

## A CATALYST FOR CHANGE AND INNOVATION – AN OVERVIEW OF THE EU ELEARNING CONFERENCE

*“ICT-enabled learning must now take a step forward. A new vision is needed that takes into account the shifts and trends that are transforming the way people work, learn, make sense of the world and have fun in a digitalised, networked and knowledge-based society. A new ambition is also needed so that elearning can now start to impact on structures, learning patterns and on breaking down the barriers we have created around our institutions. That is our vision.”*

*Odile Quintin, European Commission, Director General of Education and Culture*

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.<sup>1</sup>



The Conference ran between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> July 2006 and was one of the first events to mark the Finnish Presidency of the EU which started on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2006. It was set firmly against the background of the refocused Lisbon Strategy and its aim was to:

*“Examine questions such as how technologies can effectively support innovation in education and training, promote desirable change and support lifelong learning for all”.*

2006 marks the final year for the elearning Programme (which ran from 2002-2006), but 2007 heralds the Integrated Programme for Lifelong Learning which will continue important elements of this work. The Conference was therefore designed to examine such programmes, as well as contribute to the forthcoming Commission Communication on the use of ICT to support innovation and lifelong learning for all.

Lifelong learning, innovation, inclusion and partnerships were the key themes of the conference. A [separate article](#) looks at what the main lessons of the conference were for EQUAL, particularly in relation to Adaptability pillar.

### THE OVERALL PICTURE

---

The Conference was divided into Plenary and Parallel sessions:

- The Plenary sessions featured key note speakers from a wide range of European Commission Directorate-Generals, the Finnish Government, industry, and learning providers. There was also a representative from Tsinghua University, in China who provided an interesting overview of how universities in China are delivering learning opportunities, not only to students, but also distributed learning to address issues of poverty and inclusion.
- The Parallel sessions were divided into six themes:
  - digital literacy for all;
  - lifelong learning;
  - promoting inclusion;
  - research and innovation for learning;
  - foresight for learning; and
  - partnerships for lifelong learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://elearning2006.dicole.net/twiki/bin/view/Main/WebHome>

All of these sessions featured a number of speakers involved in a wide range of projects and were more discussion based.

Over 350 people attended the conference, from a range of countries and institutions. Furthermore, many participants represented projects which were being presented at the conference.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Conference was the opportunity to take stock of the amazing array of tools made available by innovation in ICT; for example, the Conference presentation slides were made available on a memory stick, there were blogs<sup>2</sup>, Frappr<sup>3</sup>, Wikis<sup>4</sup>, and even electronic voting!

The Conference also provided the opportunity to share lessons and showcase good practice. Outside the main conference halls was an exhibition featuring projects and initiatives that showcased the benefits and achievements of elearning.



## TOURING SOME OF THE SESSIONS

---

### DAY ONE...

#### *Opening Plenary*

The Conference began with Jan Figel, Commissioner in charge of education, training, culture and multilingualism. Mr Figel firmly established the Conference in the context of employability, lifelong learning and inclusion:

*“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 message was reinforced in later European Councils, with particular stress on the value of ICT skills for the labour market and employability”.*

With this in mind, digital skills were included as one of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning. Whilst there has been some progress in education and training, there were still fundamental issues to address, such as: gender biases; lack of participation; literacy issues; and, the lack of use of computers and the Internet.

Mr Figel reminded us that, whilst there has been a lot of focus on the competitiveness, growth and innovation aspects of the Lisbon Strategy and its recent reformulation:

*“We should not forget that the Lisbon objectives actually include not only competitiveness, but also social cohesion...The digital divide remains an important challenge: as the Information Society advances, it becomes more urgent that disadvantaged groups are not left behind and that everyone enjoys the same lifelong learning opportunities. In sum, education reforms should also aim to bring about a fair distribution of opportunities”.*

---

<sup>2</sup> A Blog is a web-based journal that is regularly updated and intended for general public consumption.

<sup>3</sup> A Frappr is a blog covering social networks.

<sup>4</sup> A Wiki is a website that people can edit as well as read.

Richard Straub - Advisor to the Chairman IBM Europe, Middle East and Africa, and President of the European elearning Industry Group (eLIG) - delivered the keynote speech of the session, entitled 'Innovating Innovation'. He made it clear that lifelong learning, inclusion and partnerships were a fundamental component and driver of this process.

A theme common to a number of presentations was our current position at a crossroads in ICT development which is likely to fundamentally change the way we live, work and learn. Increasingly, there are more jobs in services based on information, and relatively fewer in traditional services, manufacturing and primary production. Lifelong learning, openness, partnership and inclusion are fundamental components of this growing knowledge and innovation based economy and society,

### **Parallel session – Digital Literacy for All**

The focus of this session was the national, European and international policies aimed at equipping citizens with necessary competencies for living and working in a knowledge based society. The context of this session was provided by the Chair who said that:

*“Lots of people use IT, but a significant percentage aren't trained in it...80% of the EU population [with low qualifications] have never used a computer”.*

The two main speakers at the session were José Pessanha, European Commission, DG Education and Culture, and Øystein Johannessen, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Education and Research, Norway. Both speakers stressed the need for curriculum and institutional reform in order to ensure appropriate provision for disadvantaged groups.

### **Plenary 2: Digital content for learning**

David Vincent, the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Open University UK, opened the session and called upon learning providers and learners to move:

*“...from autarky to interdependence; formal to informal learning; consumption to creativity; and generic to personal learning”.*

Fabrizio Cardinello of eLIG echoed this and identified the transition from elearning to 'me-learning' - requiring a more holistic approach towards learning personalization requiring new ICT infrastructures (e.g. greater access to broadband in the way we have access to other utilities, such as, water and electricity), the way learning is delivered, and new education, business and organisational models in order to manage changes in mass, personalized and informal learning.

### **Parallel session – lifelong learning promoting inclusion**

Whilst a lot of the speakers had mentioned inclusion, this was the first session involving concrete projects which actually addressed inclusion issues. The title of the session was 'Promoting inclusion in practice: Outcomes of successful elearning and ICT projects focusing on inclusion'. The first presentation was by Peter Davitt of FIT Ltd. (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 (for more information see the [separate article](#)).

The final presentation raised important concerns about the ways in which elearning may or may not contribute to reducing the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups. Dr. Joe Cullen of the Tavistock Institute said that the policy framework linking education to inclusion is too fragmented and involves different sources of policies with their own distinct policy environments. He argued that there is little evidence to suggest that the digital divide will not widen further under the predicted economic and social changes. The reasons for this are that: lifelong learning is not 'real world' enough as it is too linked to formal education structures; there is little impact on underlying structural conditions that underpin poverty; and, that rather than being a journey to a better future, ICTs will require a passport to that journey which disadvantaged people are less likely to have.

A key conclusion of the session that is especially relevant to the EQUAL community was that there is little information sharing with people in the 'real world'. Information sharing takes place almost exclusively between experts and practitioners, which results in a lack of understanding of what disadvantaged and marginalised people require from the world of learning. Because of this, initiatives aimed at such people that are not based on an understanding of their needs and aspirations will ultimately fail.

## **Day Two...**

### **Parallel session – 2<sup>nd</sup> Learning café: Learning to use ICT and Digital skills and e-competencies**

Dr Cullen's views were echoed in the second session of the Learning Café where Nikitas Kastis of MENON argued that there needed to be a more holistic view of lifelong learning in terms of:

- *“The re-orientation of Lifelong Learning from...transition pathways to a more holistic view of learning as part of social development;*
- *The corresponding shift in emphasis from learning as a process of reproduction to one of transformative learning;*
- *The rise to prominence of joined-up government, linking education with other key policy agendas and imperatives like employment, health and the environment; and,*
- *The increasing policy inter-dependence between education and social inclusion”.*

Clearly, EQUAL has a lot to contribute to these debates!

### **Plenary session: elearning and ICT for learning and skills development: the knowledge gap on learning innovation**

This session included a round-table discussion of most of the speakers at the previous plenary sessions, chaired by Claudio Dondi of MENON Network and Scierer. A key message of the session was addressing the fragmentation within elearning; for example when people attend an ICT conference or an education conference there is little cross-over in discussion. This requires the development of new partnerships which brings all parts of the elearning agenda together in a more co-ordinated way. The role of the EU is critical to this process in providing a shared focus, and the sharing and dissemination of knowledge is fundamental to this especially between different groups of people with different perspectives in an attempt to break out from 'silo' thinking.

The discussion was brought to a close by David Vincent of the Open University UK who argued that competitive pressures meant that work-force development and lifelong learning must go hand-in-hand:

*“...lifelong learning is no longer an optional extra, but a necessity in the face of international competition”.*

However, he pointed out, that these changes are not being reflected in the ways in which learning is being delivered, and that providers will not only have to change their profile of learners but also accommodate the development of informal learning and develop ways of accrediting this.

### **Parallel session – Perspectives for promoting inclusion through ICT-supported learning**

There were two presentations in the session that were of particular interest from an EQUAL perspective; they were:

- The eMigra project, which sought to promote digital literacy for migrants (<http://www.e-migra.org/index.php?id=6&L=1>). Given the dynamics of demography across the EU migrants are an obvious solution to addressing skills shortages in the economy. The project found that the migrant community needs to be seen as a diverse community (for more information see the [separate article](#)); and,
- From Teemu Arina the CEO of Dicole Ltd, who highlighted that the accreditation and delivery of learning would have to reflect an increasing informality of learning.

## AND OVERALL IMPRESSIONS?

---

The Conference drew to a close with a speech by Odile Quintin, European Commission, Director General of Education and Culture. She referred to the forthcoming Communication on the use of ICT to support innovation and lifelong learning for all and stated that:

*“The focus of this work will be...on how ICT can be made to enhance people’s learning and to shape innovative learning processes and structures”.*

Ms Quintin highlighted the fact that lifelong learning has been the main topic of this conference. Four drivers were identified:

- Broadening the uptake of ICT-enabled learning;
- Advancing the thinking on pedagogical innovations - ICT for learning;
- Building up of new partnerships;
- Connecting communities where learning takes place.

Ms Quintin also referred to the new Lifelong Learning programme for 2007-2013 which was agreed by the European Council on the 22nd of June. The overall aim of the programme is to contribute to turning the EU into an advanced knowledge economy and society through lifelong learning. This will involve pooling together the wealth of experiences and integrate them within the real context of schools, universities, the workplace and the home.

She also identified four key challenges – some of which are highly pertinent to EQUAL:

- Re-skilling older workers;
- Responding to the needs of the young 'digital natives' (those who have grown up surrounded by ICT);
- Focusing on the learner beyond and outside the formal education and training systems; and
- Facing globalisation and competition in learning provision.

The vision for elearning provided by Ms Quintin is shown in the quote at the start of this article. She concluded the conference by outlining the way forward to achieving this vision:

*“We need it to be endorsed by all stakeholders. The Commission will set it out more fully in our forthcoming Communication and in the way in which the new Lifelong Learning programme addresses these questions. I am convinced that with your help, commitment and engagement, we can use elearning to make a huge leap forward in delivering on our commitment to lifelong learning and to the modernisation of education and training systems”.*