Stimulating the widespread use of EML

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Educational Technology Expertise Centre OTEC
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2001 year report
Work Package 3

Stimulating the widespread use of EML

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OTEC report series

The Open University of the Netherlands develops higher distance education and is a central partner in a consortium for the renewal of higher education. Educational technological innovation is one of the main fields of interest. The educational and educational technological expertise of the Open University of the Netherlands are bundled in the Educational technology expertise centre (OTEC). This centre is involved with tasks concerning the development, innovation, research and evaluation of the Open University and its consortium partners. These tasks are performed in close collaboration with directorates and faculties of the Open University and/or its consortium partners.

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1. Introduction

The reporting period covers April 1 – December 31, 2001. The plan for Work Package 3 (WP3) was approved in April 2001[1], and the activities were subsequently started. The initial WP3 plan was compiled by Peter Sloep, and the executing WP3 team comprised Jan Beijering and Eric Kluijfhout.

The ideas behind WP3 were a logical extension of the successful release of EML in December 2000, and aimed to stimulate the world-wide use of EML in its broadest sense. The WP3 objectives were to:
- establish a programme to manage and administer EML (including change management) and to create a dedicated group of EML stakeholders.
- acquire external funds in support of EML use.

The planned strategy comprised four different types of activities:
1. outlining the aims and structure of a possible partnership programme in which EML stakeholders (users, developers, tooling and services suppliers, etc.) cooperate in facilitating the widespread use of EML: the organisational and legal outcome should be an EML Foundation
2. setting up and running such a partnership programme
3. define criteria for external funding and acquisition initiatives
4. develop and submit proposals for external funding.

Parallel to the activities under WP3 aimed at making EML 'as it is' a de facto standard, Work Package 4 concentrated on making EML and its underlying concepts a de jure standard through promotion, negotiations and further development in international standardisation initiatives.

The report starts with a summary, followed by separate chapters on each of the two objectives and their related activities[2]. The report concludes with a number of recommendations and a preview for 2002. Relevant process- and milestone documents are included as annexes.

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[1] See annex 1.1 for the WP3 Plan.
[2] For an overview of time spent on each activity, see annex 1.2.

2. Summary

Two interrelated developments – occurring almost immediately after approval of WP3 - influenced the execution of the planned activities: the activities of WP4 to make EML a de jure standard proved very successful, and thus the need to make EML a de facto standard became somewhat less critical; and because of WP4's success it was suggested to broaden the scope of the partnership programme towards R&D on learning technologies in general.

This change in emphasis led to a process of re-analysis and reformulation of the WP3 mandate, especially related to the partnership programme and EML Foundation (activities 1 and 2). Over the nine month execution period the concept of a partnership programme developed into that of a network for e-learning technology specifications, and towards the end of 2001 preparations started for a kick-off conference to be organised early 2002. The idea for an EML Foundation was shelved for the time being. Thus no formal partnership programme and Foundation were established in 2001, but preparations for a less formal network were under way. These resulted early 2002 in the formation of 'the Valkenburg Group' with the objectives 1) to develop a reference architecture for EML tooling, and 2) to develop and execute validation, demonstration, dissemination and implementation projects based on this architecture: full report in the 2002 year report

The WP3 activities aimed at securing external funding for R&D (activities 3 and 4) resulted in the establishment of a sort of secretariat function for this purpose, and the actual submission of a number of project proposals to the European Commission. At the end of the reporting period most of these were still under consideration by the Commission.

3. Objective 1: Establish an EML partnership programme.

The ideas for WP3 built on the successful release of EML in December 2000, and aimed to stimulate the world-wide use of EML in its broadest sense[3]. One of the aims of WP3 was to establish a programme to manage and administer EML (including change management), and to create a dedicated group of EML stakeholders. The first planned activity in realising this aim was to define the aims and structure of such a partnership programme in which EML stakeholders (users, developers, tooling and services suppliers, R&D centres) would cooperate in facilitating the widespread use of EML. The envisaged organisational and legal construct would be an 'EML Foundation'.

Immediately after the start of WP3 the WP4 activities – aimed at making EML a de jure standard through participation in various international standardisation initiatives - proved very successful and the need to make EML a de facto standard through a partnership programme became somewhat less critical. As a result it was suggested to broaden the scope of the partnership programme towards R&D on learning technologies in general, in which EML would be just one of the implemented solutions. The Foundation would become the vehicle through which to finance (with external funds) and execute R&D activities in addition and parallel to the regular Development Programme.

This change in emphasis led to a process of re-analysis and reformulation of the WP3 mandate through a number of informal and formal discussions[4]. Over the nine month execution period the concept of a partnership programme developed into that of a Network for E-learning Technology specifications (NETspecs). The formulated aims of NETspecs were 1) to define and prioritise e-learning requirements; 2) specify e-learning technology specs; 3) formalise these in the form of proto-types; 4) validate these in test beds; and 5) consolidate these in the form of de facto or de jure standards in support of transfer-to-market[5]. EML would still play a prominent – but not dominant - role in NETspecs: to attract interested parties; to function as a cross-thematic concept for formalisation and validation; and to structure development activities in working towards EML specs.

It was furthermore suggested not to start with formalising the network (e.g. through a Foundation with an official memorandum of association), but rather to work from the opposite direction: to start with organising activities with parties that would be of interest to the Development Programme, and from there – if need would arise – work towards formalising the modus operandus of NETspecs.

The first activity planned under NETspecs was to organise a conference on the development of EML authoring tools[6]. An internal kick-off with a small group of people

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[3] See annex 1.1 for the WP3 Plan; annex 1.2 for a summary on time spent and outcomes; annex 1.3 for a further elaboration on that plan; and annex 1.4 for a presentation on the status of WP3 in May 2001.
[4] See annex 1.5, 1.6 and 1.7 for some process reports on these discussions.
[5] See annex 1.8 for the outlines of NETspecs.
[6] See annex 1.9 for the initial plan.

was planned by the middle of December[7], and a conference rationale and initial programme were drawn up[8]. The conference and the subsequent formation of 'the Valkenburg Group' were realised early 2002.

Throughout the nine months the EML web-site functioned as an important communication channel between the Development Programme and the 'outside world' interested in EML. By the end of the year about 1000 people had subscribed to the EML listserver[9] and EML was downloaded about 500 times. Many contacts were established through the webmaster (see next chapter).

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[7] See annex 1.10.
[8] See annex 1.11.
[9] See annex 1.12 for an overview.

4. Objective 2: Acquire external funds in support of EML use.

The Development Programme and its staff are part of an extensive international network. The existing contacts and related background documentation – if any – was in general 'personalised' and not easily accessible. An inventory of these existing contacts was made[10], and the related information/documentation collected from their 'owners'[11]. This was transferred to a central and open manual filing system, now containing information on organizational contacts and projects related to the Development Programme.

In April, at the start of WP3 activities, already two project proposals had been submitted for co-funding to the European Commission under the SOCRATES-MINERVA programme:
- E-LEN: A network of e-learning centres[12], coordinated by the University of Cyprus and involving partners from the UK, Norway, Greece, Italy, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands.
- VIRTULOG: Virtual programme for logistics competence training[13], coordinated by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and involving partners from France, the UK, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

The VIRTULOG project was rejected, and E-LEN was re-submitted early 2002.

A study was made of the funding prospects for R&D projects, and the Information Society Technologies (IST) Programme under the European Fifth Framework Programme (FP5) seemed to offer the best opportunities. The calls for project submission were monitored[14], and in October the proposal 'Personalisation: the self-directed learner' (SDL) was developed and submitted by OUNL in cooperation with public and private sector partners from the UK, France, and Austria[15]. From all submitted and assessed proposals it was ranked number 7 with only the first five proposals being financed. The Commission suggested to resubmit the proposal under a next call early 2002.

Through its extensive network the Development Programme was furthermore invited to participate in a number of projects coordinated by others:
- Alfanet: Active Learning for Adaptive Internet[16], coordinated by Software AG España and involving partners from Germany, Portugal and the Netherlands.
- OFFER: Offering high quality learning resources to teachers and learners[17], coordinated by Diadikasia Business Consultants from Greece, and involving partners from the UK, Norway, Greece, and the Netherlands.

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[10] See annex 2.1.
[11] See annex 2.2 and 2.3.
[12] See annex 2.4 for the full proposal.
[13] See annex 2.5 for the full proposal.
[14] See annex 2.6 for an example.
[15] See annex 2.7 for the full proposal.
[16] See annex 2.8 for the full proposal.
[17] See annex 2.9 for the full proposal.

For an overview of project details and status by the end of 2001, see annex 2.10.

In preparation for the sixth Framework Programme, expected to start by the end of 2002, an initial assessment of the options for participation was investigated[18].

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[18] See annex 2.11.

5. Other activities.

In addition to the above, various questions and leads received through the webmaster, mails and by phone were followed up. A number of visitors was welcomed in Heerlen and contributions were made to regional networking initiatives.

6. Conclusions and lessons learned.

In 2001 WP3 spent considerable time on clarifying its own mandate and priorities. As a result not all the planned activities were realised, notably the establishment of a formal partnership programme. Part of the reason for the delay and the eventual change of direction was due to the inherently uncertain nature of R&D activities.

The objective and related activities for the acquisition of external funding for R&D activities were realised in 2001, although the actual outcomes will have to be awaited till 2002. The new sixth Framework Programme offers opportunities, but will require concerted and coordinated actions by the OUNL as an institution.

What became clear during 2001 is that the nature of WP3 is different from that of the other Work Packages. WP3 initiates new activities for, and is supportive to, the other Work Packages, but in WP3 itself no R&D activities are carried out. As such WP3 has some of the characteristics of a staff bureau, and it raises the question whether WP3 should be continued as a separate Work Package. Another option would be to allocate some R&D activities to WP3.

Lessons learned and recommendations:
- The inherent uncertain nature of R&D activities does not easily lend itself to planning based on the budgetary year-cycle. Somehow delinking the activity-planning from the budget-planning (e.g. by working through lump-sum allocations accompanied by some basic procedural safeguards) could benefit efficiency and effectiveness of R&D planning cycles.
- The relation of WP3 activities to those of the other Work Packages needs to be more clearly defined in future: there is also a need for more explicit strategic re-assessment when circumstances or outlooks change, and for coordination between Work Packages to adapt to those changes. The new Programme Description (2003-2007) should cater to this problem.
- Coordination of (international) contacts and initiatives as a separate function/activity within the Development Programme is necessary: either as part of a Work Package or as part of a staff bureau. What is still lacking though, is a clear direction and overall coordination of the international strategy within OTEC, and within the OUNL. MT OTEC and the OUNL Staff Bureau should address this issue.
- Although WP3 only initiates new activities and supports the other Work Packages, a basic knowledge of learning technology concepts is still required. At the moment this knowledge is insufficiently available with the present staff. Especially the present WP3 coordinator needs to further develop his expertise in this area.

7. Preview 2002.

For 2002 the following activities are foreseen:
- Organising of the first NETspecs event and the subsequent formation of the network.
- Promoting NETspecs and its work internationally.
- Resubmission of the proposal "Personalisation: the self-directed learner" to the European Commission.
- Participation in at least two externally (co-)funded European FP5 projects.
- Prepare for FP6, in coordination with the development of the OUNL international strategy.
- Further extend our network towards R&D and training departments of large (multi-national) companies.