

## Collaboration in Continuing Education Networks: option or destiny?

Alfredo Soeiro, Pro-Rector, Universidade do Porto, Portugal

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Building a Network World, World Networking in Continuing Education

### Summary

The demand for the provision of different forms and types of Continuing Education has shown a tremendous increase in the last years. There have been difficulties and obstacles to the transformation of the university classical structure and of the typical activities of the academic staff. Several models of managing Continuing Education in the universities were developed, tested and implemented. A reaction of the universities to the transformations created by the need for lifelong learning demands has been the cooperation in projects or in agreements that can be bilateral or multilateral. These multilateral agreements take most of the times the form of networks rising from several projects that have been implemented or from natural aggregation of universities around a common ground. The experiences of benchmarking around this theme are presented.

### 1. The Development of Continuing Education

The demand for the provision of different forms and types of Continuing Education has shown a tremendous increase in the last years. There have been difficulties and obstacles to the transformation of the university classical structure and of the typical activities of the academic staff. Several models of managing Continuing Education (CE) in the universities were developed, tested and implemented. There have also some fundamental changes in government policies and regulations trying to foster this transformation of the universities. The issue has been addressed by other actors, either on the private or in the public sectors, as a result of the need to complement the offer but also as a result, probably in most cases, of the incapacity of response of the universities.

Regarding the legislative framework of CE activities at university level, the involvement of governments is variable. It can vary from setting up laws implementing CE as a function of the University together with research and training of both graduates and post-graduates at one end of the scale, to a lack of interest and thus a lack of institutional and financial support at the other. The strategies range from a will to plan an overall policy for CE, to merely dealing with emergency as they arrive. However, in a number of countries the topic is currently very much on the political agenda and there is a general growing awareness of the urgent need of University CE: trade unions, companies, the professions and governmental bodies are increasingly taking CE into account in their strategic plans. It has been suggested, for example, that future negotiations within trades and industries will change from wage negotiations to competence negotiations and the workers' right to education.

A recurrent political argument is that investment in human capital is important for the economic growth and development of society, and that increased access to training will help sustain economic competitiveness with international rivals. CE is seen as an important key to University-Society co-operation. Concerning employed workers, the aims are to promote personal and professional development in order to improve the competitiveness of companies, to adapt human resources to technological innovation and to promote the development of new economic activities. On the other hand, vocational education seeks to bring unemployed people's knowledge, skills and attitude into line with the new professional profiles required by the labor market. University CE is the point of intersection of new research findings and practical working life.

## 2. The Role of Universities in the Demand of Continuing Education.

The difficulty of assessing the situation of University CE has been stressed in the research taken and the need to develop its investigation and evaluation of the situation. Regarding organizational arrangements, it seems that CE activities in universities are best implemented in designated CE centers or departments, which have developed a particular expertise in programming, monitoring and evaluating these activities. Such centers are able to co-operate efficiently with the industry and the business world to discuss the educational needs of the region, to establish co-operation agreements with other CE providers (trade unions, private institutions...), and to promote international co-operation in teaching and training.

There are currently very little financial incentives for CE staff whose motivation comes from a personal interest in adult teaching and from the opportunity of having contacts with their professions and the application of their subjects. The provision is currently slanted towards short intensive skill-oriented courses, for which participants are sometimes ready to pay high fees. Distance education is developing, and there is a demand of education in new technologies and IT. The main actors are the adult students, their employers and market mechanisms.

Major obstacles are competition for resources with the expanding regular university education, the lack of academic recognition of CE lecturers (the emphasis in most universities remains on research), the need to raise their level of competence, and the question of financial arrangements. Openness and student centered orientation, two elements of flexibility, are the most significant dimensions to University level co-operation in CE, with the development of ODL (Open and Distance Learning), quality control and accreditation. As a consequence of these current developments several events took place. One was the association of universities in networks and other fora dedicated exclusively to Continuing Education to promote exchange of ideas and to act as lobbying process in the area.

### 3. Response from Universities and Organizational Models

The universities have addressed the answer to the CE challenge in different ways. In some universities University CE is generally organized by faculties. In the future, these universities will probably evolve to a decentralized system in which each group, faculty or department will develop its own strategy within a global university vision of CE. In other universities, CE may be organized in a decentralized manner. Programs are organized by academic staff from the faculties, departments and institutes with the help and support of the CE Center, which may function as an interface between the university and the business world.

In a centralized body-governing of CE, it is run in co-operation with the users, that is, professional organizations of academics, commonly on a totally self-financing basis, with fees coming from participants or from their companies. Registration procedures and the arrangement of continuing education activities differ widely between universities, and it is often difficult to get a statistics on part-time students, particularly non-degree and distance education program students. Generally, however, there is a tendency for these activities to become registered centrally within each university.

Universities have often organized their CE around centers or departments with a special responsibility for these activities and it is common that CE students are expected to pay for their CE. The central facilities of the universities are the most common organizational arrangement; there is also a rising number of legally independent organizations with varying forms which the universities are linked to in different ways. Almost all universities offer CE programs, but these may be located within a variety of organizational structures with a variety of titles; the predominant title is a variant of Department (or Center) of (or for) CE (or Adult and Continuing Education). This nomenclature perhaps reflects the move towards a greater breadth of provision and attempts to attract the continuing professional development audience.

University CE and the centers for CE have been seen as means of making available the resources of the universities to the outside world. Teaching of CE is generally organized at the departmental level. The teaching may take place in the daytime, in the evening, at weekends and in the form of distance learning. The CE centers are created at University level and can handle all the CE programs of the Departments. Centers at different universities can communicate and collaborate, especially in joint programs. Experiences from the University Extension Centers show that it is valuable to have a centralized unit dealing with CE at each university. CE and knowledge transfer will play an increasingly important role in connection to innovation processes outside and inside the universities.

Some recent examples of the reactions of the universities, at a global level, to these changes are the surge of associations like the IACEE (International Association of Continuing Engineering Education), created in 1989, the EUCEN (European University Continuing Education Network), created in 1992, and the RECLA (Red de Educación Continua Latino Americana), created in 1995. Other

associations like UCEA (University Continuing Education Association), EDEN (European Distance Education Network) and ICDE (International Council for Distance Education) have experienced a large development of activities in the area of Continuing Education and, in some cases, in Open and Distance Learning.

#### 4. Working in Networks in Continuing Education

As mentioned before several associations have been created allowing the universities to take advantage of sharing of information and activities with a clear economy of resources and increase in quality control. A good example is the thematic networks projects financed by the European Commission where each network concentrates on a theme and their activities are precisely financing. The network dedicated to CE is the THENUCE (Thematic Network on University Continuing Education) that worked for four years with several outputs like national reports, joint programs, shared research, etc.

The reasons to work in a network are mainly the identification of a common ground, compatibility of objectives, synergy and quality improvement. The management issues are an important part of an efficient networking. Examples of these issues are the mainly the identification of the real needs for co-operation, a clear definition of target and responsibilities, adequate management staff and planning, the establishment of a win-win relationship, clear cut projects and need to transfer vision and objectives among partners.

A good exercise on this theme of cooperation produced the results as a consequence of the benchmarking exercise: «Critical success factors for International Cooperation through University Networks and processes for future collaboration between EUCEN and RECLA" in Torino, Italy in May 1998. The group of 25 people was divided in groups of 5/6 persons with a moderator in each group. The different groups of people identified critical success factors and these were discussed in a plenary session. .

##### A. Political factors

- Identification of common ground
- Compatibility
- Synergy
- Clear goals
- Quality

##### B.. Management

- Identify Real needs of cooperation
- Clearly defined target and responsibilities
- Good management structure (people and planning)
- Capability of motivating people
- Win-win relation
- Added value for each one
- Clear projects
- Similar vision and objectives

- Tolerate and integrate different points of view

Each group also identified the processes for implementing the critical success factor attributed to each group. These processes are divided in the identification of common ground, of the needs for cooperation, of possible pilot projects and of mutual advantages. The most important are:

#### A. Identification of Common Ground

- Understand the need of the potential partner
- Accept and value the difference
- Establish mutual confidence
- Familiarize mentality and attitude of partner
- Define needs
- Define complementary areas
- Formalize the strategy of each member before meeting
- Establish common platforms to facilitate cooperation

#### B. Identification of Real Needs of Cooperation

- Create realistic expectations
- Clarify mutual advantages
- Organize regular meetings
- Joint activities
- Identify opportunities for common actions
- Create network/forum for exchange
- Increasing financial resources

#### C. Identification of Possible Pilot Projects

- Public and visible results and possible diffusion
- Specialized / dedicated personnel
- Knowing needs and capabilities
- Human Resources
- Selecting projects with added value and other
- Pressure/ opinion groups

#### D. Mutual Advantages Perceived by Members

- Maximize political influence
- Stimulated innovative ideas
- Sharing information
- Involve academic authorities
- Cooperation research
- Define options and alternatives

### 5. Conclusions

The need for cooperation in University Continuing Education exists and it will increase due to the changing demands of society and market. The reaction and strategy adopted by each institution varies according to the specific structure and policy. The results between two networks take it to a different level where there is a crossing between individual and generic questions but

they represent a good overview of the possibilities and processes that can be used. The only option seems to be laying on the degree of involvement in this cooperation and the processes used to implement the cooperation.

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