

Concept for a European E-Learning platform

for Further Education in Organic Food Retailing

1. Elements and overall structure of the system / menu

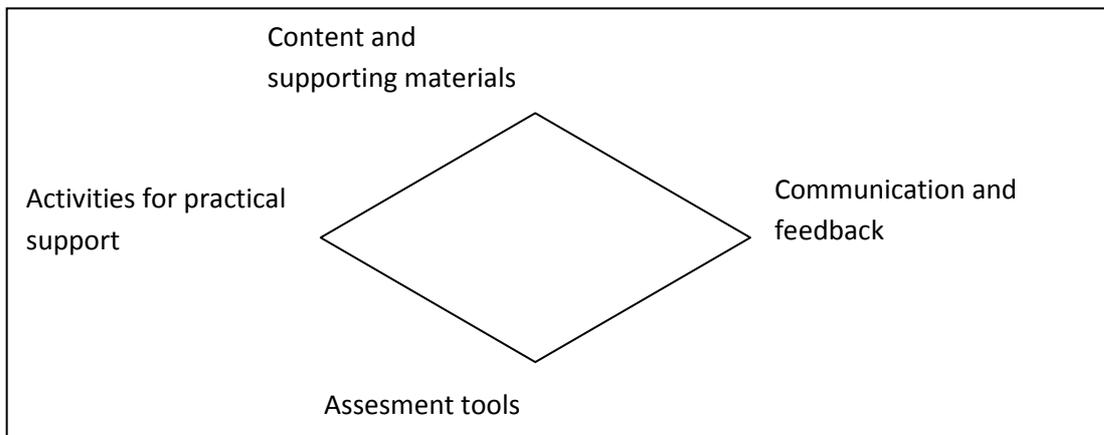
1.1. Basic structure: "Blended Learning"

The concept for the E-learning platform for further education in organic retail is based on a mix of different learning environments: a combination of a virtual classroom and face-to-face elements ("blended learning"). Staff and managers in organic retail will profit from an extension of learning materials and supplies by e-learning tools. This will meet the needs and demands of different target groups in the organic retail business with particularly eligible and innovative learning methods referring to the new learning habits.

One of the main advantages of IT-based learning is that it allows students to participate in vocational training without restricting temporal or spatial requirements. They can learn both off and on the job, which is of great advantage for staff in shops with long working hours but also during their free time. On the other hand, attendance sessions like seminars at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the courses will contribute to socially supported, constructive, learning experience.

The trainer can start a course with a well-structured introductory lesson in the classroom, and then proceed with follow-up materials online. Attendance sessions in the middle and at the

end offer possibilities for direct personal feedback, exchange of experience and direct contacts with the trainer and other students.



The concept includes four main areas of the E-learning platform:

1. contents with supporting materials,
2. an area of activities for practical support and exercises,
3. an area for communication and feedback for students and trainers and
4. assessment tools for evaluation of learning targets and success.

1.2.Content: Modular Structure

The biggest difference between classroom teaching and online teaching is the importance of a good content structure. It should be clear and comprehensible. It is important not to overload participants with information and therefore advisable to offer the course content in several small parts or modules, which are easily understood. The internet has the advantage of being able to store and distribute large amounts of information, but too much input is counterproductive for the learning process.

Accordingly the concept introduces modular organisation of the contents and the materials. The online course will be organised and divided into small modules and units. A fixed time schedule will recommended how much time the participants are to spend on each part and when they should begin and end.

Content and course materials at the E-learning platform will be presented in various formats. Some materials will be given out in their original format (MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel etc.) or converted into PDF documents, making it much easier to access them. Additionally, the use of printed materials is planned; other content can also be presented on multimedia resources like CD-ROMs or DVDs. The topics of the contents are described in part 4 of this concept.

1.3. Activities

Each module will include practical activities such as tasks, online exercises, synchronous and asynchronous activities, etc. The modules will be divided into units in order to draw the attention of the student to specific issues and topic areas. These units will include activities with increasing difficulty to encourage the learning process. All content should be linked to practical activities, which help participants to be constantly active, and which allow the tutor to monitor the progress of each participant of the course. In this respect, practical activities are essential to the evaluation of the participant's development.

Activities can be divided into two main categories: individual activities and group activities. Individual activities of the concept may be self-assessments, tests, individual tasks, presentations, case studies, research, analysis and information retrieval. Planned group activities are working groups, discussions, games and quizzes, matching and sequences, thematically projects and activities based on different types of communication tools.

1.4. Communication and tools for interaction

Tools for interaction will enable participants to communicate, exchange views and work together in joint activities, either between the tutor and individual students or amongst students within a work group. This is an important characteristic of online education because it helps to inspire the participants by using this new dynamic, based on direct and continuous participation and control of the learning process. It can trigger excellent results, as well as a high level of motivation, which will be significantly higher than in a normal classroom, where traditional teaching methods are used and where there is much less opportunity to intervene.

Communication tools can be split into two groups, synchronous and asynchronous:

- Asynchronous tools allow communication between participants, regardless of the time at which each of them accesses the online training system. These tools are very suitable for the learning process of manager and staff in organic retail trade, because they can learn both on and off the job according to their high levels of working hours but also of spare time.

- Synchronous tools demand all participants wishing to communicate with each other to access the platform at the same moment. This tool is also important for learners in organic retail trade. Often they are working very individualised. A social basis for direct interaction and exchange as well as for common learning would be of great use for them. Furthermore synchronous communication tools allow them to get to know the teachers and other

participants and discuss important issues. Their questions could all be answered immediately. In general, the use of synchronous tools is highly recommended to ensure that the participants do not feel isolated or left alone facing any problems they might encounter during the course. The former help to keep the motivation level high, they encourage debate and discussion with other participants.

The most widely used asynchronous tools planned are e-mail, mailing lists, web messaging, discussion forums, and note boards or pin boards. Synchronous tools are chats, audio and video conferencing, film presentations, electronic whiteboard or shared documents (FTP).

Our concept includes the implementation of tools for evaluation and statistical surveys. It should be possible to calculate the number of communications, offer administrative functions for the tutors, support the design of workspaces, supply organisational tools for controlling, search systems and offer compatibility with popular web servers.

Supporting technology will be available in order to help the tutors with the process of synchronous communication. Important elements are: a system for monitoring the time of on-line presence each participant has, the opportunity to visit different channels at the same time, printing options, and possibilities to exclude participants from chat sessions, access and compatibility with public channels at the internet.

1.5. Tutorial Support

The conception of an E-learning course and platform requires a decision about the degree of involvement of the tutors in the learning process. The degree of support, supervision, correction and supervision tutor is offering his or her class will decide on the type of course and the methodology used.

E-learning courses can be based on a self-assessment model, in which the teacher does not intervene, and a model which is merely supported by the teacher. In a self-assessment model the participants can set their own pace without being forced to comply with a specific timing. The planned exercises for such course and its content are geared towards self-study. The results are corrected to a monitoring system and the students can be present whenever they chose. The participants cannot adapt the material to their personal wishes.

In the teacher-supported model the tutor can correct the exercises and answer questions. He or she can present plans and determine when different exercises or items will have to be dealt with during the course. The tutor can adapt the course to the needs of each participant. He or she can take participants through various techniques of communication and encourage collaboration strategies.

Besides these two basic models, there are other types of courses, combining the above mentioned models, depending on which side the tutor wants to strengthen more, the self-assessment or the teacher-supported model. The focus of our concept lies on the teacher-supported model with tutorial support by experts regarding both content and technical aspects of the learning platform and its environment. With reference to the target groups of

the E-learning platform for organic retail and their special learning conditions, strong tutorial support is necessary in order to motivate the participants and trigger continuous and engaged involvement.

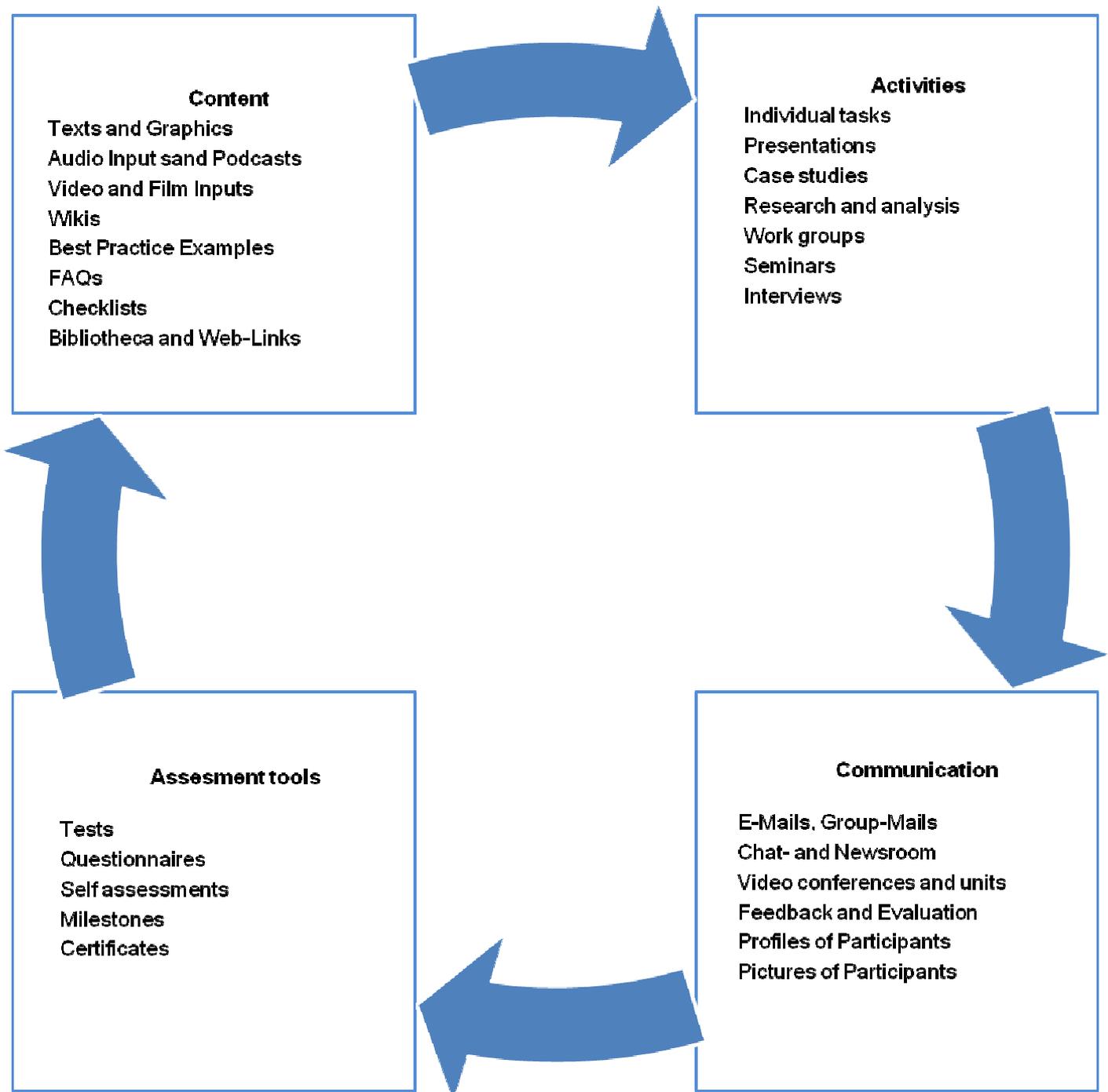
An introductory course is also planned, so that students can become familiar with the learning platform, environment and all interactive tools they will have to use during the course.

1.6. Learning management system

The decision which learning management system to use is a decision between open source or proprietary software. Working with open source software offers many advantages: the source code is available and the right to change it makes it possible to be independent of a supplier and make adjustments easily. There are no licensing or copyright costs, so they can be installed without any additional charges in as many computers as necessary. The development and programming can be very fast and flexible. However, open source also has certain disadvantages. It requires a team of programmers within the organisation to programme the learning management systems (LMSs) and adapt it to their own requirements. There is no written guarantee of the quality of the software. The developers are not responsible for any damage that may be caused. There is no company providing support or maintenance. Only internet forums run by the developer could help if any problems should arise.

Nevertheless the cost factor and the aspect of flexibility caused the promoters of this concept to decide for open source software. They agreed on the learning management systems "Moodle" (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) because it is easy to use, offers many opportunities and tools and although it is available as freeware, it is continuously being developed. Moodle is currently most used free learning management system. Many say that cost savings is not the key Moodle advantage, but rather it is the access to various innovative tools that interface with the Moodle platforms. Others like the adherence to open standards and the promotion of interoperability, roles and user management, use of innovative plug-ins, and the support from online communities of practice. Another advantage is the large user community that fosters review, quality, reliability, accuracy, accountability, collaboration, and greater communication.

1.7. Elements of the E-Learning Platform



2. Contents of the planned integrated distance learning system

2.1. Basics of food production

2.1.1. Organic Farming

In this learning unit the students get to know the basics about organic farming. At the beginning the topic is being outlined and introduced. The development of organic farming from its beginning until today is being illustrated.

The existing structures within all EU countries in the project are being described. Next to cornerstones and problems of conventional farming endeavours concerning the improvement of conventional agrarian economy are being explained. Questions like: What is “organic farming”?, what are its underlying working principles, how do the different strands of organic farming differ, which requirements does organic farming have?” are being answered to a great extent.

A description of the different national farming associations, their regulations and the parameters relevant for international trade with organic products will be put forward. The relevance of the EU-environmental-legislation for ecological farming and organic trade will be portrayed. The question, which consequences conversion and its control do mean for farming, will be answered.

2.1.2. Organic Food Production

The learning unit “Organic Food Production” lines out the particularities of organic raw material sourcing and processing. The historic and economic development of the sector is shown, with a special focus on the organic production/ processing pioneers and on benchmarking players. Key questions to be answered here are: what motivates processors to go organic? What is their role in the organic market development? The regulatory basics are explained in the context of the principles and the goals of organic food processing, answering questions like: What is particular about organic food processing? What is organic processing? What is organic process quality? What is specific with regard to raw material sourcing and vertical cooperation in the supply chain? What does that imply in terms of management? What are the key challenges?

The networks and the organisations of organic processors / producers are presented, for each country. Their history and role, their influence and their links to farmers’ associations and traders’ organisations are explained. A special weight will be put on specific processing rules that distinguish them from the standard organic rules imposed by the EU regulation.

2.1.3. Trading in organic food

The role of trade in the organic food supply chains will be outlined in a general way, both with regard to raw material as with regard to processed items. The importance of trade and the

principal flux from the agricultural production to the finished product will be outlined, on national as well as on international level.

The linkage to the topics quality management, raw material sourcing and organic control systems will be insisted upon. Especially the regulatory framework for the trading, transporting, storage and conditioning of organic food items will be explained. On a general level, the different characteristics of the trading systems of the different commodity categories (dry, fresh, bulk, packaged, cooled items etc.) will be portrayed. The aspect of inter-level cooperation will be stressed upon, on insisting in the transparency issue. Insurance and contract aspects will be explained as well.

2.2.Retail

2.2.1.Handling and merchandise of goods

In this learning unit the foundations of a successful goods organisation structure will be explained. At the beginning there will be an introduction of the range of goods in the health food trade and organic retail. Subsequently different sources of supply will be described, considering their advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore the characteristics and different criteria concerning the choice of suppliers and the liabilities concerning the purchase will be regarded. The necessary technical equipment of a modern commercial undertaking and its usability in application will be depicted. Another focus will lie on explaining the most important terms concerning the ordering of goods. The proceedings concerning the receiving of goods and all accompanying controlling processes will be defined. At the end of the module presentation and storage of as well as good hygiene regulations will be outlined.

2.2.2.Marketing and communication

The learning unit about marketing and communications will outline the basics of the subject matter. The requirements for achieving good sales rates in organic retail will be explained. Participants will be enabled to implement indispensable marketing measures. They will be taught that organic retail is in need of good marketing as much as the conventional retail industry. Learners are to understand that economic thinking and marketing are inseparable tools for any health food retailer. Subsequently they are to be able to have effective conversations with potential clients, both advising them and keeping in mind that they are aiming at good sales for their products. They are to learn how to see 'their shop' in a new light and understand how shop designs can be altered according to customers' requirements and optimum sales processes. They are to implement various marketing tools, which are economically advantageous. The selling activities are to be planned considering all resources, e.g. personnel and finances.

2.2.3.Economic viability

After this learning unit the participants will have a sound understanding of profitability and liquidity. They are supposed to understand the profitability of a business and be able to recognise all governing factors. Furthermore they shall be enabled to implement improving

measurements in terms of crisis. They are supposed to calculate in a way, which ensures both profitability and liquidity of the business. Future operating results are to be achieved by self imposed measurements and not left to chance.

First of all the calculatory and theoretical basics of profitability will be explained. Subsequently they will learn how the monthly and annual check-up and stock-taking can be done in a health food shop. The annual accounts will reveal whether the calculation has been done correctly and whether enough surcharges has been added to the purchase price. Good calculation always results in an improvement of profitability. Towards the end of the learning unit "profitability" several useful instruments will be put forward, all of which will help improve the financial results of the business.

2.3. Fresh Food

2.3.1. Fruit and vegetables

The learning unit „fruit and vegetables“ offers a general overview of the classification about fruit and vegetables, their contents and possible ways of conservation, the most important facts about maintenance, receipt and presentation of goods. Different fruit- and vegetable-varieties are being presented in different portraits.

The learners are supposed to acquire profound knowledge about the health value of fruit and vegetables, the focus hereby is lying on organic products. The participants will gain comprehensive knowledge about product care and its aims. Ingredients are to be preserved as long as possible, waste has to be minimised. The participants will gain confidence in the presentation of goods and the implementation of promotional measurements. A wide range of tips and tricks for both handling and processing fruit and vegetables are being given. The participants will be trained to pass them on to customers during the daily routine.

2.3.2. Milk and milk products

The aim of the learning unit is to outline the basics of general milk production and processing. Some aspects of this food sector are to be scrutinised. The question, which role milk and milk products from ecological farming have on the food market will be evaluated. Participants of the distance learning course are enabled to give sound advice to customers on the basis of the acquired knowledge. At the end of the course they have formed their own opinions and can give recommendations about the products they have studied.

The participants learn, which ingredients milk and milk products turn milk into a valuable foodstuff, which unwanted substances can contaminated it and how one can deal with allergies and incompatibilities. Furthermore they get to know how conventional milk is being treated. The characteristics of organic milk, raw milk and gold-top milk are being explained and a profound overview about the whole range of milk and sour milk-products is being given. The students get to know whey, buttermilk and yoghurt. At the end of the learning unit, the participants know about the big cheese classifications, how cheese is being produced and presented. They learn about the product range of cheeses including both common and exotic cheeses of many different regions. They are able to present their characteristics to the customers. Tips about sale through good consulting form the end of the module.

2.3.3. Cheese

The aim of the learning unit is to outline the basics of general cheese production and processing. Some aspects of this food sector are to be scrutinised. The question, which role cheese and cheese products from organic farming have on the food market, will be evaluated. Participants of the distance learning course are enabled to give sound advice to customers on the basis of the acquired knowledge. At the end of the course they have formed their own opinions and can give recommendations about the products they have studied.

4.4. Dried Products

2.4.1. Grains and cereals

This learning unit offers basic information about the subject „grains and cereals“. Grains are the most important human food stuff, especially in a whole food diet. In the organic food product range grains and cereals also take a predominant role. In this module the participants are being enabled to answer the questions of critical consumers. They are getting to know the specific requirements of the organic retail trade and are being informed about advice and customer guidance. They are supposed to understand the health value of wholemeal food and to learn about the characteristics of certain varieties.

2.4.2. Oils and fats

This learning unit offers basics about oils and fats. It enables participants to evaluate the physiological value of edible fats and oils, distinguish between saturated fatty acids and unsaturated fatty acids, explain different procedures of manufacturing edible oils, the process of refining, and the different characteristics of different oils available in organic retail. Having completed this learning unit they will be able to inform customers about the storage and shelf life as well as the advantages and disadvantages of spreadable fat, solid vegetable fat and other kinds of oil.

2.4.3. Soja, legumes and pulses

This learning unit offers important basics on the subject of pulses and soya products. The participants learn about the different physiological aspects of many different varieties. At the end of the unit they will be familiar with distinctive botanical features and ways of plant cultivation. Possibilities of use in the kitchen will be described and questions of storability and shelf life discussed.

Of all varieties available nowadays the soya bean, is by far the widest spread pulse. Because it has great importance as a food stuff there will be a special focus on it as a sales product. The ascent of the soya bean as one of the most important marketable agricultural crop worldwide is to be explained. An overview about the most important soya products will be given. The threat which soya beans generated by GMO production pose is explained.