"Transition to open and on-line education in European universities"
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Why (and How) Traditional Universities Profit from Cooperation in Online-Teaching

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Summary

Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern (Bavarian Virtual University; www.vhb.org) is an institute set up by the nine universities and the 17 universities of applied sciences of the Free State of Bavaria. Like its member universities, the VHB is financed by the Bavarian Ministry of Higher Education (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst).

By means of the VHB, Bavaria addresses several major issues:

- The growing overall demand for higher education with growing student numbers at least until 2020,
- The urgent need to expand lifelong learning and to open the universities accordingly,
- Growing student diversity,
- The need for more flexible study programmes, and
- The consequences of demographic change, leading to substantial population growth in some parts of the state while other regions face a serious decline.

The VHB provides online courses with an equivalent of two to six credit points by ECTS which the member universities can integrate into their courses of study. The VHB helps its member universities to enlarge and enrich their programmes, and it helps the students to organize their studies more flexibly. This is especially important for the growing number of nontraditional students. In the academic year of 2012 / 2013, the VHB had 113,000 course enrolments by approximately 43,000 individual students, so that one in eight Bavarian students was a VHB user.

The VHB provides a model for modernizing universities by the transition to more open and flexible studies. It can also serve as an example for good practice in quality assurance and in the management of inter-university cooperation – all this in times of ever more strained public budgets.

The basic working principles of the VHB are:

- To stimulate and to support cooperation in online teaching among Bavarian universities,
- To develop and offer courses tailored to the needs and the actual demand of the member universities, with an elaborate quality management.
- To focus on blended learning at the macro level of the course of study, not at the micro-level of the single course, lecture or seminar, giving priority to asynchronous forms of
communication, thus facilitating the import and export of online courses among all member universities.

- To finance the production of courses as well as the operation of these courses, especially the online tutoring of the students.

Distance teaching at university level in Germany, higher education in Bavaria and online teaching in higher education

Due to multiple factors, distance teaching at university level plays a minor role in Germany compared with e.g. North America, Australia or the Nordic countries. To mention just two of these factors: first, there is hardly any place in Germany from which you would have to travel more than 50 km to the nearest university. Secondly, there are no student fees, so there is no competition between expensive face-to-face tuition and more affordable distance education, as in some parts of the world. The FernUniversität in Hagen is the German distance university offering complete courses of study and degrees, and the demand for additional courses does not seem high enough to justify the investment in a second large-scale German distance university¹⁷⁵.

With a population of some 12.5 million, Bavaria is the second largest of the 16 German states (Länder). Bavaria currently has more than 330,000 students²⁶ and feels the need to increase the proportion of its population with a university degree. The VHB is part of Bavaria’s strategy to enhance and improve the possibilities to attend and successfully complete higher education.

According to the German constitution, all matters of education, from school to university level, lie within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Länder, not of the federal government. An amendment to the constitution which would permit the federal government to finance universities permanently has been discussed, but so far a solution which would get the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament has not been found.

In general, the federal structure of Germany results in a large variety of approaches to most aspects of education, including online teaching and learning at university level²⁷. Most of the states leave the strategy for e-learning completely to their universities, and by far not all German universities have developed a comprehensive strategy for the use of information technology and multimedia in teaching and learning. Bavaria is among the minority of German states which actively motivate and support cooperation between universities in online teaching, and it is the only German state financing online teaching across university borders.

75 „Deutsche Universität für Weiterbildung“ in Berlin can serve as an example for the difficulties a new competitor in the market has to face. Cf. http://www.schwertfeger-mba-channel.com/2013/erste-deutsche-weiterbildungsuniversitatsgescheitert/
76 Cf.https://www.statistik.bayern.de/veroeffentlichungen/download/B3110C%20201222/B3110C%20201222.pdf
77 For a survey of the activities of the German states cf. Bremer et al. (2010).
Blended learning at the macro level

To make possible online teaching and learning across university borders, i.e. to facilitate the “import” and “export” of courses between universities, it is pivotal that these courses work completely online, without any face-to-face components except for the final examination. If students have to take part in face-to-face meetings, you cannot expect them to travel for hours. Therefore, online courses with face-to-face elements can be used jointly only by neighbouring universities.

“Blended learning” is interpreted by many experts as the combination of face-to-face teaching and web-based teaching within a single course. We call this type of blended learning “micro-level blended learning”. While micro-level blended learning has many pedagogical benefits, it does not necessarily make full use of the economic possibilities of e-learning. Teachers who use single e-learning elements in their courses do not necessarily gain additional teaching time, and micro-level blended learning is hardly a remedy e.g. against the shortage of lecture rooms many universities face. For the students, this type of blended learning offers rather limited flexibility. In many cases, especially when the web-based elements are exploited by only one professor at only one university, micro-level blended learning seems to offer higher quality or added value only at additional costs.

By contrast, the VHB focuses on macro-level blended learning with the aim of offering high-quality teaching with intensive tuition in a cost-effective way. By macro-level blended learning we understand the integration of single online courses into courses of study or curricula which otherwise (and for the most part) consist of “traditional” face-to-face courses (seminars, lectures et cetera). Thus, students can earn some credits in online courses, but not their complete degree. This combination of face-to-face courses with courses that are delivered completely online (possibly with the final examination being held face-to-face) allows the students much more flexibility than micro-level blended learning. At the same time the students enjoy all the benefits of a traditional face-to-face university. Therefore, macro-level blended learning minimises the dangers of social isolation sometimes associated with e-learning.

Moreover, if online courses are developed once at one university, but used at several universities, the comparative cost effectiveness is obvious. Thanks to macro-level blended learning, universities can “import” courses from other universities, including the support of their students by tutors from the “exporting” university. In contrast to micro-level blended learning, this kind of import also helps universities to compensate a possible lack of teachers as well as room shortages.

In its initial phase, the VHB experimented with micro-level blended learning courses. Students taking part in these courses generally appeared to be satisfied with the face-to-face elements, but an unknown (and for obvious reasons unidentifiable) number of students did not choose to take part because these courses did not offer the students the flexibility they needed or desired. Moreover, from the point of view of the university the import of blended learning courses is hampered by the fact that the importing university has to provide staff and rooms for the face-to-face activities. Several member universities of the VHB have stated explicitly that for them blended learning courses would not be a desirable and helpful contribution by the VHB.

Macro-level blended learning combines the social and pedagogical benefits of face-to-face teaching and learning with the economic advantages of online teaching and learning, and it is therefore one of the responses to the challenge of growing student numbers in times of strained public budgets. The
cost effectiveness of macro-level blended learning, in turn, is the major motivation for the Bavarian Ministry of Higher Education to finance the necessary structures and the development of new content.

Programme structure

In the summer term of 2013, the VHB offered 303 courses in 14 fields of study. A further 55 courses are currently in preparation, and the two calls for proposals in 2013 will result in an additional 60 courses to be developed. Figure 1 (below) shows the details of the programme structure by fields of study.

Sometimes the question of the “onlineability” of different subjects is raised. Within the VHB, successful online courses have been developed for various subjects and with different pedagogical concepts. Of course, some subjects appear to be especially suitable for online treatment (as opposed to traditional paper-based distance education) because of the additional pedagogical benefits which electronic communication and multimedia elements provide. On the other hand, the economic benefits of offering courses online instead of paper-based or face-to-face solutions can be just as significant and important. The VHB bases its decisions on whether to develop and offer an online course on pedagogical as well as economic considerations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>Courses offered summer 2013</th>
<th>Courses in preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Informatics</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Sciences and Economics</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care / Health Management</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Courses</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Skills</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Science</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Training</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>303</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Courses summer term 2013

Because of the large variety of fields of study with their different traditions, there is a corresponding variety of pedagogical approaches in the VHB’s courses. You will find virtual seminars with intensive student cooperation, there are online lectures with tutorials, and there are virtual laboratories. In many courses students deliver papers. Self-study environments play a minor role, as the VHB puts individual interaction at the centre of its concept.

Synchronous communication places severe limits on flexible start-up and progression, and it limits the students’ possibilities to organize their studies flexibly. Therefore, teaching and learning in most of the VHB’s courses are based on asynchronous forms of communication.

The courses of the VHB are developed at the individual member universities; there is no central production unit. Generally, within the universities (or within their institutes which provide online education) there is a clear division of labour. Content is usually provided by professors, who then employ skilled staff for the transformation of that content into an online course. In some cases (mostly at universities of applied sciences), professors also take part in the technical implementation.

The process of choosing new courses for the programme of the VHB consists of two main steps: first, a call for proposals, and then a call for tender. Detailed information about this process can be found on the VHB’s website. In short, the process is organized as follows:

**Call for proposals**: Twice a year, member universities are invited to submit proposals for new online courses. For each course the interested universities form a consortium with a consortium leader. Proposals by only one university are not eligible, with the rare exception of cases where a subject is taught at just one Bavarian university, e.g. veterinary medicine. Proposals for such subjects are eligible if they are submitted in cooperation with a university outside of Bavaria.

The proposals are submitted in a standardised form which can be downloaded from the VHB’s website. There must be a demand for the given course at a minimum of two member universities, and the online course, once it is completed, must replace part of the face-to-face teaching at the universities of the consortium, so that an actual decrease in the face-to-face teaching load in the given subject will be achieved at these universities. The consortium must define the curriculum or curricula (courses of study) in which the new online course will be employed, and they must give an estimate of the number of students they expect to participate per academic year.

The consortia and their courses do not function as “closed shops”. All member universities are

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78 Cf. [http://www.vhb.org/ausschreibung](http://www.vhb.org/ausschreibung)
entitled to utilize the courses, and students of all member universities can attend the courses free of charge\(^79\), no matter whether their university is a member of the given consortium or not. Students from universities outside a consortium are advised to make sure whether their home university will acknowledge credit points earned in such courses before they enrol.

The proposals are examined by the VHB’s Programme Committee. The Programme Committee selects the proposals most suitable for funding and passes its recommendations to the Steering Committee. The Programme Committee does not necessarily favour the proposals with the highest demand, i.e. with the largest number of expected participants. Special attention is paid to proposals for courses which make it possible to establish new curricula at member universities, e.g. master programmes at universities of applied sciences.

On the basis of the recommendations of the Programme Committee, the Steering Committee decides which proposals to fund. The consortia supporting those proposals are then invited to submit detailed descriptions of the courses.

**Call for tender:** These descriptions are the basis for the next step of the process, the call for tender. Generally (but not necessarily) bidders make a bid both for the production of the course and for the tutorial guidance of the students. The production of standard courses with an equivalent of two hours per week and semester (mostly 3 ECTS credit points) can be funded with up to 40,000 €. Costs exceeding this sum must be borne by the consortium. Up to now, there have hardly been any such instances.

For the majority of proposals one bid is submitted by a member of the given consortium, but there are instances where competing bids are made. There are also instances where the only bid comes from a university outside of Bavaria.

The call for tender is published on the VHB’s website. In addition, it is distributed to organisations similar to the VHB in other parts of Germany and the German-speaking countries. The VHB encourages the use of courses which have been developed at universities outside of Bavaria; it is the policy of the VHB not to fund the design and development of courses if a suitable course for the given purpose exists elsewhere and a license for the VHB can be obtained.

In order to be accepted as the producer of a proposed course, bidders have to conclude a contract with the VHB where, as a rule, they transfer to the VHB the exclusive right to use the course in online form. In cases where the VHB is not the exclusive financer, appropriate arrangements are made.

The producers further commit themselves to arrange personally for the operation of the course (i.e. to provide tutorial services and guidance) for at least five years. Should the producer not be in the position to operate the course any more, the VHB can transfer the operation to somebody else. Up to now there have been few instances where a transfer of the operation of a course has been necessary. In most of these cases the operation of the course was taken over by another professor from the producer’s university.

All members of a given consortium have the right to take part in the quality assurance process during

\(^{79}\) Persons interested in lifelong learning can take part in the courses if they pay a fee, but his plays a minor role.
the production of the course. They are encouraged to do so, especially by taking part in milestone meetings where the state of the work in progress is presented and discussed. Members of the VHB’s project management take part in these meetings. Thus, all members of a consortium can make sure that the final course will meet their expectations; problems can be solved at the earliest possible stage.

**Intensive tutorial guidance**

Learning is to a large extent based on interaction. In comprehensive online courses without sufficient interaction, i.e. without communication between the participants and a teacher or tutor, a considerable dropout rate is to be feared. Therefore, the VHB funds not only the development of courses, but also their regular operation. Moreover, the idea of state-wide utilization of the courses, i.e. of the “import” and “export” of courses among universities, would not be viable if there was no funding for the tutoring of students from universities other than the university of the course provider. There must be a sufficient incentive for this additional teaching effort. Therefore, the VHB funds the tutorial guidance of the students in standard courses with 25 € per student. This money is paid if the student has taken part in the final examination.

This regulation has been questioned as there are instances where a student makes intensive use of tutorial guidance but does not take part in the final examination. On the other hand, there are instances where a student merely enrolls but does not take part in the course, so mere enrolment would be unsuitable as an indicator for the amount of tutorial work. The most objective measurement of the tutorial work spent on every student would be by tracking the student’s online activities, but this would infringe laws on data privacy protection. The present regulation appears to be acceptable because it also applies to students of the teacher’s own university, so that this university gets additional funding.

The question has also been raised whether succeeding in passing an examination rather than the merely participating should be the criterion for the funding of tuition. This idea was rejected after thorough discussions in both the Programme Committee and the Steering Committee, because this solution might be interpreted as an incentive for course providers to offer “easy” examinations. This, in turn, would not be in accordance with the VHB’s efforts in quality assurance.

**Quality management**

Evaluation and quality assurance play a central role in the VHB’s overall concept. The development of every new course is closely supervised by experts from the consortium which submitted the proposal for the course, and by the project management of the VHB Office. Together, they approve the new course for inclusion in the VHB programme.

Students evaluate their courses every semester, and the results of these evaluations are discussed with the course providers. After five semesters of operation, each course is evaluated by two peer experts (always professors from outside of Bavaria), one of them focusing on matters of media pedagogy and didactics, the other on the subject content. The results of the students’ evaluation are
made available to the peer experts, too. For the student and expert evaluations, standard evaluation sheets are employed\(^{80}\). The results of the peer evaluation are discussed by the Programme Committee and the Steering Committee and with the course providers. Any problems in the sphere of tuition addressed in the student evaluation can usually be resolved by the VHB Office and the individual teacher.

Course providers can apply for funding to update their courses if the work involved exceeds the occasional updating university teachers are expected to perform in face-to-face teaching. The VHB provides the required funds as long as there is a sufficient demand for the course.

Providing courses for tutors in VHB courses as outlined above is also part of the VHB’s quality assurance activities. Furthermore, the VHB supports competence development for professors of its member universities by organising workshops on e-leaning.

**Technical issues**

In the VHB with its 30 member universities, a variety of learning management systems (LMS) are in use. This variety is a consequence of the variety of the subjects taught as much as of the history of the VHB: the VHB started in 2000 with a portfolio of 36 courses which had been prepared for different subjects by different universities.

No central server is used; all courses are on servers of member universities, and they are administered by responsible persons at member universities, i.e. by professors of the member universities or by members of their staff.

It has been argued that this decentralised approach might not be the most effective solution, but as far as can be judged from the students’ evaluations, the plurality of LMS and platforms does not constitute a problem for the students. Critical remarks related to specific features of specific systems (which were then improved) did not refer to the fact that a variety of systems are used. Besides, the migration of the existing courses to a single system would not be economically sound. The gradual introduction of a central LMS has been discussed by the member universities, but the vast majority are not in favour of such a solution.

While a centralized LMS does not seem to be an urgent issue, the establishment of an authorisation and authentication infrastructure (AAI) is making progress. As a first step, a method of data exchange has been established with all important member universities that makes online registration with the VHB possible. Data on participation in examinations and on their results is a sensitive issue. This data is exchanged directly between the examining university and the students, and between the students and their home universities, not via the VHB. An AAI based on Shibboleth is being introduced in cooperation with the Leibniz Computational Centre (Leibniz-Rechenzentrum - LRZ) in Munich.

**The VHB’s organizational structure**

The basic body of the VHB is the Assembly of Member Universities, in which each member university is represented by a Commissioner, who in turn is the key person for all VHB affairs within her or his

home university. Each university has one vote per 5,000 students. The Commissioners are usually members of the governing body of their university. The Assembly elects the Programme Committee and the Steering Committee, which appoints the Managing Director.

The Steering Committee consists of three persons. Both the President and the two Vice Presidents are presidents of member universities and in this function represent the VHB in the Conference of the Presidents of the Bavarian Universities (Universität Bayern e.V.) and the Conference of the Presidents of the Universities of Applied Sciences (Hochschule Bayern e.V.). The President of the VHB is usually President of a university, one of the Vice Presidents is President of a university of applied sciences. The Programme Committee consists of eight persons. Five of these must be Vice Presidents for questions of teaching and studying at their respective universities, one must come from a university outside of Bavaria. At present, four members of the Programme Committee come from universities of applied sciences, and four from universities.

While all offices mentioned so far are held by professors as part of (in fact, in addition to) their ordinary workload, the Managing Director and the employees of the Office or Service Unit (Geschäftsstelle) work for the VHB full-time. In the Office, 21 employees work in the areas of finances, project management, public relations, student registration and technical support. The Office is located at the University of Bamberg.

In addition to its regular responsibilities, the VHB has been assigned by the Ministry of Higher Education with the organization of projects within the framework of the European Social Fund for the period of 2007 to 2013. The continuation for the period of 2014 to 2020 is to be expected.
Results and financing

As early as 2007, the VHb was identified as one of Europe’s “mega-providers of higher education online” by the European Union’s MegaTrends project.81 This study was based on data from 2005, when the VHb had about 20,000 course enrolments annually. Today, there are more than 110,000 course enrolments by over 40,000 students per academic year. Figure 3 shows the development of course enrolment over the years:

In the years for which complete data are available, 55% of the students who enrolled in a course took part in the final examination. 56.8% of the total enrolment was in courses offered by a university other than the student’s home university. This shows that the “import” and “export” of teaching across university borders have become a widespread reality.

At present, the most popular subject areas are Law, Business Sciences and Medical Sciences. There is a noticeable difference between individual fields of study regarding the participation in final

examinations (cf. figure 4). This can be explained partly by the fact that some students use VHB courses as an additional source of information and an opportunity to receive extra training and tutorial guidance, but wish to obtain the necessary credits through examinations in courses of their home university.

**Financing:** In the period from 2000 until 2008, the VHB was financed by the Bavarian government with more than 22 million €. For the years 2009 to 2013 an agreement has been concluded between the Ministry of Higher Education, the Bavarian universities, the Bavarian universities of applied sciences and the VHB by which the annual budget of the VHB has been raised to approximately 6 million €. The bulk of this sum comes from the Bavarian state budget and other state programmes; the member universities contribute one Euro per student and semester, i.e. a total of around 0.6 million € per year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Sciences and Economics</td>
<td>11,464</td>
<td>11,2%</td>
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<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>1,905</td>
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<td>Engineering</td>
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<td>Cultural Sciences</td>
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<td>Health Care / Health Management</td>
<td>822</td>
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<td>Key Skills</td>
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<td>39,187</td>
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<td>Teacher Training</td>
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<td>8,5%</td>
<td>70,4%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>101,998</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>56,8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A:** Enrolment in field of studies  
**B:** Percentage of total enrolment  
**C:** Percentage of enrolment resulting in examination

Figure 4: Enrolment and examinations by fields of study, academic year 2011 / 2012
Audit of the VHB

During the first half of 2013, an international group of experts carried out an audit of the VHB. Their conclusions and recommendations were both very favourable and extremely helpful; they have been published on the VHB’s website. Currently, the VHB is one of the subjects of a study on innovation in higher education, launched by the European Union’s Directorate General for Education and Culture. The results are expected to be published at the beginning of 2014.

Conclusion

The success and the further development of the VHB depend on its ability to serve the needs of three target groups: students, teachers and universities. By serving the needs of these target groups, the VHB serves the needs of society and the state, which in turn provide the necessary funding.

Students profit from the flexibility of online teaching which is especially important for “non-traditional” students. Therefore, the VHB concentrates on asynchronous forms of communication. Students of the member universities do not have to pay any additional fees.

The quality of the courses is assured by an elaborate system which makes the quality of online teaching even more reliable than the quality of face-to-face teaching. The possibility of developing e-learning literacy while studying a subject as part of the curriculum enhances the employability of the students without requiring additional effort.

Teachers experience a wider range of pedagogical possibilities. Many of them also appreciate the possibility to reach more students with their teaching. Where online teaching is accepted as part of the professors’ workload, they also profit from the flexibility online teaching permits.

By offering online teaching and tuition on standard subjects, teachers can focus their face-to-face teaching on more advanced or specialised subjects. This can be both more demanding and more satisfying.

Working within the VHB network is also attractive for professors because of the grants by which the VHB funds the development and improvement of online courses and because of the financing of tutors. Moreover, funding by the VHB is considered “third-party-funding” in the performance record of the respective professors and faculties.

Universities profit from the VHB in several ways. By using VHB courses, universities considerably enhance their teaching capacities. Not only can they offer additional subjects, they can also restructure teaching capacities and use them for subjects less suitable for online teaching.

Generally, universities are facing times of more intense competition. But this does not mean that

they cannot cooperate. On the contrary, in order to survive in a world of growing competition, universities will have to cooperate not only in research, but also in teaching. The VHB is an excellent means of establishing and developing such cooperation. One of the positive effects of this cooperation is the establishment of common quality standards for online teaching.

The VHB avoids competition with its member universities. In particular, the VHB does not develop for-profit courses for further and continuing education.

From the point of view of the state, the situation can be characterised by the following considerations:

1. Public budgets will continue to be strained, because debts and deficits must be reduced.
2. The number of students will rise until 2020. Later, demographical factors indicate a gradual decline. On the other hand, Germany and especially Bavaria wish to boost the proportion of their population with a university-level education, and they wish to attract more students from abroad.
3. As far as we can see, in Germany higher education will continue to be basically state funded. The introduction of moderate fees with a maximum of € 1,000 p.a. per student, introduced by some German states (Bavaria was among them), was abandoned in 2013.
4. Therefore, additional high-quality education must be provided in a cost-effective way. The taxpayer-funded development of identical or similar online courses at different universities would be economically unwise.
5. Online education which is financed, organised and exploited by a joint venture of all universities together with the Bavarian Ministry of Higher Education appears to be an appropriate and necessary response to these challenges. Of course, this cannot be the only response.

To achieve its present position, the VHB has had to concentrate on the following key factors, and it will go on doing so in order to continue its successful development:

- A strictly demand-oriented policy for the development of new courses,
- Cost-effectiveness,
- Putting quality first, employing thorough quality management,
- Close cooperation with universities and the Ministry of Higher Education,
- Drawing upon the competence of the member universities, using their infrastructure as much as possible,
- Continuous improvement of courses and of administrative processes in order to reach maximum user-friendliness,
- Transparency in all decisions, especially in funding,
- Lean organisation, simple structures.
Perspectives

By the end of 2013, an agreement on the objectives and for the funding of the VHB during the period from 2014 to 2018 is to be concluded between the Ministry, the member universities and the VHB. The audit recommends expanding the VHB so that enrolment in 2018 will be about twice as much as it was in 2013.

Possible fields of additional effort are expected to be lifelong learning in its various forms, further courses in English for both German and international students, and courses in German for incoming students. Hopefully, the Humanities will play a much more active role in the coming years. Finally, “virtual” student mobility may become an issue which would further reinforce the VHB's interest in developing international cooperation.

In the more distant future, when student numbers will stop growing, and at some universities might even decrease owing to demographic factors, cooperation among universities in online teaching will prove especially valuable. The decline of student numbers at some universities might lead to a dilemma for the Government: On the one hand, it might seem economically appropriate to close down some of the smaller universities with declining student numbers. But then again: Wouldn’t such a step make things even worse? In the regions concerned, the local university is both an important employer and a most valuable institution for keeping the region attractive and preventing further depopulation.

In this situation, a large portfolio of high-quality online courses for a variety of subjects, each course with individual tuition for the participants, will help smaller universities to stay attractive, even if their growth prospects might appear negligible. Therefore, the approach of the VHB is valid and valuable for systems of higher education in times of stagnating and even diminishing student numbers as well as in times of growth.

References


The author thanks his colleagues at the VHB's Office, especially Ingrid Martin, for their help with the preparation of this article.