

## **Analysing and Reporting on the Implementation of Electronic Learning in Europe (ARIEL)**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is based on an international joint project called ARIEL (Analysing and Reporting on the Implementation of Electronic Learning in Europe). The research focuses on the observation, analysis and forecasting of e-learning in SMEs, its use and its likely evolution, providing relevant information for policy making and for European education stakeholders. eLearning offers a number of advantages to SMEs however the take up is relatively slow. Incentives offered by Government and support groups will facilitate the awareness and alleviate cost barriers, however the culture within SMEs needs to adapt to embrace eLearning and support its implementation. The author believes that eLearning can be adapted to suit the varying needs and requirements of SMEs and aid in its pursuit of a competitive position in the marketplace.

### **Keywords**

eLearning, mobile learning, SMEs, Small Medium Enterprises, Training, life long learning, eLearning, mobile learning, SMEs, Small Medium Enterprises, Training, life long learning, observatory research

### **Introduction**

With the integration of the European market gaining in speed, the accession of new members to the EU will provide new foreign business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises. However, such cross-border activities require cross-cultural and language competence as well as a broad knowledge of markets, administrative procedures, rules of conduct, and more.

E-learning is expected to be an important means in transferring the required knowledge and qualifications in an up-to-date, cross-cultural and multilingual way. In particular, its ubiquitous nature offering flexibility in time and location could bring advantages for SMEs. However, many small and medium-sized enterprises are reluctant in partaking in eLearning initiatives and, in general, use e-learning implementations much less frequently than their bigger counterparts. This is the background against which ARIEL analyses e-learning supply for small and medium enterprises. It focuses on applications promising to impart competencies needed by enterprises facing the challenges of the integrating European markets.

The project investigates e-learning supply for small and medium-sized enterprises concerning didactic approaches, benefits and fields of application. Another of its themes is the evaluation of the impact of past EU programmes in the field of electronic learning. On this basis ARIEL will build scenarios of the future development of e-learning in Europe. An important part of the project activities is the dissemination of the results to SMEs, providers of further education, regional economic development agencies and political actors in the countries involved. For this purpose the project will also establish a multilingual website.

### **Partners**

As an international joint project ARIEL is carried out by five European partners. The overall project coordinators are the Institute for Work and Technology (IAT, Germany) the specific tasks of IAT include research and analysis with a regional focus on West-Europe (e.g. France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany). The key competency of IAT is eLearning for target groups, training needs, professional usage of computer systems in SMEs and organisation and qualification aspects of SMEs.

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Veb Consult Srl (VEB, Italy) is another partner on the project with specific tasks comprising research and analysis with a regional focus on South-Europe (e.g. Spain, Italy and Greece). Key competencies include pedagogical concepts in vocational training, human resource development, tourist sector and SME consulting.

The third partner is the Educational Media Research Center, University of Limerick (Ireland) particular tasks include research and analysis with a regional focus on North-West-Europe (e.g. Scandinavia, Portugal, Great Britain and Ireland). Key competencies of EMRC include Computer Science, data-base technology, re-usable content and training organisation in SMEs.

The fourth partner is the University of Győr (Hungary) precise responsibilities include research and analysis with a regional focus on Hungary and further accession countries. Key competencies of the University include distance learning and SMEs in transforming economies.

Finally, University of Craiova (Romania) whose explicit focus includes research and analysis with a regional focus on Romania and Bulgaria. Key competencies include distance learning, Network construction and SMEs in transforming economies

### **Aims**

ARIEL's tasks include systematic gathering of relevant information concerning ongoing eLearning activities in Europe, in-depth analysis of these activities and dissemination of information to targeted audiences. ARIEL focuses on eLearning solutions and concepts for SMEs which aims at improving their work and support their amalgamation into the European market. In addition to the observation of the general eLearning trends there will be special reports on certain sociological, pedagogical, technical or economical key issues like eLearning and blended learning applications in SMEs.

**ARIEL project phases**

**2004**

1. Kick-off phase
2. Sorting and evaluation of relevant projects
3. Interim report to the Commission

**2005**

4. Identification of success factors for different target groups; workshops
5. Development of general and national scenarios for prognosis
6. Elaboration and evaluation of scenarios; workshop with international experts
7. Final report to the Commission

ARIEL commenced in January 2004 and has duration of two years this paper looks at the results to date concerning the impact of e-Learning for SME. The first step was the sifting of projects already carried out in the area of eLearning in SMEs, this information was collated from [www.elearningeuropa.info](http://www.elearningeuropa.info) website. Data was collected from 842 projects, these projects were then classified. The projects were ambiguous and had varying descriptors of depth and content, an email survey was conducted with project leaders to establish the target groups, aim of project and results in order to surmise its relevance to the ARIEL project. Telephone interviews were then carried out to establish comprehensive information on the findings and outcomes of the projects.

The first year of ARIEL provided an overview of the strength and weaknesses of those EU-funded e-learning project which aimed at SME or SMO as their target group or one of their target groups. The results from this phase of the project were disappointing due to a low comeback rate. However, those that did collaborate provided valuable information and insight into the findings and outcomes of their projects. Due to the

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poor response from this phase emphasis was placed on devising scenarios to isolate the future role of eLearning in SMEs.

Scenarios are narratives of alternative environments in which today's decisions may be played out. They are not predictions. Nor are they strategies. Instead they are more like hypotheses of different futures specifically designed to highlight the risks and opportunities involved in specific strategic issues. (Ogilvy, J. and Schwartz P. *Plotting Your Scenarios*, 2004). ARIEL is currently developing scenarios based on the the differing stages of eLearning in SMEs, this will allow frameworks and models to be developed to capture the best approach in targeting and carrying out eLearning in SMEs in future research.

Expert meetings with eLearning and SME experts will be conducted to enlighten on the situational analysis and learning needs assessment of SMEs.

### **Lessons learned**

The results of the analysis of the EU funded projects did not provide us with a valuable contribution to e-learning in SME and SMO that was anticipated. From our experience of observing other projects we draw the conclusion that an observatory should have a more universal approach. Observations can be helpful if they are not restricted to best or good practises but comprise bad practise and mediocre practice also.

In future projects it is believed that a public sphere or forum in Europe discussing the problems of SME- and SMO-development would be advantageous. An idyllic public platform would comprise the relevant stakeholders of SME and SMO in Europe and would serve as a collection for successful solutions as well as the many cul-de-sac of IT-development, -application and -implementation for the world of SME or SMO.

The observation of the e-learning projects did highlight one organisational and technical point which clarifies that SMEs resources are scarce and it is not a priority for them to administer vocational training. So only those solutions will work which take these constraints into account. Universities and e-learning providers who are used to dealing with big corporations may find it difficult to cope with this precondition. From a pedagogical point of view one respondent highlighted the need to 'Keep it simple does not mean keep it boring! "The quality of the content is the most important, [be it] e-

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learning or not e-learning.” (Interview) E-Learning provider have to be knowledgeable about the needs of SME or SMO and have to engage in establishing a relation of trust. Trust is a keyword and trust in e-learning-technology is problematic because the e-learning-supply-side is not transparent for SME or SMO and e-learning-solutions are not really standardized out-of-the-box-applications. Therefore personal relations between the supplier and the SME- or SMO-representatives are important.

### **Recommendations**

One problem of the policy of funding in the sphere that ARIEL observed seems to be a loose-fitting between the strategic aim of the EU (Lisbon-strategy), to which the funding of e-learning-projects is committed, and the actual work that is done in the projects. A stronger coupling could raise the need of a social dialogue concerning SME- and SMO-development viewing the funding policy of the EU as one of the tools for this development.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is a working paper on ARIEL, information is sourced from ARIEL website <http://www.ariel-eu.net/> and other ARIEL documentation