

# Virtual Lifelong Learning in the University of Tartu –

## Challenges for Teachers, Students and Managers

Aune Valk, Teet Seene

University of Tartu

During the recent decades, the world has witnessed rapid changes brought about by the spread of computers and the internet. In Estonia, these changes have been accompanied by profound alternations and new value systems in society and the economy, and, consequently, in nearly every sphere of life.

This makes challenging demands on the people who must find their way in this ‘topsy-turvy’ world. Life-long learning is certainly one way to make it easier to cope with the changes, and schools and universities are naturally expected to change themselves to correspond better to the changing world around them.

These trends have resulted in considerable public attention to educational issues and a widely –acknowledged understanding of the increasingly important role of education in the development of Estonian society. The need for life-long learning is generally understood and widely talked about but what it means for the educational system as a whole, what kind of demands it set up for the university management and every teacher, what does it require from every learner needs still further interpretation.

Besides the traditional goals of promoting academic scholarship and research, the University of Tartu has stated a third mission for its activities: providing for the needs of the society. This involves fostering life-long learning, including continuing education for university graduates, ICT-based learning in part-time degree studies and professional development courses. As others so called dual mode universities which try to combine traditional education and ICT-based distance education, the University of Tartu faces several challenges: resistance of faculty members, lack of computer-skills and facilities of some students, shortage of additional resources for technological development, etc. Dealing with the problems the University of Tartu has conducted several researches among the students and teachers to find out the major obstacles and possible solutions. In the following section, we describe the most important findings.

### ICT-based teaching – challenges for the academic staff

The task to develop ICT-based teaching sets up a major challenge first of all for the university teachers. As it is in most research universities, the faculty members are appointed and evaluated primarily on the bases of the result of their research interests and record, and few of them have got any special training in teaching generally, not to talk about ICT-based teaching or training of adults. “The problem is that teaching with technology is not something that can easily be picked up along the way, as something to be done off the side of the desk while engaged in more important or time-consuming activities such as research. It should be apparent by now that the use of technology for teaching and learning needs to be accompanied by some major changes in the way faculty members are trained and rewarded.” (Bates, 2000: 98).

Based on the research made among academic staff of the University of Tartu the main obstacles on developing ICT based courses seen by the teaching staff are the following:

- Most of teachers consider elaborating ICT-based courses time-consuming and not enough evaluated activity.
- Some teachers are worried about their future lack of work: replacement by a machine.
- A lot of teachers are concerned about copyright problems in case of digital materials.
- Teaching staff is also worried about the computer skills and facilities of the learners. If at the same course there are students who are able, eager, and can use ICT in their studies and those who are not, the teachers should make double work to provide materials for both target groups.
- There is still a lack of information and skills for elaborating ICT based courses.
- A lot of teachers see their field of teaching unsuitable for ICT based studies.
- Teachers also evaluate face-to-face contact with students, considering it emotionally and intellectually rewarding.

Due to the lack of information, some teachers think that with introducing ICT-based courses, the share of face-to-face learning will disappear at all.

Based on the research of American Productivity & Quality Centre (1999) on best practices in faculty instructional development in the use of technology in teaching, it may be concluded that organisations successful in developing ICT-based teaching focus more on teaching and learning generally, not on technology itself. "Design concepts need to "emerge" in response to dealing with real teaching issues rather than be taught directly to faculty members" (Bates, 2000: 101).

In line with this example, the University of Tartu has started the series of seminars where people already using ICT in their teaching share their experiences with others discussing both pluses and minuses of the ICT based teaching. These discussions are very useful since there has been found that most of teaching skills in higher education are acquired from senior professors. Faculty members learn better from their peers through show-and-tell demonstrations than through official courses. Fellow teachers are the best example to show that ICT based teaching is possible (considering both their subject and their resources: skills and time), it is useful in organising their study process, and it is rewarding: saving time and energy usually spent for lecturing.

In addition to that some training courses for using different technologies in teaching have been provided for those already convinced in the usefulness of ICT-based teaching.

For managing with the fears, writing articles, seminars, discussion groups, constant talking, etc has been the tools we have used. The aim is to show that moving to a greater use of technology would benefit both instructors, learners and the future of the whole institution. Of course we should always bear in mind that the technology is just a tool and that only intelligent and balanced used of it will be of help. The networking, easy access to materials, students discussion forums are necessary for DE students but will also be of help for full-time in-campus students. The institution as an whole will win of the benefits of its teachers and students and a greater competitiveness on global educational market.

In addition to seminars and courses, technical assistance in elaborating ICT-based courses by an educational technologist has been of use. Although it is most probably more effective to provide technical support in faculties by the faculty members, we have found that until the share of ICT-based courses is still rather small, it is optimal to provide help from the central unit.

#### ICT-based learning – challenges for the students

As Jen Harvey ja Nora Moge refer in their article Motivating students to use learning technology: "The time, energy, enthusiasm and planning that you have invested in the design of your implementation, and the provision and arrangement of resources could all be wasted if you fail to sell the idea effectively to your students. After all, it is the students who are actually going to be working with the technology." Although most (88%) of the current part-time students of the University of Tartu are eager to participate in ICT-based courses, approximately 2/3 of them have good skills in internet and computer based learning and access to internet. Besides lack of skills and access, some students are worried about costs of using phone lines for internet access. One of the main problems is also a fear to loose face-to-face contact with teachers and fellow students. Some people also enjoy lectures and consider taking notes as useful for remembering.

#### ICT-based teaching and learning – challenges for the management

Although both faculty members and students get most of the support from their peers, the central unit for co-ordinating ICT-based teaching and learning might be of help. As the research (American Productivity & Quality Centre, 1999) on best practices in faculty instructional development in the use of technology in teaching showed: most best-practice institutions had at least one institutionwide center to support faculty development.

At the University of Tartu the central unit responsible for ODL and continuing education is the Open University. The Open University was created on the bases of the previous Continuing Education Centre and was initially first of all in charge of organising continuing education courses and co-ordinating part-time studies. Since 1998 it includes Distance Education Centre with its Regional Development Office and Office for Educational Technology, and Multimedia Centre. Besides offering flexible study opportunities on both degree and continuing education courses, Open University is also responsible for developing an ICT-based learning environment, providing educational

technological help for teachers, organising courses and seminars on ICT-based teaching, etc. The current practice have proved that with constantly changing technology and new possibilities, it is very important to have a central unit responsible for developing ICT-based teaching/learning, which collects and shares experiences of other institutions, projects and researchers. Thus, not only teachers and students face challenges while turning a new - technological page in their teaching and learning, but also managers in charge of supporting both teachers and students, have to learn every day.

References:

- American Productivity & Quality Centre (1999). Today's Teaching and Learning: Leveraging Technology: Best Practice Report. Houston: American Productivity and Quality Center.
- Bates, A. W. (2000). Managing Technological Change. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Fransisco.
- Harvey, J., Moge, N. (1997). Motivating students to use learning technology: <http://www.icbl.hw.ac.uk/ltdi/implementing-it/motif.htm>

(文章来源：华南师范大学电教系未来教育研究中心)