
ENHANCING STUDENT MOBILITY BY A WEB 2.0 PLATFORM. THE ERASMUS STUDENT NETWORK EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of a high quality information platform by the use of Web 2.0 technologies to support and enhance student mobility in higher education. It discusses the success of social networks and the role of universities. It describes the current developed projects by the Erasmus Student Network and how they can be considered as the key-elements in the creation of this platform. The paper ends with an example-project applied to the 20th anniversary of the Erasmus Program.

Introduction

The introduction of this paper is fully based on the outcomes from the Victorious project. The Victorious project, Student Mobility in a digital world, was an inter-university co-operation project partly funded by the European Commission under the eLearning Program. From January 2005 to February 2007, nine universities of the Coimbra Group shared their experience and expertise, worked together to better understand the issues of virtual student mobility in Europe.

Students are now moving physically more than ever to take courses in universities in other countries, supported in part by schemes such as Erasmus, which has ambitious targets for expansion. Students are also studying in a more place-independent mode, using the web, email, internet phones etc to get access to learning materials, staff and peers, and doing this from a widening range of locations.

In general, information provision by universities towards visiting students is weak. It is hard to find, often in the local language and there is insufficient focus on the needs of the visiting students.

Most university International Relations Offices consider that they have good websites, although this is not the view born out by the student data.

Several sources of information about student mobility exist, although no single source has comprehensive coverage for every student. As a consequence, there is a clear sign that universities need to significantly reconsider their information provision strategies. For some universities there needs to be greater clarity about what the university provides and what it expects students to provide. The student organizations can help them in this by providing websites creating a social network that offers peer-advice, enabling students to share experiences and providing solutions.

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is a non-for-profit international student organization. Our mission is to foster student mobility in Higher Education under the principle of Students Helping Students.

We are 12.000 members from 251 local sections in 34 countries working on a volunteer base in Higher Education Institutions.

In this framework and with this purpose, ESN strives for a world in which increasingly more young people will be in the condition to access, either by moving or by staying at home, the opportunities of personal growth offered by an international experience in Higher Education.

This means that prospective and current exchange students have to be provided with all the necessary information and tools for

- choosing the destination that fits the most with their interests and personal development;
- applying properly and in the due time for scholarships and for any other possible financial support;
- being integrated in the society and the culture of the hosting city, also by terms of linguistic tools and social opportunities;
- succeeding in the academic aims of their stay
- evaluating their exchange experience and having their evaluation considered and appreciated by the competent institutions, in order to foster and influence the evolution of the exchange programs and policies;
- helping, in turn, other students to succeed in their exchange study and in overcoming the same difficulties and challenges they experienced.

Therefore ESN considers it as a common goal together with universities to create a high quality information platform, where all the Higher Education Institutions support the principle of students helping students. It will allow students to find their way to mobility and to internationalization, and all existing and possible threats and obstacles to mobility are annihilated.

The Role of Universities

Facebook is this year's big net phenomenon, it has 30 million users worldwide, but Myspace is even bigger with 100 million users. The reason of this success is easy to understand. It is a simple extension of what people have always loved to do: talking with each other, advising each other and sharing their experiences.

Nowadays students have been empowered by these Web 2.0 technologies. They can blog, produce and publish videos, share photos and experiences. It enables them to make their own commentary, share information and advise their peers.

The time has come to empower the students with the tools to contribute. Universities need to implement online student networks to improve both their internal and external communication and to deepen their relation with the student. The student is eager to participate, willing to contribute as well as to receive.

Online student networks allow students to communicate with each other, give each other advice and support, and produce meaningful content that is important to them. These networks can provide the tools for the students to become content producers and close the

gaps to fulfill the real needs of the students. The content does not come from the universities alone, it also comes from the students themselves, and their peer-to-peer interaction is a major portion of the content. This information provision by peers is vital, as many students leave their normal support network behind when they go study abroad. Most students rely on their peers to help them make decisions regarding their studies. The collection of data from both universities and students would allow offering both formal and informal information to intending visitors. If this is the way that students today are choosing to access their information, then this is a reason why universities have to give it to them.

ESN strongly believes that the current developed projects by ESN: ESN Satellite, ESN Galaxy and ESN Identity can be considered as the key-elements in the creation of this high quality information platform

ESN Projects

In what follows we will briefly discuss the current projects that are developed by ESN and in the next paragraph we will elaborate on how these projects can become the basic ingredients in developing new information provision strategies for universities.

The ESN projects are meant to provide a possible solution to the current ESN on-line situation. Most of the section websites are not well built and they do not offer enough services for the visiting students and do not fulfill the basic needs of the section. Another important point is that the ESN on-line community, in spite of the ESN spirit, is an isolated community: within it no knowledge and/or practice is shared and this in turn produces two main disadvantages:

- sections spend resources to implement the same range of services for Erasmus students;
- information collected at the local level, useful to the whole network, is not shared and it is difficult to reach.

ESN Satellite Project

All ESN sections have, on a different scale, the same basic needs: all of them need to advertise their events, to spread information to students, to let Erasmus students sign up for activities, to give a professional image to potential partners; and almost all of them would like to have a nicer website, easier to update and maintain.

Since the needs of every ESN section are similar, re-implementing the same tools in every website is a loss of time; the final aim, thus, was to build a website template with a set of instruments and content management tools that is ready to use and that the sections can download and install in their web spaces in few minutes.

This is the reason why ESN Satellite (Fig. 1) was born, in March 2006: to give every section the opportunity to use a free, nice website template that ordinary, non-technical section members can update in an extremely intuitive way. ESN Satellite is packed with features (news with comments, events calendar, partners list, customizable photo gallery, private areas for registered users, automatically updated news from ESN International) and you have full control on what you decide to activate for your section. It is also designed to be completely interoperable with the very popular Drupal content management system: this allows anybody to extend ESN Satellite with new features by installing one of the hundreds of freely available Drupal modules.

The template is also useful for all the community living inside the ESN network like Working Groups, Organizational Committees of International Events or National Platforms, Fun(d)raisers Coordination, Alumni Community, etc...

Having a look around the current ESN websites we can have an idea about what kinds of tools an ESN web site can contain. Just to point out some of them an ESN web site can provide:

- Content Managing System to easily publish and maintain content;
- Events System to publish events and easily manage online subscription;
- Members/Card Owners Registration;
- Local Infocentre to upload and share useful documents;
- Housing and Hospitality System to help Erasmus students to find a place or simply hospitality in other ESN members' house;
- Job Offers System to help Erasmus to find a job in the host country;
- Buddy System to implement the Students Helping Students ESN principle;
- Mailing Lists to reach ESN members;
- Forums, Photo Gallery, Chat, etc... to empower the sense of community through ESN website members.



Figure 1 - Example of ESN Satellite

Now, one year after the development started, ESN Satellite has been an astonishing success: more than 60 sections are adopting it as their default website and the number of installations is steadily increasing. Moreover, ESN Satellite is becoming the standard platform for ESN event websites, regional platforms or other international meetings. ESN has a big community of ESN Satellite administrators who share solutions to common problems and the ESN Satellite documentation is growing with instructions and tips.

ESN Galaxy Project

Every ESN Satellite website mainly contains two kind of information:

- Community Information: every kind of content that makes the community stronger (forums, guestbook, photos, etc...);
- Helpful Information: useful information with helping purpose (housing system, job offer, info about the host city, etc...).

A significant part of the helpful information could be really useful also outside the local context: just think about an ESN member looking for a house in a new city or a group of ESNrs that wants to have some information about ESN events of a city they are planning to go to.

A way to achieve this is to share this kind of information by collecting it at the local level. In this way the local sections become a source of helpful and useful information for the whole network in sharing events, house and job offers, mentors and so forth.

All the collected information will be kept, in a centralized way, in the ESN Galaxy databases with several strong benefits for the entire network, such as:

- local websites become a source of knowledge and information for the whole network;
- it will be possible to have an European wide search through the ESN resources;
- information collected could be used for statistic purposes;
- having a huge amount of useful information could help in searching for sponsorship/partnership.

The ESN Galaxy (Fig.2) was born out of the following vision: creating a real network, with a fast and automated information flow between sections using a graphical, intuitive representation of the entire Erasmus Student Network.

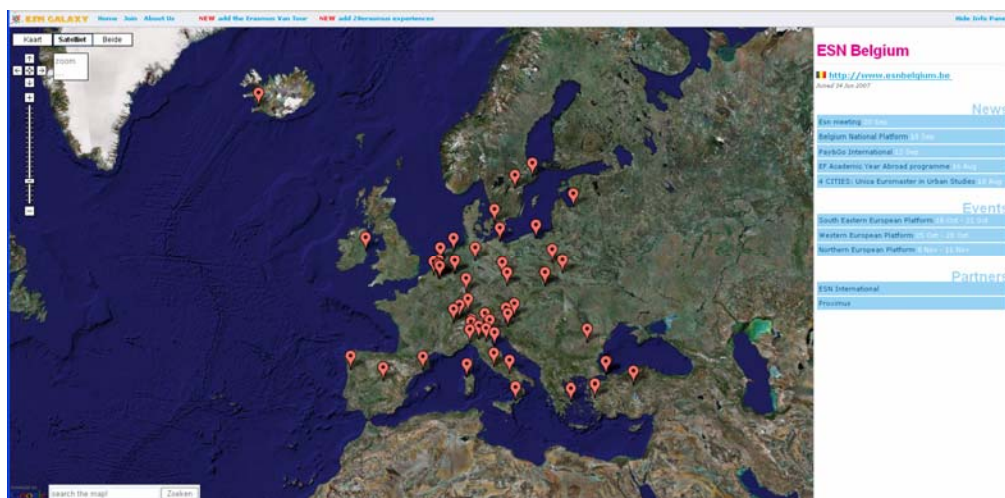


Figure 2 - The ESN Galaxy

The ESN Galaxy (<http://galaxy.esn.org>) website displays a map of Europe (using Google maps) with balloons for every section in the Galaxy (potentially every ESN section): by

clicking on a balloon you browse through the upcoming events of that section, links to “more information” pages, local news, local partners and contact details.

Moreover, it is absolutely effortless for a section to join the ESN Galaxy: all ESN Satellite installations can be enabled to automatically transmit news, events and partners to the ESN Galaxy, so everything will appear there with absolutely no need of work but the initial registration. Even non- Satellite websites can be configured to appear in the ESN Galaxy as long as you make specific RSS/iCal feeds available.

The ESN Galaxy enables also better and more effective communication from the international to the local level: ESN Satellite can optionally be enabled to automatically display a box with the latest news from ESN International, so that information about important ESN projects like the ESN Survey can appear on a dedicated box on the section homepage without any intervention from the section..

ESN Identity Project

The third project, ESN Identity, is to empower the sense of community by making the network stronger. Now, in fact, the different ESN online communities are like islands in the ocean. If it is important to share useful helping information it is, maybe, even more crucial to foster the contact among the members of the network.

To allow this, an ESN member needs to be able to access all the websites of the network with the same username and password, if the local administrator allows it, with an improvement of the sense of community.

Having access to all the network websites with the same authentication codes means to move the first steps into the creation of a unique personal identity within the network (Fig. 3).

Extremely fine-grained access control policies will allow every entity within the ESN Identity to access exactly what is needed by its role: a section president, for instance, will be able to change contact details of his own section but not to see details or members of other sections.

The main idea behind ESN Identity is that everyone in ESN can access the different online Satellites with his username and password; his role will automatically be recognized by the system and he will be given privileges to perform actions on this Satellite as his role permits (most actions will be directly implemented, some actions will need approval by the relevant responsible persons in ESN).

This project will make ESN stronger by using the potential that can be found inside the network: the sections and their members. It will allow members within the network to actively contribute to the knowledge and information within the Network.

What is ESN? Such a short a question, yet up to now it was so difficult to answer. You could answer; it is a huge network: dozens of countries, hundreds of sections, thousands of members; but honestly numbers are far insufficient to describe it. Words can already enjoy a much greater success: volunteers, students helping students, national representatives, fostering mobility; but still not enough to convey the meaning. Today, thanks to the ESN identity project, it is possible to tell the external world what ESN is in concrete, beyond numbers and words, because all sections and all members belong to the ESN Galaxy. Every single individual receives his unique balloon within the ESN Galaxy (Fig. 4). It shows the world that ESN is about sections and about members, not represented by a number but by Satellites and Unique Individual profiles.



Figure 3 – Personal Profile



Figure 4 – Where are you

According to the role within ESN Identity ESN members also get access to the ESN Supernova (Fig. 5) website. This is a pan-European website which aim is to make the work of ESN International transparent, presenting the international board, the national representatives, the working groups and the webteam. Members of those bodies receive the possibility to blog on their work within the network, to share files and to manage working groups

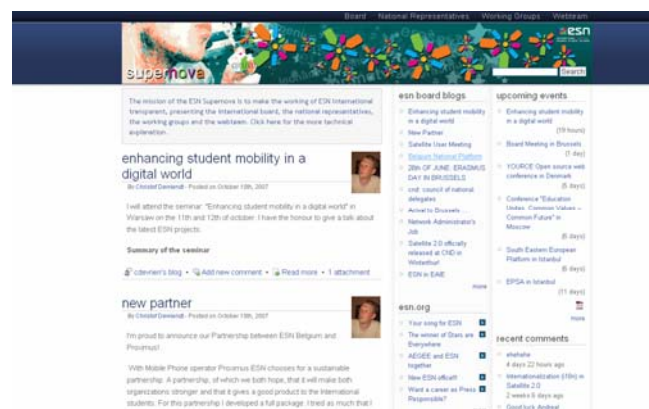


Figure 5 – ESN Supernova

Example: 20th Erasmus Project

In the year 2007 Erasmus Program celebrates its 20th Anniversary. By this celebration ESN wanted to show the importance of the academic mobility to all the European citizens and demonstrate that by the meeting of other cultures we can create a better Europe for the future.

The main activities of the event were:

- Erasmus conferences everywhere
- mobility bus visiting the organized conferences
- website project to share Erasmus and exchange experiences

The main aims of the project were:

I. To promote Erasmus and exchange to local students and to encourage more students to go abroad

II. To make the European citizens understand the importance of mobility and of Erasmus scheme

III.. To create a cultural exchange of stories and experiences between students from different backgrounds (different countries, cultures, socio-economic background, physical ability, gender etc) by publishing some of their stories on a online platform.

To support these aims of the project ESN made a website, where former Erasmus students could upload their personal living story (Fig. 6). They could share their experience with others, by writing their Erasmus story, uploading videos and pictures. In a second phase these experiences where used to promote Erasmus by creating a platform where everybody could read these stories by going to the ESN Galaxy. Every experience was given a unique identity and balloon inside the ESN Galaxy .



Figure 6 – Example of Experiences on Website and ESN Galaxy

According to the words of Ján Figel', European Commissioner in charge of Education, our goal should be to have this kind of platform where you would be able to consult over 3 million experiences by 2011.

The Vision

A high quality information platform: dream or reality? We strongly believe that with the rise of the new technologies and the developed projects by ESN we are getting very close to reality. It should be a common goal of a strong group of universities and a strong student organization, such as ESN, to make it reality. The described tools allow universities to create their own information platform, fulfilling all needs of incoming students (using Satellite technology) and offering both formal and informal information. These technologies also allow the creation of a more efficient way of information and knowledge sharing and a systematic development of e.g. a central database of courses (using Galaxy technology). Moreover these technologies also enable the students to share their experiences and advice their peers (see 20th anniversary project).

The main lesson for universities is: students are eager to participate and willing to contribute. A modern University should not only be the creator of information but also the facilitator and mediator of information. Universities need to create the environment where students are stimulated to contribute with their own information and knowledge. Students must be treated as co-information providers. If we build them a platform from which they will benefit, they will use it. We need to offer them the technologies to fulfil their needs and to provide solutions to their not yet known problems.

Universities that will have a high quality information platform and universities that will be supported by a strong community of actively contributing students will be the ones being most successful in attracting new students in the future. After all the "word of mouth" is still the most trusted and powerful source of information!

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