Future Developments of E-Modules: The Role of Interactive Tools and Multimedia in Teaching European Studies Online

Alina Christova, Free University Brussels, Belgium

ABSTRACT

E-learning tools can be found on an occasional basis in higher education, in particular regarding social sciences. This paper concentrates on envisaged future developments of E-Modules, the innovative e-learning platform on European Union matters created by the Institute for European Studies, which is an autonomous department of the Free University Brussels. First, it provides an overview of the strategy and the concept of E-Modules as well as content, structure and main features of the e-learning tool including best practices and current challenges. The author also explores in depth the role interactive tools and multimedia can play in enhancing the transfer of knowledge and skills to the users of the E-Modules.

Keywords: E-Learning, E-Learning Platforms, E-Modules, Higher Education, Interactive Tools

INTRODUCTION

The Institute for European Studies developed E-Modules as an innovative e-learning tool with the purpose of complementing the academic offer of the Institute for European Studies, which encompasses amongst others two advanced master programmes, a Master on International Law and European Law and a Master of European Integration and Development, as well as a summer school on the European Decision-Making Process and further training activities on EU matters. The Institute for European Studies is constantly working on the further development and improvement of the E-Modules. One of the challenges is the steady need for update regarding the content of the e-learning tool, which covers a topic subject to constant change. Simultaneously, the modules need regular update of the technological components of the tool. Currently, the Institute puts efforts in improving the interactivity and use of multimedia to enhance the learning effect of the platform.

The E-Modules Concept

The purpose of E-Modules as an online learning tool is to offer a structured and interactive
way of making understandable and tangible a complex, constantly changeable actor on the international arena as the European Union. In particular, the tool deals with the historical development of the European Union, its structure, legal framework, policy areas, decision-making process, etc. There are a large variety of information sources covering the European Union. The challenge for persons determined to study the European Union is to find their way through the vast amount of information available, to prioritize sources and information and to get to know the meaning of many terms specifically used in the context of European integration. In this respect, the modules offer concise, well structured, easily comprehensible and free of EU-jargon information, which allows the users to develop a basic understanding of what the European Union is about and then have the possibility to enhance the knowledge by concentrating in-depth on more specific topics.

Being an online learning tool, E-Modules offers distinct advantages in terms of flexibility since it is accessible at all times with no geographical confinements and makes self-directed learning possible. It allows complete freedom of the users to determine when and where they would like to learn, how much time they want to dedicate to studying, at what pace they would like to complete the modules, whether they would like to end their studies with a final exam or not and at what time they would like to take the exam.

E-Modules was designed as an online learning tool addressing every person, not only in the European Union, but worldwide, who is interested in acquiring knowledge about the European Union. Thus, the target group of the e-learning platform by far exceeds students involved in European Studies at the university, and an enrolment in the academic programme of the Institute for European Studies is not a precondition for becoming a user of the E-Modules. Nevertheless, the E-Modules are often used to complement the academic programme of the institute and access is given to students of the institute in preparation for the attendance of the master programmes, summer school or specific trainings, seminars, etc.

The concept of the E-Modules targets knowledge acquisition and skills acquisition. The e-learning tool on European studies transfers basic knowledge on the European Union, but at the same time it also helps the users to attain crucial skills like conducting a targeted information search and processing the information acquired, developing a structured approach to various subject matters, linking various aspects of an issue in coherent reasoning and problem solving. Both elements complement each other in the learning process.

Content, Structure and Main Features of the E-Modules

At the moment, E-Modules consists of three separate modules: the module on European History, Institutions and Decision Making, the module on European Union Law and the module on European Information Sources. However, the Institute is in the process of expanding the areas covered by the e-learning tool and developing new modules that deal in a more in-depth manner with specific policies of the European Union like, for instance, a module on Common Foreign and Security Policy, a module on Environmental Policy, etc.

The first module on European History, Institutions and Decision Making deals with the history of post-war European integration. It presents the foundations of the European Union in the form of the founding treaties and deals with the various institutions of the European Union as well as other bodies and agencies. Moreover, it describes and analyses the decision making process on the European level including the various procedures employed. The module on European law focuses on the characteristics, principles, objectives and sources of European Union law as well as guaranteed freedoms and the various policies of the European Union including the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The third module addresses the challenge of finding the right information on Euro-
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