

A Review of MegaTrends publications

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Introduction to the Project

The objective of the **Megatrends in e-learning provision** project, that was co-funded by the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci Programme (October 2005 - September 2007), was firstly to *identify the megaproviders of e-learning in the European Union*, that is to identify e-learning systems which have achieved robustness, sustainability and critical mass to such an extent that one can confidently assert that they are permanent providers of e-learning in Europe and will not be going away.

The second objective was to produce *case studies of the successful institutions* to identify how and for what reasons they had successfully matured as e-learning providers and had passed the stage of being a project and had achieved maturity today.

The third objective was to *analyse the project's findings on the megatrends and the megaproviders* for the benefit of the European Commission and for the benefit of e-learning institutions and practitioners in Europe.

The project set up a couple of strict criteria for e-learning megaprovision. The selected institution had to either:

- Enroll more than 5000 enrollments in e-learning courses per year or
- Have more than 100 online courses on offer at any one time provided that
- Institutions whose e-learning provision was from a base in the United States of America or elsewhere outside Europe would not be included in the surveys and provided also that
- The students were studying at least 50.1% of their courses off-campus from a distance.

Certainly there are hundreds, if not thousands, of experts and practitioners in the 26 countries studied who know more about e-learning in their area or district than they do. In every survey of this kind local knowledge is more accurate than research findings in identifying a phenomenon in a local area. Therefore the project looks for and welcomes clarification, critical comments and/or addition of data to its publications.

The Publications

The Provision of e-learning in the European Union

The project partners conducted an extensive research in the 25 countries of the European Union plus Norway. However, as the countries and regions differed a lot, the researchers in practice chose different solutions for collecting valid and reliable data. Dependent on the individual researcher's knowledge of the actual country or region various common directions were given.

Ministries of Education (and/or the Ministry for Universities) had been contacted in each country. From the Ministry it was recommended to try to get information about possible official e-learning officers in the country and leading e-learning experts. These leading experts provided support in identifying the 5 leading e-learning providers in the surveyed countries and to point out sources of statistical data (such as annual enrollments and number of courses and possible contact persons at the institutions), academic and research information.

In addition, widely known experts from the field were identified, based on personal knowledge and membership of the major European organizations in the field of distance education and e-learning (such as the European Distance Education and E-Learning Network - EDEN, the European Association of distance Teaching Universities - EADTU and the European Association for Distance Learning - EADL). Further, national surveys, such as the work in the United Kingdom of Britain and Liber (2003), could constitute valuable information for further examination.

To avoid biases to the greatest extent, at the very beginning of the project, a nomination form was made available for the public to suggest megaproviders for the researchers to analyse.

Gathering input from the above described sources, this book presents an introductory overview of the provision of e-learning in Europe.

Megaproviders of e-learning in Europe

The search for success criteria started with the success factors presented in the book: Online education and Learning Management Systems. The hypothesis of the Megatrends project is that it is possible to detect specific conditions that increase the possibility of success and sustainability of e-learning programmes. Sustainability is defined as programmes being offered on a continuous basis and not phased out after a defined project period or after specific subsidies are terminated. The work undertaken within the partnership in the project application hence suggested the first important factors for robustness and sustainability. These factors were discussed and refined later during the project run.

With the 26 institutions, that were clearly identified as megaproviders during the first phase of the MegaTrends research, in-depth interviews had been conducted, based on a carefully engineered interview guide, that was taking into consideration every factor discussed and agreed to be important to success by means of achieving robustness and sustainability earlier. The interview manuscripts, later, had been elaborated into structured case study articles. The 26 case study articles and a first analysis of them are presented in this book.

E-learning initiatives that did not reach targeted goals

Research in the area of educational mistakes is notoriously difficult. Documentation is hard to access. Key figures disappear or refuse to be interviewed. Access to vital sources is denied. Where government use of taxpayers' money is involved the secrecy is even more pronounced.

Successful online education should be robust and sustainable. It is therefore of great concern that too much of the online education that has been offered so far has been transient, unsuccessful and far from sustainable. Several examples of online education initiatives that have not been robust and sustainable are described in the article Online Education Obituaries (Paulsen 2003). The examples are organized according to the following statements:

1. Many governmental online education initiatives have not been sustainable
2. Online education consortia are often not sustainable
3. Many commercial and investor-driven online education initiatives have failed
4. Boardroom initiatives often fail
5. Several high profile international ventures have been discontinued because of an unhealthy economy

This book provides an analysis of a number of case studies of e-learning initiatives, which did not reach targeted goals. The reason for choosing the case studies that are included in this book is first of all that the researchers had some knowledge about the cases through their professional work, and that the researchers were fortunate to find people who were involved and willing to share their knowledge about the cases.

Analyses of European megaproviders of e-learning

The hypothesis of the Megatrends project is that it is possible to detect specific conditions that increase the possibility of success and sustainability of e-learning programmes. Sustainability is defined as programmes being offered on a continuous basis and not phased out after a defined project period or after specific subsidies are terminated. For the success analysis, based on the earlier research results, the partnership suggested 25 important factors for robustness and sustainability under the following headings:

- Historical factors

- Technical factors
- Course factors
- Management, strategy and attitudes
- Economical factors
- Additional factors

These 25 factors formed the basis of the interview questionnaire, taking into consideration further contextual factors, such as:

- Market size (depending on country population, language used)
- Market readiness (penetration, technology infrastructure, broadband availability) to use online technology (differences between countries)
- Target group acceptance of e-learning (preference, reputation, legislation)
- Digital literacy in population
- National policy (national funding schemes)

The 26 interviews represented 8 distance education institutions, 13 institutions characterized as universities, colleges or consortia, and finally 5 corporate training providers. The case studies, therefore, are analysed according to the matrix model presented in the table below. One side of the matrix is institutional clusters and the other is factors from the interview guide.

	Distance education institutions	Universities, colleges and consortia	Corporate training providers
Historical factors			
Technical factors			
Course factors			
Management factors			
Economical factors			
Additional factors			

Further to this narrative analysis, the qualitative case descriptions were also supported by quantitative ratings of the factors, provided by 4 independent researchers.

The final results of this sophisticated analysis are summarised in this publication for the benefit of e-learning institutions and other providers throughout Europe.

MegaTrends Recommendations

This short document presents the ultimate results of the MegaTrends research, that are the (almost exclusively) practical recommendations for robust and sustainable large-scale e-learning provision.