E-RURALNET - NETWORK PROMOTING E-LEARNING FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Executive Summary

Lifelong learning and the promotion of qualifications and competences are decisive framework conditions for the economic development and sustained competitive strength of enterprises. Technological and economic restructuring makes new demands on the imparting of knowledge. In particular, further vocational training is of increasing importance not only in the course of technological and economic structural change, but also in view of demographic change. In the context of education and Knowledge Management the use of (new) information and communications technologies (ICTs) plays a central role in promoting sustainable development. To meet the demand for further training and education from various occupational groups and sections of the population, mainly in rural areas, an efficient educational offer must be ensured. Consequently, special importance is attached to e-learning, a new type of learning in the educational sector based on new ICTs. Because it individualises the learning process and is independent of time and place of learning, e-learning offers the opportunity to bridge the digital divide and surmount spatial disparities, not only between countries, but also between urban and rural regions within each country.

"e-ruralnet – network promoting e-learning for rural development", a project co-financed by the European Commission (including ten other EU countries, with project coordination in Greece), is dealing, within the scope of the "Programme for Lifelong Learning", Transversal Projects-ICT, with e-learning as a perspective for rural areas, and at the same time focusing on the needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), micro-enterprises and self-employed persons, but also of job seekers. One aspect of the project is analysis of the e-learning market, in terms of both supply and demand. In this connection, a nationwide survey was undertaken in order to establish the supply of and demand for e-learning in the field of further education, especially in rural areas.

Within the period January 2010 to February 2011 surveys of e-learning providers, e-learners and a control group were conducted throughout Germany in order to investigate the use of e-learning in the further training and education sector. The focus was directed to non-formal and informal learning conceptions. Within the scope of a quantitative research method, three online-based questionnaires for each target group were provided through an internet platform on the project website. The advantages of this kind of questioning are, in particular, those of time and cost. Additionally, paper-based questionnaires were used in the scope of the survey of e-learners and the control group. The data are analysed within the framework of a descriptive analysis.

E-learning is an established form of both core and supplementary learning in many contexts in the area of further education in Germany. It covers a wide range of technological developments in the field of new ICTs and different organisational forms of learning. On the basis of the present findings, it can be concluded that the German e-learning market is a growing market. Private and smaller organisations offering e-learning dominate the further training market. As well as providers that supplement their traditional learning and delivery mode with e-learning, there are other providers that specialise in e-learning. E-learning plays a particularly important role in the context of vocational training and can help to improve the competences and qualifications of different occupational and population groups. Irrespective of location and branch of industry, the workforce, especially

employees in enterprises and self-employed persons, are very important target groups for e-learning providers. Among companies, large-scale enterprises and SMEs are the most important target groups. The main reasons for e-learners and control group for the participating in a further training course are connected with vocational education and training, and relate to learning important for their occupational perspectives in the company or the labour market.

The majority of e-learning providers do not target rural areas and therefore do not differentiate between urban and rural areas. Providers with a rural orientation are more likely to assess their e-learning courses as innovative than providers without a rural orientation. Rurally orientated providers tend to offer more specific learning content from the area of tourism and the primary sector. Taken as a whole, business management subjects and ICT-related subjects dominate the content of e-learning courses.

However, e-learning does not meet the expectations of all participants. The results of our study show that learners have a strong desire for social interaction, such as with tutors or other learners. For e-learners the online communication does not seem to have a sufficient degree of personal interaction. Additionally, a more needs-oriented structuring of the course content for the learners is important. Each e-learning concept must be adapted to the specific target group. Furthermore, e-learning seems to be less motivating than conventional courses for a relatively high proportion both of the e-learners and of the control group. In this context, blended learning appears to be the most promising e-learning delivery mode.

Easy-to-use e-learning courses can increase levels of access, motivation and acceptance among users. From the viewpoint of the providers, e-learning can particularly benefit persons with a high potential of self-discipline and willingness to learn. Therefore the participants should have or acquire specific competences for self-directed and self-organised learning. Most e-learners had no difficulty with their e-learning course, especially with regard to their IT skills and usage of the courses. The main perceived problems in connection with participation in the e-learning course were lack of time and lack of self-discipline. Within the framework of the control group survey, lack of time and the high cost were given as the main reasons for previous non-participation in a further training course. In both groups, further training is mainly financed by the participant or by the employer.

The existence of an adequate technical infrastructure is a prerequisite for the use of e-learning. But an insufficient technical infrastructure is still stated as the main problem or barrier for the use of e-learning in rural areas. A further problem mentioned by e-learning providers and control group, is the IT illiteracy of the participants and their lack of the skills to use these latest technologies. Therefore the digital divide is still an issue in Germany.

But finally it has to be stated that the majority of e-learners have a positive opinion of e-learning and would be well prepared to participate again in an e-learning course. The control group, however, have a more pessimistic attitude to e-learning due to their lack of experience of it.

E-learning makes an important contribution to the promotion of lifelong learning and can help to improve rural development. The requirements necessary for this appear auspicious, but further improvements are still needed.