

Sixth eLearning Forum in Hungary

Budapest, June 2005 – (by *Margit M. Kanter*) "Is there finally going to be breakthrough in eLearning?" Or expressed in a spicier Hungarian formulation: "eLearning at home – what's stewing in our saucepans?" On June 9-10 in Budapest, about 300 Hungarian participants from business, industry, education, and science tried to give an answer to this fundamental question.

The eLearning Forum's basic question as to whether the breakthrough will come in the near future was clearly answered in the positive by the representatives of the eLearning business sector. The participants from SAP Hungary (Dr. Kaszai Pál), Oracle Hungary (Blahut Boglárka), Hungarian Postal System (Dr. Sárváriné Zándoki Beáta), Eduweb Multimedia AG (Dr. Szilágyi Ágnes), Neting GmbH (Tóth Péter) agreed about this unanimously, although SAP's Pál still expressed some reservation.

Oracle Hungary's Blahut Boglárka took a more optimistic view. Because of emerging partnerships, cooperation agreements, exchange of experience and references, and - in his words - "we do not believe that eLearning is just a bubble", he contends the direction is clearly demonstrating a positive tendency.

Dr. Szilágyi Ágnes, who in her function as organizer and editor of the educational television format "Everybody's School" had already proved in the 1980s that tele-studying does work, passionately defended the chances of eLearning in Hungary. She noted that price is no longer decisive, and so a new learning culture – lifelong learning – is spreading, with the result that "the cleverest escape forward". In addition she explained, "if today someone has already started with eLearning, he will not stop any more".

Tóth Péter from Neting GmbH had the opinion that one can expect the installation of Learning Management Systems by the end of this year, the development of content by the end of 2006, and the frontal breakthrough for eLearning in Hungary in 2007. In contrast, Dr. Sárváriné Zándoki from the Hungarian Postal System thought that the breakthrough had already started. He cautioned, though, that as long as there was a lack of content, platforms would not yet be necessary and added that many people would feel scared by eLearning because one still tried to force expensive LMS on them.

In the sector "eLearning – Modernization in the Public and Civil Services" Szaniszló László, representative of SABEDU GmbH, reported about the project "Specific Further Training for Judges – Support of 6000 Employees with the Aid of Blended Learning". Halmos Eszter spoke about the experience with the introduction of eLearning in the office of the Prime Minister, and Kerekes Anikó described "The Support of Controlling at the Inland Revenue via eLearning".

Lakos István, President of the Association of Companies for Adult Education, spoke about "The Role of eLearning in the Modernization of Adult Education". He turned out to be more skeptical than the representatives of the economic sector: "There are a lot of contradictions, many question marks, and only a few answers", István explained. "Many Hungarians don't have a computer yet. Everything is concentrated on Budapest. It is expensive. The exams can't be passed via eLearning, and how shall an unemployed person get access to eLearning?"

Szaniszló László from SABEDU GmbH compared the Hungarian eLearning market to an eight-week-old baby in its mother's body – the hope of the near future. His list of statistics regarding eLearning consumers was revealing: up to now companies have spent one billion forints for eLearning, the public sector a half billion, and governmental institutions as foundations or non-profit PLCs six billion forints. These figures represent 77% of the total nationwide expenditures for eLearning to date.

In a heated public discussion entitled "The role of eLearning for the Increase of Employment and Competitive

Power", Szilágyi Antal, Secretary of the National Commission for Adult Education, mentioned the wish that 3.9 million unemployed as well as the 50+ age group could get vocational training with eLearning at low costs or even free of charge. Education vouchers for employees are also being considered.

However, Eszes Gábor, representative of the Ministry for Economy and Transport, said that the development is firmly related to the development of content. "The breakthrough will not come until the content plays a central role and the 'e' has become just a means for the purpose." He added: "eLearning is not the target but an efficient weapon that will enable us to hit the target."

But according to Aszenov Aszen, General Director of the Eduweb Multimedia AG, "The big companies, including Hungarian firms, have already been using eLearning for a long time. The smaller ones spend little money for the training of their employees anyway because they are not yet aware of the importance of human resources development."

Szlankó János, President of MATISZ (Association of Hungarian Content Developers), had the same opinion: "Up to now eLearning has taken place only in big companies where the investment is worth it." He appealed to the government: "Politics should not ignore the topic and should help small companies to benefit from eLearning." His conclusion: "The Hungarian education system is not yet ready for eLearning."

Despite the somewhat muted optimism, the last forum under the direction of Zárda Sarolta, General Director of the Számalk AG, proved beyond a doubt that eLearning already plays a role in Hungarian universities. At the six participating universities and colleges, eLearning is already used by more than half the students: 5,179 of a total of 9,577 or 54%. The personnel employed, including tutors, content developers, and administrators range from 66 at the smallest to 162 employees at the largest institution. Among the learning platforms are Moodle, Ilias, WebCT, CoEdu and Intralearn. Quite often more than one of these systems are used in parallel.

"The readiness of the students is at a maximum and that of the teachers is increasing," Zimányi Krisztina of the Budapest University for Economics explained. Kovács Miklós of the University Széchenyi István added that his eLearning group had an average of 1.3 points, which was a better achievement than that of a traditional learning group.