Quality for eLearning on the Global Cooperation Agenda

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I. INTRODUCTION

Developing countries need the deployment of high quality Information, Communication and Learning Technologies (KILT) for accelerated and sustainable development.[1]

A quantum leap in development is required for developing countries to achieve the „Millennium Development Goals – MDGs".[2] It is widely accepted today that a decisive accelerator for sustainable development processes is education and that KILT is a major enabling technology for its provision of the massive scale needed. In order to achieve, for example, the educational MDG - universal primary education by 2015 - UNESCO estimated that additional fifteen million teachers and hundred of thousands of teacher educators will be needed. This quantum leap in education can only be achieved through the deployment of KILT. This is what places KILTs so high on the agendas of many governments in developing countries. KILTs are seen as the key solution that will allow them to meet the needs in rural and under-served areas and bring services to widely distributed citizens rapidly and cost efficiently, be it in health, education or public services.

However, as it can be learned from first experiences in Africa and other regions, and as can be seen from the experience made in Europe, the effective deployment of eLearning is by far not only a technological question but rather a question of an integrated approach which combines organisational change, teachers/ tutors qualification, economic concepts, pedagogic approaches and scalable technological frameworks. Quality of the learning experience, recognition of certificates acquired through distance and eLearning, transparency of what is offered to the students/ learners

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[1] The presented Whitepaper is a result of a multistakeholder inquiry and started in 2006 at the Online Educa in Berlin, Germany, continued in the first eLearning Africa conference in 2006 in Addis Abbeba, Ethiopia and in workshops of the European Foundation for Quality in E-Learning throughout 2006 and 2007.

[2] www.un.org/millenniumgoals/

are in the centre of attention and will drive the actual developments and determine the effectiveness of the planned and already made investments.

II. THE CREATION OF QUALITY NETWORKS AND COOPERATION AS GLOBAL AGENDA

Assuring the quality of education provision through KILT is a fundamental aspect of gaining and maintaining credibility for programmes, institutions and national systems of higher education worldwide. Despite a long and generally successful track record, eLearning is still required to prove that the quality of student learning is at least equivalent to face-to-face teaching. A comprehensive quality development can help accomplish this. In eLearning this includes developing and producing learning materials, academic programmes, services and support, as well as standards of student learning. Since the 1980s, provision of education through the mobility across borders has grown considerably. In parallel, new delivery modes and cross-border providers have appeared, using ICTs to provide education on a distance in order to offer new opportunities for improving the skills and competencies of individual students and the quality of national higher education systems. While in some countries the national frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications take into account such a provision of eLearning, in many countries they are not geared to address.

The problem addresses issues of a nature which demand international cooperation between the countries involved in providing and receiving educational provision. The challenge faced by current quality assurance and accreditation systems is to develop appropriate procedures and systems to cover the following aspects

a) Recognition of certificates, educational levels and acquired competences between countries and institutions.
b) Assurance the quality standards are met in a sufficient way for students and teachers to interact in a meaningful way while achieving the objectives of the provided courses.
c) Development of a culture of quality and change towards excellence for institutions using ICTs to provide education over a distance.
d) Empowering students to grow on their path towards the desired qualification and in their ability to become skilled learners for a learning throughout the lifetime.

The aforementioned challenges call for the development and implementation of effective quality assurance and quality management strategies which control, improve and transparently reveal the characteristics of every eLearning offer. In Europe it can be seen that two components are crucial for such effective quality

improvement concepts: A sound technical development and a community in which the concepts are shared and further developed in consensus. Quality – in this understanding – is the commonly shared ground and concept which is agreed on by a variety of stakeholders from the learners, the providers side, from different countries and educational backgrounds. Quality needs this element of participation and negotiation between the stakeholders in order to gain credibility and recognition. The concepts of creating quality networks and consensus groups promoted by the European Foundation for Quality in E-Learning goes in this direction and provides a framework which allows the creation of country and stakeholder group overarching quality dialogue to can *prove* and *improve* the quality of an institution's methods, and educational products and outcomes.

Europe and the European R&D programmes need a strategic partnership with developing countries with a focus on quality.
In Europe the building of high quality learning opportunities through the use of KILTs is at the core of European Commission R&D programmes. At the same time the topics addressed by the European programmes such as eLearning, eWork, eGovernance and eHealth are highly relevant for developing countries. In 2005 the European Commission formulated a new strategy for Africa that relates to the MDGs and suggests a new framework for development policy in order to accelerate Africa's growth. In this new framework the digital divide is addressed through a proposed „EU-Africa Partnership for Infrastructure" and a number of „access to knowledge and transfer of know-how" initiatives. So far the framework offers an important access driven strategy. The new framework should however complement the access with an explicit ICT based enabling and accelerating strategy. Such a widening of perspective and deepening of impact can be achieved through building a bridge between the European „Information Society Technologies – IST" programme and European eLearning initiatives and R&D programmes and the many and ambitious „ICT for Development" projects currently being deployed in numerous developing countries. In a European strategic partnership with Africa such R&D programmes should play a more active role. Creating the framework for an inclusive research and development approach between Europe and developing countries is not only very important from a European perspective, it will also play an important role for the dynamic leapfrogging phenomena one can observe today in many developing countries. It is important to underline the fact that quality assurance and quality development in such initiatives have to be seen as the driver for effective implementation and creation of students/ learners value. The experiences made in Europe and in many other countries around the world which call for an effective

quality development for every use of KILT for educational provision should be valorized in newly planned projects and initiatives – a new global agenda for sharing and cooperation in the field of quality for the use of KILT for education is therefore inevitable. It would synergetically link together pedagogy, organisational change, technology and economy and would be the place for the development of mutual recognition of cross border education through KILT.

Africa and Europe will both gain from joint R&D Agenda in the field of quality for eLearning
Quality for educational provision is at the heart of every society relevant development process. For the European Information Society Technologies community the forging of close links with counterparts in developing countries is a highly relevant mission today. Especially in the field of quality and the building of quality networks a global cooperation with developing countries can be of benefit. From a European perspective collaboration for the advancement of information society technologies with relevant institutions in the South will

- allow to taking-up of important requirements and needs of emerging markets for KILT educational provision;
- make quality R&D results more relevant and widen their up-take potential also beyond Europe's borders
- open the potential of eLearning products and offers to new usergroups, communities, markets and bring in consumer protection through quality transparency;
- build new valuable partnerships and allow synergies through global cooperation

For the R&D communities in developing countries partnerships with European projects will

- strengthen local and regional emerging quality and accreditation initiatives and networks as well as capacities;
- enhance national „ICT for Development" projects through valorising them with explicit quality cooperation components, peer-review and peer-learning mechanisms, and thus widen and deepen the role of local eLearning learning stakeholders;
- facilitate the entrance into an international quality research process and voice demands and concepts from a developing perspective, especially in the field of standardisation and quality certification (Development of Quality Marks);
- allow many higher education institutions to link up with R&D for the first time;
- have a significant impact on the quality of academic education;

- and create new forms of accreditation, mutual recognition and quality improvement with partners in European countries and beyond.

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

European stakeholders and R&D projects have started to include African partners in a global cooperation agenda in which quality is placed top. A specific inclusive approach of European initiatives and projects, directed toward improving the quality of ICT for learning in developing countries, is however just in its start-up phase. The European Foundation for Quality in E-Learning facilitates the process of creating a global cooperation agenda. First cooperations have been taken up by EFQUEL in cooperation with the UNESCO during the eLearning Africa Conference in Addis Abbeba, Ethiopia in 2006. A further forum for discussion has been planned for the Nairobi 2007 conference and is currently under negotiations with the organisers (www.elearning-africa.com). The following recommendations are made in order to strengthen the cooperation in the field of quality for eLearning programmes with the aim of improving educational offerings and developing lasting cooperation for the mutual benefit of both regions:

- A global forum for exchange of stakeholders, god practices and cooperation opportunities should be installed and regularly animated in order to facilitate the dialogue between Europe and other regions of the world.
- European R&D programmes in the field of IST and learning should take the aspect of quality, accreditation and recognition for eLearning and learning in general in cooperation with developing countries into account.
- The new calls for proposals should encourage institutions set up networks and initiate partnerships with developing countries in order to bring together stakeholders to form region overarching networks to provide leadership in the field of quality development for learning and esp. eLearning.
- Innovative partnership projects should be launched in the fields of eLearning which have a special quality development component.
- Model projects should focus on inclusion in all project phases (e.g. within requirement analysis and dissemination).
- In 2008 an observatory on best practices of use and implementation of KILT for educational practices and their application potential in developing countries should be installed. The aim: to identify stakeholders and to map out existing initiatives and their potential for the provision of high quality learning opportunities which is the underlying conditions for every sustainable development and synergies in

cooperation between Europe and developing regions of the world.

- A stakeholder conference should be organised by a European-African "Special Interest Group" as part of the "eLearning Africa 2008" conference, that prepares the ground for the "European-African Pact on quality for global eLearning" and further recommendations for the European Commission.