

# E-Learning and International Education in The Netherlands

*Research explored the relationship between distance learning and internationalization of education in The Netherlands to find best practices*

By **Henk Frencken, Ria Jacobi, and Karen Jager**

European education today is characterized by two dominant trends. First, e-learning has made impressive advances in the past five years. Second, European higher education has become increasingly internationalized. We wanted to determine how e-learning is used in higher education in The Netherlands, our home country, to increase and improve the internationalization of education.

On the surface, the two trends appear to have developed independently. We started from the assumption, however, that e-learning could be a prime tool for new and better forms of international education. Our research methodology consisted of a survey aimed at selecting case studies or good practices that would confirm our assumption. Our final goal was to formulate a number of lessons learned from these good practices.

## Different Definitions

We found immediately that our research question was not straightforward. Many different definitions of e-learning appear in the literature. The e-learning field, at least, has a practical understanding of the core concept—not so for internationalization or international education, especially since universities can have many different motives for internationalization and therefore employ many different definitions. Some universities see internationalization as a quest for foreign (paying) students, on campus or online. Other universities define it in terms of status and branding. A third approach is to see internationalization as a curriculum issue: all students should acquire the competen-

cies to function adequately in an international professional world.<sup>1</sup> An increasing number of Dutch universities implement all three approaches at the same time.

## International Model for Education

To solve the definition problem, we devised a simple matrix model in which all our cases could fit, regardless of the institutions' definitions or approaches (see Figure 1). The recipients of education—the students—occupy the horizontal axis. Are they regular students (meaning, from the institution's home country) or international students (from abroad)? The vertical axis indicates where students receive their education: at the institution<sup>2</sup> or abroad. A horizontal band indicates that students sometimes physically study at the institution and at other times abroad. A vertical band represents the situation in which regular students and international students study together. The nine squares represent nine different modes of international education. Most forms of international education will fit into the model, as seen in the figure.

For all the types of education that can be described within each mode, the same formats of e-learning and IT support appear to be appropriate. For instance, the right column, middle row square describes foreign students whose study abroad alternates with studying done at home through e-learning. So e-learning is part of a blended learning approach here. A learning management system can help organize the learning process. Synchronous and asynchronous online tutoring tools and an electronic portfolio system

represent important e-learning tools for this mode.

The middle square of the model represents a mode in which regular and foreign students work together, at the institution and abroad. This might seem a bit far-fetched, but of the eight cases we collected and described in our study, five fit this mode.

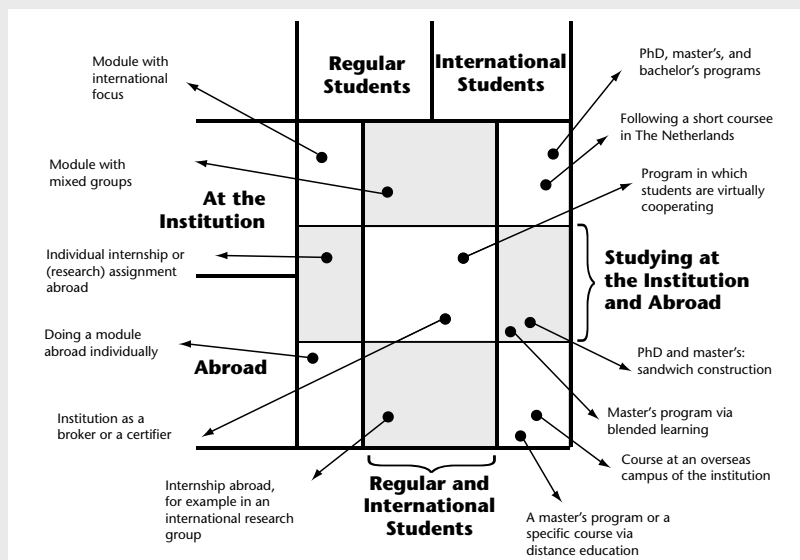
## Survey and Cases

Our research focused on finding out how e-learning is used to increase and improve international education. Toward the end of 2004 we conducted a survey that asked for examples of international education with an explicit e-learning component. We collected many, but most were projects still in planning or in the first cycle of implementation,<sup>3</sup> which we disregarded. Owners of the remaining projects were briefly interviewed by e-mail or telephone. On the basis of this data we selected eight cases, which we considered best practices: four at the module level and four at the bachelor's or master's program level. Then we conducted in-depth interviews with one or two key persons per case and studied project documentation, Web sites, and relevant materials. All case studies were described using the following questions:

- Why is this case interesting?
- What is its educational context?
- Why and how is e-learning used?
- What makes the case a success?
- What are the main bottlenecks?
- How did the participating students evaluate the case, and what did they learn?
- What lessons can be learned?

**Figure 1**

## Internationalization Model for Education



### Example Case

One case involved the course “Analyzing Digital Journalism” in a bachelor’s of journalism program. Local groups of students in Sweden, The Netherlands, and Spain each analyzed the quality of 50 to 100 digital newspaper sites from their respective regions, appraising the sites’ interactivity, content, and usability. The evaluation questions for each theme were developed by three international teams that each included Swedish, Dutch, and Spanish students. The teams then evaluated and ranked the sites.

International collaboration among students took place entirely online, using video conferencing for a kick-off meeting, ICQ chats for developing evaluation items, e-mail and telephone calls to finish the evaluation form, and another video conference to finalize the course. Using these tools, students produced a well-researched list of top European electronic newspaper Web sites. They also tackled the question of what constitutes good digital journalism.

The students discovered important cultural differences between the south and the north regions of Europe and effectively incorporated those differences in their research. For example, Swedish and Dutch students believed that good journalism entails representing different viewpoints on a given topic, while Spanish students favored choosing a particular viewpoint

and defending it with eloquence and professional honesty.

### Conclusions of Our Study

Our research model, the eight cases, and an additional four essays were published in a report by SURF.<sup>4</sup> Our conclusions were formulated as lessons learned around four themes: motives for internationalization, networks and commitment, technology and organization, and international pedagogy.

Institutions in The Netherlands have many different reasons to pursue the internationalization of education. E-learning is used in creative ways to attract foreign students and to develop international competencies among all students. However, clear and overarching internationalization policies, explicitly incorporating e-learning as a tool, are still lacking in many institutions.

The best cases in our study involved staff of institutions in different countries who knew each other personally, often through international research networks. These staff are the pioneers in international education. To make their efforts sustainable and to mainstream them requires clear support from the top leaders of the educational institutions and formal letters of intent between institutions as prerequisites.

The most important adage of technology and organization is, keep it simple!

Technical problems grow when crossing country borders. We also concluded, however, that what is now considered complex will change over time. Until quite recently, video conferencing was an expensive, labor-intensive, and unreliable technology. Over the past five years this has dramatically changed—video over IP is cheap and simple, and it works.

Timetables proved another obstacle. Many different course-calendar arrangements exist in our international academic world, making joint timetabling quite a hassle.

Staff who engage in international education with e-learning need a wide array of professional competencies, often new to them. To engage successfully with foreign students, a teacher needs cultural sensitivity and an understanding of educational practices in other countries. In online educational settings, this seems even truer.

In a general way, the report’s conclusion can be summarized as follows: E-learning in international education is a challenging and promising field, one in which education should come first, internationalization second, and technology third. *e*

### Endnotes

1. Students can accomplish this by doing part of their study program in another country but also through a local curriculum with a strong international bias. “Internationalization at home” applies to the latter concept.
2. The options include forms of blended learning, where students often meet at the institution.
3. We can probably conclude from this that internationalization combined with e-learning, although still new, is growing rapidly in The Netherlands.
4. SURF is the Dutch higher education and research partnership organization for network services and information and communications technology. For the free, downloadable PDF file of the report see <<http://www.surf.nl/publicaties/index2.php?oid=187>>. This publication is in Dutch, with an English summary.

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