

Chapter 6.14

Education Networks: Expected Market– and Cost–Oriented Benefits

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about virtual universities, teleteaching or Internet-based learning usually concentrate on pedagogical or technical topics. Ideas and concepts about management, organization or profitability of Internet-based co-operations between universities are missing. This is remarkable due to the ongoing discussion about the efficiency of universities, especially in Germany. This chapter gives an example of an inter-university education network and presents the expected effects of co-operational activities. Both cost-oriented and market-oriented benefits are mentioned. Further on, actual cost- and market-oriented advantages are explained by using the case study of the education network WINFOLine. Finally the authors

mention some problems and open questions about how to manage (open) education networks to initiate further discussion about this topic.

INTRODUCTION

The use of new media, for example Web-based trainings, is frequently called for by practitioners and politicians in the field of higher education because German universities can only compete on an international level by emphasizing teaching based on information and communication technologies (Hagenhoff, 2003). By using new media in education, teaching is to become more illustrative, motivating, efficient, and, last but not least, less expensive. The idea of saving money,

however, should be critically examined because the use of new media is often quite cost-intensive in comparison to conventional instruction at universities, at least if the Web-based trainings are produced at the high quality standards required for self-instruction. To achieve a quality improvement in the field of online education, it is essential to avoid a simple stringing together of pure HTML text pages. A uniform interface of the studying platform, simple serviceability, a good didactic-methodical concept, a meaningful visualization (in the form of short animations), a fullness of exercises and different ways of synchronous and asynchronous communications are just some aspects to be considered during the production of high-quality Web-based trainings. The high costs for the development and operation of such high-quality Web-based trainings often turn out to be a problem, because they usually cannot be borne by a single institution. Besides, it is necessary to reach a large number of students since otherwise the expensive teaching material will not pay off. For this reason it is useful to establish co-operations between education service providers in the field of higher education.

We describe the benefits that arise from such co-operations from the point of view of the co-operational partners. We do not consider potential benefits for the end customers (the students) in this article. The aim of this article is to show the benefits that arise from a co-operation between education service providers in detail. In order to do this, we will first describe the basic types and goals of education networks before turning to the practical example of *WINFOLine*, which will then illustrate the different groups of advantages. Finally, we discuss some open questions, which will have to be answered in the future.

BASICS

In the following, we will first give a precise definition of the term “education network” in order

to be able to analyze possible advantages. In the next step, we will introduce *WINFOLine* as a practical example.

Ideas and Aims of Co-Operations

The construct of co-operation (Hess, 1999)¹ functions as a starting point for the term network. For years, scientists have used various ways of trying to define the term co-operation. Most of these attempts have come to the conclusion that a co-operation is a tacit or a contractual partnership of convenience between at least two legally and economically independent partners who, for a specific period of time, pursue a common goal in a job-sharing fashion (Grochla, 1972; Knoblich, 1969; Rotering, 1990). With regard to inter-university co-operations, the partners are either associated with universities or interested in the development of educational offers and their contents, this includes individual departments² or teachers, as well as companies not directly related to the university, such as partners from the practical field, sponsors or learning platform suppliers.

Through years of research in the field of co-operation, multiple goals, like increases in efficiency or power, as well as time and cost-saving measures, can be taken from the respective specialized literature (Porter and Fuller, 1989; Beck, 1998; Ebert, 1998; Eisele, 1995; Picot and Jaros-Sturhahn, 2001). Often, the list of individual goals is highly enumerative and sometimes the dividing lines are blurred. In the following, the author M. Ebert is thus to be used as an example of someone who has, in a first step, reduced these multiple goals to one prime goal: “The realization of synergy effects.” This means that, through the co-operation of multiple partners, advantages which one partner would not have been able to achieve by himself can be achieved. By taking this step, two main groups of goals can be identified: the cost- and market-oriented goals. The cost-oriented goals are primarily reached

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