Model* it was regulated how the teaching load could be considered on different universities and how the experiences could be exchanged. A special issue was the common development and implementation of blended learning courses with students' access to different offers of the *network* universities in a common learning management system (LMS), improving the use of resources and decreasing the in-class lectures as mass events. This means for the *Didactic of Blended*

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3 cp Arnold, R. (2009): LehrerCoaching – Herzstück einer transformativen Weiterbildung von Lehrkräften. In: Birgmeier, B. (Hrsg.): Coachingwissen. Denn Sie wissen nicht, was Sie tun? VS Verlag, Wiesbaden, S. 313 – 232.

4 Menzer, C.; Faber, K. (2010): Lernen wo, wann, wie und mit wem ich möchte - Die Ermöglichung flexiblen Lernens im Netzwerk Bildungswissenschaften, in: Apostolopoulos, N.; Rebensburg, K.; Schwill, A.; Mußmann, U.; Wulschke, F. (Hrsg.): Grundfragen multimedialen Lehrens und Lernens : E-Kooperationen und E-Praxis ; Tagungsband GML2 2010 11.-12. März 2010 in Berlin, Münster.

Learning to combine local in-class lectures i.g. as kick-offs or lectures to special topics, with a *distance learning* mode. For this it was needed to define local contact persons and to admit a common exam management. In this way the courses changed from an instructional design to a systemic-constructivist design, with the aim of differentiating and promoting the individual learning processes by the use of personal learning environments, e-portfolio and peer assessments. The *Students Administration* was arranged in four steps:

1. Log-in through the online courses offer of university.
2. Take part at a kick-off session.
3. Log-in to the online course in the LMS Blackboard or Online Learning and Training (OLAT).
4. Additional in-class lectures as trainings, workshops or presentations of results.

Finally a formative and summative *Evaluation* about the quality, acceptance and customer satisfaction took place. The evaluation criteria were built in 3 phases into the *NetBi Project*:

1. Installation and concept for cooperation and didactic.
2. Integration as a pilot between the universities in one online course and the contract of cooperation.
3. Implementation of several courses.

The change in the context awakes not only the wish, but also the need for a change. The learning and teaching in *higher education* comes to strength the intentions, moreover the possibilities of internationalization of *higher education* and to open a new form of international cooperation, a horizontal collaboration between Europe and the worlds Universities, which, doubtless, empowers the participant universities.

Linguistic turn for a new education policy

The project Netbi is a successful step into a new way of learning and cooperation in the context of higher education. Arnold (2010)[5] shows that it is important to change the culture of learning at the university, the former ways of in-class learning and the classical *distance learning* supported by printed materials..

The Netbi project is the fulfillment of a linguistic turn, in which an idea of an independent study mode was developed and implemented in the area of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. This way of learning is a mode, which could be called i-learning. A kind of language-game, which can be defined following Meder (2004, p. 10) as a realization of an educational ideal by the use of technological options like collaborative Self-Assessements and Personal Learning Environments with a structure of a universities *network*.[6]

Furthermore, this turn into the i-learning is a bigger one. It is not only a change of didactic, it is implicit a cultural, social and spatial turn into a globalized world, where universities and their students need to care about social, ethnic, intercultural and political questions[7]. The new aspect in this turn, is not the possibility to learn without boundaries but a structure of cooperation between universities, which work into a climate of competition and a field of ill-defined faculty procedures. After Bologna reform, there are standards of education all around Europe. The world is not in this point yet, but as we already said, the first step is given in free initiatives. And this is not only a geographical distinction, it is a change in the everyday practice of learning, the mental structures and in this way a change of range and deep of field for the claim of universal validity of established learning concepts for *higher education*[8].

International thinking for international standards of Education

The concept of globally thinking has its origin in environmental science. Nowadays, with the ar-

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5 cp Arnold, R. 2010. Selbstbildung oder wer kann ich werden und wenn ja wie? Schneider Verlag, Hohengehren.

6 cp Bogner, C. (2010): Studentisches Feedback im Bachelor. In: Zeitschrift für E-Learning 2010, H. 1, pp. 36-49

7 cp Dzierzbicka, Agnieszka/Sattler, Elisabeth. (2007): Chancengleichheit und Vereinbarungskultur – Notwendige Ambivalenzen pädagogischer Doktrinen. In: H. Schluß (Hrsg.): Indoktrination und Erziehung. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. S. 49-60.

8 cp Berking, H. (2010): Raumvergessen – Raumversessen. Im Windschatten des Spatial Turn. In: A. Honer, M. Meuser, & M. Pfadenhauer (Hrsg.): Fragile Sozialität. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. S. 388-394.

riving of globalization we have no choice; our once big world is today a smaller place. We use to be separate by frontiers, geographical or natural; however necessities and problems of humanity are the same all around the world just in different levels, as well as the solutions. In our particular case, education is a first order necessity and *higher education* is an important theme in agenda of all countries and organizations working in *higher education*.

UNESCO (2007)[9], during the Third Global Forum on International *Quality Assurance*, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications in *Higher Education*, highlights the challenges for an *Emerging Quality Assurance Network*. They conclude that globalization and the internationalization of *higher education* have created both challenges and opportunities in quality assurance (QA) to which countries and regions have responded in different ways, depending on their traditions, culture, resources and priorities. Moreover, the open workforce place in different countries magnified the need to produce quality graduates at the national and regional levels.

Also there are some previous experiences between Continental *Networks* and Bilateral Assistance or Co-operative Development of Sub-continental Quality Assurance Systems. International development cooperation for enhancing quality assurance has been focusing on bilateral system development or close continental *networks* mainly facilitating the exchange of experience (same UNESCO Report). The Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) of the World Bank and UNESCO now opens the way for supporting sub-continental quality assurance systems in small and medium-sized university systems within developing countries. It is hoped that this development will aid in the creation of important economies of scale especially when organizing training and facilitating adaptation process within institutions. Moreover, by bringing together decision-makers as well as academic and non-academic peers from neighbouring countries, sub-continental QA organizations help increase ownership, independence of decision-making and the trans-national spread of innovation.

It is clear in this report that the global thinking in *higher education* has already begun. *NetBi* as an local example for a global context is a new possibility to develop international standards emerging from "on going" experiences, allowing a meeting point between universities all over the world. *The Netbi project* provides a fundament intersystem exchange of content, structure, counseling, exam management and local in-class lectures. In this exchange process, offers one professor e.g. at the University of Kaiserslautern an online lecture for a pool of lectures into the *network* of universities. This offer will be charged to the professor teaching load in his own university. In another local University will be second professor, who is in coordination with the professor of Kaiserslautern responsible for the in-class lecture of the online course with separate teaching loads. Students from different areas of Rhineland-Palatinate and different subjects like physics, chemistry politics and so on can come together in virtual learning environments. They can learn together and with the support of e-portfolios and self-assessments they can learn from each other.[10]

For this cooperation the universities of Rhineland-Palatinate have created a *network* management by the VCRP Virtual Campus of Rhineland-Palatinate, whom development is based on the principle of "structure follows strategy".[11] These are very important experiences to find

- usable ways for cooperation,
- standards of education and
- standards of processes e.g. the realization of the concept, the administrative, organizational and technological fulfillment of teaching and learning settings.

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9 UNESCO (2007) Third Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education Learners and New Higher Education Spaces: Challenges for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

10 Menzer, C.; Faber, K. (2010): Lernen wo, wann, wie und mit wem ich möchte - Die Ermöglichung flexiblen Lernens im Netzwerk Bildungswissenschaften, in: Apostolopoulos, N.; Rebensburg, K.; Schwill, A.; Mußmann, U.; Wulschke, F. (Hrsg.): Grundfragen multimedialen Lehrens und Lernens : E-Kooperationen und E-Praxis ; Tagungsband GML2 2010 11.-12. März 2010 in Berlin, Münster.

11 Burton, R. M./Obel, B. (2004): Strategic organizational diagnosis and design: the dynamics of fit. Heidelberg: Springer, p. 276
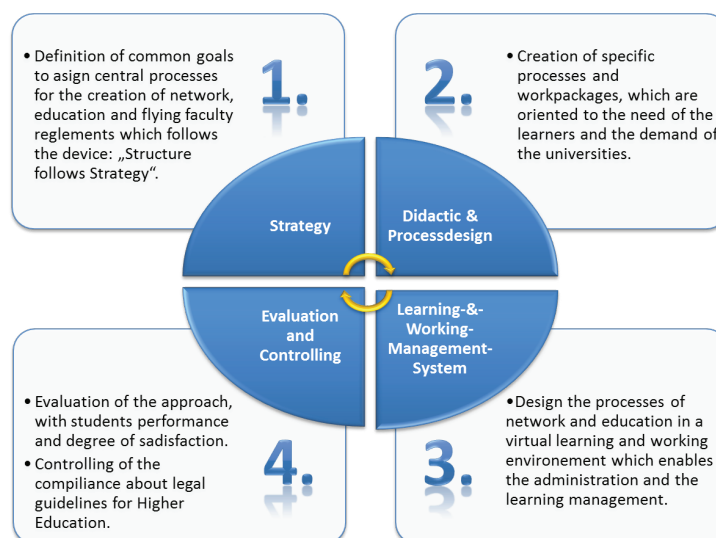
Picture 2: *Processmanagement for international educational network.*

These experiences are a bottom-up-step in direction of flexibility in learning and teaching processes for competence based settings. Especially in teacher *education* contexts it is important for the next generation of teachers, to develop their intercultural competencies for an intercultural in-class situation. Today it is important, so Luciak (2010, pp. 42)[12] says, that teachers are effective for coping with the diversity in classrooms as multi- and intercultural education: "Research has shown that cultural differences influence students learning styles in many ways."[13] (Luciak 2010, p. 49). So the perceptual learning styles like individual, group or field-dependent learning are kind of culturally responsive strategies for teachers. Teachers have to learn to be sensible for the clues of ethnic and the individual needs, by using different teaching styles and learning arrangements. In the context of an intercultural *network* with exchange projects and a self-directed learning process, students will be able to improve their general dispositions of intercultural competence.[14]

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12 cp Luciak, M. (2010): On diversity in educational contexts. OECD – Centre of Educational Research and Innovation: Educating Teachers for Diversity. Meeting the Challenge, OECD, pp. 41-62.

13 cp Luciak, M. (2010): On diversity in educational contexts. OECD – Centre of Educational Research and Innovation: Educating Teachers for Diversity. Meeting the Challenge, OECD, p. 49.

14 Sercu, L- (2005): The foreign Language and Intercultural Competence Teacher. In: SErcu, L. (Hrsg.): Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence: An International Investigation. Multilingual Matters, Frankfurt Lodge, pp. 130-159.