

STRATEGIC NOTE

09/02/2021

EUTOPIA WP2

Towards a EUTOPIA Learning Community

I. INTRODUCTION

This is the second strategic note in a sequence of four (July 2020, February 2021, November 2021, May 2022). The strategic notes are discussed and commented within WP2 meetings and will feed in our final proposal for the EUTOPIA educational model.

The first strategic note introduced the building blocks of the EUTOPIA educational approach and highlighted the advantage of participating in Connected Learning Communities (CoLeCo) as compared to more traditional forms of international mobility and cooperation. We argued that strengthening connectedness paves the way for cross campus networks and international learning processes for staff, students and stakeholders outside academia. We expect these participants to co-create pedagogical formats that are driven by research findings and inspired by changes in society.

The second note comments on the experiences with the startup of learning units / communities identified in the first round of the pilot program and now sharing educational resources and engaging students in cross campus activities. We reflect on the performance of our model in the context of the pandemic and the digital transformation imposed on the educational sector.

Then we have a look at the responses the EUTOPIA model is offering for helping to achieve the priorities on the European agenda for 2025.

We conclude by identifying the challenges for sustaining our activities within the pilot program and beyond.

II. CONTEXT

Aversion to change is not an option in the context of the present pandemic. In the first year of the pilot program our educational model has coped successfully with the limitations on physical mobility. We switched to a virtual mode for meetings, interviews and the rollout of the first connected communities. The awareness of possible disruption seems to help us in convincing our colleagues to reflect about how to cooperate in a less conventional way; therefore, their efforts can be inspiring for maintaining openness in our academia beyond the needs for the EUTOPIA project.

The experiences in the first series of Connected Learning Communities demonstrate that our educational approach paves the road for avoiding discontinuity in the learning processes as well as for countering discouragement of both teachers and learners. Moreover we succeed in maintaining our focus on innovative pedagogies partly because the leads and partners in the communities perceive recognition from the academic authorities and guidance of their efforts by the curriculum team. The latter implies a significant workload and forces us to reflect on the sustainability of our model and the conditions that have to be fulfilled so that successful communities can continue to act as the built in drivers of curriculum innovation for the EUTOPIA universities.

A supplementary advantage of our model is that for each learning unit we identify a group of highly motivated staff members and students across the EUTOPIA campuses that are willing to participate in the pilot program. We do not confront them with dramatic changes in their teaching routine and learning patterns. EUTOPIA does not come with a shock but starts from sharing resources and best practices before evolving towards joint activities enabling them to profit from the value added and the synergy within an international network.

Despite the promising outcomes of the on-line cross campus operations we dream of translating our virtual connectedness into the making of an embodied EUTOPIA family of likeminded educators and learners. Meanwhile we aim to make use of the lessons learned from the digital startup of our pilot communities to further strengthen the capacity of the universities in the context of reduced physical mobility. Therefore we introduced a proposal for a special Erasmus Key Action 2 call in October 2020. DigiLAB (standing for Digital Learning Across Borders) involves the design and implementation of activities aiming to monitor the digital readiness and competences in the EUTOPIA partnership. It will elaborate a toolkit and roadmap for embedding virtual connectedness of curriculum units and digital cross campus student collaboration in the learning communities. This will enable the EUTOPIA partner universities to benefit from the full potential of digital technology thereby avoiding the risk of digital exclusion. It is an opportunity for EUTOPIA and for the Higher Education sector as a whole to meaningfully engage with the Digital Agenda of the Commission.

The outcomes of this proposal will allow to create the best conditions for digital connected learning communities by taking into account:

- the characteristics of active learning
- the presence of digital skills and resources in the partner universities
- the potential of state-of-the-art digital tools

There are three main results to be expected from this proposal:

- the design and implementation of a monitoring tool for the mapping of digital readiness of all participants
- the development of a framework that helps the participants in the learning communities to make the right choices in blended learning
- the dissemination of a multimedia toolkit and policy guidelines for using DigiLAB's results in a wider context

III. CONTRIBUTION TO THE AGENDA FOR THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

We reconsider the characteristics of our educational model and reflect on their potential for helping to achieve the priorities on the education agenda. The EUTOPIA model responds to a range of key actions communicated by the Commission. Underneath we cite the more important ones as mentioned in the EUA response to the European Commission Communication of September 30th 2020.

1. European collaboration is vital to ensure that education systems innovate and transform to fulfill a number of purposes assigned to them.

In a forthcoming paper we will reflect on the innovation potential of our model. "In EUTOPIA the academic authorities give support to a selection of highly motivated teachers that are experimenting with new learning formats in their present teaching practice. Through connecting these practices in cross campus networks we reinforce the existing drive in the operational core of our universities and significantly reduce the administrative barriers for innovation. The CoLeCo introduce a dynamic and entrepreneurial component in the institutional context for curriculum development that is still burdened by the inertia of professional bureaucracies" (Angouri and S'Jegers, 2021 – forthcoming paper on 'A model for transnational education').

2. Societal engagement is central to the university mission

All EUTOPIA labeled learning units are challenge driven and address the complex challenges Europe is confronted with. The learning units identified in the first selection rounds of the pilot illustrate this principle as they respond to the needs of society for important challenges such as: sustainability, citizenship, diversity and multilingualism, social power, fallacious reasoning, global media, etc.

The CoLeCo's reach out to stakeholders outside academia and co create learning material inspired by real life cases. Work Package 4 is planning to back up the learning communities for strengthening the ties with an international network of stakeholders in a learning community focusing on the transition from local to global challenges.

3. Ensure policy coordination and synergies with existing frameworks

An effective European Education Area requires education policies to be linked to other EU policies such as Research & Innovation, Digitalisation and Social affairs and Employment.

The sustainability of the Connected Communities depends on the value added created for all participants. We are proud to say that the colleagues identified to develop the learning communities are highly respected for their pedagogical approach but also for their contribution to research and innovation in our partner universities. It is therefore extremely important that we further improve the synergy between WP2 Education and WP3 Research. Participants in the Learning Communities would experience significant incentives by getting priority access to initiatives for young and promising researchers involved in the topics of the CoLeCo. In this we can turn the EUTOPIA labeled learning units into the spill of Learning and Knowledge communities at a European scale.

As discussed in paragraph II of this note our DigiLAB proposal is well aligned with the digital agenda of the Commission. The EUTOPIA learning communities are a perfect test cases to identify the digital readiness of all stakeholders involved in the learning process and plan the needs for training staff and students as to avoid an increase in the digital divide.

Our educational approach supports the learning journey of the students across all cycles of the educational cycle and beyond. The value added for the students participating in the cross-campus activities is not restricted to the period for obtaining their bachelor, master or PhD degree. Students assume responsibility by contributing to the learning content and operating in an international context. In the CoLeCo they create sustainable relationships that will be at the origin of long term professional and personal networks, thereby improving their perspectives for employment as well as for becoming truly European citizens. WP6 contributes to this aim by directing a number of their international initiatives (such as student conferences and grants for study period abroad) to the topics covered by the EUTOPIA labeled learning units.

In EUTOPIA students will use virtual spaces for teamwork, benefit from challenge focused short term mobility and seamlessly move between institutions and placement opportunities across Europe. This is in line with the European Commission's focus on alternative ways to recognize skill development through a flexible mechanism that builds on microcredentials. For these insights the WP2 coordinator was accepted as a member of the EU consultancy group on microcredentials and was thus enabled to contribute to a report published by commissioner Marya Gabriel in December 2020, including the ambitions on the role of EHEA in lifelong learning.

It is clear that our EUTOPIA labeled learning units fulfill all characteristics for qualifying as microcredentials in terms of size, portability, assessment and quality assurance. In order to become providers of microcredentials, EUTOPIA partner universities need to reflect on the modalities and organizational support needed for the delivery and outreach towards a highly diversified group of learners. It is our aim to stay involved in this discussion and look for the stakeholders in society that are interested in cooperating with us on a business model fit for this purpose.

4. Embrace diversity and foster inclusive education systems

Making education systems more inclusive needs to be a priority across Europe.

Our educational model builds on the ideals of openness, inclusion and societal engagement. Equality of opportunity is a core value of our alliance and will be embedded across all educational activities. The principles of co creation in our international communities are based upon the added value of bringing together the diverse talents, skills, and cultural background of students, staff and stakeholder organizations outside academia. One of our core ambitions is to meet the needs of the so called "non modal" students (students who combine work and study, students not mastering the language of their host university, non-degree seekers aiming to update their previous education, disadvantaged students).

WP5 Inclusion can help us to identify these target groups and monitor their involvement. They will organize a dialogue between a diverse student group and the partners in the learning communities as to share experiences and expectations for creating a truly inclusive learning process .

IV. EPILOGUE

The second strategic note relates on the first reality tests for the EUTOPIA educational model. Looking at the results of the experiments in the 2020 round of learning communities, we feel reassured that the model can live up to the expectations formulated in the original proposal and confirms its role as a built in mechanism for bottom up curriculum innovation.

Moreover the coincidence of these developments with the COVID-19 context indicates that the connected communities could help in sustaining the international cooperation in times of constrained physical mobility for staff and students. In a complementary Key Action 2 proposal we therefore plan to further explore the potential of EUTOPIA to offer a digitally connected learning environment that goes beyond a short term response to the present pandemic.

Despite these promising perspectives we need to stress that the sustainability of the Connected Learning Communities is still fragile and based on the availability and motivation of the teaching staff to become partners in this pilot program and beyond.

At intra alliance level this calls for the right type of incentives and clear recognition of the efforts made by the academic authorities. The long run success of the communities is their transformation into learning and knowledge networks having privileged access to support for pedagogical innovation, for research driven activities and for helping to create regional impact and cooperation with stakeholders outside academia.

Taking into account the alignment of our educational model with the priorities on the European agenda we need to explore the additional resources this can create for our alliance. It is therefore suggested to follow up on the opportunities offered by the initiatives of the Commission for linking educational policies with existing frameworks for research and innovation, digitalisation and employment.