VIRTUAL EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM

Project:
Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region – ICI

USER MANUAL

FOR

VIRTUAL

EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM

Author: Valentina Terzieva
Publisher: Avangard
Translator: Diana Dimitrova

Reviewers: Prof. L. Kocarev,
Prof. Dr. R. Chobanova,
Prof. R. Andreev

Free / Non-Commercial Edition

CONTENT

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Educational Platform (VEP) is a web-based system that provides an online environment for self-training and qualification of employees and all interested in from the forestry and forest-based industries. Despite the platform is developed by a joint Bulgarian-Macedonian project for cooperation in the border regions, it is freely accessible after registration and can contribute to all employers and employees in the logging and wood processing sector who strive to improve their competitiveness.

VEP is aimed at distance learners, with the main goal to deliver specific professional knowledge and acquisition of computer and technological skills that are now one of the main requirements for career advancement. Strongly motivated learners do the best and they have the greatest benefit from distance learning. VEP is designed to meet the needs of typical and atypical learners, and especially those who are most at risk, with difficulties to cope with the traditional training format. The platform provides an opportunity for Internet-based professional development through self-education as the users themselves can set the time, the place and the pace of learning. In fact, it is assisted the process of passive learning with the focus on an active participation of trainees.

The platform is accessible and easy to understand, with an intuitive interface to help interested parties to acquire new knowledge and improve their qualifications. Teachers have the rights and control

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

over the structure of the educational materials, its content and teaching methods, but not on the participation of trainees.

This guide briefly introduces the main features of the virtual educational platform that are necessary to complete the learning process:

- initial profile registration and setup;
- orientation in the platform and basic functionalities;
- description of training courses;
- receiving feedback.

The manual is not exhaustive; it presents a brief overview of the main topics. The platform is under development in order to provide more opportunities for a complete learning process. When updating the VEP, an electronic version of the manual will be available on the website of the platform.

For comments, recommendations, and suggestions on the Virtual Educational Platform, write to the e-mail addresses listed in the Contacts section of the VEP.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PLATFORM

The Virtual Educational Platform is based on Moodle – e-learning environment that offers a variety of learning opportunities through dedicated content management software. Essentially, it is an interactive web system, providing a variety of functions and activities supporting on-line training. It is organized in the form of e-learning courses tailored for self-learning. Each of the courses may contain different types of study materials, tests, questionnaires and tasks, forums, chats, embedded rating system and other tools. The platform VEP is available at web address http://vep.bas.bg/. In order to use it an up-to-date browser is required. It is recommended to use the latest version web browsers (Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox) that can be downloaded from their official sites. Cookies and pop-ups must be enabled and Java installed in order to take advantage of the full functionality of the platform. A stable Internet connection and enough memory to open the resources in the platform are necessary. Users must install Adobe Reader to open files in PDF format. VEP is also accessible from mobile devices.

Figure 1 represents the home page of the virtual learning platform, where any visitor can view the publicly available information.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

Figure 1. VEP Homepage screen

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

The platform supports three languages - Bulgarian, English and Macedonian for the interface (menus), information, and learning resources. Not all the resources are available in each of the languages.

REGISTRATION IN THE PLATFORM

In order to use the Virtual Educational Platform, each user must make a free initial registration that is for identification with a login username and password. Figure 2 shows the screen from which the users create their profile and account by email or log in the platform.

Figure 2. Screen for registration or login into the platform

It is necessary to fill in all the required data for the creation of a new user's profile. All fields marked with a red exclamation mark are mandatory (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Initial registration in VEP

Username – the name that will be used to enter the VEP. It should be in small letters in Latin characters.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

Password – a user-selected combination of letters, numbers and other characters. The password must contain at least 8 characters that meet the following requirements: at least one digit, a lower case and a capital letter, and at least one non-alphanumeric character. If necessary, the letter checkbox can be used to check the vision of letters (such as an eye) when entering a password. This allows the user to see the entered password so it can be recorded and kept in case the user forgets it.

Email address – a valid email address that the user uses. It should be displayed twice so the system can check the match between the two records and if an error occurs to give a signal. Successful sign-up requires verification of an email sent automatically by the e-mail platform and use of the data in it.

First name, Surname – user's name and surname.

City/town – the place where the user is normally placed when using the VEP*.*

Country – the country in which the user uses the VEP.

When you have completed all the necessary data, click the "Create my new account" button*.* After that, the system verifies whether the entered data is compliant and if it finds discrepancies it shows with red captions what needs to be corrected. When the data is correctly filled in, a new user profile is created, which requires confirmation. In the e-mail address specified by the user, the system sends a message with easy instructions to complete the registration.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

Confirmation of the registration

The user must open the message sent to his/her e-mail from the platform on behalf of the administrator. If a registration has been made, but an email has not been received, it is possible that the specified email address is incorrect or the automatic spam protection of the user's mailbox has been triggered. The user must check for a received letter in the spam folder, and if it is not there, the user has to make a new registration again with another valid email address.

The users have to copy and open into a browser the internet address written in the received email in order to confirm their registration. This action completes the registration process, so the user can log in the platform for the first time.

Log in to the Virtual Learning Platform

In order to log in to the VEP, the user has to press the log in button (Figure 1) on the first page http://vep.bas.bg/. In menu „Log in" (Figure 2) the user must fill the username and the password she/he used when registering. The system offers and maintains a forgotten password mode.

SETTINGS AND PROFILE EDITING

Upon logging in the platform, the user's name is displayed in the upper right corner of the screen, and there is a drop-down menu (Figure 4).
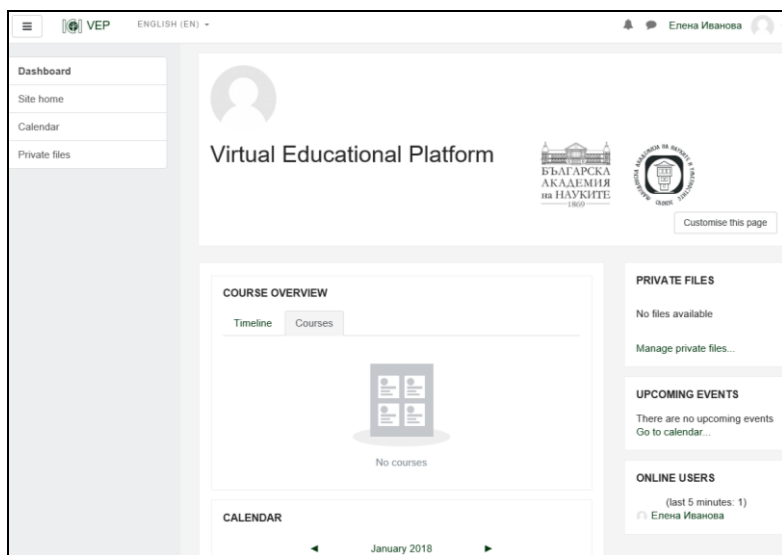

Figure 4. VEP screen after logging in to the platform

From the "Profile" link the user can see the information that was inputted into the system when registering. The user can put new data in the profile immediately after the confirmation of the registration and after logging in the system, through pressing the button "Edit profile". The user's personal information can be

supplemented by a brief description, a photo, a list of interests, a personal web page, and links to a social networks' profile; a Skype name, an institution, a phone, and other contact details. The link "Exit" allows the user to leave the VEP.

The block for setting is located to the right, just below the navigation block (Figure 5). It provides interaction with the content of the current page. The available functions in the block change depending on which part of the platform it is located on. Some of the more important functions are:
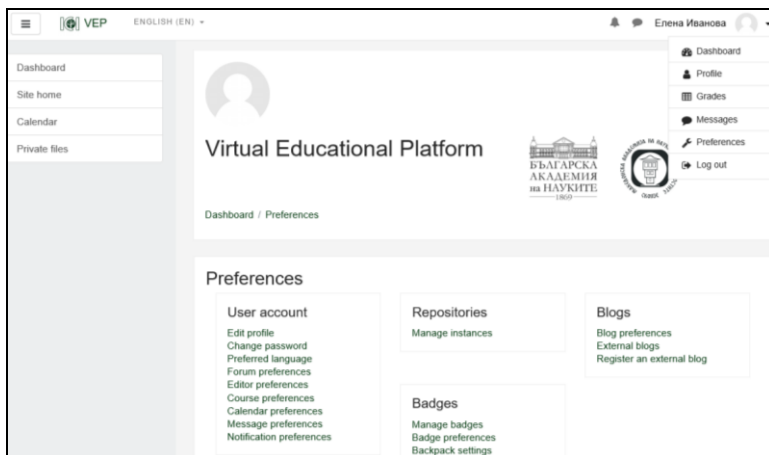

Figure 5. Screen for editing and setting preferences

- Editing the user profile;
- Password Change - allows the user to change the password;
- Language preferences, forums, editing, courses, messages,

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

etc. - allows the user to set the preferences for the different features that the platform offers or choose how to receive notifications about different activities (via a pop-up window or an email message);

- Course Administration - this is a section that is visible only when the user is into a particular course.

When all the needed data is filled in the required fields, click the "Save Changes" button to update the information.

NAVIGATION IN THE PLATFORM

Once the users enter the virtual learning platform with their username and password, they can access its functions. In the top left of each page, there is a navigation block – a menu with many tools that allow interaction with the platform (Figure 6). It contains links to the frequently visited pages:

My menu – a menu that shows the courses in which the user is enrolled as a learner. The users can view the content of some course by clicking on the link with its name. The users can participate in all the courses in which they are enrolled. For some courses in VEP, a self-enrolment option is available (Figure 8), so that the users can access the learning content and related learning resources which they choose.

Figure 6. The Site home screen of the platform after logging in

The Site home gives basic information about the platform and its terms of usage, as well as about the project on which it is built:

- *Terms and conditions* under which the VEP can be used;
- *Information about the project* under which VEP is created;

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

- *Information about the program* under which the project is funded;
- *Contacts* of the administrator and the persons responsible for VEP;
- *Questions and suggestions* - contact form for feedback.

The contact form can be used by all users at any time, which helps to improve the quality and functionality of VEP. It gives an opportunity potential user to express an opinion on e-learning courses and resources on or to ask questions.

The VEP homepage also visualizes the training opportunities presented by:

- *Course categories* – a list of all available courses;
- *News* – an announcement of the latest news. When the user has entered into a course, the news is about that course, while the other pages show the latest global news about the platform.

Calendar - Provides information about upcoming events by dates (if any).

Personal files – a link to the personal files page of each user where the learning materials can be stored.

MAIN ACTIVITIES

Types of courses

Courses in VEP are organized into categories where each of categories and sub-categories has some learning courses. When clicking on the name of a category, its structure and course titles that are included in it appear (Figure 7). Below the title bar of the platform from left to right, the screen shows the "path" to the current location (page) and how to get there. The basic navigation block is at the upper right part of the screen. Generally, the courses are divided into two types: freely accessible to everyone and others with enrolment options – i.e. require an administrative or another formal enrolment.
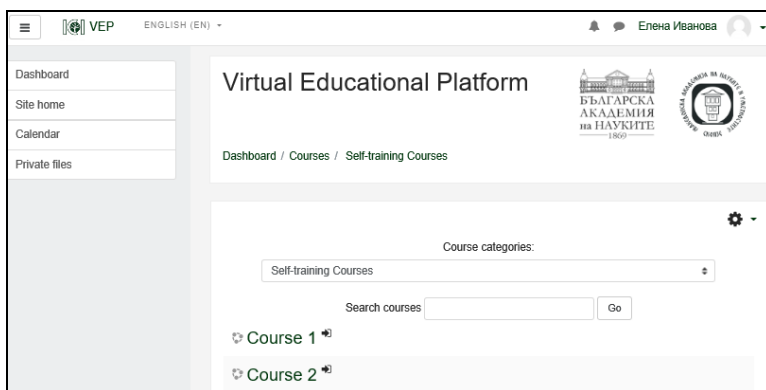
Figure 7. Training courses in the platform

Guest access to courses – some courses are set so that even non-registered users can access their content.

Most of the available courses in VEP are configured so that every registered user of the platform can self-enrol in them. If you click on the name of a course, a page similar to the one shown in Figure 8 will be loaded.
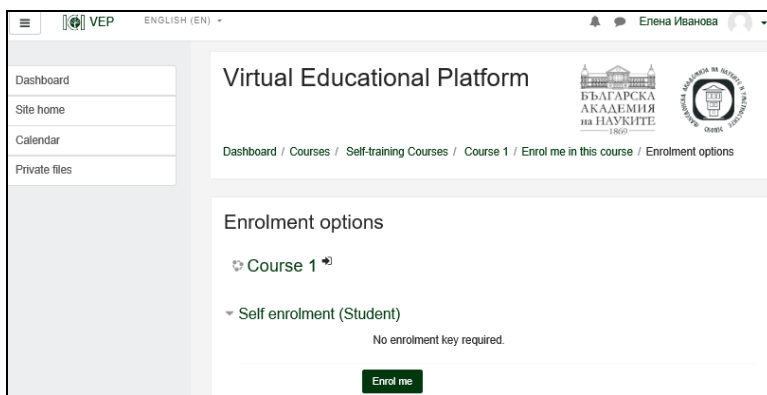
Figure 8. Self-enrolment for a course

The user can enrol in the course by clicking on the "Enrol me" button. It should be done only once per each course. Then, at each entry into the platform, the user will be able to enter the course directly.

Another case is when courses are available with a special code (key) that usually is provided by the lecturers. In this case, a screen similar to Figure 8 will have an "Enrolment Key" field where you must enter

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

the enrolment code.

Course titles are links that lead to the learning materials and activities in them. When the users enrolled in a course, they will have access to all activities related to it – they will be able to read the lessons, make tests, receive ratings and feedback, receive messages and news related to the course, etc.

Course page

Courses in the virtual educational platform are organized by topics, where usually there is one section for each topic, which contains the relevant learning content.

For each course in a separate block may be provided contacts of the lecturer responsible for the course. Since the platform is designed for self-study, the lecturers usually play the role of consultants for the courses that they have published. Some courses may have tests that are automatically evaluated by the system. After passing them, the learner receives immediate feedback on the result. Learners can contact the respective teacher to ask questions about the course content.

The feedback form (Figure 9) is shown as a section on the homepage and can be used by all users at any time, helping them to improve the quality and functionality of the VEP. The users have an opportunity to give feedback on e-learning and course materials or ask questions.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

In the courses, there may be exercise tests after each topic or final test. Exercise tests are available throughout the entire training course and can be done several times. Normally, the final test settings make it possible to solve it only once.
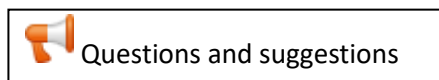
Questions and suggestions

Figure 9. A feedback form

When the users enter a test, they view the rules for making a test as well as the rating system. Additionally, it is indicated the time restrictions – a period during which the test can be done and its length. The type of questions, the points, and duration of the test, as well as the number of attempts to solve it, are determined on the basis of the teacher's recommendations. If the time to resolve the test is pre-set, the period begins when pressing the button "Start the test now".

Working with files

When working on the platform, users can upload files that are saved in the Personal Files folder. When there is such a task, a dialog box appears in which the "Add File" button must be pressed. The maximum size of the file that can be uploaded (in the VEP is 100 MB) and the maximum number of files that can be uploaded (in this case 1) are listed above the window. There are two ways the user can upload a file to the platform:

1) *Uploading by dragging a file* – the easiest way, by directly dragging the file from the user's computer into the browser window and then running on the rectangle with a blue arrow. (This option may not work for some older versions of browsers.)

2) *Uploading by selecting a file* – by clicking the "Add ..." button located at the top left of the upload file window. Then a dialog box is loaded in which the user can select a source from which to upload a file. The "Upload file" option must be selected from the shown list. A file upload form is displayed in the window, where the file to upload is selected using the "Browse" button. In the field "Author" the user can specify who the author of the file is. By default, it is the user. In the "Select a copyright" drop-down menu, the user can choose a license under which to use the specific file. The field "Save as" allows the user to select a name under which the file should be saved on the platform, and if it remains blank, the system will retain an original file name.

To finish the process, the user must click the "Upload file" button. To cancel, the user must press the **X** sign at the top right of the window. When uploading the file successfully, it will appear inside the file upload window.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

Editing files

If it is necessary to edit the settings where a file was uploaded, the user must click on its icon in the uploaded file list. There is a dialog box where the user can change the file name, the author or the license under which it is uploaded into the system. The file can also be downloaded or deleted.

To finalise the uploading of files, the user must click the button "Save changes" to save the files or "Cancel" to reject the changes made. In the second case, the uploaded files will not be saved.

FUNCTIONS AND TOOLS FOR TEACHERS

As the Virtual Learning Platform is based on Moodle it provides the complete range of e-learning functionality. All tools for the lecturers are available after initial registration and authorization by the administrator of the platform. The platform' administrator can assign different roles lecturers: manager, course-creator, editing or non-editing teacher. The information and courses offered by a user for publishing at the platform should initially be verified by the Methodological Council and after their approval, a publication permit is given. The Methodological Council consists of experts - members of the project team, as well as other prominent experts from the institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,

Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, University of Forestry – Sofia, etc.

The main functions of the lecturer in VOP include:

- creating courses – creating, editing and deleting content in them;
- attaching different types of files (text, images, sound, multimedia, databases, etc.);
- changing the appearance of the course by adding or removing various activities and functions;
- creating links to other resources on the global network (sites, search engines, dictionaries, blogs, etc.);
- dividing learners into groups by manually enrolling them in the courses;
- preparing and conducting tests and analyzing the results;
- assigning tasks to learners as well as checking and evaluating their performance;
- monitoring activity and tracking learners' development through the results of the evaluation;
- maintaining constant feedback with learners;
- maintaining a forum and chat for each course;
- sending messages simultaneously to all or only to some of the students enrolled in the course;
- receiving by email all new posts from the courses' forums;
- exploring students' opinion about courses through surveys.

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

Creating courses

When creating and changing the settings of a course, the teacher performs various activities:

- Uploads, edits, displays, hides or removes training materials;
- Prepares, edits, displays, hides, evaluates or removes assignments and tests;
- Creates forums, chats, databases, etc. in the course;
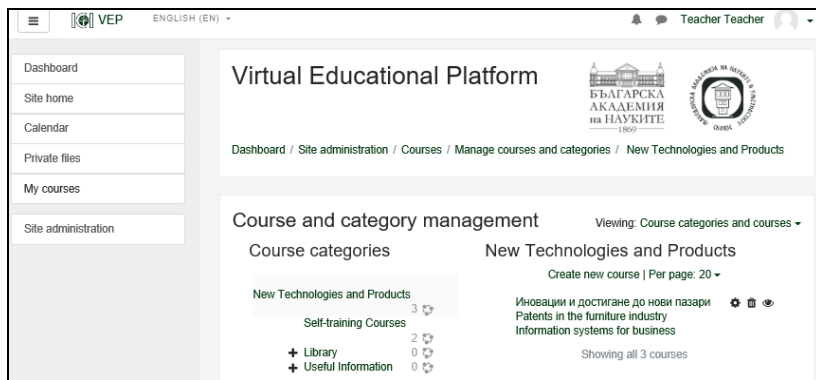- Activates, shifts, displays, hides or removes blocks from the course screen.

Figure 10. Creation of a new course

Editing mode is available from the Site Administration block on the left side of the screen. Then a new "Courses and categories management" menu is activated, from where the teacher can create new training courses (Figure 10).

Figure 11. Adding new courses screen

When adding a new course, it is obligatory to enter its basic parameters – full and short course name, to choose which of the existing categories to belong, description (summary), etc. (Figure 11). Typically, the VEP does not specify the starting and ending dates of the course as the courses are intended for permanent use.

A course format (social, thematic, weekly or single activity course) should also be set and the type of learning activity should be determined (Figure 12):
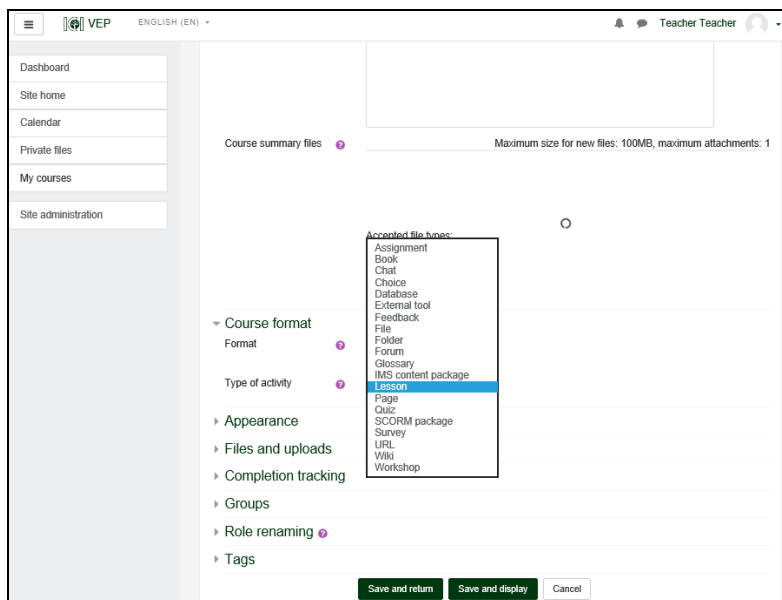
Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

Figure 12. Choosing the type of the learning activity

The learning activity is determined depending on the type of resources selected for publication. All required fields must be filled in so that the new course can be saved.

Then course-creator enters the already created course and adds the learning content depending on the type of the selected resource.
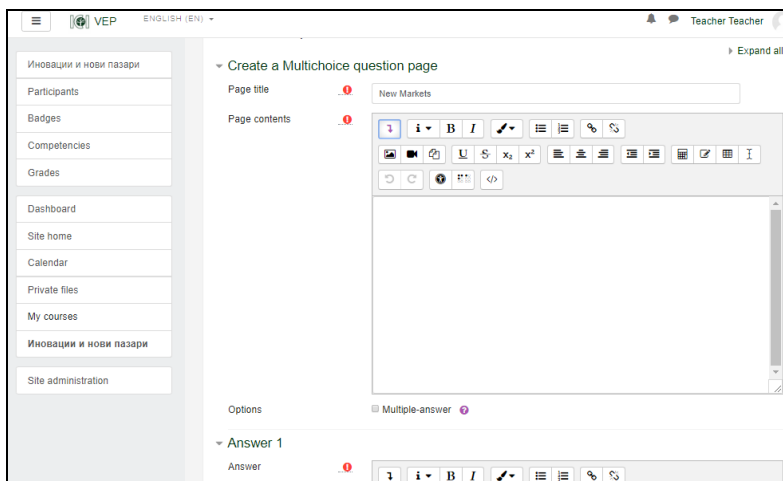
Figure 13. Creation of questions and tasks to a course screen

Figure 13 shows how to create questions in a lesson – it opens a template where the teacher can add text, attach pictures, insert links, etc. For convenience at the top of the writing area, there are icons that resemble the icons in the word processing programs. They enable easily formatting of the text in the desired way – setting a font appearance and alignment, adding a list, table, etc. To finish creating the learning resource, click the "Save changes" button.

Managing courses

When entering a course, the left side of the platform is the navigation block (Figure 13) where the user can see all the students and colleagues in the course by clicking on the "Participants" button. Their personal accounts are also viewable. If some or all of them are selected, they can be emailed simultaneously.

In the same block there is the "Competencies" button, through which administrators and lecturers who can manage site-level or category-level competency frameworks can create, import, and export competency frameworks and identify related competencies. Competencies allow learners to be evaluated according to training plans.

The "Administration" block allows the user to perform the following activities:

- *Editing* – adding, changing, shifting and deleting learning resources and course activities;
- *Settings* – change basic course parameters (name, number of topics, access code, etc.);
- *Assigning roles* – reviewing the lists of students and lecturers in the course and manually adding new ones;
- *Groups* – splitting students into the course and creating groups that may have different rights to access the learning materials and activities;

Project № CB006.1.31.070
„Innovative Cooperation Initiatives in cross-border region"
This project is co-funded by European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC
Programme Bulgaria - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Programme,
CCI Number 2014TC16I5CB006.

- *Reports* – monitoring students' activity by clicking the "Reports" button from the drop-down menus, which information should involve the reference: which activities and functions in the course are attended, when and how many times a resource has been opened, etc.;
- *Questions* – gives access to the bank with questions about the course where the user can create, edit or delete test questions;
- *Files* – gives access to the folder of materials to the course, and the available ones can be edited or deleted, plus adding new ones;
- *Ratings* – allows tabbed tracking of assignment and test scores for all course participants. This feature supports the formation of final assessments as well as statistics and course analysis.

There is a drop-down menu at the top right of the screen, allowing the user to make some settings (Figure 14). For example, pressing "Locally assigned roles" shows other possible roles in which lecturers can enter through "Assign roles to ...". There is a choice between the roles of a non-editing lecturer, a student, and a guest. These options can be used to check what the course or an element (job, test, poll, etc.) looks like from a learner or guest's point of view.

Figure 14. Learning resource settings

This guide is not exhaustive; it only provides basic guidelines for the work of students and lecturers in the virtual learning platform. If you have any questions or need help, please write to the email address of the VEP administrator: vepadmin@vep.bas.bg.