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E-LEARNING ACTIVITY OF WARSAW SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS (SGH)

Abstract: The Centre for Development of Distance and Permanent Education has been established in order to coordinate the process of e-education at Warsaw School of Economics. This role, although very important is not the only one. Quite a lot attention is paid to promoting e-education all over the country, especially by publishing an e-magazine e-mentor. The Centre staff is also involved in research and projects in Poland and abroad. The paper will give the overview of various forms of that activity.

Keywords: e-learning, online courses, extramural studies, blended learning, e-magazine

1. E-learning as a support to traditional teaching forms

The university started to implement e-learning as a support to the traditional teaching in 2001. Two years later a Centre for Development of Distance and Permanent Education was established. An e-learning platform (e-sgh) has been built and the first task of the Centre was to promote online lectures among the university teachers and to encourage them to introduce that form of education to everyday practice. Some courses were also offered to MBA and PhD students.

The role of the Centre is not only to coordinate the introduction of e-learning, but also to offer versatile help to all who are going to prepare online materials. Apart from the typical help desk activity there are also regular monthly seminars organised, which goal is to familiarize the university community with various aspects of e-learning.

The activity of the Center is not limited to the academic community only. Modern society requires obtaining new qualifications and skills throughout the whole life. In collaboration with Regional Labor Office in Ruda Śląska we prepared a project of blended learning courses for the staff of that office and some other similar offices in the region. The courses are expected to allow the participants to extend their knowledge in the subjects like: human resources management, competitive skills, negotiation techniques, strategic planning, public relations.

Our experts are also involved in another EU founded project (EFS) addressed to the teachers from Malopolska region, who want to gain new qualifications, especially in the field of e-learning.

2. PPUSZ – Programme of Common Supplementing Extramural Studies

After the introductory phase a Common Programme for Supplementing Extramural Studies was established. In the Polish tertiary education system there are two parallel forms of university studies. A student can get his/her Master or Bachelor degree by attending either regular lectures and classes or in an equivalent form called extramural studies. Those students meet only at the weekend sessions. Consequently the total amount of lectures and classes they attend does not exceed 80% of those offered in regular form, which means more students' individual work is required. In order to help those people to fill the gap it was decided to introduce e-learning technologies and to offer some lectures in an online form. Such a solution gives the students more support from the academic staff, which means they are not left alone with their studies, but at the same time it does not imply more frequent presence at the university campus (which is often an obstacle for working students). The first step of the Programme started last academic year (2004/2005). It is foreseen that the whole curriculum will be supplied by more than 2200 lecture hours on the whole, but for each individual student it will be about 1500 hours of online lectures and classes. Preparation of online materials has been divided into three main parts:

The first one – started last year – deals with all basic obligatory subjects. The second step applies to all other university subjects already taught. The teachers who want to take part in the project can work individually or in groups. They can always get necessary help from the Centre staff. Both technical advice and didactical or methodical support are offered to them. It is worth to be mentioned that university standards concerning various aspects of preparing the learning materials as well as lecturing and tutoring online have been prepared. The first version of a guide, covering those standards, was published in October 2004. They have also been published in e-mentor magazine [4] and it is worth mentioning that several academic institutions follow that example and make use of our work, which is proved by frequent questions and letters. Six months later a supplement to that guide was published [5], which brought the necessary information for preparing more sophisticated online content and online classes.

The final step implies introduction of about 30 new fully online courses. The students will be obliged to choose two of them each term starting from the

fourth to tenth, which means they will have to complete 14 online courses by the end of their studies. This process has been divided into two steps – in the first of them 20 subjects will be offered, and the second step should allow to extend the choice to 30 courses. The first step started in January 2005 by a competition for university teachers – in consequence 20 subjects have been chosen and are being prepared – it is expected that in October all these courses will be available for students. There are two possible ways of conducting these new subjects – either a lecture with teacher's supervision or in a form of a seminar, which implies more activity of both sides – the teacher and the students. At the beginning the students can choose the courses freely, but it cannot be excluded that in the future some of them will become the obligatory part of a curriculum.

3. Editorial activity of the Centre

One of the most important actions, that have been undertaken in order to promote e-learning at the university is an e-magazine issued every two months since October 2003. At the beginning addressed to the teachers of Warsaw School of Economics, systematically becomes more and more popular and at present it reaches more than 300 educational institutions all over the country. The printed in 1200 hard copies is also available online at the URL: http://www.e-mentor.edu.pl. The current statistics show, that the site was visited by over 150 000 people (May 2005). E-mentor covers all the topics concerned with the use of modern technologies in information society. It has five units: e-education, e-business, knowledge management, lifelong learning as well as teaching methods, forms and programs. The growing popularity of the magazine is proven not only by the number of people and institutions subscribing to it, but also by the range of authors and articles sent to the editorial board for every issue. Our ambition is to present possibly wide spectrum of problems and solutions in the indicated subjects, to describe best practices and case studies form Poland and abroad. We try to promote our magazine all over the world and to encourage the authors from other countries to publish in it. All the necessary information can be found at the address given above.

4. International cooperation

CREN SGH is also oriented on international cooperation, although it does not have much experience in that area. This year a bilateral cooperation between SGH and University of Illinois at Spriengfield was undertaken. Since October a joint Top Class is organized – 15 Polish students and the same amount of American students will take part in an online lecture "Rationality and Moral Choice". The lecture will be held in English and that is why the platform e-sgh is now being prepared for such a task. Three other courses are prepared as well and will systematically be introduced. One of them, called "Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (SMA)" is aimed at the presentation of the

transition experience of counties in Central and Eastern Europe with the special emphasis on the results of the transition process and the present stage of social, political and economic development. The course uses many data from economic reports as well as case studies on companies from CEEC. It has been prepared by SGH teachers and will be presented in English for Polish and American students at the same time.

Our intention is also to establish multilateral contacts with similar centers in other countries and to take part in the projects carried out in international environment. Just recently a group of several institutions from Spain, Italy and Poland applied for an EU founded project within FP6. Its main goal is to implement educational games into e-learning. Although the idea itself is not new its application to online studying, especially by the use of wireless and mobile means of communication does not have numerous examples of research.

5. Promotion of e-learning at the university and country wide

Another way of promoting e-learning ideas is the open seminars organized by CREN SGH. They are addressed to all the people interested in new means of education. To take part in them it is enough to fill in the form available on a CREN website[1]. The aim of the first edition of the monthly seminars (February to June 2005) was to familiarize the participants with pedagogical, psychological and methodical aspects of e-education. Their role was also to give some pieces of practical advice what tools are offered by an e-learning platform and how to make use of them. It is planned to continue this initiative in the next semester. In general, the new cycle of seminars will deal with modern means like mobile phones and wireless communication and its application in e-education.

6. Research and projects

Last but not least form of activity of the Centre staff is the projects carried out both individually and as a team. In previous academic year an evaluation project started. It was aimed at the teachers and students involved in the first stage of introducing e-education in SGH. The intention of the project team was to collect the data concerning students' and teachers' attitude towards the forms of e-learning offered to them. Two separate questionnaires have been prepared. The people involved in that process have been asked about the usefulness of online education as well as the difficulties they face. More than 400 answers have been collected. Their analysis was published in e-mentor [12] and therefore will not be presented here. It is planned that the project will be continued in the next academic year. It will focus then on the quality of the materials offered to the

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[1] www.cren.pl

students and on measurable profits from such a form of education. The teachers will be asked to express their opinions about pros and cons of such a form of teaching and to indicate the obstacles they meet.

Closely linked to the project mentioned above is another piece of research – started in May 2005 and aimed at evaluation of sample solutions and schemes of online classes. The rapid, and mostly uncontrolled growth of e-learning activities in Poland leads to the conclusion that there is an urgent need for preparing the patterns and standards of online teaching, which could be adopted and respected by all educational institutions interested in introducing e-education professionally. There is no doubt that the experience of Warsaw School of Economics in the field of e-learning can give a significant contribution to that process.

Complementary to the team projects some members of the Centre staff carry out their own research. Parallel to collecting examples of best practices of online classes and elaborating teaching samples mentioned above, similar projects will be done on the quality of learning materials used in online education. It is expected that as a result a set of methodical rules and hints will be prepared.

On the other hand, it has to be stressed that online education offers unique possibilities of adapting the learning process to students' individual preferences and expectations. Asynchronous aspects of studying give the extraordinary opportunity of differentiating the learning process provided the appropriate forms of presenting the learning content as well as interactivity tools are implemented. It is planned that the results of that research will lead to practical solutions, which primarily will be implemented on e-sgh platform, but in the future could hopefully also be disseminated to other e-learning centers.

7. Summary

Presented forms of activity carried out by the Warsaw School of Economics are only the part of our everyday work. The main task of the Centre is to give the university staff all the support they need in the e-learning area. We try to promote e-learning in various places taking part in numerous conferences in Poland and abroad. Just recently our work was presented at the International Conference organized by European Distance and E-learning Network in Helsinki.

The other universities follow our example – they want to implement our standards and ask for advice. Our intention is not only to supervise the implementation and further development of e-learning process at Warsaw School of Economics but to spread out our achievements among the other high schools in Poland. It is quite important to popularize the concepts of e-education and its practical implementation among the academics and university authorities in particular. Numerous examples show that the resistance against introduction of e-learning comes from the lack of proper knowledge in this matter.

It is about time to consolidate the efforts of different schools and academic institutions in order to plan and elaborate the scope and the forms of well organized e-learning in Poland. In our opinion the Warsaw School of Economics can significantly contribute to that process.

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