A CATALYST FOR CHANGE AND INNOVATION – KEY MESSAGES FROM THE EU ELEARNING CONFERENCE

The European elearning Conference 'Technology Enhanced Learning – Catalyst for Change and Innovation' recently took place at the Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli, part of the Helsinki University of Technology.[1] The Conference ran between the 4th and 5th July 2006 and was one of the first events to mark the Finnish Presidency of the EU which started on 1st July 2006.

This article presents the key messages and issues from this Conference and puts them in the context of the general EU policy debate on elearning and Lifelong Learning (LL) themes addressed by EQUAL. An associate article describing the Conference proceedings in more detail is available.

ELEARNING DRIVERS

The opening session placed the Lisbon agenda as the key driver in the development of elearning. Ján Figel, Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism, who said that: *"…the political drive for this work comes from the Lisbon European Council in 2000. There is no need to remind you that this is when the leaders of the EU set Europe's political and economic reform agenda for the present decade and concluded that every citizen should be equipped with the skills needed to live and work in the knowledge society. The main rationale for this is that the socio–economic potential of information technologies is directly related to their accessibility".* The Lisbon Strategy has recently been refocused on jobs and growth, and more stress has been put on investment in knowledge and innovation.

There are a number of changes which are putting the development of learning and skills, and elearning at the forefront of national and international debates. Within the EU the population is getting older. This has two major implications. Firstly, the skilling of older people to use and work with the new technologies. Secondly, the smaller numbers of younger people means that there is an opportunity and indeed an urgency to upskill more young people into higher level skills, qualifications and jobs.

The demographic changes will affect the EU's competitiveness relative to its main current competitors (e.g. North America and Japan), and increasing competition from India, China and other emerging economies in the Far East. Mr Figel pointed out that: *"Public spending on education is indeed increasing in most EU countries and stands now at 5.2% of the gross domestic product. However, as far as total investment in the knowledge economy is concerned, the gap between Europe and our competitors worldwide has not narrowed"*. This notion that we have to progress just to 'stand still' was mentioned by a number of speakers. Despite progress in a number of areas, there are still challenges, particularly in addressing disadvantage and discrimination. For example, many young people leave school too early, one in five 15 year olds have literacy problems, one in ten people of working age are involved in adult education, and 58% of the EU workforce (and 80% of the population with lower qualifications) have never used ICTs.

There were also a number of pedagogic changes and challenges to be faced in delivering, accessing and accrediting an increasingly flexible, personalised, innovative and informal learning system with an increasing emphasis on the role of the teacher or facilitator, the need for learner support mechanisms, and a technical and strategic infrastructure that can understand and respond to these increasingly fast moving and complex developments.

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[1] See http://elearning2006.dicole.net/twiki/bin/view/Main/WebHome

Several speakers mentioned that we are at the crossroads of these developments and learning and skills will need to keep pace with the technological, communication and media changes as consumers of learning become more varied, intelligent and demanding.

ELEARNING ISSUES

Personalised learning

Several speakers referred to the increased personalisation of learning. This concept is nothing new, but is likely to develop significantly in the future due to changes in ICTs. Personalised learning offers a number of opportunities and challenges as far as the LL and inclusion agendas are concerned. To date, ICTs have assisted learning using traditional methods, but personalised learning will open up educational resources and opportunities to a broader range of learners in a variety of different ways.

A lot of the predictions of the ways in which ICTs can contribute more effectively to lifelong learning in general, and that of disadvantaged and marginalised groups in particular, comes from developments in the Internet and the ways in which young people are increasingly using ICTs. Internet use is far more widespread amongst this group and young people use a variety of ICTs to communicate, such as, the Internet, mobile phones and iPods. Young people are using ICTs in a much more personal and interactive way. The sharing of text and images (for instance, through Blogs[2]), the increasing development of social networks (such as Myspace), and new tools to personalise web usage (using, for example, tagging) all have potential to broaden the content and use of elearning.

The belief is that ICTs will be able to deliver learning in a much more tailored, flexible and accessible way. People will not require formal tuition (delivered by a teacher), but can download materials and access them in a variety of ways. The flexibility of ICTs will also enable content that is more relevant to people's specific needs so that it is much more attractive to them. This will increase people's motivation and confidence in accessing learning (especially amongst disaffected and disadvantaged groups). It will also help people learn more effectively because the content and the way it is delivered will be much more relevant to them.

The other dimension to these developments is people's ability to interact more effectively with the learning content, teachers and tutors and other learners. For example, a Finn living in Athens would be able to access and interact with content in Finnish and communicate with tutors and other learners in Finnish without leaving their homes or workplaces.

Management of learning

The personalisation of learning will present a number of opportunities to deliver learning and skills in a way that is more accessible and relevant to a much broader range of people. However, this will also bring with it a number of challenges. One of these challenges is the ways in which learning is managed, both at the macro (e.g. Governments) and micro (e.g. teachers) levels. At both these levels there will be moves from the transmission of knowledge to roles of facilitation and advocacy.

If the personalisation of learning moves forward in the ways in which it is predicted, there will be an increasing need (and demand) to deliver learning to a broader spectrum of people with more varied needs. At the macro level, this will require the development of new ways in which learning is delivered, funded, assessed, accredited and supported. This will require, for example, an extension of the broadband infrastructure and new ways of accessing it (e.g. through people's televisions). It will also need changes in the provider infrastructure as education and training moves away from traditional methods of delivery and into a more varied and interactive learning experience. It could be that people use and combine different providers and other sources of

[2] A Blog is a web-based journal that is regularly updated and intended for general public consumption.

knowledge (such as, work experience) depending on their needs and what is most appropriate and relevant for them.

At the micro level, there will be a change in the relationship between learners and tutors. Rather than delivering knowledge teachers will have much more of a role in supporting and facilitating knowledge acquisition. At the Conference, a spokesperson from the Norwegian Education Ministry said that an important part of their current developments in expanding education (both in terms of policy and funding) was investing heavily in teacher competencies so that they have a methodological freedom in how they support learners. This could be in the learning materials used, they ways in which they are delivered, and the level of support that teachers give as the individual takes a much more central role in the learning process.

Partnerships

These predicted trends will also need the emergence of new partnerships of Governments (at all levels), industry (in developing and delivering learning materials), educational institutions, (schools, higher education, further education, private training providers, employers), learning facilitators (teachers and tutors), and learners. Several speakers spoke about the need to move away from 'silo' thinking, in which the decision making process happens within traditional departmental, sectoral or other parameters. Learners will have more choice and will need more choice and this will require new modes of understanding and delivery. One aspect of this is the increasing policy interdependence between education and social inclusion in order to instil and improve core competences amongst excluded people (whoever and wherever they are).

In the closing speech, Odile Quintin (European Commission, Director General of Education and Culture) said: *"ICT can link up schools, homes, workplaces and neighbourhoods and create innovative learning communities. I believe that allowing broader networks to participate in education is the most significant difference the technology can make for the future".*

She went on to mention the Lifelong Learning Programme for 2007-2013 agreed by the European Council on the 22nd June 2006. Partnership is a key aspect of this in pooling: *"…together the wealth of experiences and integrate them into the real context of schools, universities, the workplace, home etc…*[so that]*…every part of the Lifelong Learning Programme...is open to projects using ICT for learning."*

ELEARNING AND INCLUSION

This last point will hopefully address an important concern manifested at the Conference i.e. the lack of relationship between the ICT, elearning and inclusion agendas. For the Plenary speakers, inclusion was a key theme of their speeches. However, this did not appear to be matched by what happened in the Parallel sessions and the profile of delegates. Most of the projects presented in the Parallel sessions were higher education and school focused. Although one theme of the Parallel sessions was 'lifelong learning promoting inclusion' several of these sessions did not appear to be addressing inclusion as people in the EQUAL programme would know it. The profile of delegates also reflected this emphasis on higher education and schools, with very few attendees from inclusion projects.

In the three of the four 'lifelong learning promoting inclusion' parallel sessions attended, there were only two projects which addressed the inclusion agenda, and highlighted the ways in which the opportunities identified above can be taken forward and how the challenges can be met. .

The first was the FIT project based in Ireland (see http://www.fit.ie/). FIT is an alliance between industry, Government and local communities creating potential and progression of unemployed people, through acquiring IT skills and career support. FIT works with marginalised people (e.g. unemployed people, early school leavers, lone parents, disabled people etc.) and trains them as IT professionals. The project has developed new market led courses in partnership with the IT industry. The programme provides support for three years, through recruitment, training, placement and beyond. Its focus is on engaging with people first and then progression into learning. Part of this process involves going into local communities and working with people who know these communities and the barriers that marginalised people face (e.g. welfare officers).

The second relevant project was eMigra, which sought to promote digital literacy for migrants (http://www.e-migra.org/index.php?id=6&L=1). The project has identified and published online a database of initiatives, projects and policies which promote digital culture across Europe. Best practice has been identified within these projects. In promoting digital culture it is important to avoid ICTs that contribute to or aggravate the exclusion of people who are already excluded but, rather, build on those essential acts of everyday life whereby people utilise ICTs. Good practice from projects included linking in with e-skills and searching for jobs, learning the language of the host country, and access to health. A feature of these projects is understanding the diversity within migrant communities by giving local flexibility to projects and involving migrants themselves.

ELEARNING OFFERS OPPORTUNITY

The main conclusion from the Conference, as far as inclusion is concerned, is that ICTs and elearning offer a lot of opportunities in developing the lifelong learning agenda so that it embraces everyone. However, in order for this to be done effectively, it needs much greater involvement from the non-higher education, school and technology sectors. For example, Framework programmes concerning personalised learning have focused on highly skilled professionals. There has been little focus on blended learning (i.e. combining flexible elearning with more traditional local face-to-face support), which would help reduce barriers that ICTs themselves sometimes represent to some excluded people.

In addressing the demographic, economic and skill challenges ahead, excluded people are an invaluable resource. However, if ICTs and elearning are to be a vehicle for greater inclusion, there needs to be much more involvement of the inclusion sector in informing these projects, programmes and policies.