

FOURTH STRATEGIC NOTE

CONSOLIDATING THE EDUCATIONAL MODEL

In this 4th strategic note, we look back at the results of developing cross campus connectedness in the learning communities and we refine the arguments for sustaining the EUTOPIA educational model in the next phase of the alliance.

EUTOPIA's educational approach is aligned with the vision on innovation expressed by the European commission and reflects the ambition for openness characterizing the member universities of the alliance. In that way EUTOPIA does not impose change but empowers innovative practices already in place that can benefit from cooperation on a European scale. The counterpart of such a bottom-up approach is that specific efforts will be needed to ensure continuity for the successful connected activities emanating from the pilot experiments.

In the last months of the EUTOPIA 2050 project the activities of the Work Package Education and Students attain a maximal operational level dealing with the full range of 30 Learning Communities in different phases of maturity. The importance of a consolidation exercise goes beyond the context of specific communities and is a condition sine qua non for maintaining the dynamics of the model and for (re)allocating the central EUTOPIA resources to the support of new initiatives.

Finally the incorporation of successful results emanating from cross campus learning activities will act as a built in driver for international curriculum development in the member universities of the EUTOPIA alliance, thereby creating stronger links between the EUTOPIA project team and the permanent staff implementing educational strategies on our home campuses.

1. RESULTS

In retrospect the Work Package Education and Students can be proud of the results delivered for all sub activities: in sub work package 1 the educational strategy has been documented, discussed and presented within EUTOPIA and on many fora in the Higher Education Area ; sub work package 2 reported on the barriers and enablers for international cooperation and the results will be the input for a final policy brief ; in sub work package 3 the ambitious target of creating 30 pilot experiments for an innovative European university has been reached and results in a wide range of connected learning activities involving students , teachers and stakeholders across the campuses of our member universities.

It is important to acknowledge that these efforts have been supported continuously by the highest academic authorities of all member universities in alliance: from the preparatory talks in 2018 and throughout all stages of the pilot project we have benefited from their presence and feedback in the trimestrial transnational meetings. Thanks to their commitment and that of the central team this Work package was able to meet all targets and could rely on the additional support from the administrators in the home universities.

More specifically the trust and mutual understanding between vice rectors for Education and academic authorities in similar positions proved to be a crucial condition for engaging and convincing academic and students to participate in the pilot experiments. Now that we aim to create sustainability for the pilot proven formats in the mature communities, the backup of the representatives in the WP2 transnational meetings will become even more vital. We must therefore

make sure to further develop the role of this governance tool as to fully integrate the new member universities of the alliance and as to align with the new vision on the connected communities in EUTOPIA MORE.

In EUTOPIA we challenge the superficial assumption that *'the higher the degree of change the more innovative the act'*. National and international interventions such as the Bologna process have shown that for educational change to happen, it needs the support of political authorities, senior management and last, but not least, academics and students. The further away they are from current practice, the more difficult it is to motivate and engage stakeholders with their respective and diverse agenda's.

EUTOPIA's educational model does not impose change but strengthens good practices in research driven and challenge-based learning. The academic authorities helped us select 30 Learning Units and teachers that accepted to become the conduit of thematic learning communities linking students, teachers, and stakeholders at cross-campus level. To spread the efforts and to profit from a learning pattern for developing the communities, we organised 3 selection rounds throughout the pilot period (2019 -2022). Therefore, the communities are now in different phases of their life cycle:

- I. Following 2 operational testing years the communities of the first selection round have reached maturity and are reflecting on the best formats and resources for continuing their connectedness after the pilot period.
- II. The communities of the second round are looking back at their first experiments and are fine tuning the cross-campus activities for the coming academic year.
- III. The communities emanating from the latest selection round are sharing resources and are starting to explore their potential for academic cooperation.

The 30 Learning Communities cover a wide range of topics across disciplines and learning cycles (ba/ma/phd) in the degree programs offered by our member universities. The central EUTOPIA team facilitates and supports the gradual development of connectedness by working with partners of each community in a series of learning development meetings. This process is documented and monitored on specific learning platforms accessible for the participants of the community only. This information also enables us to recognize the efforts of teachers and students engaging in cross campus learning activities.

The Learning Communities have proven to be an effective tool for surpassing the traditional divides that still dominate higher education. These divides relate to organizational structures based on disciplines and cycles, in the learning patterns, and on separate policies for education versus research. Grounded in active collaboration, learning communities make students aware of and enable participation in different fields, disciplines, and ways of knowing. An emphasis on practice is directly aligned with the approach we are advocating and involves learners to take ownership of their learning experience. LC 's have been used in different sizes, types and structures, but they rarely take the form of inter-university schemes connecting staff and students from more than one organization. This is where our approach aims to contribute to the higher education sector. Trans institutional teams come together in blended spaces and enable students, staff, and stakeholders to engage in a European cross-campus learning journey, thereby enhancing motivation, engagement, and the perspective on diversity of all involved.

2. BUILDING A CASE FOR CONTINUED SUPPORT

EUTOPIA's educational model explicitly aims to be a driving force for the continuous curriculum development in the European Higher Education Area. For that purpose, there is no need for creating new programs but to facilitate the infiltration of EUTOPIA dynamics in the existing ones. Best practices in innovative learning from the member universities are connected through learning communities involving students, staff and stakeholders from a wide range of adjoining activities outside academia. We thereby re-imagine mobility and open up credit bearing components from our present degree programs without the need for mass mobility of staff or students. We seek to provide international experience for all by using virtual and blended mobility schemes in the existing learning journey.

As described in earlier strategic notes, EUTOPIA's educational model is well aligned with the vision on innovation expressed by the Commission and at the same time reflects the ambition for openness characterizing the member universities in the alliance.

The EUTOPIA model responds to a range of key actions communicated by the Commission. We cite a few and refer to the corresponding characteristics of the EUTOPIA pilot experiments:

- I. *“European collaboration is vital to ensure that education systems innovate and transform to fulfill a number of purposes assigned to them”*

Through connecting highly motivated teachers that are working with new teaching practices in cross campus networks, EUTOPIA reinforces the existing drive in the operational core of our universities and significantly reduces the administrative barriers for international cooperation.

- II. *“Societal engagement is central to the university mission “*

All EUTOPIA labeled learning units are challenge driven and inspired by the complexity of today's society. The connected learning communities reach out to stakeholders outside academia and prepare students for coping with issues such as sustainability, diversity, social power and citizenship, fallacious reasoning, global media etc...

- III. *“Ensure policy coordination and synergies with existing frameworks “*

The implementation of our educational approach requires education policies to be linked to other EU policies such as Research and Innovation, Digitalisation and Social Affairs and Employment:

- The colleagues identified to develop the learning communities are highly respected for their pedagogical approach but also for their contribution to research innovation. Participants in the learning communities experience significant incentives by getting prioritized access to initiatives for young and promising researchers involved in the topics of their thematic networks. That is why in the new proposal EUTOPIA MORE we no longer talk of parallel development of learning communities versus research communities. The EUTOPIA labeled learning units will instead become the spill of integrated Learning and Knowledge communities at a European scale.
- The EUTOPIA model is by definition aligned with the digital agenda of the commission. Our learning communities cope well with limitations on physical mobility as they operate on collaborative learning platforms and create virtual spaces for teamwork. Staff and students can also benefit from assignment based intensive short term mobility and 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 micro credentials.

- The educational approach in EUTOPIA supports the learning journey of the students across all cycles of the educational journey and beyond. In challenge-based learning students assume responsibility for contributing to the learning content in an international context. They create relationships that are not limited by the period for obtaining their degree and that are at the origin of long term professional or personal networks.

IV. "Embrace diversity and foster inclusive education systems "

Our educational model builds on the ideals of openness, inclusion, and engagement for society. One of our core ambitions is to meet the needs of the so called "non modal" students who combine study with professional activities and /or personal responsibilities. The well received Key Action 2 proposal FLECSLAB introduced by the EUTOPIA member universities in summer 2021 will explore the potential of the connected learning communities for offering a flexible type of Lifelong Learning.

3. BUILDING A CASE FOR CONSOLIDATION

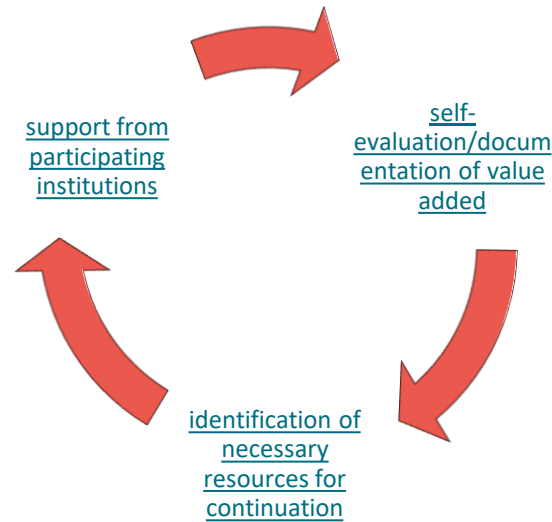
EUTOPIA's pilot experiments rely heavily on the empowerment of the professional core in the home universities of the alliance. Academics are willing to take responsibility for starting up of Learning Communities. As such the system is well conceived for avoiding one of the major pitfalls when introducing innovation or change in an organization. This is especially important in academia where the successful implementation of a university-wide strategy depends on a good match between the decision making at institutional level and the motivation of individual members of the academic staff.

The downside of this bottom-up approach is that specific efforts are needed to ensure sustainability for the value added resulting from the connectedness in the learning communities. This is the so called consolidation phase and is part of the learning community life cycle initiated in the 3rd Strategic Note¹. The consolidation starts by documenting the results of connectedness developed between the partners during the two test years of their cooperation. Thereafter, the leads and partners of all communities selected in the same round collectively reflect on the nature of the piloted activities. The partners are asked to prioritize the connected activities that have created value added for students and staff involved, and that they are willing to organize at a multi-partner level beyond the horizon of the pilot period.

On a case-by-case basis the central curriculum team, in collaboration with the colleagues participating in the communities, screens the formats chosen for continued implementation and indicate the type of resources needed for integration in the curricula of the home universities, or for other types of incorporation in the recurrent activities of the universities involved. The results of this systematic approach are presented in the WP2 transnational meeting / to the Education Board for feedback and commitment before taking back to the participating institutions for local development of the LCs. Considering the type of integration and the partners involved in the cross-campus activities, the vice rectors indicate the staff that can facilitate the further process. Following that discussion feedback is organized to the respective Learning Communities and contacts are made with the local facilitators.

¹ Third Strategic Note: Lifecycle and Sustainability of the EUTOPIA Connected Learning Communities

The proposed process includes three stages involving ongoing consultation between the communities themselves and the curriculum team:



The first objective of this exercise is of course to safeguard the value created by mature learning communities. However, the importance of the consolidation goes beyond the context of the specific communities involved and is a condition sine qua non for maintaining the dynamics of the model:

- I. consolidating the results of a mature group of learning communities allows for reorienting the resources of WP Education towards support of LC that are in an earlier stage of their development or to new initiatives,
- II. the consolidation exercise will trigger stronger links between the EUTOPIA project team and the permanent staff in the member universities that are responsible for curriculum development and strategies for European cooperation,
- III. last but not least the consolidation activities will create better insight in the respective systems for managing /steering curriculum innovation and triggers the exchange of best practices within the alliance.

In other words the impact of the consolidation efforts for the learning communities goes beyond the strengthening of the relations between individuals within the thematic networks. The incorporation of specific connected activities thus is a conduit for making EUTOPIA a truly integrated part of strategic developments and decision making in our member universities. Especially in the case of teams that take care of curriculum development, the efforts for integrating the successful EUTOPIA cross-campus activities will further strengthen the openness of our educational system. The cross disciplinary nature of the thematics dealt with in the communities, allows for the insertion of the EUTOPIA labelled learning components in a vast number of programs offered at all levels of the educational cycle. The trans institutional cooperation of highly reputed educators will thus surpass the selected learning units, and work towards broader development in our learning patterns.

4. CONCLUSION

In this third and last year of the pilot project the Work Package Education and Students is facilitating a target group of 30 learning communities. The connectedness within these communities is gradually increasing and varies between start up and coming to maturity. The lessons learnt from all these stages of development are monitored and documented. This data will be the basis for even better and more efficient organization of the next generation of communities.

Supported by the central EUTOPIA team the participants in the more mature communities will take stock of the cross-campus learning activities that are likely to create value added for students, teachers, and stakeholders beyond the pilot period of this project.

At the governance level of Work Package Education and Students it is crucially important to profit from this so-called consolidation exercise. It will help us to define more clearly the part of the development of the EUTOPIA model that we can take responsibility for. It enables us to reflect on cooperation with other Work Packages and the various governance levels that are needed to back up the incorporation of the results of the connected learning communities. It also allows us to identify strategic developments across our member universities that could inspire new thematic networks.

Academic work forthcoming:

- (i) *Angouri, J., S'Jegers, R. and Moriau, L. (2022). Connected Learning Communities: A model for Transnational Education. Submitted to: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences, May 3 2022.*
- (ii) *Moriau, L. and Angouri, J. (2022). Connected teaching, learning and curriculum design: an EUTOPIAn journey. Submitted to: Teaching In Higher Education, March 28 2022.*