

**On the Way to a New Learning Concept through E-Learning:
The M.A. Programs East European Studies Online
and International Relations Online
at the Center for Global Politics**

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Today, academics and practitioners of continuing studies face new challenges in designing learning concepts and curricula as they find themselves confronted with the fundamental changes surrounding the globalized job market. Biographies of transnational elites in various vocational fields are changing; instead of following the same career paths all their lives, many young professionals have to seek new ways of earning additional qualifications in order to switch between different career opportunities and to remain competitive on the international stage. This approach to “life-long-learning” poses new challenges for didactical concepts. First, this newly emerging target group of young professionals cannot afford to give up jobs in order to become further qualified, but need to pursue both their career and studies at the same time. Second, content delivery in training programs and academic curricula addressing this target group need to be flexible in the modes of delivery; students must be able to access tailor-made content independent from time and space, while at the same time drawing on highly individual tutoring and counselling capacities. Third, outdated modes of consecutive content delivery need to be substituted by alternative learning concepts that allow students to follow their own learning paths while at the same time receiving an excellent and comprehensive training in the study field at hand. Fourth, all of these demands should be realized in an environment which benefits from the didactical opportunities provided by new media and enhances international standards of education.

Professional e-learning delivered by distinguished institutions of higher education provides a good starting point to meet these demands. But the question remains, how can new learning models be realized that combine, on the one hand, the benefits of e-education with the highest academic standards in content delivery and tutoring capacities and, on the other hand, full flexibility with regards to the individual learning paths? In response to this question, the international and award-winning M.A. programs East European Studies (EES) Online and International Relations (IR) Online, designed by the Chair of Political Science held by Prof. Klaus Segbers at Freie Universität Berlin, seek to create new ways of e-education. Both programs are two-year blended learning M.A. programs, combining 90% online studies with 10% on-site classes. Thus, EES Online and IR Online are among the few blended learning programs in Social Sciences in Europe that put high emphasis on the online component by seeking to create a full virtual learning environment. Using the e-learning platform Blackboard, the programs are designed around an innovative didactic concept that guides students through the single learning units. In addition, the platform offers synchronic and asynchronous modes of e-communication, which have been specifically designed by the program teams to support students’ learning achievements in the most optimal way.

However, to realize the above vision and demands there are three challenges or dimensions which need to be dealt with in the following years. In sketching out these challenges, this article draws on the experience and concrete examples of the two M.A. programs introduced above:

1) Didactics: While most e-modules today still follow the old consecutive format, future online modules should be designed in a way that follows a non-consecutive model so that students may focus on a specific field of interest within one module in accordance with constructivist learning theories. In order to accomplish this, elements of choice building on a common academic basis should be introduced into the learning modules. In addition, students should be enabled to trace their field of specialization throughout the subsequent study program, while at the same time not missing out on the core curriculum either. On the way from consecutive to non-consecutive modes of content delivery, academic personnel is required to fulfil high academic and didactic standards; not only do they need to be experts with regards to a specific field of content, they need to be equally confident in applying e-didactics to the tailor-made e-study content.

2) Technical implementation: The above mentioned demands will only be achieved by the application of high, innovative IT and e-delivery standards. Next to web-based support and the maintenance of



synchronic and asynchronous communication platforms, new multimedia based features of e-delivery need to be integrated into the learning platform. Examples would be live broadcasts of lectures, audible units to supplement the online reading material and support different learning types among students, and web 2.0 features. In addition, the e-platform needs to provide specifically designed features to guide students through their non-consecutive learning path and ensure that they fully meet the program requirements. This will be an essential prerequisite to implement the above outlined non-consecutive learning concept.

3) Legal and administrative environment: The third challenge addresses the legal environment e-education formats are currently embedded in. E-learning formats are so innovative that no comprehensive international framework of e-delivery has been introduced up to now to ensure high quality standards and international comparability. Program formats in different countries tend to operate in different legal environments and with different legal standards with regards to accreditation and certification. Thus, accreditation standards, as well as data security and copy rights, remain a gray zone, increasing the mental obstacles the target groups struggle through in order to attend e-learning programs. A clear international framework in regards to copyrights and standards of e-delivery would strengthen e-education formats and substantially improve the reputation of online delivery.

The above three dimensions for the improvement of e-delivery are challenging and mark the milestones that must be reached in a new learning concept through e-learning. While good examples like the M.A. programs EES Online and IR Online exist, the next steps involve translating the benefits of new media and the opportunities of online delivery into a new didactical concept embedded in an international framework and within recognized standards of excellent e-delivery.