

38 CLIX® Campus and the imc Higher Education E-Learning Network: A Private Public Partnership-Approach to Creating New Educational Benefits

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Abstract

The imc Higher Education eLearning Network is a Private Public Partnership in standard e-learning software development. Its goal is to provide universities with a standard platform that fits their specific needs. The paper presents the approach adopted by imc AG and its higher education partners and discusses some of the lessons learned.

Keywords: Learning Management System, Private Public Partnership

1. ICT in Higher Education: Innovation and Sustainability

In the past, media and technology in university teaching have mainly been discussed from a perspective that attributes to new media the role of a catalyst for university reform in the above-mentioned sense; new media is considered the engine, the enabler and the facilitator of a modernization of higher education institutions as well as the higher education system as a whole.

This view is far from incorrect. There can be no doubt about the innovative potential of new media with regard to the organizational forms and institutional structures of a university – but also with regard to contents and their mode of delivery. And yet it has become increasingly clear that the potential, inherent in new media, for structural reforms cannot be fully utilized within institutions devoid of adequate steering capacity and with only rudimentary management power. We also need institutions that are able to take on responsibility, to act independently, and to decide about their own course of action.

In other words, although new media's potential to foster institutional change is beyond any doubt, technological innovation and innovation by technological means as yet lack the sustainability we need in order to make full use of new media in higher education.

And yet, the use of media for instructional purposes is hardly ever part of an institution's goals and mission. Only in rare

cases is it integrated in a process of strategic planning and priority-setting. And the link, so important for a sustainable media development, still needs to be developed between media projects, i.e., innovation, on the one hand, and on the other internal modes of allocating funds according to institutional priorities. Media projects, for the most part, are still in a stage in which they are funded according to the modes and criteria of research funding, i.e., on the basis of third party (research) grants without much institutional back-up and without the necessary ties to an overall institutional policy.

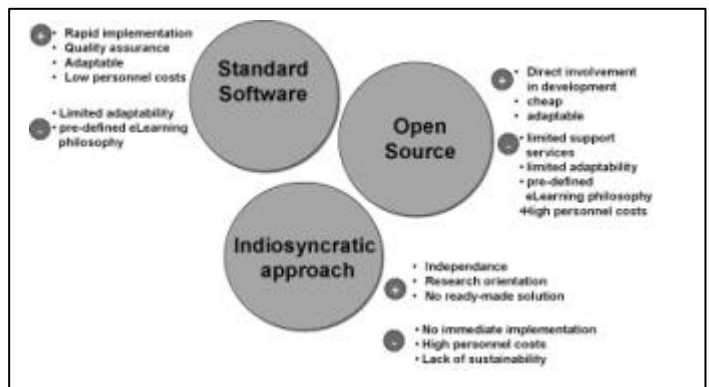


Fig. 1 Different approaches – Pros and Cons

As a result, there is an as yet unresolved conflict of interests in the higher education sector: The search for (technological) innovation and the claim for (academic) independence to some extent oppose the (institutional) need for reliable technological and organizational frameworks. This conflict is further accentuated by the predominant mode of financing ICT-related projects according to the traditional rules of third-party research funding (i.e. external validation of project ideas and project funding for limited periods of time only). As a result, common practice quite often challenges both the sustainability of ICT in higher education and the every-day viability of tools and platforms used.

Hence, in order to secure the sustainability of innovations in the field of media and technology, it seems that there is a need to shift the emphasis

- from idiosyncratic approaches and solutions to institutional as well as inter-institutional technological standards, norms, and forms of cooperation (and here the alternatives "make or buy" with regard to platforms, software, and tools is a very pertinent one);
- from tackling media-related issues and problems individually to linking technological innovations to an overall institutional strategy;
- from a bottom-up orientation of media development, driven by individual research interests, to a process of organizational reform and institutional planning initiated and supported top-down;
- from project-based, research-oriented forms of "doing new media" to integrating media development into broader institutional, infrastructural contexts and professional forms of support (support for faculty and staff among other things);
- from technology-driven initiatives to the use of technology based on comprehensive pedagogical concepts.

In short: There seems to be a need to re-invent the university – in terms of its organization, its structure, its management, etc. – for sustainable technological change. In this regard, some of the following questions are of crucial importance:

- What are the prerequisites for successful and sustainable technological innovations?
- Which organizational forms, on the institutional level, are suitable to support the effective use of technology-based instruction in higher education?
- What is needed to make them endure?
- What are the essentials of a successful "change management" with regard to promoting media on a broad institutional scale?
- What are the strategic options for a university to engage in media-based and technology-driven education? And what are the economic implications of these options (i.e., where are the future markets?)
- To what extent do institutions relying on technology for instructional purposes have to reconsider and change their traditional institutional goals and mission?

Hence, an approach is needed that moves beyond the (research-oriented) project level. Institutional approaches are needed, with a clear focus on the *strategic* issues involved.

Four dimensions are of particular interest in a holistic and *balanced* institutional approach (Programmbeirat 2001), i.e.

The adaptation of organizational structures and internal "business" processes to the new demands;

Financing and economic issues with regard to the use of ICT in teaching and research;

A perspective on the educational market and the increasingly competitive HE sector,

Personnel development and training with regard to new demands.



Fig. 2 ICT in Higher Education: Strategic Framework

And finally, new partnership and cooperation models are needed for strategic investments on the infrastructural and technological level.

2. Cooperation and Partnership

Now, universities, in general, are rather reluctant when it comes to opting for standard software and e-learning platforms in their efforts to create a "virtual campus." Given the limitations commonly associated with commercial standard products – e.g. limited adaptability, pre-definition of a specific e-learning philosophy, dependency on specific companies – this reluctance appears to be justified and in line with the curiosity-driven culture of an academic setting.

However, there are no viable alternatives in sight. Idiosyncratic approaches, for instance, are quite popular in academic contexts for their high degree of individuality and the independence they grant; yet they are costly, time-consuming, and hard to implement on a broader institutional scale. Open source approaches, by contrast, tend to produce lower costs, offer R&D opportunities to the people involved, and promote the idea of adaptability; yet in general, they move rather slowly, do not provide support services required for implementation and every-day use, and they hardly exceed commercial products in their degree of flexibility and reliability and the scope of customization that comes with them.

This situation prompted imc to adopt a new approach to designing new e-learning environments and to cooperate with institutions in the higher education sector: the imc Higher Education e-learning network.

2.1. imc information multimedia communication

imc information multimedia communication AG is a spin-off company from the Institute for Information Technology at the University of the Saarland, established in 1997. It has a strong R&D-background in the area of ICT-based university teaching. It is experienced in conducting complex media-projects in university settings, from the initial designing stage to their implementation and curricular integration. On the basis of its e-learning platform CLIX imc develops integrated e-learning solutions for companies and universities in Europe (Kraemer/Müller 2001).

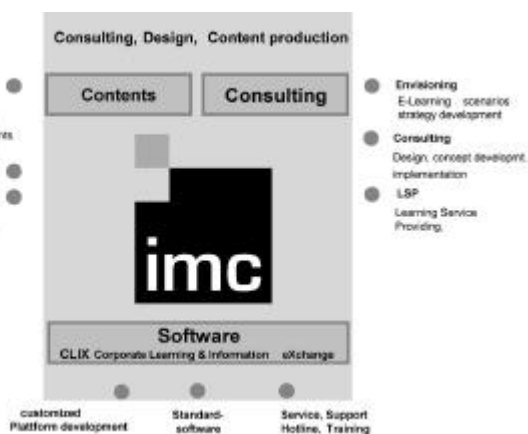


Fig. 3 imc eLearning Solutions

2.2. imc Higher Education eLearning Network

The rationale behind the imc Higher Education e-learning network is to turn potential customers – i.e. universities – into company partners. Within the network, imc and its partner universities cooperate in order to make full use of the advantages of standard software solutions, while at the same time making standard software more flexible and adaptable to the universities' specific needs. Network members enjoy preferential rates and special licensing agreements, and they receive support and training services provided by imc.

The imc Higher Education e-learning network, thus, is designed as a private public partnership (PPP), combining standard company software production/adaptation with an open source component. It aims at creating a product particularly suitable to universities, to their e-learning requirements, and to their specific organizational as well as administrative demands.

3.3. eLearning Platform CLIX

The imc Higher Education e-learning network is structured around the imc learning platform CLIX[®]Campus. CLIX[®]Campus is built on CLIX[®]Enterprise, an AICC-certified product that serves as the standard platform for numerous corporate universities.

The imc Higher Education e-learning network, thus, serves as a forum in which universities voice specific needs with regard to their prospective e-learning environment. On this basis, imc adapts and modifies CLIX[®]Campus in view of providing partner-universities with a platform that uniquely fits their needs. Member universities, thus, participate in the further development and specification of standard software.

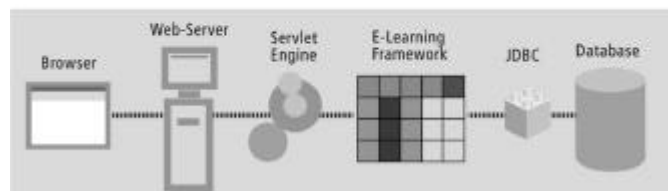


Fig. 4 Clix[®] Campus: Software Architecture

2.4. Private Public Partnership

The imc Higher Education e-learning network is a private public partnership that brings together private and public interests in view of generating a win-win-situation for all the partners involved. Its rationale is to foster cooperation so that private/commercial and public interests meet on a common ground.

The network, thus, aims at generating synergies – e.g. cost reduction, risk sharing, competitive advantages, transfer of know-how – in the course of an R&D process of continuous and cooperative experimentation and adaptation. Its overarching concern is the most effective realization of both private and public goals.

With this approach, the imc Higher Education eLearning Network operates within a general framework of cooperation – i.e. a Public Private Partnership – that increasingly proves to be successful in the area of research and development (Vogel/Stratmann 2000).



Fig. 5 Partnership and Cooperation Model

Programmbeirat Virtuelle Hochschule Baden-Württemberg (2001), *Leitlinien für die Medienentwicklung an den Hochschulen in Baden-Württemberg* (http://www.che.de/html/news_medienentwicklung.htm).

Vogel, B., Stratmann, B. (2000), *Public Private Partnership in der Forschung. Neue Formen der Kooperation zwischen Wissenschaft und Wirtschaft*, HIS GmbH, Hannover.

3. Preliminary Results and Lessons Learned

Since it started operating, the imc Higher Education eLearning Network has grown considerably. A number of universities have joined the partnership, interested in bringing their needs into the further development of the software they use. On such a broadened base for cooperation and exchange, imc has implemented a number of new system components geared toward the universities' specific needs (e.g. new course structures, workflows, a learning logic).

What turns out to be a real asset – besides software improvement – is the forum for communication and experience exchange the network provides. Very often, individual needs and idiosyncrasies have to be sorted out and made explicit in an inter-disciplinary discourse. It is quite difficult to define a common ground beneath the specifics of the various disciplines involved and to engage in a communicative process of prioritizing different needs. Yet at the same time it is a rewarding experience to see different interests merge to a common understanding of what needs to be done next.

In this process, imc very often takes on the role of a mediator and moderator – not that of a company trying to sell a product. Marketing generally plays no role at all in the course of network-meetings.

Finally, besides all the “hard” facts underlying the cooperation there is one “soft” factor that turns out to be crucial: trust. In a context where private and public interests meet, open communication and cooperation would be impossible without the general feeling that the parties involved actually can trust each other, that they “speak the same language”, and pursue a common goal.

References

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