

STRATEGIC NOTE

29/6/2020

EUTOPIA WP2 Towards a EUTOPIA Learning
Community

I. INTRODUCTION

The EUTOPIA education model explicitly aims to be a driving force for the continuous innovation of curriculum development in the European Higher Education Area. For that purpose there is no need to develop new programs but to allow the infiltration of EUTOPIA dynamics in the existing ones.

In the EUTOPIA alliance best practices in active learning from the six partner universities are connected through cross campus learning communities involving staff, students and stakeholders from a wide range of adjoining activities outside academia. We thereby re-imagine mobility and open up credit bearing components emanating 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.

It is our aim to make a comprehensive choice in selecting the learning units that help students to address global issues in line with the priorities indicated by organizations such as the UN and EC'S Horizon. The cross disciplinary nature of these challenges will allow for the integration of EUTOPIA labeled curriculum components in a vast number of programs offered at BA, MA and PhD level on our campuses. The transinstitutional cooperation of highly reputed educators on these topics will surpass the selected learning units and touch the broad curriculum development in our universities.

In these disruptive times the impact of EUTOPIA can be compared to that of a benign yet powerful wave of change. The students on our campuses will be gradually affected by choosing courses, modules and seminars that are part of a transnational connected learning community. In doing so students get access to learning material enhanced through European cooperation and can exchange their views on challenge based assignments with their fellow students on a EUTOPIA wide platform.

In a series of 4 semestrial strategic notes we will deepen and refine the narrative of these experiments. While building the connected learning communities we gradually start to monitor their development and identify the barriers and enablers for their implementation in an interinstitutional EUTOPIA wide curriculum. By the end of the pilot period this will result in a policy brief indicating our suggestions for adapting internal procedures in our European university as well as for measures to be taken at the level of both local and European higher education authorities.

II. MOBILITY AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Before turning to EUTOPIA we take a critical look at the rationale of today's mobility and exchange between higher education institutes in Europe and beyond.

Roughly speaking Europe uses a double approach:

- (i) The European Higher Education Area focuses on mobility schemes for individual students and staff. In second position there are incentives for developing joint degrees. Thirdly there is the continuous effort for harmonizing educational rules, legislation and accreditation systems. The incentives are involving the academic players only. Much of the exchange is to be compared with an import /export system: we accept each others programs / students / staff and (partly) pay for their mobility costs. The exchange is limited to the period of study and the impact is on the individuals involved rather than on institutions or the broader society.
- (ii) The European Research Area focuses on cross national activities. Researchers have to put effort in networking, not only across universities or similar research institutes but also through proven cooperation with stakeholders outside academia. The incentives stimulate the take off for these networks but aim at long lasting value added for departments, institutions and society. This is not about export / import expenditures but about investing in the creation of European content and scale. The budgets are huge but the impact lasts for the successful ones; so programs can be launched and the funds can be oriented towards new initiatives as the old ones either become obsolete or become self sustainable. The impact therefore is continuous and goes beyond the academic world because other actors in society are participating and have a direct interest in the innovation capacity that is created for them in the networks.

EUTOPIA 's educational model tries to combine the best of both worlds: we focus on existing credit bearing educational formats that apply a network philosophy. Active learning processes involve staff, students and stakeholders from outside academia. This already resulted in learning and teaching processes that have proven their positive impact on the motivation and learning outcome of students and staff. In most cases however the impact is limited to the local students, staff and environment of the university.

As to enable the internationalisation of European Higher Education in a sustainable way we therefore apply the method of interinstitutional connected

learning communities. By doing so we aim to achieve sustainable networks supporting students in their professional and personal life, strengthening academic staff through recognition of their pedagogical efforts, opening up and linking the learning processes to organisations from both the social profit sector and the business world.

The efforts for supporting such a model for a European university thereby avoids the pitfalls of former Erasmus tools: funds outreach the benefit of individual students or staff. The successful communities will be long lasting as they are improving the present curricula and inspired by a wide range of actors in society.

The comparison between traditional mobility and EUTOPIA connected learning is illustrated by a few characteristics in the scheme underneath.

ERASMUS MOBILITY versus CONNECTED LEARNING

Erasmus Mobility	Connected Learning
Individuals	Networks
Physical mobility	Blended approach
Impact limited in time	Sustainable relationship
Intra academic	Involving stakeholders outside academia
Disciplines/joint programs	Complex challenges in society
Spending	Investing

III. THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF EUTOPIA

The EUTOPIA educational model is based on the selection of Learning Units emanating from the present degree programs of the partner universities. By the end of the 3-year pilot period, 30 learning units of the present curriculum in the EUTOPIA universities will have a EUTOPIA label. These learning units are selected in 3 rounds and gradually connected to the degree programs (ba/ma/phd) of the partner universities.

All learning units selected for EUTOPIA fulfill the criteria of openness that are characteristic for our alliance:

- They are relevant across disciplines: the learning units cover interdisciplinary topics or analytical tools that are needed to understand the global challenges our societies are confronted with.

- They make use of active learning methods: in these learning units students move away from being passive absorbers to being active participants in the teaching and learning process. Typically active learning includes problem solving assignments, research inspired learning and co creation processes between staff, students and experts.
- They involve extra academic stakeholders: representatives of the business world, the cultural sector and public organisations are invited to participate in the learning process and to inspire the learning material with real life issues.
- They accommodate for a diversity of students: the learning units reach out to a wide range of learners and seek to motivate them by using innovative and flexible pedagogical approaches and course content.

EUTOPIA learning units emanate from present components in the curriculum of one of the EUTOPIA universities. The academic staff member that is teaching a EUTOPIA learning unit, takes the responsibility of opening up the course to a selection of students of the EUTOPIA partner universities. This process is facilitated by the coordinator and the curriculum developer of EUTOPIA; the leads and partners of the learning communities are invited to meetings and learning circles where they make plans to open up their course material to students in all EUTOPIA universities and learn to organize their teaching on a collaborative platform.

IV. TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL MODEL

The EUTOPIA educational model advocates new learning spaces beyond traditional binaries such as on/offline; long/short term mobility; in/extracurricular learning. Instead, it draws on blended learning and flexible mobility and is proposing a new education model, one that is open, fluid and transnational.

We claim that educational innovation is directly related to enabling students to become responsible, independent and competitive global citizens. Students use virtual spaces for teamwork, benefit from short term mobility schemes and seamlessly move between institutions and placement opportunities, transgressing linear mobility schemes where the students are 'here' or 'there'. This is in line with the European Commission focus on alternative ways to recognize competence, achievement and skill development through a flexible mechanism that builds on micro-credentials.

The EUTOPIA educational model is designed to provide international learning for all; this particularly applies to those for whom traditional year/term long mobility is unaffordable because of financial constraints or life commitments. This is in line

with current mobility recommendations (Erasmus 21-27 report) calling for digital mobility experience and flexible opportunities for all learners.

EUTOPIA is an innovative and timely project which addresses the priorities of the European Commission for embedding internationalisation, enhancing collaboration between the academy and industry and other third sector stakeholders, develop complex and resilient blended learning environments and provide evidence-based policy recommendations. It offers an alternative approach to student empowerment by providing a way to connect micro-activities and certification alongside students' traditional discipline training. It is conceived to introduce a new model of blended learning activities which is versatile and can be tailored according to the needs of the participants. This is particularly timely as higher education is experiencing significant disruption under the Covid-19 impact. Disruption is always opportunity for change and the EUTOPIA learning model provides the framing and methodology for re-imagining European higher education.

Through systematic monitoring and evaluation of the development in the learning communities, we aim at improving the ability in European higher education for creating added value for all involved:

- Academic staff co-create learning spaces and experiences. They amplify pedagogic innovation and outcomes of research at a European scale.
- Students get experience, learn to operate at international level and become the European responsible citizens of the future.
- The stakeholders outside academia benefit from innovation, creativity and solutions produced by the EUTOPIA learning communities.
- The Higher Education sector gains a model which, for the first time, can harness the dynamics of transnational learning in complex and agile Learning Communities. Through multifactorial evaluation, EUTOPIA will provide a tested model which brings together all stakeholders involved in blended learning environment.

In closing, the EUTOPIA educational model offers agility and a flexible learning environment, delivering innovation at multiple levels. Our transformative pedagogy enables participants to co-create and develop learning and teaching approaches that are innovative and address real world challenges. This is built on a strong culture of connectedness and a network approach to transnational education which goes beyond bilateral and linear models to complex and dynamics networks of learning.