

# Virtual Seminars

Creating new opportunities  
for universities

*Summary Booklet and Recommendations*



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The logo for VENUS, featuring the word "VENUS" in a sans-serif font. The letter "V" is white and set against a dark blue circular background. The letters "E", "N", "U", and "S" are dark blue. The "U" and "S" are connected by a thin, curved line that loops around the "U".

VENUS

# Creating new opportunities for universities

*Experience and Best Practice from the VENUS Seminars and Summer School*

## 1. Introduction

Universities nowadays have a mission to provide knowledge not only to their on-campus students but also beyond the “walls” of the institution. Lectures or seminars that have relevance for a wider audience and that go beyond the campus boundaries are often held in public and are open to all citizens. What we are seeing in many universities is a strong desire to open up the campus, to break down the barriers that have traditionally kept out those not directly involved in full-time courses and to invite the citizen in to share the academic richness of the modern-day university.

The VENUS Handbook “Creating New Opportunities for Universities: Experience and Best Practice from the VENUS Seminars and Summer School” is the result of one such endeavour on the part of a group of European Universities working together on the VENUS Project, which was supported under the European Commission’s eLearning programme (DG Education and Culture). During the lifetime of the project, the VENUS partners organised seminars focused on issues that are relevant for European Society today. These seminars were delivered virtually and simultaneously at all European locations by means of videoconferencing and live streaming. Each lecture was followed by interactive discussions at all participating sites as well as online. The VENUS team also organised a summer school on the subject of Social Software which involved a mix of face-to-face events and virtual seminars supported by videoconferencing linking the partner universities.

This booklet describes the model that was used by the partners in setting up and managing the seminars and summer school and provides a summary of the main guidelines and recommendations arising from our work which we hope will be of value to others working in the same field.

## 2. VENUS Model

The model used by the VENUS partnership to set up virtual seminars and a virtual summer school was divided into four phases:

- Phase 1 = Defining the Goals
- Phase 2 = Planning
- Phase 3 = Delivery
- Phase 4 = Follow-up

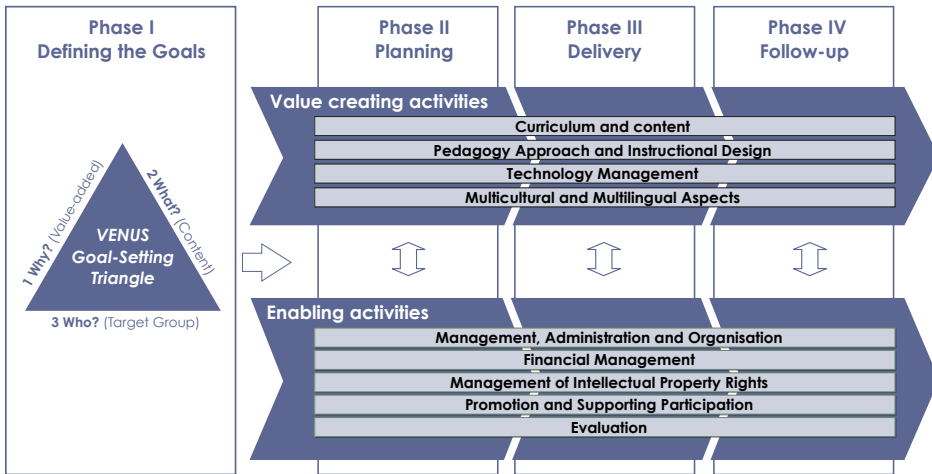


Fig.1 The VENUS Phased Approach

The goal-setting phase is the basis upon which the decision is taken as to whether it is worthwhile to go ahead or not with a project. The key elements of this phase are what kind of content the team wishes to deliver, for whom it is intended and what is the added value for the participants, as well as to the organisers and the various stakeholders. In the planning, delivery and follow-up phases, the project team operated with two kinds of activities: those which are clearly adding value and those which enabled the value creating activities to occur. In seminars of the type proposed by the VENUS consortium, when internationalising the existing content of learning activities to both students in other higher education institutes as well as to citizens, the content is closely linked to curriculum development. The learning design, often called the pedagogical approach, leads to a certain kind of instructional design geared to the needs of the audience but also to the limitations of the setting: what kind of technology is in use, what are the time constraints of the participants, what are the overall local circumstances in each participating site, which includes cultural and language issues.

## 2.1 Defining the Goals: Why, What and Who

Initiating a project, like the launch of a virtual seminar usually starts with a vision, an attractive but rather diffuse idea about the potential benefits of such a seminar. As a first step, it is essential to clarify this vision and elaborate on the specific goals of the project. Defining specific goals makes it easier to:

- draft a project plan;
- make the seminar concept sound appealing to potential participants and raise their interest, and
- win support from the stakeholders (e.g. those in the organisation responsible for the allocation of resources).

The process of mapping the objectives of a project can be quite lengthy and painstaking. This is especially true when more than one party is involved in the goal-setting process, since conflicting interests among the partners involved will almost certainly arise when goals are being discussed. However, agreeing on specific goals right at the beginning of a project like VENUS is worth the effort.

Based on their work in the VENUS project and the VENUS project partners' prior experiences in similar project contexts, the application of the following heuristic method – the “Goal-Setting Triangle” – has proven successful as a way of pinpointing the objectives of a project:

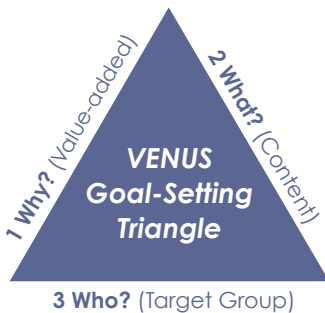


Fig.2 The VENUS Goal-Setting Triangle

In the case of VENUS, each side of the triangle represented a dimension related to the objectives of the planned virtual seminars and summer school. These objectives needed to be approached from the participants' point of view in order to obtain valuable answers. The dimensions are each represented by a question that served as a guideline to elaborate the project goals covering the given dimension.

- Why – what is the purpose of the activity?
- What – what content will be the focus of the educational activity?
- Who – who is the educational activity aimed at?

The goal-setting process can be considered complete, if and only if the question for each dimension can be answered sufficiently and unambiguously from the participants' point of view. Coming up with no or insufficient answers to one dimension indicates a major problem with any planned project. If that is the case, extensive dialogue with the potential learners and among the

project stakeholders is recommended in order to clarify the goals of the project. It might even be advisable to delay or abandon the project completely if no consensus on the project goals can be reached.

## 2.2 Set-up, Delivery and Follow-up Phases

As soon as we had clarified our goals, we then reached the planning phase of the project, followed by the implementation and follow-up phases. We used value chain thinking to help organise the activities into manageable entities. The tasks to be implemented in order to be successful with these types of activities can be divided into those that create value for the initiative and those that enable these activities. Any or all of the value-creating activities may be vital in developing a competitive advantage for the project.

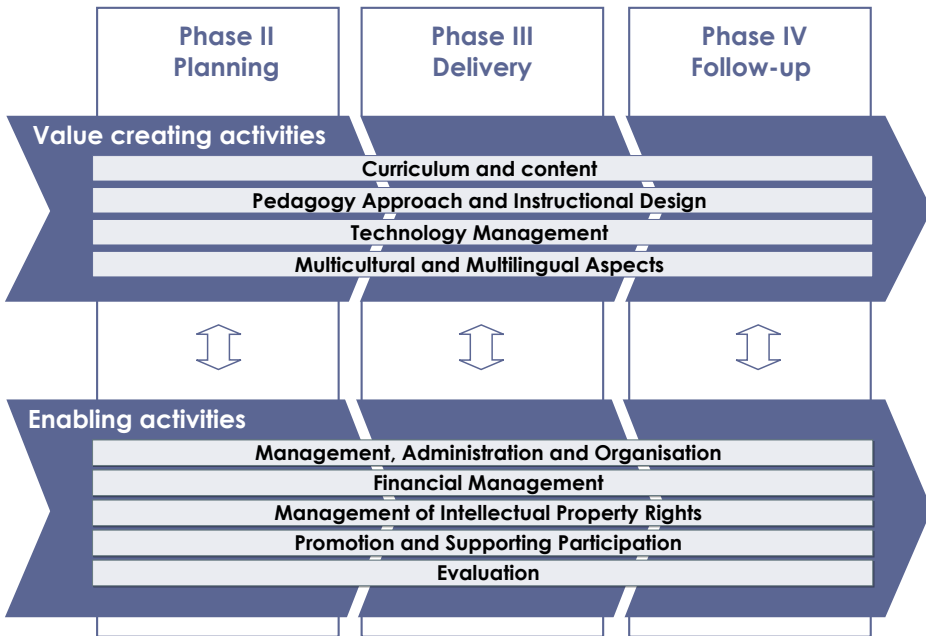


Fig.3 Phases II, III, IV

For the VENUS activities, these value-creating activities were naturally the content (the overall topic, the specific topics of the individual seminars, the excellence of the expert) and the curriculum (if the provision of accreditation and certification was to be considered), the pedagogical approach leading to a particular instructional design, choice of technology and the multicultural and localisation issues, very essential in the international context. These components are again interconnected and influence each other. When setting up an initiative like the VENUS Seminar Series or Summer School, it is clear that the different activities are there throughout the whole project. However, specific tasks and their relative importance have naturally varied during the different phases of the project.

The enabling activities are also critical for the success of a project like VENUS, even though from the VENUS perspective they can be seen as normal procedures for setting up learning activity in general. The nature of enabling activities is that they support the development of a competitive advantage for the project.

The enabling activities which were essential for VENUS were:

- Project management and financial planning
- Event planning and scheduling
- Marketing, PR and communication
- Support services
- Management of IPR issues
- Evaluation and quality management

### 3. VENUS Activities

Taking this overall model into account, VENUS implemented two different models of virtual educational activities, a virtual seminar series (regular seminars during the academic year) and a virtual summer school (1 week during September 2007). Both focused on providing the audience (students as well as citizens) with access to otherwise unavailable knowledge of common and current interest given by high-level experts.

#### 3.1 Virtual Seminar Series

The definition of virtual seminars used in VENUS was one of seminars that take place entirely on-line or through videoconferencing technology. In the VENUS Seminars, the lecturer and participants were not necessarily at the same location; the communication between lecturer and participant largely took place synchronously.

Each seminar in the VENUS series consisted of 3 main parts:

- Interactive preparatory activities: these were run virtually following different instructional design models and supported by different technologies.
- Seminar delivery: A presentation from a top, internationally-recognised expert was delivered virtually (using videoconferencing and live streaming,) and distributed to other partners in the network backed up with interaction possibilities. The topic was presented from a European perspective. In addition, the topic was discussed locally by participants in each region. Then a debate took place between all partner sites based on the main conclusions of each region. The videoconferencing sessions were recorded and made available afterwards to all those interested.
- Interactive follow-up activities: These were run virtually following different instructional design models and supported by different technologies.

The VENUS Seminars were supported with lecture materials (background reading materials, biography and possibly the lecture support materials) before the lectures, during the lectures.

During the lectures the learners could participate in parallel discussions (via chat), and afterwards there was the opportunity to extend the discussion in the form of a forum, and to re-visit the seminar by looking at the recorded seminar again.

## 3.2 Virtual Summer School

Within VENUS, a Virtual Summer School was defined as being a summer school held over a limited period of time that included virtual activities supported via videoconferencing or other online technology.

In realising a *Virtual Summer School*, the partners agreed that it was imperative to keep the essential characteristic of a summer school, which is in-depth research and discussion of a relevant topic complemented with practical sessions (working with tools and software). Intensive interaction with and between participants is a key feature of a summer school.

The VENUS Summer School was held simultaneously at 7 different partner sites. It lasted 5 days (one working week), and each day consisted of face-to-face, local activities and virtual/online, international activities. The topic of the summer school was *The Use of Social Software in Business and Higher Education* and it was targeted at academics (students, teachers, and tutors), professionals and citizens in general. The face-to-face, local activities included introductory presentations to the subject (sometimes with local experts), presentations of tools, hands-on practice sessions and discussion groups in the form of learning cafés. All these activities were conducted in the local language and the focus was on local/regional/national issues.

# 4. Guidelines and Recommendations

This section gives a few guidelines and recommendations that emerged from our experience of organising virtual seminars and a summer school.

## 4.1 Finding Networks and Partners

Virtual seminars and summer schools in an international setting require a network of partners in a consortium. You may find the following suggestions useful if you need to find partners:

- Look for an existing network in your field of expertise. Most educational institutions have an International Relations Office, where you can find appropriate networks or universities.
- Look for existing European or Trans-European networks of universities.
- Be sure to have a clear and explicit plan of action and in particular to describe to potential partners exactly what their roles and responsibilities will be.
- Draw up clear agreements with the partner universities, including budget and IPR agreements.
- When selecting locations, take the different time zones into account.

- Make sure your network shares a common interest.
- To make organisation easier, select a coordinating partner with a small secretariat at one of the locations.
- Make sure the appropriate technological infrastructure is available.

## 4.2 Curriculum and Content

Content and speaker are the main attraction points for any seminar or summer school. A relevant topic, an innovative view and an engaging speaker are all essential for a successful seminar. When choosing content for a seminar series, summer school or similar activity, the following points are worth bearing in mind:

- Make sure the chosen speakers are engaging. In a videoconference, the quality of the speaker becomes even more apparent as the speaker is not physically present.
- Ensure that the chosen topics are attractive to the target audience.

If the targeted audience is mainly students, several other considerations need to be taken into account:

- Ensure that the topic(s) fit into the curriculum of the participating institutions.
- Provide ways of accrediting and certifying these activities.
- Bear in mind that even if the final beneficiary is a student, the actual decision for students to take part in such activities will be made by their departments and faculties.
- Remember that these activities offer students an opportunity to go either deeper into a particular section of their chosen field of study or to go beyond their chosen field of study and look at issues in society surrounding the actual science.

Speakers will need to be chosen who can provide valuable input to both professionals in the field or those who already have the basic knowledge of the specific lecture content as well as those who do not have previous knowledge in the field but are simply interested in the topic.

## 4.3 Managing IPR

The following IPR management guideline may be useful when conducted at the appropriate project stage.

At the **programme planning** stage, you may need to assess IPR conditions and requirements:

- Which sites in which countries will be involved? Which legal frameworks have to be considered?
- Will the live sessions be recorded? Where will they be stored? Is the site public or for a closed group?
- Is the project embedded in a commercial context?
- Who has access to the live seminar and/or the recorded sessions?

At the **programme implementation** stage, you may need to establish and enforce a project-specific IPR policy to include:

- Issue IPR guidelines
  - What kind of third-party content can be used (e.g. Creative Commons only)?
  - Issue guidelines on how to use third-party content properly (include directives for correct references and quotes).
- Acquisition of copyright for content to be developed in the project:
  - Confirm that the author is not aware of any third-party copyright violation.
  - Acquire rights from the author to use and redistribute the content and/or recorded audio and video of live sessions, if this is part of the project scenario.
- IPR Compatibility Check:
  - Can the third-party content be integrated with the project content to be developed in the project? Look for “non-commercial” and “share-alike” license terms.
  - Is the resulting combination compatible with the project conditions and requirements?

Prior to the live session you may need to carry out an IPR pre-check to include:

- Inventory of third-party content used, including sources and licenses used.
- Check correctness of quotes and references.
- Brief parties involved on IPR policies, raise awareness.

After the live session, you may need to carry out an IPR post-check for the learning material used (in case the recorded sessions are offered for download) and update the inventory to take into account any changes that have been made to the material and to check if any additional material has been included.

Based on our experience in this area, we would like to encourage you to make your learning content available to the public under a Creative Commons or similar license, if legally possible.

## 4.4 Management, Administration and Organisation

To ensure the seminars are well organised, begin planning the event well in advance. The following recommendations may be useful:

- Define the goals, the approach and the target group well beforehand and make sure this is clearly described in all your materials
- Create a very detailed planning scheme before the start of the event(s)
- Agree at the beginning about deadlines in respect to the organisation and timing of specific aspects.
- Good communication is, of course, necessary for a successful collaboration, for example:
  - Have regular meetings, face-to-face, phone, use web conferencing facilities like Skype, MSN
  - Send a monthly e-mail listing all the activities planned
  - Create a mailing/telephone list of everyone involved (speakers, technical staff, coordinators, experts, moderators) per partner site
  - Create an open online space where partners can evaluate activities, organisation etc.

## ■ Preparing Speakers and Content

It is important to put in place a good communication strategy for dealing with speakers before your event. Speakers should be well informed about what to expect and you in turn should be very well informed about what they plan to speak about, etc. The following information is worth sharing:

- Remind them that giving a lecture via videoconference is not the same as giving a lecture in a classroom. It is worth bearing in mind the strengths and limitations of this technology.
- When preparing slides:
  - Make the slides preferably using a recent version of Microsoft PowerPoint or a similar presentation software package
  - Individual slides should follow the following guidelines:
    - Maximum 9 lines per slide
    - Maximum 35 characters per line
    - Font size between 24 and 36
    - Minimum 2 point line thickness
    - Preferably use a pastel-coloured background
  - During the session:
    - Follow the slides (use keywords from the slides)
    - Look into or just below the camera
    - Speak slowly and articulate clearly
    - Do not be too formal in front of the camera
    - Do not move too much or suddenly
    - Attract attention by modifying intonation or rhythm of speech
    - Mention possible problems, be clear in their description
- Regarding clothing:
  - Do not wear brightly-coloured clothing and/or busy prints, or clothes the same colour as the background
  - Do not wear shiny or noisy jewellery. Women should wear normal make-up and avoid dark eyeliner and lipstick

## ■ Structure and Content of Sessions

When organising your own activity, the following general points are worth bearing in mind:

- A running order is a very helpful tool when organising the structure and different stages of the seminar
- Try to make as much content available as possible beforehand through a web site or other means. This might be a biography of the speaker or background papers, interesting web sites, etc.
- Communicate with the speaker about the structure of the seminar. Give them the opportunity to adapt the structure as they like, check their preferences for the lectures.
- Communicate with the participating sites beforehand on what is expected of them during the seminar.

If you are organising a summer school, you will have to decide aspects like the following:

- Is the week an integrated programme of activities that can only be followed as a whole?
- Can individual days in the week be followed as separate entities?
- Can subsequent days be attended with a different programme?

Other points worth remembering include:

- Make sure you vary the programme as much as possible to ensure that participants do not feel it is repetitive and try to be as flexible as possible.
- Take local differences into account, in respect of timing, for example, and allow for different local approaches in different locations.
- Be sure to reach an agreement on the working methods used in the common activities.
- Be flexible in adapting the local activities to the feedback and preferences of the audience.
- In our experience, participants in a summer school are very interested in practical hands-on sessions. Integrate plenty of practical sessions into the summer school.
- Capitalise on the audience: involve experienced members of the audience as tutors in your practical sessions. Let them talk about their experiences in all activities. Encourage learning from peers.
- Create an online presence for the summer school or seminar series through a weblog and/or wiki. Encourage participants to report on their discussions and thoughts online.
- Try to relax and take any technical problems in your stride. They are part and parcel of virtual seminars and no reason for frustration.
- After a seminar session, be sure to thank all participants and ask for their feedback on the activities. This will give you valuable information for the future organisation of such seminars.
- Keep lectures short and allow more time for discussion – the videoconference lecture itself should not be too long (30-40 min is a maximum). Passive listening to a videoconference is tiring and leaves participants disinterested.
- Be sure to mix international learning activities with a local flavour.
- Be sure to allow time for local interaction before international - this will give participants time to reflect on the lecture within local face-to-face discussions. It will also improve the quality of the international discussions.

## ■ Roles and Responsibilities

In an internationally organised virtual seminar or summer school, the number of roles increases sharply in proportion to the number of locations. As well as the participants, there can be moderators, content providers or speakers and technical support people. It is important to point out that while the number of people involved in VENUS was relatively high, experience shows that as these types of activities become embedded in the daily work of institutions, the need for large numbers of specialised staff decreases. Also the level and complexity of the seminar or summer school can have an influence, as well as the specific circumstances of individual partners.

In VENUS, in the central location we had what we called a Central Moderator (who guided the whole seminar, and doubled as a Local Moderator guiding the local activities), a Chatbox Moderator and a Technical Team (a videoconference technician, a streaming technician and a technical helpdesk moderator). Each participating location had a Local Moderator (who guided the local activities), a Local Expert and a Technical Team (with at least a videoconference technician).

The following sections will provide guidelines related to several of these roles.

### *Local Moderator*

Each location that participated had a Local Moderator on site. This was the person responsible for facilitating the local session, leading the local discussion, collecting the questions for the speaker and acting as the local chair person during the international discussion. Based on the experience of the VENUS project, the project team created a list of factors to consider when selecting a moderator:

- Should be able to manage and control the progress of the seminar (time, content, etc.) and should be instructed to manage timing precisely.
- Should be able to manage discussion and have no hesitation about stepping in if the lecture, discussion or input from one of the sites takes too long.
- Should be diplomatic and understand the needs and level of expertise of audience and speaker
- Should be aware of the technology (in contact with central technical team and communicate problems to the group efficiently and effectively)
- Should be aware of what the sites can and cannot see and give enough information to all
- Should have clear and attractive speaking style and be able to interview and moderate
- Should know how to summarise discussion (synthesis of ideas)
- Should speak very good English (clear pronunciation) if English is to be used as the language for the international parts of the sessions
- Should have empathetic approach that overcomes cultural differences and linguistic challenges

This is a sample of the guidelines we provided for Local Moderators taking part in either the seminar series or the summer school.

- Explain clearly the format for the session at the outset during the initial local introduction phase, make sure you alert people to the different elements and indicate when local discussion can take place
- Try to find out who is actually attending your session locally, if possible ask everyone to introduce themselves during the local introduction period and indicate why they are attending
- Ensure that the audience is familiar with the location of cameras and microphones, explain how the system works and agree how questions will be put by the local audience to the international expert,
- At the beginning make sure you introduce yourself and the local expert, and when anyone at your site asks a question or makes a point, ask them to introduce themselves too.
- Make sure you find out how to mute your local microphone yourself, your microphone should only ever be switched on when you are actually making a point or asking a question
- You can always raise your hand to indicate to the Central Moderator that you wish to speak.
- During the local discussion, do your best to stimulate debate.
- If no questions are forthcoming from your site, try to come up with at least one yourself in order to show some interest on behalf of your own site.
- Try not to allow anyone to dominate the discussion, either during the local debate and discussion or during the time when you are connected with the other sites during the international discussion phase.
- Remember that your image and that of those seated next to you are likely to be on view to all other sites throughout the session. This means that it is important you are facing the camera and that you remain attentive throughout the session when you are connected.

### *Speaker*

The main content provider during the seminar was the International Speaker or Expert. The speaker generally gave a 20-minute presentation, then engaged in the local discussion at his/her location (if possible) and then answered questions from the audience.

Based on the VENUS experience, here are a list of factors to consider when selecting a speaker:

- Needs to be a renowned and recognized expert in a particular field
- Should be a speaker who understand the needs and level of expertise of the audience (can adapt lecture to the audience's level by using appropriate vocabulary, good examples, etc.)
- Needs to be clear (verbal delivery and focus on tone, pitch, speed, forcefulness, articulation) and have an attractive speaking style
- Empathetic approach that overcomes cultural differences and linguistic challenges
- Open to discussion, not a monologue style
- Very good English if English is to be used as the language for the international parts of the sessions
- Uses presentation or other helpful support material
- Speaker knows how videoconference and web streaming work and how participants perceive him/her

### *Local Expert*

Each location that participated in a live session via videoconferencing tried to make sure they had a Local Expert in the specific content area chosen for each seminar at their site. The tasks of the Local Expert were to explain his or her own point of view on the topic and to relate the issue that was discussed by the speaker to the national situation. Based on the experience of VENUS, we suggest you consider the following factors when selecting a local expert:

- Needs to be a charismatic person, outgoing, vivid, able to think and react very quickly
- Should have empathy, good presentation skills and interaction skills
- Best if he/she has recognised expertise in a particular field and an understanding of local conditions – as well as the ability to link the topic to the local context
- Needs to have a clear understanding of the main speaker's opinion and position and to be able to explain these to the audience
- Needs to be able to motivate people in discussion and to manage a lively local debate
- Should be enthusiastic about the virtual activity being undertaken

## ■ Online Discussion, Chat and Resources

Based on the VENUS experience of using a chatbox to support online participation through the live stream, we would like to make several recommendations for the use of a chatbox should you decide to use one.

- Make available a separate communications channel, e.g. a chatbox, to facilitate communication about technical issues. Because the VENUS Seminar Series used only a single chatbox, during some sessions this was completely overwhelmed with discussion related to the technology being used.
- Make it clear from the outset what the specific purpose of a chatbox is, this can be facilitated by having a short introductory text above the chatbox explaining clearly how the chat works, what its purpose is and what is expected from participants.
- It is important to make it easy for participants to create a user name under which they can post comments or questions.

## 4.5 Multicultural and Multilingual Aspects

We recommend the mixed use of local languages and a common lingua franca, e.g. English or French in educational activities. The central idea is, on the one hand, to reduce the threshold of participating in expert seminars by using the local language, but, on the other hand, to keep the direct interaction with international speakers in a common language.

Don't be afraid to introduce new approaches. Despite the initial resistance, it pushes people to go beyond their comfort zone and often results in interesting creative solutions. Many of VENUS' partners experienced the seminars as eye-openers in pedagogical, organisational and technical respects, and have used this experience in their daily work.

Cultural differences often occur unexpectedly. It is important to be open to cultural differences and to work towards solutions that are workable for all partners. As these are often considered to be sensitive issues, it is important for partners to be rational and calm when discussing them. It is also important to allow for local differences in the way these types of activities are organised in different countries. This adds to the uniqueness and the richness of the events.

## 4.6 Promotion and Supporting Participation

We found that it is useful when you begin planning an activity like a virtual seminar series or summer school to create a dissemination plan. This can help you coordinate your activities to make sure you reach your target participants in an effective way. Here are some suggestions on how to set about such a plan:

- Define the goal: what are the goals and objectives of the dissemination effort? What kind of target numbers are you aiming for?
- Define the context: who is the main target audience, what are the available communication channels and what are the possible barriers.
- Analyse the target audience: who they are, where are they, can they be divided into several groups, what are their expectations, what is on their agenda and what are the barriers for them?
- Define the message: what language should be used, what are the benefits for the target groups of attending the seminar?
- Plan and organise the dissemination (timing, channels, etc.).

When only a few participants take part in your seminars, you should assess the target groups to find out why. Perhaps the dissemination was satisfactory, but the (subject/lecturer) seminar was not what the audience was expecting, i.e. it is important to have a clear view of what is happening and why it is happening.

## 4.7 Reaching the Audience

The following list contains strategies that you can use to identify and reach your audience and includes some of the information we provided to local site organisers to promote the VENUS activities:

- Try to find media partners: you advertise their event on your supporting web site while they advertise yours. This will also improve your overall search page rankings.
- Do not forget to send out reminder e-mails shortly before the event takes place to increase the number of attendees.
- Try to locate online communities which are built around the topic being discussed at the event.
- Check your university for relevant research centres, MA or BA programmes etc. with related topics.
- Check the name of the expert online, ticking the same box so you get only pages from your country. This way you can find out who has worked with him/her before.
- Calendars of events of (online) magazines are a good way to reach citizens.
- Check out the education or science pages of regional/national newspapers and try the local press.
- Invite participants of previous seminars and ask them to help promote the event.
- High-school teachers tend to be an interested group – it is worth checking if there is a portal site or magazine for them (especially history or politics teachers) which you can use.
- Don't forget other universities in your area.
- Contact the press office of your university if you have one.
- If you know of any other lecture series taking place locally aimed at a similar target audience, it is worth contacting them and asking for their advice.
- Ask the international expert to invite people or to suggest NGO's, interest groups, etc. to invite.
- Put up posters and leaflets in public libraries.

## 4.8 Keeping the Audience Interested

Here are some suggestions to make sure participants are satisfied with the seminar and how it is organised. If participants are happy with the way an event like this is organised, not only are they more likely to return, but they are also more likely to bring their friends/colleagues/fellow students with them.

- Make newcomers welcome and ensure basic services are all up to scratch.
- Make sure that those who have to deal with the participants like people and that they are friendly.
- Ask those taking part for their opinions in a systematic way.
- Track the number of visits to your seminar's web site.
- A way of tracking the success or otherwise of your dissemination activities is by adding a question to the evaluation form asking where participants first heard about your activities.

When you advertise seminars through web sites of other organisations, it might be difficult to keep track of results. Build relations with your contacts in the other organisations and ask for

confirmation when/if people include you on their web site. This will help you track results. Should you find it difficult to attract adequate numbers of participants to your virtual seminars or sessions, you may want to re-consider the following:

- Location: this only applies when the seminars are broadcast at several locations. Perhaps the location is hard to reach by public transport, or is too far away from the city centre. Try using another location that is easier to reach
- Timing: one of the hardest issues to tackle is finding the right time of day, so you may need to experiment until you find a good compromise.
- Alternative structure: you may need to test out different structures to find one that really works.
- Scope of the subject: maybe it is too limited and not sufficiently attractive to your target participants.

## 4.9 Technical Management and Guidelines

You may find the following suggestions and tips useful when setting up and using technology.

- Inform all participating sites and individual participants about the technological requirements of the sessions and support them in verifying if their set up matches these requirements.
- Consistent instructions need to be provided to all with regard to the required hardware and software, as well as with regard to participation procedures.
- Immediately before and during the seminar, all technology coordinators need to be in close contact to be able to immediately solve any technical issues that arise. We recommend that participants communicate using the telepresence platform in a natural way also regarding issues and problems.
- Always carry out a common site survey, not only does this help to establish what technologies and solutions are available in each institution, but this will also help build a strong technical support team and establish a common vocabulary and set of standards.
- Establish a network of technical contact points in each institution taking part, circulate the names and contact information of these people and ensure regular contact and communication.
- During a live session, create communication channels with the contact persons and local moderators at participating sites other than the videoconference channel.
- Try to involve this technical team in all evaluation activities in order to help and support the network and as a way to prepare for future developments.
- Use common and available solutions where possible, before putting in place a new tool or service, ensure a rigorous usability assessment has been carried out with typical users

## 5. Web Site

If you are considering supporting your virtual seminar or summer school with a web site, first define the objectives and goals of a web site devoted to your activity. Consider the additional tools that you might need, such as a user management system, forums, chat functionality, etc.

One of the aspects you may wish to use your web site for is registration. Based on our experience, we have several recommendations to make in this respect:

- Online registration can be a valuable tool when used in the right circumstances, i.e. when the numbers are high. However it is essential that all participating sites have access to the central database.
- Registration for online participants is particularly helpful as this can also provide the necessary security and will enable people to be named in an online chat situation which is important.
- Registration for online participants and those participating on site has to be extremely user-friendly.
- Access to information on the activities in the local language is essential to attract citizens.

If you are considering an open source content management solution, be aware that, despite the flexibility, customising it to your specific needs requires an investment in terms of both time and skills that may not be feasible for all institutions.

## 6. Cost Issues

The following table shows the common costs categories for virtual seminars with the corresponding costs calculation mode and examples for each category:

Cost category	Cost calculation	Examples
Staff costs	Opportunity costs (e.g. total hourly wage)	Project Manager Teacher Moderator Technical Support Administrative Support
Infrastructure costs	Depreciation Rental Internal cost rate	Buildings and furniture Telecommunication hardware Network hardware Computer hardware and software
Ongoing Expenses	Payout (invoiced amount)	Data and telecommunications volume Consumables External services Travelling and accommodation

Based on the information you collect, you should be able to thoroughly evaluate and discuss the cost structure of your project from different perspectives. Note that changing the cost perspective by omission or inclusion of cost centers (e.g. costs borne at an institutional level) may significantly change the exhibited cost structure of your project.

## 7. Evaluating Virtual Seminars

Evaluation is an essential part of organising virtual activities. This can be carried out in a variety of different ways, spread throughout the lifetime of the project. It should also be aimed at a number of different target groups. We recommend that it is important to set up an evaluation plan at the outset.

Before you start to develop evaluation instruments, we recommend you ask yourself the following questions:

- What information do you need to collect from your evaluation analysis?
- Who do you have to ask to get the right information?
- Which method will be the most suitable for the group to be evaluated

Your evaluation plan will probably show that you need different information from different users and that there are various ways in which you can obtain feedback, i.e. it may not always be a good idea to use a questionnaire and you may decide to use an interview instead concentrating on the most important issues you need to investigate. Short questionnaires are a very good way of gauging the immediate reactions of seminar participants. You can ask basic questions about their level of satisfaction, feelings, comments, and so on. But do remember that this questionnaire should not be too long.

The best way to check how the technology works or the organisation of an event like a virtual seminar is to make a control test or a simulation. Don't forget to obtain feedback from people who participate regularly during the entire series as this will provide you with useful information on the whole process.

With all evaluation groups it is very important to make sure they know their input is valued and that it will be taken into consideration and used to improve the activity by reflecting the needs of the participants. If the virtual seminars are organised through the cooperation of several partners, self-assessment by each partner followed by an open discussion (either virtual or face-to-face) helps provide a useful overall evaluation of the activity.

Universities nowadays have a mission to provide knowledge not only to their on-campus students but also beyond the “walls” of the institution. Lectures or seminars that have relevance for a wider audience and that go beyond the campus boundaries are often held in public and are open to all citizens. What we are seeing in many universities is a strong desire to open up the campus, to break down the barriers that have traditionally kept out those not directly involved in full-time courses and to invite the citizen in to share the academic richness of the modern-day university.

**eLearning**



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