

THE SALAMI CONCEPT*

Course transfer across national borders is a complex problem due to the variations in education systems and institutions.

These variations may occur in course duration, prerequisites, objectives, and deviations of exact profiles of the target population. But most of all, the procedures of design and development of contents may be heavily tinted by cultural determinants, leading to references which may be totally irrelevant or incomprehensible outside the socio-cultural context within which the course was produced. The problem of different national languages is, in comparison with the previous differences, of minor importance.

Although a really good translation is a lengthy and expensive process due to the high degree of qualification required, we do not include this among the "difficult" problems.

It might also be argued that a very good course, recognized as such in terms of scientific content and didactic efficiency within the environment where it was produced, should allow for significant savings on its transfer, with the necessary adaptations, to another institution as compared to the design and production of a new course from scratch.

However, course transfer would be easier to achieve successfully if the internal organization of contents was based on a principle of modulation with the different parts considered as self-contained units, hopefully independent from each other. Should this be the case, a foreign user might select the appropriate units to build a "new" course, if necessary adding any units considered relevant for specific purposes.

From a more general perspective, a course to be used in a particular country could be the result of the addition of units of a different origin. These units could be selected to obtain the best match between existing materials and the specified needs of a well-defined set of objectives and the target population.

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The major obstacle to the success of this idea lies in the tendency of curriculum and course designers to carry the concept of "internal coherence" of higher education programmes too far. Instead of being autonomous, each course is closely interwoven with previous or subsequent courses. Within a given course, each unit does not have an independent existence, as previous study of the former units is required to lay the foundations for understanding the following units. In this respect, higher education institutions in the Anglo-Saxon culture tend to be more flexible than those of Latin or German influence. In the former, undergraduates as well as graduate programmes offer wide possibilities of choice to students from a "menu" of relevant subjects, whereas in the latter variations in curriculum are only allowed in a small number of optional courses.

For the specific purpose of facilitating course transfer between distance teaching universities across national boundaries in Europe, we propose that authors and course designers use the "salami concept". Using this concept a given course can be "sliced" into a significant number of parts or modules, each one having the right to exist separately without losing scientific relevant and didactic usefulness. This means that each slice should contain a full specification of objectives, prerequisites, definitions, foundations and conclusions so that it can be separated from any other related subject or unit without the scientific coherence or learning value being damaged.

The "salami concept" should also be useful in the context of joint course production. The design of the various parts of the material can be assigned to different partners in the venture, without the risk of the final output being something like a chaotic patchwork. Course design and development should also benefit in terms of the overall duration of the process due to the fact that independent course teams can work in parallel. This avoids the process taking an excessive length of time as is the norm when using the more traditional approach.