EPICA Newsletter - 11th Edition – December 2020

EPICA INTERVIEW OF THE MONTH - TORUNN GJELSVIK

Could you briefly describe your role as Secretary General of ICDE?

My role as Secretary General is to lead the daily operations of ICDE, which are carried out by our small secretariat in Oslo, Norway. This includes the day to day management and all legal and financial matters of the association in accordance with the policies defined by the Board and the mission and aims stated in the ICDE Constitution. My role also involves following up of the latest developments in the field of open, flexible and distance learning and engage with members, partners and stakeholders from all world regions within our field.

ICDE being the coordinator of the EPICA Initiative, what do you consider the main benefits for your organisation being a highly active part of it?

The main benefit of EPICA resides in the various European-African collaborations that were established in the frame of this project. The network developed within the consortium, including the other institutions represented by the members of the External Advisory Board, is wide and covers many countries in Africa and Europe. In itself, this constitutes the greatest benefit for ICDE.

Now that EPICA is reaching its end, how would you say it has contributed to decrease the skills gap between university graduates and the labour market? What would you say are the main contributing factors of EPICA to overcome this disparity?

EPICA being a development project and given the durable impact of the Coronavirus crisis, it is a bit early to state that the project has already contributed at addressing the skills gap between graduate students and the labour market. What can be said, however, is that EPICA definitely helped understanding the realities and the challenges of addressing these skills gaps. Within the project a consequent amount of work has been invested in researching and analysing the pedagogical requirements for an ePortfolio. I would therefore argue that this understanding acquired by the consortium is the main contributing factors as of today for addressing this disparity.

From your point of view, which sector (academia, businesses or individuals) will benefit most of the EPICA results?

Once the situation will allow the proper launch of the EPICA ePortfolio I believe that students will be the main beneficiaries, then ultimately Academia. On a larger scale, local businesses would be able to benefit from the commercialisation of the ePortfolio. Should the ePortfolio develop into a successful network, many other sectors could subsequently benefit from this online platform.

How, in your opinion, does having an ePortfolio benefit a student and graduate and how is it different from a CV or a graduate certificate?

The particularity of the EPICA ePortfolio is that it is skill-based. Skills that can be validated by lecturers, university professors, academic staff or even other students. From this angle we can understand how students may highlight their accomplishments in addition to their degrees and by doing so increase their employability. This system - similar to the so-called "micro-credentials" - is online and interactive allowing multiple skills recognitions. If I may use a metaphor to illustrate this it is the similar idea as of the blockchain technology, where multiple actors recognize the veracity of one item making it more secure and reliable than a piece of paper where ultimately a student can write whatever he or she wants.

How, in your view, will employers benefit from receiving access to an ePortfolio?

Potential employers could obviously value such a tool in order to help them with their recruitment processes by easing the identification of qualified students. It could also ease the review process of applications by filtering certain skills through the platform. Ultimately the EPICA ePortfolio has been designed from the beginning for the benefit of both students and employers.

What do you think are the most crucial coming steps that need to be negotiated for a successful implementation of EPICA's strategy, such as overcoming technological requirements, increasing the visibility of the initiative, improving funding, etc.?

The most crucial step forward is to overcome the current restrictions set up due to the COVID pandemic crisis. The work of the project has been impacted in that regards as our initial strategy was to identify local businesses to commercialise the ePortfolio towards universities. Unfortunately, these have been either closed or severely disrupted in their operations forcing us to reassess our strategy. The positive aspect of the current situation is that the field of Education has been forced to increase its digitalization speed, and there lies our optimism.

EPICA PARTICIPATES IN THE OEB 2020 CONFERENCE

This year the OEB Conference took place from the 30th of November to the 4th of December with a focus on "Shaping the future of learning". Marcelo Maina, Lourdes Guàrdia, Federica Mancini and Derek Clougher, members of the Edul@ab team at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, presented 'EPICA: Showcase Students Employability Skills using an ePortfolio' on the 4th of December in the new virtual format adopted for this year's conference.

Derek Clougher

The presentation focused on the EPICA project and provided a detailed overview of the theoretical background on which the project itself is based. The focus on the conceptual framework sparked debate and encouraged open conversation between all those in attendance. Following this an outline of the three phases of the project (organisational, academic and professional) was provided. This was extremely useful as it detailed the importance of all the stakeholders involved which included local coordinators, professors, employers, and of course, students. By providing a detailed overview of the process, it helped listeners to understand how the project was carried out and also how each phase was uniquely important in achieving the overall objectives of the research project. To clarify how these phases were conducted information was also provided regarding the support materials that were administered to all participants in their respective phases. Once all of this information had been discussed, the strengths of the study were presented which attempted to highlight the usefulness of an ePortfolio as a reflective, professional and transitional tool to showcase graduate skills to prospective employers while promoting innovative pedagogical methods and strategic collaboration among stakeholders.

The presentation at the OEB 2020 Conference was well received by fellow participants and researchers were keen to understand the solutions proposed based on the EPICA designed ePortfolio. For more information on the EPICA project and its findings you can check out the project website here. To read more on the conference you can have a look at the programme of this year's conference.

EPICA FINAL CONFERENCE

The final international EPICA Conference was held virtually on Thursday, December 10. Over 400 participants from around the world attended this lively event which was held under the overarching theme "Increasing University Graduates' Employability Chances through the Use of an Innovative ePortfolio - The Epica Initiative".

The aim of this final conference was to highlight the highly innovative work and results of the EPICA Initiative focusing on its relevance and implications for local uptake, implementation and sustainability.

Leading experts in the African and European higher education sector as well as Kenyan, Tanzanian and Ugandan students, teachers and employers, who formed part of the success stories collected during the EPICA Pilots in the three partner countries gave insightful presentations and inspiring talks.

The conference was chaired by Philise Rasugu, longstanding member of the African Virtual University (AVU), Kenya. Torunn Gjelsvik, Secretary General of the International Council for Open and Distance learning in Norway gave the opening speech, which was followed by a keynote address given by Dr. Bakary Diallo, Rector of the African Virtual University (AVU) on the relevance on skills for employability. Dr. Marcelo Maina from the Open University of Catalunya – UOC, shared fascinating insights on how the innovative methodologies, developed by UOC, can support a competency-based learning approach in any learning environment. This was followed by a lively interactive discussion and poll on employability skills led by Michael Opiyoh of Maseno University in Kenya.

Mr. Andrea Contino of MyDocumenta, Spain gave a live demo on the EPICA ePortfolio which was co-designed by the EPICA initiative partners. His demo was followed by a highly interactive session

led by Prof. Paul Muyinda of Makerere University, Uganda, with students, teachers and employers from the three pilot countries highlighting their success stories while using the ePortfolio during the Pilot experience.
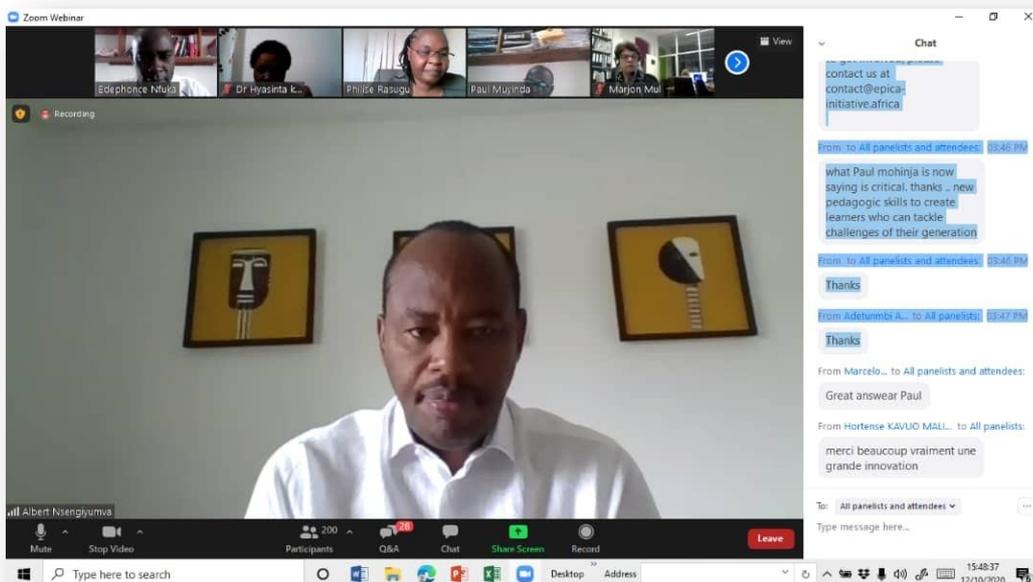
Dr. Edephonce Nfuka of the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), Tanzania shared his very interesting perspectives on the benefits and advantages of using such an ePortfolio and how this enhanced and increased the visibility of OUT's learners' skills and strengthened their employability perspectives.

Reaching the end of the conference, there was a space left for Q&A between the experts and the participants, let by Philise Rasugu as chairperson of the conference.

To conclude the event, the conference counted with the presence of Albert Nsengiyumva, Secretary General of ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa) and member of the External Advisory Board of EPICA, who spoke on the relevance of the topic at the pan-African level.

Participants were given deep insights into the relevance of skills for employability and the methodology that was developed by UOC to assess and make employability skills visible. They learned how a European ePortfolio was adapted to address the needs of the African job market and heard firsthand from students, teachers and employers how the use of the ePortfolio enhanced and increased the visibility of the students' skills.

This conference was organised by ICWE and hosted by eLearning Africa and promoted to the eLearning Africa Community of Practice. To view a recording, please follow this link.

Snapshot of the
Virtual Conference

GOODBYE AND HELLO!

The EPICA Initiative, a strategic partnership between Europe and Africa to co-design an innovative and scalable ePortfolio to improve the quality, visibility and availability of new skills, has now come to its official end when the project comes to a close at the end of December 2020.

The initiative, which was co-funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, was launched in January 2018 by the following consortium partners: The African Virtual University, ICDE, ICWE, Makerere University, Maseno University, MyDocumenta, the Open University of Catalunya and the Open University of Tanzania.

During its three-year lifespan, the consortium successfully co-designed an ePortfolio, developed by MyDocumenta, and adapted it to the needs of the African market with the support of its African partners institutions. Its consortium member UOC developed the underlying innovative methodologies to support a competency-based learning approach in any learning environment. The co-designed EPICA Portfolio was piloted in the different African partner universities involving students, teachers and employers.

One of the highlights coming out of the project is the EPICA Employability Skills Kit that can be downloaded here. These resources were created by UOC with the aim to support the academics, students and employers - who participated in the pilot study - to perform the necessary actions to assess employability skills, award micro-credentials, and make them visible for the workplace. These materials also aim to inspire the stakeholders' community and support the implementation of the proposed methodological approach in other higher education institutions preferably adopting blended and online learning models.

We, the EPICA Consortium, are very sad to say goodbye as this project comes to its final stage but we look forward to engaging with you in the future. EPICA's main outcomes will remain available to any interested individual or organisation who would like to make use of these highly relevant results that aim to support the increase of employability across Africa and beyond.

To engage with EPICA and its consortium, please contact us at info@epica-initiative.eu.

For information on the EPICA Initiative activities and results, please visit us at https://www.epica-initiative.eu/

You can also follow us on social media:

https://twitter.com/Epicainitiative

https://www.facebook.com/EpicaInitiative/

https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13589357/

Signed: The EPICA Consortium

EPICA Initiative Consortium Members

To learn more about **EPICA Initiative co-funded by the** H2020 Programme of the European Union, and the purposes that underpin it, please browse our website: http://epica-initiative.africa.

Do you know friends or colleagues who might be interested in receiving information about **EPICA Initiative**? Feel free to direct them to the subscription form: http://newsletter.epica-initiative.africa.