



Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges

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A students' viewpoint of Life Long Learning:
Outcomes and Experiences from the Symposia organised by
the Board of European Students of Technology

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Abstract

By this article we, members of the Educational Committee of BEST [3], try to present students' perspectives on Life Long Learning by sharing our experience, outcomes and conclusions as a result of the work that we have been developing in BEST. We believe that we can enhance the efficiency of the information channel between students and other engineering education stakeholders.

1. Introduction

It is well known there is no clear definition for the term "Life Long Learning". [1] For the purposes of BEST Symposium on education "Engineering Demand and Offer in Europe" we agreed to facilitate its definition by separating it in professional development courses and master courses, where the first aim at specific groups who already hold a degree and need to be up-dated on critical advancements and the second aim at identified needs among particular professional groups.

Despite this, it was clear during the symposium, that students have difficulty in deciding what Life Long Learning (LLL) consists, in terms of specific programmes. Many other queries were raised during the talks, with the most profound being how LLL is supported by universities, i.e. if it is the role of universities to offer such programmes, how the programmes should be funded, how the cost should be shared between employers and employees, the duration and the structure of

the program. Participants expressed concerns about the time needed to attend such programmes, about how absence from the workplace could be compensated, as well as the need for relocation.

The students concluded that such programmes should be developed with the cooperation among industries and universities, which should act as a medium of access and attractiveness to LLL. Furthermore, they were unanimous that payment, duration, and structure should be arranged according to the programme, the needs it addresses, and the benefits it derives.

As a matter of fact, although LLL is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area, there was no reference to it. This notion was confirmed during the Symposium. The bewilderment of the participants indicated that there is a lack of information concerning LLL, structured programmes and a structured approach in national level on the issue.

In addition to all these, another symposium organised by BEST Educational Committee in Stockholm with topic "Practise of Life Long Learning" [2], showed to us that the most common problems seem to source from the lack of social communication among students and professors together with the lack of updated information and high-technology equipment, as well as the lack of learning and teaching skills from both parties. The individual needs of a learner should be recognised and various teaching and learning

methods should be used in order to maximise the learning outcomes. New structures and methods for evaluating the learning process should be developed. Learners' responsibility of his/her own education should be emphasized as well as supported by the educational environment.

Furthermore, a third symposium organised by BEST Educational Committee in Stockholm and the valuable support of the Thematic Project VM-BASE [11] of the association EuroPACE [18], with topic "Virtual Mobility: European Education and beyond". Outcomes of this event are highly related to the practical implementation of LLL via e-Learning methods and tools [19].

2. BEST and BEST Educational Committee

2.1 BEST

Board of European Students of Technology- (BEST) [3], is a constantly growing non-profit, non-representative and non-political student association. Since 1989, BEST provides communication and cooperation possibilities for students all over Europe. Seventy six Local BEST Groups (LBGs) in almost thirty countries form a well organized and powerful student network.

BEST strives to assist European students of technology in becoming more internationally minded, by providing opportunities to work in international teams. Additionally, BEST makes it possible for students to meet and learn from each other through the academic and non-academic courses and educational symposia [3].

2.2 BEST Educational Committee

BEST Educational Committee (EduCo) is an international team, responsible for the Educational Involvement of BEST, which takes an active role in promoting and raising awareness on educational matters, related to the educational world of the modern engineer.

Students' feedback, experiences and opinions gathered in BEST events on Education are considered quite relevant and valuable by different engineering education associations (such as SEFI [4], CESAER [5], FEANI [6])

and European Thematic Networks that seek to develop the European dimension of engineering education and improve its quality (TREE [7], ReVE [8], EIE-Surveyor [9], SPUTNIC [10], VM-BASE [11]).

3. EuroPACE and VM-BASE

3.1 EuroPACE

EuroPACE ivzw [18] is a European non-profit association of universities, educational organisations and their networks.

Their main objective is to develop networked e-learning, in order to enhance virtual mobility, to support internationalisation of higher education, to create and share knowledge, and last but not least, to facilitate lifelong learning [18].

In order to accomplish these objectives, the EuroPACE association:

- Develops, prepares and manages networked e-learning projects as international, or national, or regional programmes, together with its members;
- Provides assistance for networked e-learning project applications of its members;
- Participates in international, or national, or regional networked e-learning projects of its members, as well as other partners;
- Disseminates information through portals, regular letters, seminars, and so on;
- Provides administrative, technical and logistic support, as well as daily management of e-learning networks, (virtual) exchange programs, e-courses, e-programs, and so on [18].

3.2 VM-BASE

VM-BASE ("Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges") [11] is a two-year project supported by the European Commission under the Socrates, Minerva Programme. It aims to enhance the impact and efficiency of the current Erasmus programme:

- Acting as a complement to the existing Erasmus exchange programmes, in which

virtual Erasmus can be used to prepare and follow-up the physical mobility;

- Supporting teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching) for both preparatory and return initiatives [11].

4. BEST Events on Education

BEST *Events on Education (EoEs)* are BEST events where engineering students discuss, share and exchange knowledge on specific themes of concern in the field of education. Two types of such events exist:

- *BEST Symposium on Education (Symposium)*;
- *BEST Academics and Companies Forum (BACo)*.

Symposia aim to increase the awareness of technology students in educational issues. In the case of *BACo Fora* the topics to be debated are related to the corporate world and presented from three perspectives, students, academia and industry.

A *BEST Event on Education* consists of 3 up to 5 working days attended by twenty to thirty students from different European countries. The structure of the working days includes on topic presentations performed by professors or other experts in the field, and discussion groups which treat the topics from various aspects in order to bring to light the full potential of the participants. The students participating are selected to ensure variety of backgrounds and knowledge about educational matters. Cultural and academic diversity provides the proper environment to analyse the topics from different points of view.

The conclusions and outcomes of these working sessions are gathered by BEST Educational Committee members and compiled into reports which are presented to European Higher Engineering Education stakeholders as student input on the matters presented during the event. The goal of the report is to integrate students' ideas and feedback in the process of developing and improving Higher Engineering Education at a European level.

5. Outcomes

5.1 Definition of LLL

The acceleration of the development of the technological progress during the last years has increased the amount of knowledge and skills that are essential for a professional engineer, with a career of approximately four decades. Obviously, the increased length of education during the young ages cannot cope with that. Hence, a new concept of learning has risen that is known as Life Long Learning.

Life Long Learning considers that people have learning opportunities throughout their professional career, and may include postgraduate programmes, with goals similar to the ones of internal industry training, though LLL is not so focused on specific skills. LLL can be implemented in a number of ways, including e-learning, and continuing education.

Life Long Learning is already one of the major goals of the Bologna Process, and is supported by the European Commission, as it is obvious from the Life Long Learning Programme [12, 13].

5.2 Students perspective of what LLL is

For most students it was difficult to understand and clarify the structure, the duration and the exact definition of Life Long Learning programmes. Most of them focused on the whole number of activities needed for the improvement of important soft skills. The duration and the structure of such programmes should depend on the profession. Universities and companies should collaborate optimally for this, and provide some support to employees that want to or are obliged to participate in such programmes. LLL programmes can become beneficial to employees, companies and universities when they all find the most efficient way to collaborate [1].

5.3 How LLL strategy can be efficiently supported

Learning one set of skills at school, technical college or university is no longer enough to have successful career nowadays [14]. Learning clearly has some connection with

what is taught in educational institutions as universities but is not limited to the planned instruction that these institutions provide.

Nowadays, fast-changing technological universe demands graduated students able to manage big amounts of information and able to learn and adapt to new skills and trainings. Current scientific and technological progress acceleration is so significant that knowledge and skills acquired during a bachelor or master degree are usually not sufficient for a thirty years professional career. Universities, companies, national governments and the European Commission were defined as the main responsible ones by the students. They are expected to provide better support for lifelong learning initiatives, in order to meet future career demands of students.

Lifelong learning concept foresees citizens able to learn continuously, whether in the classroom, in the workplace, home or elsewhere. Lifelong learning seems to be the key programme to achieve the Lisbon Strategy goals. European Commission published in 2007 the Communication "It's always a good time to learn", outlining a work plan to implement the 2006 Communication on adult learning "It's never too late to learn". Lifelong learning is the guiding principle for the Community action programmes: Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Youth. They offer a wide range of possibilities: support for school-business partnerships, teacher placements and exchanges, youth initiatives, student travel grants, adult education, language teaching and learning, and for exchanges of ideas, information and good practice. They have been redesigned and renewed for seven years, with more funds than before [15].

Lifelong learning in Higher Education Institutions is characterised by a great diversity within and between European Union member states and includes not just courses but a whole range of academic services for adults (e.g. coaching, various forms of advice and guidance, validation, consultancy and so on), for enterprises, and other organizations [1]. Professional development courses and master courses were initiatives that students think higher education Institutions should support, promote and encourage. Students believe that a bachelor degree is not enough to accomplish their career expectations. It is more frequent to take a master degree in the

university for modern student, although some students did not feel confident or motivated to continue in appealing higher education Institutions to take professional development courses [1].

Universities are educational, research, innovation and development centres in society. For students, universities have the most strategic role in lifelong learning strategy from all the stakeholders mentioned above. Higher educational institutions can be a meeting centre for academics, companies, students and society that can stimulate learning and be a powerful supportive vehicle for lifelong learning strategy [1].

Universities should provide an easier access to knowledge, create more and more diverse learning opportunities for students and employees, but students also do think that companies and government should be made responsible as well. Companies should cooperate more with universities, not only for innovation and development purposes but also fund learning initiatives as courses. After all, companies have the benefits afterwards when recruiting better prepared, skilled and trained employees. Companies should promote more learning programmes among their employees, motivate them to learn more and help them financially to afford different courses along their professional life [1].

Furthermore, universities are expected to provide other services, such as on-line courses – e-learning, e-coaching – and provide access to on-line university resources for their LLL students. BEST Symposium in Sofia. [19] The major advantage of e-coaching is that it enables students to study at their own pace, while providing access to courses to wider audience. While classrooms have limited space and require physical presence, e-coaching would enable virtually any number of students to attend lectures on-line. Capability to have lectures recorded and played back later is an important advantage for students. These features can be very convenient for adults, who are usually busy with many activities, and are following LLL programmes. [19]

Students are not indifferent to a knowledge society and they believe knowledge and learning are the main vectors for a society and market development. States have a direct responsibility to stimulate universities,

companies, students, employees and employers to contribute actively for lifelong learning strategy. Government should support more learning possibilities, create more funding programs and promotion campaigns to motivate and stimulate learning [1].

Despite the fact that students welcome lifelong learning initiatives, they expressed some concerns regarding motivation. An individual that constantly focus on learning will feel discouraged and consequently suffer a productivity loss. Students believe that throughout life, humans lose their capability, motivation and will to learn, they think this fact should be understood and seriously considered [1].

Information quantity and learning courses should be accredited according to the individual's age, family affairs and time, as the importance of a personal life or life quality cannot be ignored. This last comment is specially focused by southern and east European students where companies, universities and governmental institutions seem not to care about their students', employees', and citizens' personal lives, and the value they have for individuals' motivation, creativity and will.

When it comes to students and e-learning/e-coaching, the students feel more comfortable when they ask questions on-line, than when they are in the classroom. Majority of the Symposium participants preferred instant messaging over traditional email, as it is faster mean of communication; however, it was noted, that real-time communication requires the teacher to be on-line concurrently with the participating students. However, participants felt that established mailing lists would also foster cooperation between students and better exchange of ideas and information [19].

Another benefit of e-coaching for LLL is the capability to provide better quality courses. It is hardly disputable that quality of course depends mostly on professors teaching it. E-coaching enables to invite world-class specialists in the field to teach courses. These experts are usually very busy and might not be interested in travelling to another country to give a lecture. However, they use ICT and prepare lecture materials for students all over the world to attend at their own convenience. Moreover, students could ask questions and get answers from such specialists [19].

Concerns were expressed about the time needed to attend such programmes, how it would affect the absence from the workplace, as well as the need for relocation. It was discussed who should compensate the absence time and who should financially support the need of a possible relocation of the employee. State funding programs could support partially the relocation and the fee and companies would be responsible to assure the employee position in the company. Nevertheless, e-learning and e-coaching activities would be real money and time saver for all involved parties. Students will not have to use transportation or travel in order to attend lectures, and professors will have more time for their other activities, e.g. research, as well. Big companies have their own learning system according to their needs. It is salutary that companies create their own system but they should not ignore universities, as they have an extra value to add that cannot be dismissed. For students, universities are centres of knowledge creation, excellence centres for learning and their role in any professional development initiative should be always considered by society or any big, medium or small company. Governmental programmes should give a higher importance to higher educational institutions and small companies cooperation as it exist higher probability to be more efficient and productive.

Students believe lifelong learning initiatives can attract more learners, as long as it is duly supported. Lifelong learning strategy can fail if programmes are not developed in cooperation between industries and universities, if qualifications gained in such programmes are not accredited and recognized, if financial incentives are not created and promoted or if programmes are not structured according to the needs it addresses and to the benefits it should derives [1].

5.4 LLL programmes Dissemination

The new educational imperative is to empower people to manage their own learning within a variety of contexts throughout their lives. This can describe the development of LLL programmes and the necessity for them to be well disseminated in order to reach all interested parties.

Five strategies for LLL programs were dictated: (1) to meet the needs of the learner, (2) to develop support for lifelong learning, (3) to accommodate learners' differences in the program, (4) to develop higher order skills, and (5) to enable learners to use all language processes in their lives. [16]

Even though, according to the Bologna Process, there are efforts in order to implement LLL programmes, these have not been fully implemented. Programmes such as Grundtvig and Open University are nice examples of well known and recognised undulations of LLL dissemination. [17]

In many countries, the majority of the universities do not implement practices to upgrade knowledge among graduates. Students cannot find the channel to continue their educational life in parallel with their work, when they are inside the labour market. It is difficult for them to find the appropriate time and the most beneficial opportunity to work and participate in LLL programmes, even if it is about improving their abilities or skills, at the same time. Universities and companies have not found the golden section in clarifying what a LLL programme is, what it includes, what its structure should be, and to whom it should refer to. Both parties do not seem to have all necessary specifications set yet. Necessary information for the existing programmes does not reach all straightforward interested parties, and most of the time there is not enough motivation for the workers to choose a programme and to participate in it. What engineers, institutions and companies could do within the upcoming years is of major importance for the improvement of continuing education in future [1].

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(*) The reports are available in the public website of BEST: www.best.eu.org. Further information may be asked in the email address: education@BEST.eu.org.