

E.A.SY

“European Agency for eaSY
access to virtual campus”

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Culture
(EACEA))
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General aim of the project

Since 2005, the Faculty of Sociology of the University of Rome has been coordinating the EASY project in collaboration with organisations in five other European countries with the aim of adding to and diffusing the awareness of themes such as learning at a distance and physical and virtual mobility.

The project is part of the Eus¹ E-learning programme and advocates the creation of new tools within the education and training systems in order to respond to changing needs, improve learning quality and facilitate access to ICT.

What is the EASY project?

The EASY project aims to make a contribution to the Eus effort to foster the development of new organisational models in higher education, favouring exchange and collaboration also in terms of virtual mobility². This contribution is empowered by the creation of a project portal (<http://www.easy-elearning.net>) which provides a virtual forum for the exchange and sharing of experiences of e-learning in the various European campuses.

The objectives of the EASY project

The *principal objective* of the project is to monitor the diffusion of e-learning as an aspect of social learning³, that is to examine the diffusion and sharing of e-learning techniques above and beyond the examples of excellence which are a reality in many European universities. It aims to explore, and make known, the very numerous instances of learning at a distance which are developing naturally in the campuses of Europe. This aim was born from the hypothesis that the ICTs have become a forum for the universities programming strategies and are now a point of reference for students and professors alike.

EASY has two *main objectives*:

¹ The e-learning programme was first proposed in may 2000 by the Commission in reply to a call from the Lisbon Congress and was approved by the European Congress which took place at Feira in June 2000.

² The project drew on the experience of existing projects of mobility and cooperation such as Erasmus.

³ Our project adopts a wide vision of e-learning and includes all those areas of social practice which imply the mediation of ICT in the informative and learning processes.

- 1) to analyse the development and diffusion of e-learning from an institutional viewpoint, focussing on how the universities introduce and implement e-learning policies;
- 2) to analyse the ways in which the students (from the newly-enrolled to Phd students) use e-learning and their resulting needs and competencies.

Areas of action

To attain these objectives, the EASY project partners pinpointed two areas of research:

- 1) virtual campuses, chosen among those of our European partners⁴, in Poland, Hungary, Spain, Belgium, Italy and England;
- 2) university students on the campuses⁵.

With regard to the first area, the project partners chose 46 cases of distance learning⁶ which formed the base for our analysis of the development and diffusion of e-learning in educational institutions, using qualitative research methods. For the second area, an on-line questionnaire was adopted to analyse the uses students make of e-learning in both their academic and private lives.

Research on the virtual campuses

Research on the 46 virtual campuses was carried out using:

- interviews with institutional members;
- the use of a standardized evaluation tool.

Using these instruments, we aimed to examine the areas of activity covered by distance learning within the universities, the degree of technological innovation and the quality of the didactics and research.

In the *interviews*, particular focus was placed on: University, location, on-line address, study areas/course, degrees and certificates

offered, duration of experience, short description of experience, short description of products/services, short description of staff and their competencies.

With the *Evaluation tool*, our aims were:

- 1) to exemplify the principal activities carried out on every campus;
- 2) to indicate how the institutional actors evaluated their performance with regard to the didactics and services provided in distance learning. The evaluation tool is organized in four levels of analysis: macro-areas, actions, informative units, indexes. Each macro-area is developed in a single format, and the tool comprises seven evaluating formats to be used together for each virtual campus experience under investigation. There are seven macro-areas of evaluation: Institutional actions (*plan strategies*); On-line support for students (*information and orientation services consultancy for itineraries*); On-line support for students (*learning*); On-line support for staff, Technological supply; Management, organisation, human resources (*processes/services/resources*); Evaluation of the monitoring of the system.

The cross-analysis of the results of the interviews and of the Evaluation tool helped build up a data base which has become an important resource and is available on the private section of the EASY portal.

Research with the students

The research on the students involved six European countries (Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Poland, United Kingdom) and was carried out using a standardized questionnaire which the students filled in on-line choosing from the following languages: Italian, English, French, Spanish, Polish. 1199 completed questionnaires were gathered between March and June 2006.

Following the aforementioned objectives, three general areas which allowed us to gather the information necessary for the didactic orientation and distance training according to the different needs of the students in our target groups were identified: sociographical data; evaluation of the

⁴ These include very many types of e-learning, from degree courses on-line to information services offered on line and others.

⁵ All the students who took part in the research on line but were not enrolled at one of the 46 campuses offered their contributions spontaneously.

⁶ These experiences enabled us to begin the mapping of the campuses, which will be continued through the use of the interactive portal.

students knowledge of technologies (e-learning services offered by the universities; technological competencies of the students).

Scientific results of the research

The campuses

The interviews on campus and the Evaluation tool were aimed at supplying information on the diffusion of e-learning and the extent to which it is used as an accepted practice within the EU countries, and not as a means of ranking the experiences of those countries taking part. Our research therefore highlighted the following trends:

The presence of Institutional interest in the development of learning on campus. All the organizational areas are presided over by the campus management.

Consistent investment in the relationship with students who represented the main users on campus.

The contamination of that investment by other organizational areas on campus (Organization, human resources, etc.)

A summary of the results of our macro-area research are as follows:

The coherence of the actions with the campus planning project. In this area those involved were confident that the aim of developing and implementing a strategic plan for e-learning was satisfactorily on track thanks to adequate institutional intervention.

Interaction with users. All the campuses are supplying services with a view to making life easier (e.g. access to the administration)

Learning. Those involved maintain that they are already supplying "good" levels of service.

Support on line to staff. Feedback regarding the permanent assistance available to teachers in terms of availability of technical resources (software, rooms, libraries) is judged to be satisfactory, improving the quality of teaching and, consequently, the quality of learning.

Verification, for the staff, of the improvement in competencies. A certain weakness can be noted in this area.

The evaluation of the quality of technological platforms. An overall positive judgement.

Management and organisation of human resources. Although a great effort is being made, the overall situation is still in an initial phase.

Methods and procedures of evaluation. The situation is still uncertain, and the risk of rituality in the assessment of the systems persists.

On the whole, it can be said that e-learning is a dynamic reality in almost all campuses, but evident deficiencies persist both in terms of areas to be kept under observation and in terms of user-friendliness.

The students on campus

Some initial results can be observed from the questionnaires.

The validity of the sample. The sample group was made up of self-selected students who opted to take part on line in both guided and spontaneous studies. (More than 22% of the students taking part did not belong to the on-line campuses under examination but had other experiences of distance learning within the university). On the whole, the methodology adopted was successful, even though the sample did not possess any statistical importance and cannot be deemed representative. It was, however, relevant as an example of research experience.

Distance learning and life-long learning.

One result which emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires was that the importance of distance learning is becoming evident not only among university students but also as one of the technologies utilized in social education. Two examples can be used to support this theory: the first is the average age of the students taking part, which reached a peak of 33 at the high end of the range, quite an advanced age for a non-traditional instrument like e-learning. The

second is that 95% of the interviewees use Internet at home in their personal social learning processes.

Institutional and personal uses of distance technologies. Two results emerge from the examination of the uses of distance technologies. On the one hand, didactics and on-line services are utilized by students in their interaction with the institutionalised structures (information, courses, gathering of material and data, contact with professors, administrative information): On the other, a less institutional and more personal side emerges (chat, exchange of information between colleagues, etc.), highlighting a more social use of the net within the institutional educational processes.

Student profiles – the competent and the interested. The students interviewed on line were familiar with ICT and possessed high levels of competence on average. Among the 1199 interviewees, 271 declared themselves to be highly competent, 646 to be in need of further instruction and 89 to be sufficiently competent and not interested in the development of further competencies. More than 80% of the sample can be grouped in a category of average competence, while only 16% declares no interest in possessing ICT competencies. The students appear to have developed a certain familiarity with ICT, which is a proxy dimension of competence. Although this represents a limited portion of European university students, judging by the type of use and the development needs they profess, they can be said to be indicative of a segment of that web society illustrated by Castells.

The need for a more “relationship”-oriented type of on-line university services. Although quite a variety of on-line services emerge, most are of the “frontal” learning kind (i.e. they are often only for the receipt of information, and not its exchange). There is a real need for a more relationship-oriented form of ICT (virtual classrooms, simulations, a more active exchange with professors, orientation services, etc.).

“Normal” campuses receive an overall positive average evaluation from students. The 46 virtual campuses chosen did not represent excellence in e-learning experience

but rather “normal” learning experiences in the use of distance learning. However, on average the students gave a positive evaluation of university on-line services. Perhaps we can say that the use of ICT in didactics and university services has entered a phase of “ordinary consolidation” and, despite some necessary improvements and the need for further development, emerges as a widespread institutional practice.

Distance learning as widespread social knowledge. Two levels of utilisation of distance technologies stemmed from our research. Firstly, a social but structured use, both individual and collective, of ICT within standardized and structured education (such as university courses) in which the potential applications of information technology and communication are used and/or learned. The ICT are, in this case, an educational vehicle in distance training processes, or in the presence of individually-gear instruction for students with diverse starting levels of preparation. In this case, the modalities of the link among the participants, and also the contents of that link, are partially but not entirely preordained. Secondly, a more social use of ICT in real or virtual environments and processes emerges, in this case neither predefined nor pre-structured. Here the cognitive resources and experiences of the users supply the modalities of access and interaction on line, socialization processes which include learning and which are carried out within but above all outside the institutional structures.

Operating results of the EASY project

So far, the EASY project, which has been operational for almost two years now, has produced an important operational goal:

Activating the participation of numerous institutions:

- a network has been set up among the 8 European university partners in the project;
- links have been established between 46 virtual campuses which present a multitude of characteristics and a wide variety of experience in e-learning with diverse types of users;
- each partner has involved experts and e-learning exponents in their research, and

these have made an important scientific and operational contribution;

- operational instruments, such as the evaluation tool and the on-line questionnaire, have been created by the researchers on the project, and these can become standard instruments in the monitoring of e-learning activities in Europe, both with regard to the academic institutions and the students;
- a data base, which is already accessible in the private section of the EASY portal, has been set up. In it, the 46 experiences of virtual campuses have been listed and coded, and a comparison can be drawn in relation to the different dimensions of analysis;
- almost 2000 virtual campus students were contacted through the on-line questionnaire and offered their contribution to our analysis of the diffusion and needs of e-learning on campus (the questionnaire contributed to the creation of a second active data base with information about the students);
- a web portal which will supply an in-depth vision and a continuous update of the two research projects is in its final development phase.
- in the future, other campuses and other students can take part in the analysis using the two data bases already available on the portal which will thus become a kind of virtual space where the diffusion of experiences in on-line campuses and the quality of the
- competencies of students with regard to e-learning can be compared and monitored;
- a research report comprising the analysis of the 46 campuses and the 1200 students will soon be available on the project portal.

Further results of the EASY project

In the ongoing project, further developments will be possible:

- two research instruments (the evaluation tool and the questionnaire) will be available on the project portal to other campuses and students for the self-evaluation of institutional and individual competencies in e-learning;
- an observatory of e-learning practices in the partner countries will be set up, and

will be made available on the portal. Information listed will include descriptions of the institutional actors and the professional market plus the most significant events in the e-learning field in each country;

- furthermore, the partners in the project will create an on-line training package on matters of particular scientific interest which could provide a prototype for on-line didactic material available to campuses and students who visit the portal and who take part in the project;
- a final seminar will promote the diffusion of the main results of the project and the minutes of the seminar will be published in book form along with the scientific and operational results of the project.

The project partners