Socrates-Erasmus Thematic Networks

Challenges and Issues at Stake

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide some food for thought with regard to the future of the Thematic Networks (TN) and their potential within the Socrates-Erasmus programme over the years to come.

The TNs have been one of the main innovations of the Socrates-Erasmus programme. They were created to deal with forward-looking, strategic reflection on the scientific, educational and institutional issues in the main fields of higher education. The TN model has been successfully adopted in other strands in the same programme and in other programmes.

All the TNs have taken European integration on board and have had a very pronounced European dimension. In fact, the TNs have envisaged European cooperation at two levels: firstly, as a policy issue, where higher education has been called upon to contribute to the cultural, economic and technical construction of the Union, and secondly as a means in itself to stimulate and, where necessary, adapt higher education, in other words, improving its quality and effectiveness.

This paper presents a brief overview of the history and structure of the TNs, their basic tasks and possible new tasks, impact, evaluation and funding.

2. HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF THE THEMATIC NETWORKS

The TNs were launched officially in 1996 by an initial call for proposals closing in May, following the submission of an expression of interest presented 1 January 1996. The majority of the TNs developed from one of the ERASMUS evaluation conferences organised in the period 1994-95 as part of a Commission initiative, the main aim of which was to test the validity and feasibility of the Thematic network concept.

When they were set up, the aim of the TNs was to help higher education institutions to create forums to analyse and study the state of development of the various education and training fields in Europe in order to encourage the European dimension and improve the quality of education and training.

Almost six years on, it can be confirmed that these aims have been achieved. The TNs are an original feature in the landscape of European higher education and in the activities developed under the Socrates programme. Their philosophy has always been to emphasise the “teaching” dimension of university activity. Many institutional synergies

have been created within and outside the academic community, based on the mobilisation of universities' intermediate structures (faculties, departments) where the drafting and implementation of teaching and scientific policies receive top-level attention.

The average number of partners per TN now exceeds one hundred participating institutions. Coordinating a TN is not an easy task and a certain central infrastructure is needed combined with decentralisation and the sharing of work, even if not all partners invest equally in the activities of the network. Some networks have problems ensuring the transparency and overall coherence of the project and its results.

The option of a next three-year cycle followed by a dissemination year is popular with almost all the partners. Introducing the option of an additional year for dissemination, has proved successful. TN Coordinators are looking for ways to ensure the sustainability even after Community budget funding ends. They are all keen on local or European-level recognition for their TN also after the period of Commission funding.

Universities, the prime actors under Socrates-Erasmus now act at present as TN coordinators after an initial phase in which associations took the lead. Associations remain important, however, for the sustainability of TN activities. Network coordinators are looking at the option of joining existing associations or creating new ones where they do not yet exist.

TN partner universities come from all Socrates countries, but the Nordic and candidate countries are underrepresented among the coordinating institutions.

3. BASIC TASKS AND FIELDS COVERED

The TNs have carried out two sets of basic tasks over the years:

Mapping and enhancing education

- Describing, analysing, and comparing existing teaching methods
- Defining and experimenting with new teaching methods
- Identifying existing teaching material and placing this at the disposal of the members of the network with the aid of databases
- Producing or updating translating and disseminating new teaching material
- Activities in the field of quality assurance

Facilitating European cooperation

- Assessing the state of the art in European cooperation, identifying needs and obstacles and ways to overcome them

- Setting up tools (the use of ECTS, new models of coordinations, Europeanisation strategies)

- Promoting the production of European modules

Fields covered

Some TNs have a rather narrow scope whilst others have embraced extremely wide areas of application. TNs cover three types of fields:

- Traditional disciplines such as medicine, law or business studies

- Multidisciplinary fields such as environmental studies or humanitarian aid

- Horizontal themes such as Continuing education and Teacher Education

At the moment there is a measure of imbalance in favour of scientific disciplines, compared with the 'humanities' and other sectors which are completely unrepresented (literature, economics). See Annex 1.

The Commission aims to ensure that all relevant fields are well represented, avoiding overlap and encouraging mergers where necessary. The instruments used to achieve this aim are information campaigns, priority-setting in the annual Socrates Call for Proposals, and the selection rounds.

4. NEW TASKS

The "Europe of Knowledge" and the "Bologna Process" put a new emphasis on the need to pool resources and to create centres of excellence at higher education level fostering internal European development and stronger links with other continents. This has implications for the tasks TNs may take up in future:

1) Defining and updating **generic and sectoral competences** using the method of the Pilot Project "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe". Tuning phase one (2001/02) was built on the previous experience of a series of Thematic Networks. Now it is up to the TNs to take the Tuning results further. One of the tasks of Tuning phase two will be to transfer its methodology to existing and future Thematic Networks. A phase three of the Tuning project is not envisaged.

2) Promoting **synergies between teaching and research** by encouraging universities to integrate research results in their teaching and link Socrates-Erasmus TNs with the Thematic Networks funded by the Research DG. See annex 2.

3) Reinforcing the link between **education and society**, bringing together public-sector, scientific and professional players, contributing to the European innovation capacity.

4) Creating **links with other continents** on activities within the scope of TNs as foreseen in the section on "Complementary Activities" in the Commission proposals "Erasmus World", to be realised as from 2004.

In addition some targets need to be reached as regard the structure of TNs

- Being open, as far as possible, and working in such a way that existing and new the members can become involved and benefit from working together.

- Being representative of the European academic world.

- Operating in a climate of responsible management and decentralised organisation as far as possible (applies in particular to the large TNs).

5. IMPACT AND EVALUATION

Before the end of the current Socrates programme in 2006 an external evaluation of the impact of the TNs will be undertaken. Already in 2003 it will be necessary to define internal parameters (using self-assessment mechanisms) for evaluating the activities of the TNs and introducing improvements.

There is a need to find out whether the direct coordination of the TNs by the universities has been followed by a greater involvement of faculties, schools and departments at their respective levels.

6. FUNDING

Community grants are awarded according to the principle of co-funding. The parcticipating universities have to contribute their part in terms of direct costs and staff costs. This is not always easy. It will therefore be necessary to seek support from partners other than the traditional ones in the academic world. Greater use will have to be made of professional partners, particularly as one of the future challenges facing the TNs will be that of consolidating collaboration between professional groups, society and higher education.

Moreover, at Commission level, it is vital to introduce multi-annual funding in order to end the current complicated procedure of awarding the contracts on an annual basis.

7. QUESTIONS

1) ***Are the Thematic Networks an effective instrument to carry out the <u>Basic Tasks</u> described in section 3 (Mapping and enhancing education and facilitating European cooperation). How could they do better? Should there be some kind of "terms of reference" for TNs? What should be the link between TN and CD activities?***

2) ***Are the <u>New Tasks</u> described in section 4 (implementing Tuning, links with research and society and establishing global with other continents) appropriate tasks for the Thematic Networks? What other tasks could be more important? ? If these new tasks are appropriate for TNs and necessary for the European Higher Education Area, what changes in support arrangements should be envisaged?***

3) ***Do the Thematic Networks have enough <u>visibility and impact</u> in the academic world and beyond? What improvements could be suggested?***

4) ***As a consequence, what improvements could be made as regards <u>structure and financing</u> of Thematic Networks? How to ensure their <u>sustainability</u> beyond the period of Commission financial support.***

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<u>Annex 1</u>

OVERVIEW OF THE THEMATIC NETWORKS IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORTED BY THE SOCRATES PROGRAMME

The following is a list of all the Thematic Networks that have ever been supported by the Socrates Programme.

ACOHUM - Advanced Computing in the Humanities
ACUME - Cultural Memory in European Countries - An interdisciplinary Approach
AFANet-SOCRATES - Thematic Network for Agriculture, Forestry, Aquaculture and the Environment
Archeonet - Archaeology towards the Third Millennium
ATHENA - Advanced Network in Activities in Women's Studies in Europe
ATLAS - Thematic Network in Tourism and Leisure
BIOTECHNET - BIOTECHnology Thematic NETwork
'Bologna' Thematic Network 'Innovation in Higher Arts Education in Europe'
CiCe / CiCe2 - Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
CICERO - Legal Education and Training in the European Learning Society
CLIOHNET - Creating Links & Innovative Overviews to Enhance Historical Perspectives in European Culture
COTEPRA - The Study of Teaching of Literature from a European Comparative Perspective
DEDHEE - Development of a European Dimension in Higher Engineering Education
PIE - Plastics in Engineering
PROTECT - PROgram for Technical Textiles
DENTED - Achieving Convergence in the Standards of Output of European Dental Education / DentEdEvolves A network promoting best practices in dental education whose initiatives have extend globally.
E.E.N - European Ethics Network
E4 - Enhancing Engineering Education in Europe
ECET - European Computing Education and Training
ECN - European Communication Network
ECTN / ECTN 2 - European Chemistry Thematic Network 2
Educational and Social Integration of Persons with a Handicap through Adapted Physical Activity
EEGECS - European Education in Geodetic Engineering - Cartography and Surveying
EFB WPEd - European Federation of Biotechnology Working Party on Education
ENHSA - European Network of Heads of Schools of Architecture
ENOTHE - European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education
EpharNet - The European Pharmacology Network
EPISTEME II - Enhancing Political Science Teaching Quality and Mobility in Europe
EQUAL - European QUALity Link
ESSENCE - Environmental Sciences in Europe
ETNET 21 ENVIRONMENT - WATER: European Thematic Network of Education and Training
EUCEET / EUCEET II - European Civil Engineering Education and Training II
EUPEN - European Physics Education Network
EUROBIO - European Association of University Departments of Biology
European Network for the Development of Nursing Practice
European Thematic Network in Political Science (Projet de Réseau Thématique en Science Politique) - Europeanisation of Academic Programmes in Public Administration
EUSW - European Social Work : Commonalities and Differences
FOODNET - Thematic Network in Food Studies

GENIE - The Globalisation and Europeanisation Network in Education
H.E.N.R.E. Higher Education Network for Radiography in Europe
HERODOT - a Thematic Network of Geography Teaching and Training
Higher Arts Education in Europe: Creating in diversity
HUMANE - Heads of University Management and Administration Network in Europe
HUMANITARIANNET - Thematic Network on Humanitarian Development Studies
ICEVE - Interaction and Collaboration in European Veterinary Education
Immaginare l'Europa - Interdisciplinarity in Philosophy and the Humanities
Improving Planning Education in Europe
INEIT-MUCON - Innovations for Education in Information Technology through Multimedia and Communication Networks
ISEKI-Food - Integrating Safety and Environmental Knowledge Into Food Studies towards European Sustainable Development
LE NOTRE - Landscape Education - New Opportunities for Teaching and Research in Europe
LYSIAS - Towards a Unified Judicial Protection of Citizens in Europe
MED-NET / MED-NET 2 - Medical Education and Didactics NETwork
Observatoire Européen de l'Emploi Sportif (OEES) du Réseau Européen des Instituts de Sciences du Sport (REISS)
PHOENIX - European Thematic Network on Health and Social Welfare Policy
Social Professions for a Social Europe
Speech Communication Sciences
STEDE - Science Teacher Education Development in Europe
Teacher Education in Europe
TEMPERE - Training and Education for Medical Physics and Engineering Reformation in Europe
THEIERE - Thematic harmonisation in Electrical and Information EngineeRing in Europe
Thematic Network for University / Industry Co-operation in Europe in the Field of Computing
Thematic Network Project in the area of Languages / Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages II
THENUCE - European Thematic Network in University Continuing Education
THETA-DUNE - Telematics in Higher Education, a Transeuropean Action - Distance Education Network of Europe
TNPA2 - Building the European Dimension of Academic and Higher Education Networks in Public
TNTEE / TNTERE - Thematic Network in Teacher Education and Research in Europe
Una filosofia per l'Europa; Nord e Sud, Oriente e Occidente come Tematiche Interdisciplinari
Universités et Economie Sociale
USAEE - University Studies of Agricultural Engineering in Europe; a Thematic Network
VET 2020 - Development of European educational strategies : Design of veterinarian profiles identified by market needs for the year 2020

Annex 2

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH TRAINING NETWORKS AND THEMATIC NETWORKS IN THE FIELD OF RESEARCH SUPPORTED BY THE FIFTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

The current Fifth Framework Programme (1999-2002) includes research training networks and thematic networks:

- *Training networks* for promoting training-through-research especially of researchers at pre- and post-doctoral level (these are only implemented under the IHP programme);

- *and thematic networks* for bringing together e.g. manufacturers, users, universities, research centres around a given S&T objective. These include co-ordination networks between Community funded projects. Support will cover a maximum 100 % of the eligible costs necessary for setting up and maintaining such networks.

For more information see http://www.cordis.lu/fp5/management/particip/v-gfp2.htm#I.

Research Training Networks started in 2000-2002 and run individually for three to four years until 2003-2006. There will be approximately 300 networks.

A Research Training Network is a group of researchers - at least five groups from at least three countries - who come up with a common research and training proposal. The common research project is the vehicle for providing training to the young researchers - typically pre-doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers. Crucially, the young researchers supported by salary costs in the programme must be 35 years of age or younger (there are exceptions for national service and childcare). They must be willing to move to another country, as they cannot be employed in their country of origin or in a foreign country if they have already lived there for more than 12 months during the 2 years preceding their appointment. Young researchers from third countries resident in the European Union for at least 5 years are also eligible.

The research topics are chosen by the researchers themselves and there are no priorities imposed by the Commission. [This differs from Key Action programmes in FP5, where the subjects to be funded are chosen in advance by the Commission and proposals are invited only on those topics.]

Networks are funded for up to four years and normally receive a maximum of EUR 1.5 million with a maximum of EUR 200,000 per team, when averaged over all such teams in the network. This money supports the employment of the young researchers in each team and provides modest support for networking, overheads and certain direct costs.

The primary objective of Research Training Networks is to promote training-through-research, especially of young researchers, both pre- and post-doctoral level, within the frame of high quality transnational collaborative research projects, including those in emerging fields of research. In addition to their primary role of training young researchers, Research Training Networks are also intended to encourage the interaction between different disciplines, the combination of different technologies, the dissemination of results and co-operation between academia and industry.

Research Training Networks succeed the TMR (Training and Mobility of Researchers) networks activity in the Fourth Framework Programme.

There are Research Training Networks in the following areas:

Chemistry	Life Sciences
Economic, Social and Human Sciences	Maths and Information Sciences
Engineering	Physics
Environment and Geosciences	

For more information see http://www.cordis.lu/impro