

Networked curricula: Fostering transnational partnerships in open and distance learning

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Abstract

Transnational Networked Curricula (TNC) provides many benefits to the institutions that offer them as well as to the different stakeholders involved, not only the students but also the academics, the institutions as a whole, and the wider society. Supporting Higher Education Institutions in enhancing and implementing international networked practices in virtual campus building is the main aim of the NetCU project, which has been developed by the EADTU, in partnership with 14 member organizations, from 2009 to 2012. The project outcomes intend to facilitate the future set-up of networked curricula in Higher Education institutions and potentially lead to more transnational partnerships in Open and Distance Education (ODE) and blended learning, showing challenges, obstacles and ways to overcome them. This paper presents the main products developed in the project, assesses its completeness and usage, and discusses on the challenges of curricula networking starting from the ideas and opinions shared in different stakeholders workshops organized under the NetCU project.

Keywords: Challenges of Curricula Networking; Higher Education Institutions Transnational Partnership; International Mobility; Open and Distance Learning; Transnational Networked Curricula

Introduction

Some of the challenges of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in a global society are related to the encouragement of networked curricula, mobility recognition and strategies for integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a way to achieve the requirements of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), facing the diverse needs of today's student population and lifelong learners (EUA, 2006). Transnational networked curricula, in particular, have a number of positive effects in this sense, providing students with the best knowledge and skills needed in today's labour market. Through collaboration HEIs can offer their students a broader range of content, better quality and an improved international learning experience.

Transnational Education refers to education provision that is available in more than one country and includes a wide variety of delivery modes (Baskerville, MacLeod & Saunders, 2011). It includes a variety of curriculum plan design in which different Higher Education Institutions are involved ranged on a continuum from less to more integration and structure plan and strategy. Exchange curricula include flexible programs organized in a short term to tailor the needs or interest of individual students at the host university. However academic recognition of mobility period abroad is still problematic. Networked curricula include collaboration among universities based on student groups' mobility having the option for dual certificates in case of substantial stay at various universities. Integrated curricula include –in most cases– a common part of the curriculum and complementary options with a mobility (physical and virtual) plan for all students with a Joint Certificate at the end of their study (Henderikx & Ubachs, 2012, p. 6).

The growing importance of ICT based teaching and learning and the steady developments in web 2.0 technologies, bear great opportunities for the realization of international networked curricula fitting the lifelong learners needs. As pointed by Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Hodgson and McConnell (2012) the web 2.0 supports networked learning pedagogical approach, focusing on the potential of ICT to support collaboration. Johnson (2001) emphasizes the importance of adequate scaffolding inside communities of practice, especially in the cases of online communication techniques and technical support. However, most networked curricula so far are delivered in a traditional face-to-face setting and do therefore not cover the needs of a growing number of students. But lifelong learners and non-mobile students should also benefit from such offers.

Since the 2001 Prague Higher Education Summit which included the demand to “step up the development of modules, courses and curricula offered in partnership by institutions”, an evolving landscape of transnational partnerships in Higher Education can be witnessed. While this is certainly also valid for open and distance education (ODE) and blended learning, here the activities seem to be missing an overall analysis as well as models and guidelines for facilitating implementation. A short survey among the members of the European Association of Distance Education Universities (EADTU) showed that many of them are already collaborating with international partners and offer networked curricula schemes via online or blended modes. The majority of the universities want to get further involved in it and sees international networked curricula as a major step towards their future success. A need for more action-research and sharing experiences, for transferable models and for clear guidance in how to initiate and implement networked curricula in ODE and blended learning, have been expressed.

Trying to fill this gap, EADTU, in partnership with 14 member organizations representing 20 European showcases, ran the NetCU project¹ during two years (2010–2012). This project has combined a set of activities and approaches: a) already existing networked curricula in the field were collected and analyzed; b) from this analysis, models have been derived and c) guidelines to create and implement different forms of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning have been given. In addition d) experiences with advanced ICT solutions and emerging practices, e.g. social software, have been shared, transferred, tested and evaluated.

Value and benefits of curricula networking

As Heusser and Dittrich (2010) point out, joint programmes are at the core of the Bologna reform as they stimulate trans-border cooperation as well as the mobility of students and staff in Europe, and are therefore on the top of the European Higher Education agenda. But this is not a European issue alone: all over the world institutions are aiming at collaboration and internationalization, and the European Commission funds projects in which there is transnational cooperation between European and non-European countries. In the needs assessment carried out in the Inter-Alfa project² (Mata & Ávila, 2008; Malik *et al.*, 2010), one of the main reasons to be involved in a joint programme, pointed out by one of the Latin-American project partners was “to establish agreements with international higher education institutions in order to deliver high quality graduate programs and allow an exchange of knowledge and experience that will ensure high level specialized training.”

As part of a Mexican institution’s internationalization process, the “establishment of networks and collaboration with institutions in other countries, access to some of their courses and programs, mobility of our professors and students to these institutions, and reciprocal interinstitutional accreditation” were considered primary goals aimed at the country’s participation in the global increasingly competitive arena.

As stated in the Bologna Process website (2007–2010), good joint degree programmes offer a series of interrelated benefits for students, staff and institutions alike:

- Institutions are able to combine their strengths in a collective endeavour in which one unified programme becomes more valuable than the sum of its parts.
- Joint programmes offer the potential to develop more internationalised, multi-dimensional curricula, in addition to opportunities for developing and practising language and cultural skills.
- Students experience the intellectual stimulation of viewing their chosen subject through more windows, developing new learning methods and ways of thinking.
- University staff can be exposed to unfamiliar approaches to their subject through more sustained contact with partner colleagues.
- They may also explore how different methods of teaching and learning in their areas of specialisation can complement and enrich each other.

In the same fashion, soundly implemented joint-degrees provide a clear added-value to the EHEA (and we can say that to other continents' higher education areas as well), due to the following characteristics (Bologna Process website, 2007–2010):

- Mobility is integral to the course content and design rather than an 'add on'. Students are thus required and assisted to study in a partner institution in a different country.
- The preparation of integrated joint degree study programmes encourages more transparent academic recognition procedures. The correct use of ECTS and the Diploma Supplement (DS) can greatly help.
- Quality enhancement of programmes is encouraged through teaching staff devising curricula that are open to scrutiny from partner colleagues abroad.
- Students who experience high quality joint programmes have a greater chance of becoming internationally employable graduates.
- Teaching staff in joint programmes have opportunities for professional development outside their home country. Within joint degree networks, they can thus establish links that build a firm foundation for further international cooperation including transnational research.
- Joint degree programmes, particularly at Master and doctorate levels, are of great potential interest to students from outside Europe, and opportunities for such students have been extended by the Erasmus Mundus programme. Institutions can thus use these programmes to position themselves strategically in an international market.

Other benefits or aspects which add value to networked curricula:

- Attractiveness of achieving degrees which are easily recognized in more than one country
- Educational value of studying in another institution and another country within a clear pre-planned agreement on recognition and integration in the curriculum
- Increased promotional prospects for a student's career, by earning a joint or double degree, or more than one, and the social competences developed, as well as a broader worldview are usually appreciated by employers.
- Acquisition of new knowledge, enhanced by a richer curriculum derived from the cooperation of different academics and institutions.
- The experiences lived with students from different origins.

International students are a key element in the global society development. As stated by Dunkel (2009) the tension between convergence and diversity within a higher education system is a key

factor to face balancing the diversity (horizontal and vertical) and variety (between countries and cultures). Bartram (2008) explores the association between student characteristics (age, ethnicity, nationality and aspects of personality) and perceived support requirements, taking into account aspects as ideological and educational backgrounds. Culver *et al.* (2012) examine strengths and weakness of a sample of dual and joint degree programs, finding some positive results in personal dimensions among students as self-reliance, rather than professional ones.

The NetCu project

EADTU's NetCU project has taken up the societal and institutional needs as described above and developed a work programme that supports HEIs in enhancing and implementing international networked practices in virtual campus building. The project outcomes intend to facilitate the future set-up of networked curricula by HE institutions and potentially lead to more transnational partnerships in ODE and blended learning. Thus NetCU lead to a successful internationalization of universities and enhanced virtual campuses. Universities receive strategic and practical support for improving the quality of their curricula and for strengthening their international portfolio. Students find access to more and better learning opportunities and have the opportunity to enhance their ICT and international skills. On the European level the transparency and convergence grow and a European identity of study programmes in ODE and blended learning emerges.

The general aim of the NetCU project is to develop models, guidelines and strategies for transnational networked curricula that supply a broader range of content and learning activities, using ICT for innovative strategies in an international context.

Methodology

The research methodology applied is the study of cases based on a qualitative approach combining a set of phases: a) Identification and analysis of networked curricula examples; b) Collection of key information on them using a questionnaire; c) Analysis of the key elements of the TNC model through the development of several internal and external workshops; d) Analysis of the most useful ICT tools among partners; and e) Evaluation of the NetCu products developed.

As a first step a comprehensive mapping, description and analysis of the currently existing networked curricula was made. A set of key areas were analysed: educational model, ways of sharing of content, role of mobility, issues of assessment, recognition and quality assurance, the role and usage of ICT in the curriculum, national, legal and institutional frameworks defined, etc. Information on these and further questions helped to deliver comprehensive data for deriving systematic models of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning. With these models specific cases were transferred into common features of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning and translated into viable guidelines for developing and implementing transnational networked curricula. To strengthen the important technological dimension of networked curricula in ODE and blended learning innovative ICT solutions were shared, analysed and plugged into one of the case studies for testing and enhancing.

During the second year of the project lifetime -2012- two external stakeholder meetings and a series of 12 internal local seminars were held with the aim of testing those Guidelines in practice and receive feedback for further fine-tuning and improve the final outcomes, showed at the EADTU annual conference 2012 under the EU-Presidency of Cyprus.

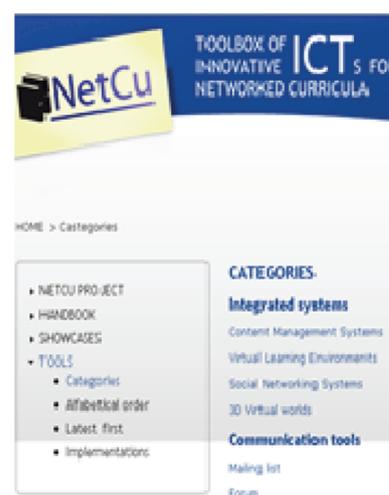
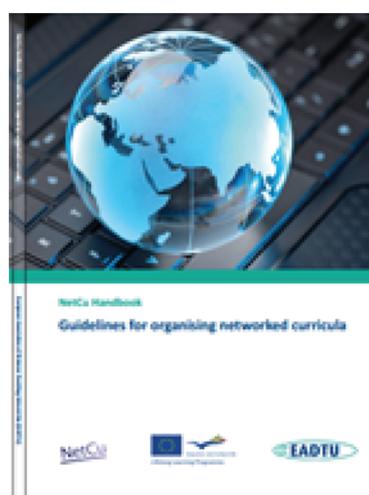
In the last stage of the project, a number of internal stakeholders' workshops were delivered with the joint participation of academics, students, managers and administrative staff from different HEIs

involved in the project. These workshops intended to test and assess the completeness, potential use, practical usage of the project's products as well as to discuss on challenges and obstacles related to the implementation of TNC, and ways to overcome them. A brief summary of the ideas shared in these workshops will be presented below.

The NetCU products

The project outcomes and results stimulate and facilitate the set-up of new networked curricula and improve existing ones and thus trigger the positive effects as described in the previous part of this document. One of the specific objectives of the NetCU project was to help universities to promote transnational networked curricula using ICT, facing challenges as recognition and strategies for mobility. In order to fulfill this aim, a set of products has been developed:

- The **NetCu Handbook** (Ubachs, 2012) offers easy-to-use scenario's and gives examples of best practices for all professionals who want to engage in setting up a networked curriculum. It covers key aspects as Goals, Partnerships, Students and Students Characteristics, Models and Formats, Legal Framework and Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Europe.
- The **NetCu Showcases Compendium** describes and analyzes running European examples of transnational networked curricula. The collection of success factors from existing models intend to help new initiatives to become successful as well.
- The **NetCu ICT Toolbox** provides with full information on innovative and useful tools under a broad range of categories: *Integrated systems* (Content Management Systems, Virtual Learning Environments, Social Networking Systems, 3D Virtual worlds); *Communication* (Mailing list, Forum, Chat/IM, Audio-Video conferencing, Web conferencing); *Collaboration* (Collaborative editing, Collaborative aggregation, Calendar and agenda management); *Live presentation* (Video streaming, Slides presentation, Screen sharing, Lecture webcasting); *Publishing and sharing* (Audio publishing/podcasting, Video publishing, Image publishing, Slides publishing, Documents publishing, File sharing, Lecture recording); *Social and personal learning* (Blogging, Activity streaming, Aggregation, Social bookmarking, Connection and contacts management, Media sharing); and finally, *Research and Evaluation* (Survey, Reference management, Self-evaluation, Testing, Assignment).



- *Completeness and Usefulness of the NetCU Products*

Research projects require counting from its initial proposal and throughout its development with the requirements of quality assurance that are presented in the Handbook as a way of inventory: How to perform the analysis? Who will be the actors involved in the evaluation? Which will be the documents to analyse? Should specific surveys be created? (Pereira, Morgado, Caeiro & Teixeira, 2012, p. 106). The feedback of workshops' participants emphasizes the clarity and appropriateness of the issues addressed in the NetCU Handbook as well as its usefulness for future consortia. It provides the reader with a highly supportive methodology and good examples. However there are some relevant issues that, from the participant's view, need to be addressed; among others, how to solve the inequity as a result of the difficult access to mobility of students from countries lacking of specific funding, as well as how to make competences' accreditation equivalent in the different institutions / countries involved.

Regarding the NetCu Compendium of Showcases (NetCU Project, 2012a), the workshops' participants highlight that it presents synthetic data that make easy to review the key achievements of each case selected in the study. It is valued as a motivating product, easy to be understand, that clearly describes how other institutions works and may inspire. It provides a good exemplification and offers ideas to start designing a new networked curricula. They suggest to add a comparative study of success, ways to overcome obstacles and tips for improvement in the cases analyzed, as well as a contact of someone who could provide more information in case the reader has questions not answered in the text. In order to promote good practices in high education environments we share the following idea: "Education for global citizenship embraces the ideas of peace, tolerance and mutual understanding, human rights education and related educational themes (. . .) promoting intercultural understanding, inter-faith dialogue, respect for diversity and empathy." (UNESCO, 2011, p. 23).

As pointed out by the European Commission (2011, p. 10): "Networking has become one of the central capabilities in mobile, knowledge-based societies". On regards to the institutional responsibility in the development of networking, some universities suggest the need of some kind of specific section or back office, a proactive structure with representation of academic staff, to support the organization, development, monitoring and dissemination of curricula network. Individual efforts are crucial, but the complexities of the networking require a formal support system and strong cooperation between academics and administrative staff.

In the participant's opinion, the ICT Toolbox (NetCU Project, 2012b) provides an overview of the vast and changing field of web resources that can be applied in education, most of them open materials, and allows adaptation to different models of networked curricula. It makes shorten the decision making process about the tools. Updating of the database is a challenge.

- *Institutional Benefits and Responsibilities*

Workshop participants agreed on the absence of a specific policy about networked curricula in their institutions, and highlight that there is still no provision for networked curricula in national legislation. Nevertheless, internationalization and cooperation are key aspects for HEIs progression, so all of them declare to have a strategic plan or a framework for future development, as well as many specific ongoing initiatives on curricula networking. They defend the need of overcome the barriers of on-site and virtual learning, and encourages the virtual mobility as a good option.

Participants outline that many advantages to the university can arise with networked curricula: internationalization (strong recommendation on the level of EU guidelines), marketing, sustainability and mobility (of students). The international cooperation between different academic institutions

is essential to improve the quality of the didactic, and also to give the students a more qualifying preparation and better opportunities in the labour market. In addition, networked curricula contribute to make it possible for more people to access higher education, open the institutional perspectives and provides with more and better opportunities to researchers and students. Finally, it enables to advance in the internationalization rankings supported by EU and other international organizations.

- *Challenges and Obstacles, and Ways to Overcome them*

Some of the main obstacles identified by the workshops' participants relate to issues of language, certification, students workload, school calendar (in particular for partnerships involving non-European countries), wide variation in fees at the international level, compatibility of assessment practices. More specifically, compatibility between models, practices and evaluation systems is an issue that rise challenges for the promoters of networked curricula. Management and administrative procedures among potential partners are frequently incompatible. Sometimes there are different registration requirements for students in terms of, for example, entrance Degree. On the other hand, sometimes specific virtual spaces are not designed to friendly add other languages: Curricula flexibility faces strictness of technical applications. It was highlighted that it is usually easier to overcome these obstacles at the level of postgraduate than in graduate courses.

Moreover, networked curricula provoke a work overload and a high level of effort for academics and staff in general. Internally, a possible way to overcome these difficulties would be to work collaboratively at the different involved levels: institutional, administrative, technological and academic. Another suggestion to get over this obstacle points to networking smaller parts of curricula.

Another challenge relates to the difficulty to find partners with convergent interest and wishing to cooperate for the creation of joint programmes. Attendance to international conferences and meetings use to be a good method to find partners for scientific cooperation, but it seems not to be so fruitful for didactic cooperation, probably because a higher trustfulness level is required. To overcome this, they suggest to extend and strengthen the existing national and international relationships among HEIs and to promote the creation of new ones. The development of a space or environment where one specific institution can find requests and offers of new didactic collaborations in specific sectors may be an instrument to encourage the creation of new networked curricula. They also suggest that, due to its novelty and complexity, forums and debates about the advantages and difficulties in virtual mobility should be encouraged, and the European Commission should disseminate good practices to renew and extend the good results given.

Conclusion

EADTU's NetCU project has taken up the societal and institutional needs as described above and developed a work programme that supports HEIs in enhancing and implementing international networked practices in virtual campus building. The project outcomes intend to facilitate the future set-up of networked curricula by HE institutions and potentially lead to more transnational partnerships in ODE and blended learning. Thus NetCU lead to a successful internationalization of universities and enhanced virtual campuses. Universities receive strategic and practical support for improving the quality of their curricula and for strengthening their international portfolio. Students find access to more and better learning opportunities and will enhance their ICT and international skills. On the European level the transparency and convergence grow and a European identity of study programmes in ODE and blended learning emerges.

With the NetCU project, EADTU has taken the lead in providing an analysis of international networked curricula in ODE, from which models and comprehensive guidelines have been developed. All the NetCu products are available as open source material under Retrieved from www.networkedcurricula.eu. Thus, HEIs can find useful orientation on starting a networking project or programme, as well as methodological and technical support in designing and implementing a networked curricula.

Transnational Networked curricula can be quite complex and challenging to implement, nevertheless, they provide many benefits to the institutions that offer them and to the different stakeholders involved, not only the students but also to the academics and the institutions as a whole, as well to the wider society, due to the outcomes derived from the strengthening of collaborative teaching and research.

At the same time, the NetCu project enhances and supports the development of virtual mobility as a solution to the challenge of meeting the needs of all students, including non-mobile students and lifelong learners. Networked curricula should take into account that all students should benefit from international collaboration. In this sense, limits on physical mobility must not be barriers to offering our students an international experience. Technology now makes possible a mix of learning opportunities, such as virtual seminars, projects, internships and so on, from which we can begin to expand the mobility of credit and qualifications.

Acknowledgement

Networked Curricula—Fostering Transnational Partnerships in Open and Distance Education and Blended Learning (NetCu Project). EC Lifelong Learning Programme—510771-LLP-1-2010-1-NL-ERASMUS-EVC, 2009–2012. Website available from <http://www.networkedcurricula.eu/>

Notes

- ¹ *Networked Curricula—Fostering Transnational Partnerships in Open and Distance Education and Blended Learning (NetCu Project)*. EC Lifelong Learning Programme—510771-LLP-1-2010-1-NL-ERASMUS-EVC, 2009–2012. Website: Retrieved from <http://www.eadtu.eu/netcu> Video: <http://vimeo.com/50174521>
- ² *INTER -Euro-Latinamerican Postgraduate Programme in Intercultural Education (2007–2009)*. Funded by the Alfa Programme. Ref: II-0534-A. Retrieved from http://www.uned.es/grupointer/interalfa_en.html

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