Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern (vhb)
Bavarian Virtual University (BVU)

The Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern (vhb) / Bavarian Virtual University (BVU) was established in 2000 as a network organization of the universities and universities of applied sciences of the Free State of Bavaria, one of the 16 German federal states. Its primary goal is to improve studying conditions for the growing number of students who require flexibility both in terms of time and place. This flexibility is best offered by virtual teaching and learning environments.

Organisation

The BVU network currently encompasses 31 member universities with some 385,000 students. Several hundred professors in Bavaria are involved in the BVU either in a teaching capacity or as committee members. The Assembly of Member Universities is the basic governing body of the BVU; it comprises delegates from each member university. The Assembly elects the Steering Committee, which consists of the President, two Vice Presidents, and the eight members of the Programme Committee. The Steering Committee develops the strategic guidelines for the BVU. The Programme Committee advises the Steering Committee on all questions related to the course programme and quality management. The committees are supported by the BVU Office in Bamberg.

Courses – Funding Guidelines – Programme Structure

a) CLASSIC vhb – Blended Learning for Degree Programmes

The BVU portfolio includes approx. 550 online courses across 15 subject groups and there are around 50 additional courses currently in development. The online courses are tailored to and usually integrated into degree programmes at multiple member universities. With its portfolio, the BVU considerably extends the range of courses offered at Bavarian universities. Students from all BVU member universities may take courses for free. Each course provides students the possibility to earn credit points (ECTS). Interactive teaching and learning is a central aspect of all BVU courses; all participants are supervised by trained e-tutors. More than 50% of BVU course participants complete the examination associated with their course. Students who do not complete the examination use the courses as additional drilling, practice, or simply to acquire new knowledge, in order to improve their performance on examinations at their home university. Because interaction has such an extraordinary bearing on learning success, the BVU funds the supervision of the participants and the training of the tutors, besides funding the actual development of the courses.

The exchange between all our member universities has proved successful. More than half of all course registrations by students are for courses that are not offered by their home university. This positive effect is also true across the different types of higher education institutions: every year thousands of universities of applied sciences (UAS) students take courses offered by universities and thousands of university students take courses offered by UAS.

Producing online courses takes time and costs money. That is why the state government, via the BVU, funds the coordinated and demand-oriented development of such courses for use across all higher education institutions in the BVU network. The courses are developed and provided on the basis of funding proposals from member universities. Proposals for new courses must be submitted by a consortium of at least two member universities. The universities in the consortium guarantee that the course will be a required course or a required elective course in their degree programmes and that the credits earned in the course will be accepted as transfer credits. The BVU will also fund preparatory courses (introductory courses, preparatory courses for examinations, etc.) that are not integrated into any set curriculum, on a case-by-case basis. For students at member universities, BVU courses are free of cost; other participants can participate in supervised courses for a fee.

Currently, the BVU offers courses from across 15 subject groups: introductory courses, business informatics, computer science, economic sciences, engineering, health care / health management, humanities, key skills, languages, law, medicine / medical science, natural sciences, social work, social sciences and teacher education. See kurse.vhb.org.
b) OPEN vhb – University Knowledge freely accessible for Everyone

Within the framework of the Bayern Digital II initiative of the Bavarian government, the BVU is extending its course catalogue with courses that are open to all interested individuals. OPEN vhb courses make university knowledge freely accessible. Our member universities are also given the opportunity to engage audiences that are of particular interest to them (e.g. prospective students, students from abroad, refugees/migrants). Courses that are included in OPEN vhb are not necessarily linked to the academic schedule (semesters). It is not planned to award credits for OPEN vhb courses, nor will they be supervised. Outstanding design based on current media didactics is a central feature of OPEN vhb courses, which contribute to the profile of the Bavarian university landscape. Funding for OPEN vhb courses has been available for member universities since 2018. The course platform open.vhb.org has been open to the public since July 2019.

c) SMART vhb – Blended Learning for Lectures

The BVU is augmenting its course offerings with a programme called “SMART vhb”. This programme is aimed at developing small, flexible units that are designed for use in blended learning in individual lectures. Instructors and students from our member universities can use the units. The units can comprise diverse instructional material such as exercises, videos, text elements, or simulations related to a given topic. They are available in a central repository https://smart.vhb.org. Funding for blended learning units started in 2018.

Cooperation and Coordination

The coordination and cooperation managed by the BVU results in an efficient use of public funds. The BVU supports the system of established higher education institutions and strengthens the university landscape in Bavaria. Online courses and so-called blended learning units supplement and complement on-campus study. With assistance from the BVU our member universities make use of distance learning and offer their students more flexibility – both in location and scheduling.

Technology

As much as possible, the current infrastructure at the member universities is used. The standard courses with tutorial supervision are hosted on the member universities’ respective servers. The course catalogue and participant registration, as well as the learning management systems for courses in OPEN vhb and the blended learning units in SMART vhb, are centrally managed by the BVU Office. In order to make accessing the courses as simple as possible, a Single-Sign-On access system based on Shibboleth is used in cooperation with the member universities; this means students can log in to the BVU portal and the campus Learning Management Systems (LMS) using their personal university login information.

Quality Management

Quality management is especially valued at the BVU. All online courses are evaluated by the participants. In addition, every standard online course is evaluated on its content, use of media in instructional design and the technological implementation by two experts from outside of Bavaria; these peer evaluations take place regularly—once after the first two semesters and, thereafter, after five sessions of a given course. Evaluations by participants and external experts of the courses in OPEN vhb are also implemented. If improvements or revisions to the courses are recommended, the BVU will fund such measures.

More information is available on our website at www.vhb.org  

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