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Introduction

In this essay I am going to propose a system which should improve both quality and accessibility of university education in Czech republic - using modern e-learning methods. These suffer great deficit in usage here, yet unleashing their potential can in my opinion lead to quite amazing results. My reason for choosing this topic is straightforward - I am fourth year student of both Charles and Czech Technical Universities, hence I feel that my very recent experience allows me to formulate (and possibly solve?) the problems connected to high education in Czech rep. most pregnantly.

I am going to sketch a system which should aid in student-student and student-teacher information exchange greatly. It might sound too ambitious (and sure it is), but I think that similar system - not necessarily mine - shall in few decades be CENTRAL tool of education. My reasoning is simple: information exchange is the core of education process, so why shouldn't we do it in a efficient way?

There are two more issues, which I should mention before I will start describing my propositions. First is - how is this connected to given essay's topic? Well, the connection of any such proposal with information society is quite self evident. Furthermore, as you will read (and hopefully also see :), the transformation of education process to be much more IT driven does not necessarily be a long run issue, but can bring significant results in a few years horizon. I will go to the details in further text, but the core message is to be stated here: the potential of e-learning is slowly being enforced by students even today. What it lacks is proper infrastructure and support from the Universities - and my topic is how to get both of these.

Second issue i wanted to mention are the EU funds. I am perfectly aware, that my propositions are fully supported by European strategic papers such as Lisbon Strategy or Single Programming Document and they should not have problems to receive support from EU funds, as they are centrally connected to issues of introducing IT into education, supporting of interdisciplinary and international students etc. Problem is, that I can not provide any more detailed information about this funding (and I doubt that anyone else does), as due to the recent new EU budget there are almost no calls for funding proposals ready yet - and will hardly be till end of

2007. But it is pretty sure, that a way of EU funds usage will be found for my project, as it matches the long term goals set by EU Committee.

Problem

The fact is that there is no problem. Everything works fine..as it did ten or fifty years before. No, I don't want to complain about bureau rigidities, this is about anything a bit different. Simply - there are no real managers in whole education "industry". People care more in a way of how to get things running smooth, and not how to improve them.

I am no social engineer, and have no intention to change their system - which would hardly be a efficient way (if it was even possible). My thesis is, that it is quite cheaply possible to build a parallel structure to Czech education system, which will provide such benefits for both students and teachers, that they will willingly choose to use it. This will suppress some traditional teaching methods, saving both lots of time and money. Now I will describe present state of things: student-student and student-teacher communication will be my topics. Let's get to the first one:

Almost each student more or less uses IT during education process. There are tons of websites, e-mail conferences ftp accounts etc. where students share their notes, materials, discuss about subjects and exams..[1] Drawback is that the materials are not always legal - either in the sense of University rules or author's law. This leads to fact that conferences are mostly hidden and kept secret. Admission to study materials is therefore highly selective, sometimes it even becomes a matter of trade. Both fairness and quality of education suffer. Another bad property of such forums is their life cycle – which is mostly connected with a single group of students. If there are any useful data accumulated within few years of their studies, they simply fade out after they graduate.

In the teacher-student case things are a bit different. Two streams of information are imperfect and can be improved – the process of knowledge communication and of feedback. Present state of things is quite heterogeneous – mostly dependent on the teachers capabilities to deal with IT. If there are any, they are very teacher specific, that means you mostly need some info (such as link to teachers web page) in order to get to study materials or to get some other information about subject – even just a syllabus. It sounds ridiculous, but this is a serious problem especially for foreign and interdisciplinary students – but if far from being a problem only for these.\

Another slowdown of process is, that teachers are often not willing to provide any materials (and to take a feedback). They do not gain financial benefits from author's rights (contrary to paper scripts), and they want students to come to their lectures.

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1   This really is very broad experience – even throughout the most non-technical faculties.

Solution

As always – the implementation is the easiest part of problem solution. This work contains a *very* brief sketch of the problem, but I don't' doubt any skilled programmer who has read it already anticipates at least part of my proposal – which becomes to be quite evident once we set the problem: to optimise and improve information flows between actors in our education system. In fact I am going to concern this part just briefly. I apologise myself for violating the essays topic a bit – but I feel, that it is much more necessary to explain how such system is to be introduced and how it will find it's users, than to focus on implementation details. So let's describe it roughly.

Core of the system should be a *single* website divided into parts considering different fields of education such as medicine or law. This website should contain relevant info about subjects from the teaches and attached „official" study materials on one side, but should give a broad space for the students – not only to explain their opinions, but also to share materials and notes. Advantage of such system will be the transparency – not only for those who are students of certain programme or even part of some small group, but also to the internationals, interdisciplinars or ones who are just seeking for a study programme.

There are many details, which I have in mind, but they wouldn't fit to this paper in reasonable form – just briefly : i mean there really could be copyrighted materials, videos from lectures, ratings to the subjects everyone can see immediately – once he chooses subjects for next semester...

Support

All these are really not hard things to implement, but can have serious drawbacks in other places. No doubt, that if the infrastructure is right and useful, students will gladly begin using it in a *very* short time. The main question is:how to push teachers to such project? Well, there is no simple answer. First thing which can be done, is the replacement of „paper script" yields. I guess, this can be done from the EU funds – as sharing educational documents is not only good step for e-learning but also for whole information society (and these are words, which e-bureaucrats like to hear). Furthermore it helps to provide better feedback and citation index – which certainly is worthwhile for the teachers.

There is also other obstacle – which is in my opinion much more serious. These are IT skills of teachers – even if the system was very user friendly, their involvement would be problematic. It is no about their unwillingness, but their incapability. I suggest to prepare assistance team – which would help them free of charge. This is the cost of getting good content – and I don't think it's too high.

Other Advantages?

Economies of scale, standardisation, communication improvement. That's it.

Summary

The system, which I suggest should meet demand which is very quickly emerging between czech students. Signs of it are everywhere – the informal student "information exchange" communities grow even on faculties of social sciences or medicine. Their trials to use computers are not allways usefull, but given the right infrastructure, quality of such exchange will improve greatly. It is not true anymore that such exchanege is undesireable. In fact, lot of informal information streams (such as old tests) begin to be published legaly by the schools in order to ensure fair strudy conditions.

Teachers are tougher question – but in my opinion, the evolution will do the trick. At least, we are trying to converge towards modern educational systems, where they are appreciated on basis of their teaching results and good feedback is one of essentials for this.

I am aware of minimalistic dimension of essay which can not cover such broad topic, but I hope I have succeeded in sketching my basic idea which stems directly from my present study experience. I am quite convinced, that here lies the line of future development, if we will follow it today – that's the question.