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Final report pilot 4: Making course choice from remote universities easier

Abstract

This report gives an account of the activities undertaken in pilot 4 of the Victorious project on facilitation of course choice from remote universities. Besides the description of our experiences with offering course descriptions to a broader community, an overview is given of existing course databases on study opportunities inside and outside Europe.

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1 Aims of this Pilot

Pilot 4 of the Victorious project on improving course choice for students from remote universities and the Course Description Metadata (CDM) standard aimed to find out the feasibility of exchanging course descriptions between European universities and of offering course descriptions to the broader community on a common website. By exploring this possibility a number of existing policies and procedures within each participating institution were aimed to make explicit. Among these were:

- The creation and keeping up-to-date of the electronic prospectus of the university
- The ownership of the course description (copyright issues)
- The technical format for the course descriptions and the reasoning behind it
- The information taken up in the course descriptions and the reasoning behind it
- Explanation for different versions of the course descriptions (e.g. English vs. local language)

Another aim of the pilot was to study existing course databases (country-specific or Europe-wide) with regard to their content, quality and user-friendliness to finally come to some recommendations on how universities can promote their course offers and make them more visible and transparent to interested students.

2 Methodology and Work Plan

The pilot consisted of two parts, a more practical part aiming at making course descriptions of some partner universities of the Victorious project available via a common website by using the Course Description Metadata standard and a theoretical part including a desk research on existing course databases (country-specific or Europe-wide) with regard to their content, quality and user-friendliness.

To be able to participate in the practical part of the pilot the course descriptions of the universities had to be available in English and they needed to follow the CDM standard. Some preliminary investigations had to be carried out at the individual universities in order to transfer the course descriptions to the CDM standard:

1. Administratively:

- Who is the owner of the course descriptions?
- Who is responsible for managing the course descriptions?
 - technical management
 - content management
- What are the conditions (set by the university authorities) to be taken into account in this pilot?

- Which languages are the course descriptions available in?

2. Technically:

- What format are the course descriptions in?
- Why was this format chosen? Advantages/Disadvantages
- Can the course descriptions be changed into the CDM format? What is needed for this?

The results of this preliminary research would determine in a major way the implementation of the practical tests. Some obstacles we expected for the implementation were:

- the university authorities do not allow access to existing course descriptions
- changing the format to CDM/XML is not feasible within time scope of the project
- available technical expertise

For the implementation the objective was to transfer the course descriptions of a university from the current format to the CDM format taking into account constraints such as the current format of the course descriptions, the conditions posed by the university authorities, the technical requirements for the transfer, the technical expertise available at the different universities and the time scope of the project. Finally the objective of the tests was to make the course descriptions available online through a common website for all participating universities by upload onto the website <http://www.ects.info> and to decide whether a special website is preferable for this pilot within the Victorious project.

3 Preliminary Investigations Preceding the Implementation

The preliminary investigations showed that *ownership of course descriptions* is handled very differently at the participating universities. In some cases the university is owner of the descriptions. This makes it easier to reach an agreement about the exportation of them. In other cases the departments, faculties or even teachers are owner of their course description. In these cases the exchange of the descriptions can be a cumbersome process due to the necessary mutual agreements.

In most cases faculties or teachers are responsible for the *content management* of the course descriptions. The *technical management* often is in hands of a central office like the external relations office or the communication and marketing office. They coordinate the final publication of the descriptions.

The full course descriptions in most cases are only available in the *local language* of the university. English versions are sometimes available in condensed form or for courses or programmes with an international audience.

The *technical situation* is similar at the different universities. The course descriptions are provided to students in paper form and/or electronically on

a webpage. In most cases teachers have to fill in special templates with the required information, which is stored in a database. In some cases descriptions are available in XML-format and can be changed into the CDM format without to much effort, but generally speaking the CDM format is not very well known.

4 CDM and ECTS.info

4.1 CDM - Course Description Metadata

CDM stands for Course Description Metadata and is an XML-based specification for educational data (programme and course descriptions). CDM started in 2001 and has been developed at the University of Oslo in Norway for the Norwegian eStandard project, Norway Opening Universities and Utdanning.no, Norway's national portal for education. This last organization still maintains the format. More information can be found on their website [4]. There you also can download the CDM XML schema and specification. The metadata are intended to satisfy the following objectives:

- Facilitate description and exchange of information about educational course units
- Facilitate a standardization of course unit descriptions
- Facilitate the establishment of national and international course catalogues
- Facilitate the establishment of course portals and other services helping students

In order to obtain an ECTS label institution must make accessible an Information Package/Course Catalogue in the local language of instruction and in English. It should make study programmes easy to understand and compare for all students and staff - local and foreign - and provide them with essential institutional, academic and practical information.

CDM can be used for having a common way to encode the information to make the content available online. Presenting the content in a structured way makes it easy to search and navigate.

4.2 ECTS.info

ECTS.info [3] has been developed together with CDM. It is an online catalogue of ECTS courses and institution descriptions which allows potential students and students considering Erasmus exchanges to get an overview of the study possibilities in all European countries.

Initially the search engine included the ECTS course catalogues from the higher education institutions that have received the ECTS label. But other institutions implementing ECTS are encouraged to submit their ECTS course catalogues too.

The European ECTS search engine has been developed with financial support from the European Commission.

5 Experiences with ECTS info and the CDM format

In the course of this pilot, it was found that the CDM format is very elaborate and detailed. However, not all information that is included in the format is considered important to individual universities. Moreover, it was noticed that since universities stored their information on courses in various formats and in various places, implementing the CDM format for specific universities was not an easy job. It meant gaining access to different data files, which meant going through more administrative lanes in the institution.

Only one partner was able to implement the CDM format on a sample course description. The technical transfer was relatively straightforward, but the administration to go through was much more cumbersome.

One other partner tried to make the transfer, but gave up early due to too much work for the scope of the project.

Overall, the CDM format offers an extensive framework for programme and course description, but is perhaps too extensive for wide-spread use.

Uploading the data in CDM format to the ECTS.info website [3] was quite straightforward. It is only necessary to indicate the location of the data (exact URL). However, it took a long time for the information to be accepted and added to the database.

6 Results of the Desk Research: Examples of Course Databases

6.1 Europe-wide Course Databases

PLOTEUS (Portal on Learning Opportunities throughout the European Space) PLOTEUS contains information on studying in thirty countries - including the Baltic States and most Central European nations. It was set up in order to respond to the conclusions of the Lisbon and Stockholm European Councils, which invited the European Commission and Member States to create a Europe-wide service providing information on jobs and learning opportunities. The purpose of PLOTEUS is to put into effect the right to freedom of movement for European citizens by providing the necessary information.

In its present form, PLOTEUS aims to facilitate navigation among existing information resources on learning opportunities. The work of identifying and classifying the information resources is carried out by the National Resources Centres for Vocational Guidance (Euroguidance) - a European network funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme and by national authorities.

PLOTEUS is a project under construction. On the one hand, the current service for guiding users to existing information resources is being permanently expanded and updated. On the other hand, the Commission and the relevant national authorities are working together to define a common protocol that will allow the interconnection at European level of national and regional databases. This will provide citizens with unified, direct access to any such tools.

The project is managed by DG Education and Culture; its development was supported by the DG Enterprise IDA (Interchange of Data between Adminis-

trations) programme¹.

Study in Europe The "Study in Europe" web portal has been created by the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), an independent European organisation dedicated to the management, analysis and improvement of education and training co-operation within Europe and between Europe and other parts of the world. ACA member organisations are major European national organisations responsible for the promotion of international cooperation in education.

This web portal gives access to the national websites of European countries, which provide information on higher education in these countries: higher education institutions and study programmes, language of tuition, admission procedures, degrees awarded, grant opportunities, campus life, country information and other practical details that might be of interest while planning studies in Europe. Most of these websites have links to those of individual institutions of higher education, where more detailed information can be found.

Finally, the portal contains links to other internet information sources on education opportunities in Europe².

Hobsons Study Europe Guide provides a database of European institutions of Higher Education searchable by country, subject area and study level (postgraduate/masters and undergraduate/bachelors, MBA). It is also possible to search for institutions by name. If the search was successful the contact details of the providing institution are shown. However some testcases revealed that this database is not very complete and the information is not up-to-date.

6.2 Country-specific Course Databases

6.2.1 Belgium

- <http://www.hogeronderwijsregister.be> (only for Flanders in Dutch)
- <http://www.enseignement.be> (only for Wallonia in French)

6.2.2 France

- EGIDE: <http://www.egide.asso.fr/uk/guide/>

6.2.3 Germany

- <http://www.daad.de/deutschland/index.en.html>

6.2.4 Italy

- <http://www.study-in-Italy.it>
- <http://universo.miur.it> (uses the same database as "Study in Italy")

¹Source: Ploteus Website [2]

²Source: Study in Europe Website [1]

6.2.5 Spain

- <http://www1.universia.net/estudiosXXI> (a well known portal to find information about Spanish universities and Studies in Spain, only in Spanish)

6.2.6 United Kingdom

- <http://www.ucas.com/>
- <http://www.educationuk.org/>

6.3 Information on Study Opportunities Outside Europe

6.3.1 USA

- EducationUSA (<http://educationusa.state.gov>): The US Government's official portal for international students considering studying in higher education in the States; it includes information on undergraduate and post-graduate study, short-term study and opportunities for scholars.

6.3.2 Australia

- IDP Education Australia (<http://www.idp.com>): Promotes and supplies information on study in Australia including an online searchable university/course database and help on applying and funding.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

In the course of the pilot it was found that transferring the whole course catalogue of a university in a certain format to one or more specialized databases to promote it throughout Europe is an administratively cumbersome and time-consuming job. However, comprehensive and user-friendly country-specific databases are already available for a number of European countries. So the idea of portals like "PLOTEUS" [2] and "Study in Europe" to facilitate navigation among existing information resources on learning opportunities seems the more practicable approach. Support of such initiatives is worthwhile as well as stimulation of high quality country-specific databases with information on courses, programmes, study modalities and student facilities. All these portals need to be promoted towards HEIs and interested students.

Nevertheless it is desirable that universities provide a searchable database of courses and programmes which fulfils the ECTS label requirements on their websites. Information and website should be available not only in the local language but also at least in English. It is recommended that they test whether the information is also available via European portals like "PLOTEUS" and "Study-in-Europe" and if necessary take steps to make information available there.

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