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Over and Inside the Ivory Bridge: How Universities will Become Ideal Places Where to Learn

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Learnovation Vision Paper 3

“Over and inside the ivory bridge” - How Universities will become ideal places where to learn -

November 2009

A Vision for 2025:

“Being a Lifelong learner becomes a condition of life. Thanks to their massive and natural use in everyday life, technologies acquire an emancipating power on people opportunity and ability to learn, favouring a spontaneous tendency towards meta-cognition and ownership of their learning process”

1. Introduction

This Paper presents the Learnovation vision for 2025 in the areas of Higher Education, Evolved Distance Education and Virtual Mobility. There are several common features in the above e-learning fields. All three areas cover larger scale, state-supported or maintained systems. These fields have significant records of contributions in the modernisation processes of education, through the integration of ICTs and open learning methods. In the meantime, they represent a kind of “marker”, being quite visible, symbolic institutions for the ICT-supported education transformation processes. The target groups, motivating and driving forces in their communities and the related success indicators are rather closely related. All of these domains have strong international dimensions.

The Vision Paper is structured around **three main blocks**: state of art of innovation, expected future, and recommendations to reach the desired future scenario, the latter being composed of long term recommendations for 2025 and short term agenda on urgent actions to be taken starting from 2010 to let the desired scenario(s) come true.

The paper must be seen as a component of the whole Learnovation effort to refresh the EU vision of innovation and ICT for learning, and is based on a number of research results that can be accessed through www.elearningeuropa.info/learnovation.

2. State of art of innovation in Higher Education

The last decade in the higher education field has been marked by initiatives of historical significance. These strategic endeavors included the Bologna process in higher education, the Lisbon strategy of the European Union and the related eEurope – e-learning – lifelong learning initiatives and programmes. The higher education world has in the meantime been the subject of intensive challenges. In the accelerated, globalised environment, the pressure to perform placed both on institutions and their graduates from the side of the employers, the corporate sector, has increased. The impact of this pressure is partly an efficiency-raising, restructuring, innovating one, but it also contributes to the strengthening of flexibility.

There is a more and more intensive **competition for the professional and social space**, which is now occupied by higher education, both from the corporate education and training side, and from the other educational sectors' side. The internationalisation element has also been strengthening, reinforcing global competition among universities.

According to Curran, **e-learning strategies** adopted by universities have been approaching the core issue from the perspective of three most frequent objectives:

- widening access to educational opportunity;
- enhancing the quality of learning;
- reducing the cost of higher education

The term **evolved distance education** is increasingly being used in the sense of the traditional, professional, well-established distance education providers, like open universities, which have continuously been evolving by integrating new approaches supported by ICTs. Whilst open and distance universities put the main emphasis on the organisation of the learning process and instructional design approach, with the increasing performance, availability and affordability of ICT-based tools, their functioning has been considerably changing by integrating e-learning elements.

With easier and cheaper access to higher performance ICT tools and networks, we can observe a proliferation of creative – initially experimental or pilot, but later integrated - ICT solutions. The high performance solutions on the market became more and more affordable, the technical performance of the tools dramatically improved, the spectrum of solutions widened. There has been a relatively slow but very massive penetration of different technology tools and solutions in the learning and teaching practice.

The ever stronger diffusion of increasingly sophisticated ICT solutions is changing the governing praxis and slowly but also the institutional structures. A sort of spontaneous “penetration” of ICTs in the learning domain has been accelerating beyond expectations. In the non-institutional progression and adaptation pathways, individual and informal actions have been playing an important role.

One decade ago, it was stated that it would be more accurate to regard the growth of e-learning as a **process of evolution rather than as a revolution**. Nowadays, it seems that the expectation about the “revolution” was a somewhat exaggerated one, linked to ambitious early e-learning visions. It was also expected that with the development of e-learning, most higher education institutions would develop and implement a strategy for its use. This expectation still sounds probably too ambitious.

Recent analyses and system critics acknowledge, however, that at an undergraduate level, ICT-supported solutions are largely inspired by classroom teaching. ICT is primarily used to **support existing teaching structures** and traditional ways of tuition.

The integration of **the e-learning 2.0 approach** into mainstream education did not progress as intensively as initially expected, whilst in the informal learning field the collaborative behaviour of learners and the related tools did develop. In the **quality and accreditation** of e-learning in higher education, positive progress could be observed, but the issue of ICT is still far from being really integrated in the current institutional approach to Quality Assurance in higher education and, more generally, in the discourse on HE modernisation and the Bologna process.

3. Looking ahead: expected future developments

Looking at the latest developments in terms of innovation in Higher Education and Distance Education some trends emerge, which are believed to have an influence of future developments in the area:

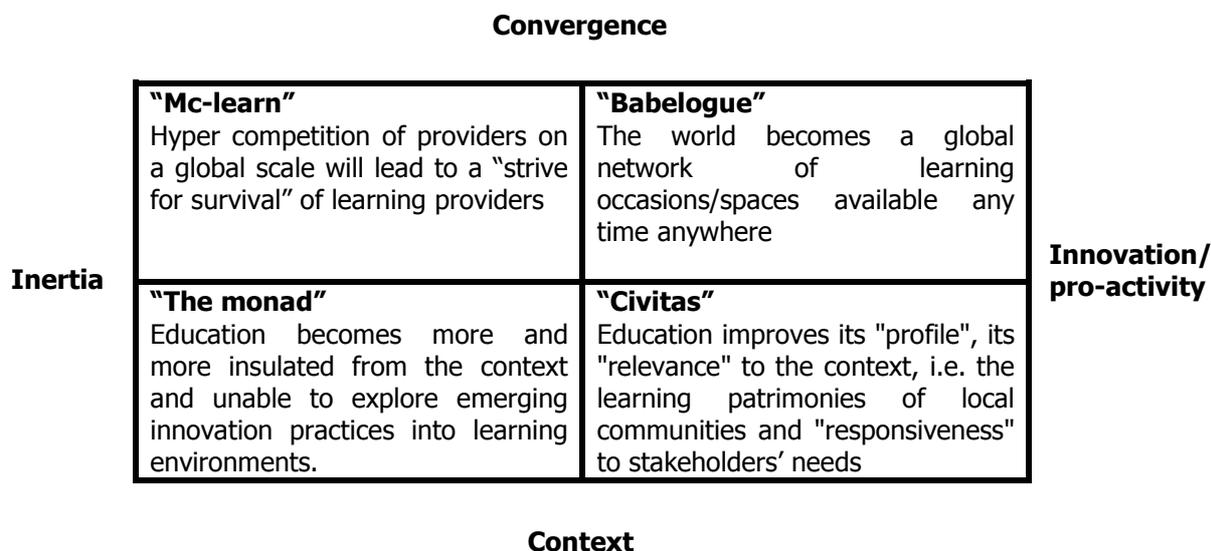
- The movement of open education – resources, virtual learning environments, software – is challenging the well established idea of universities as main owners of knowledge stored in impressive libraries with limited access and opening new prospective in terms of where the “core business” of universities is: producing and delivering content, certifying learning achievements, supporting students to become lifelong learners and learn how to make sense out of a wider and wider availability of contents.
- The “revolution of learning outcomes”, substantially supported by the Bologna process and European policy and programmes, challenges the disciplinary structure and the knowledge – centred way of teaching of most higher education institutions and encourages a more systemic dialogue with employers and other stakeholders, metaphorically leading the Ivory Towers towards the concept of Ivory Bridges, i.e. potential leaders in organising the knowledge-based regional/internationalised development model in which research, higher education and innovation are the cornerstones.
- Internationalisation of higher education provision is the “natural” reply to globalisation of economy and multiculturalism: beside the classic mobility of researchers, lecturers and students, new forms of joint degrees, virtual mobility and structural cooperation among Higher Education Institutions of different countries/continents are emerging, to a large extent supported by ICT.
- The recognised social demand for equity in access to and progress/completion of higher education programmes also challenges Higher Education Institutions to find new ways of organising/supporting learning in which the use of ICT allows to combine efficiency and quality of academic input as well as support processes.

The results of DELPHI Survey consultation - run by Learnovation to investigate on the future of learning (in terms of innovation in learning and contribution of learning to innovation) - lead to a learning world featured in 2025 by the following trends:

- Specialisation/diversification of education of Education providers (concerning the full spectrum of lifelong learning, not only higher education).
- Emergence of worldwide and regional interdisciplinary centres of excellence.
- Learning initiatives by education and training institutions more and more linked to the needs of local context.
- Informal learning through networking emerging as the XXI Century learning model allowing for diversity and dialogue in education.
- increasing adaptation of learning systems to individual needs.
- motivation and interest as the main levers of learning in adulthood.
- increasing experimentalism and change in learning pushed from the bottom.

In this general context, what scenarios are expected for learning in Higher Education through distance education and virtual mobility?

Learnovation identified four macro scenarios graphically represented below and asked experts to rate their feasibility in each lifelong learning area, including those related to the field analysed in this document.



Higher Education: Civitas

Civitas was rated as the most likely scenario as concerns higher education. It is interesting to note that the rating of the other three scenarios is quite close to the most rated one, with only 0.3-0.4 points of difference. This reflects, in our view, both uncertainty and a pronounced differentiation of views among respondents. Looking at the core tensions (contextualisation/convergence and inertia/innovation) the Civitas scenario falls into the innovation/contextualisation quadrant highlighting that – though innovation is hoped and expected, the need to concentrate the interests and activities of Higher Education on the local context is felt as predominant. Nevertheless, the need to increase the international dimension of HE is stressed by respondents as shown in the list of comments below:

- Favour cooperation on different levels: public/private, with stakeholders, with the local community and its needs, at an international level, among HE institutions (in place of competition)
- Develop quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms, with a global perspective, and favour the emergence of independent evaluation bodies.
- Support research in Higher Education in order to lead innovation
- Foster ICT as a mean to increase access and to improve learning processes (for instance through simulations and game-based-learning).

Distance Education: Mc learn followed by Babelogue

Mc Learn is the prevailing scenario as far as Distance Education is concerned, followed by Babelogue. Not surprisingly, both stand in the convergence trend and elements of both scenarios can be found in the comments and recommendations provided by respondents:

- ensure access to distance education, in terms of tools usability, availability and affordability;
- universalise distance education and digital content as a learning utility, through public commitment and public/private cooperation and quality assurance development;
- Intend ICT as a support for collaborative exchange and cooperative construction of knowledge, rather than as a tool for realizing knowledge repositories.

4. Towards a desired scenario: the LEARNOVATION recommendations

Analysing the free comments provided by the experts consulted with the DELPHI one can argue that the desired scenario for the area of higher education is one where universities shifts their core educational functions from the area content towards mentorship and sense-making, as well as evaluation and certification of learning outcomes.

In addition, they play a key role in the implementation of the knowledge triangle concept both at local/regional level –by acting as a leading partners among others on societal priorities- and at the international level –by acting as a node of the global academic community and a catalyst of internationalisation of the regional economy and society.

In short, Universities become the ideal place where to learn in an equilibrium between the local societal needs and concerns and the global transformation processes.

What are the actions to be implemented to support the realisation of such a vision?

Learnovation elaborated, based on the results of analysis of innovation in learning in all Lifelong Learning areas, a set of 26 “statements” on urgent actions for change in order to implement innovation in learning and to make sure that learning supports innovation of the European society and economy. Originally, five main statements were linked to the area analysed in this vision paper:

Match quality assurance with innovation

Exploit the full potential of ICT to support equity and innovation in Higher Education

Use virtual mobility to democratise access to international study experience

Support integration of informal learning without colonisation

Innovation and creativity of Higher Education staff and students must be rewarded

Such statements were subject to a multilevel consultation involving (in chronological order):

- the ca 100 experts and policy makers participating in the Learnovation Open Forum held in Brussels in May 2009;
- the ca. 1200 practitioners participating in the on-line consultation launched through the Learnovation web site
- the ca. 50 experts and decision makers involved in the DELPHI consultation.

The elaboration of the ratings as well as of the comments and proposals for new urgent actions to be included led to the following “imperatives for change” to be implemented by 2025:

Imperatives for change – Horizon 2025

Amongst the 10 imperatives for change, those which most directly affect the area of higher education are the following:

Face openly the issue of relevance of current learning provision: change is urgent

There are many good reasons why change in institutional education may not be too quick, and stakeholders’ concerns is one of them. However, the generalised perception of decreasing relevance of education should leave nobody indifferent: Europe needs learning systems which are closer to societal needs and encourage creativity and innovation, and it needs them now.

Establish more connections among the different areas of Lifelong Learning

From a learner’s perspective the institutional separation among school, VET, higher Education, adult learning makes little sense: a really integrated system of Lifelong Learning should be a common policy aim across Europe.

Recommendations – Agenda 2010

In order to implement the above mentioned imperatives for change, the following action lines are suggested, in the form of recommendations, as short-term instrumental actions to be put forward by policy and decision makers:

1. The **strategic choices for education policy** in the EU shall include a commitment to **lifelong learning** and the implementation of **student-centred learning**. ICT has much to offer to student-centred learning. Due to the specificities of the distance learning field, this has been much more present in the evolved Distance Education sector from the beginning.
2. **Quality assurance** has much to contribute to both lifelong learning and student-centred learning. Ways to identify and certify non-formal or informal learning should be found and one should be able to **assess credibly what has been learned**.
3. Increasing attention should be paid to **virtual mobility** in order to build **intercultural dialogue, support the internationalisation of curricula, make international study experience accessible to all students and promote cooperation with third country universities** (as an alternative to “brain-draining” strategies). Within the EU, virtual mobility is starting to be perceived as a potential component of the Bologna process, bringing together joint titles in a cooperative way (rather than betting on the recognition of national degrees in different countries).

Annex. Background

The LEARNOVATION project

In the period 2008-2009, the LEARNOVATION project, supported by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, has worked to stimulate a consultation process aimed to lead to a collective and consensus-based new vision of eLearning (or technology-enhanced learning) in Europe. The rationale of the exercise is to inspire the full exploitation of its potential to implement lifelong learning strategies and to support innovation in Europe, also beyond the borders of education and training systems.

What is behind this Vision Paper

LEARNOVATION has organised a number of activities involving a high number of European decision makers, experts and practitioners in the field of ICT for learning, with the aim of reaching a set of recommendations that can contribute to guiding EU E&T policy in a long term perspective by increasing the level of innovation and creativity of EU LLL systems.

The present document presents the results of these activities and the constructivist process that has brought to the LEARNOVATION Recommendations, along the following steps:

- 1. Desk research and EU networks consultation.** An intense desk research phase has brought the LEARNOVATION consortium to the identification of a number of learning-related areas that need specific attention in terms of innovation and creativity. The work has concentrated on four main areas, related to school education, higher education, work-related learning and informal learning. The results of this work, that are available in four Cluster Reports at www.elearnineuropa.info/learnovation, have then been discussed with some of the most relevant European networks in the field of ICT for learning¹ in March and in November 2008, as well as with key European and national policy makers².
- 2. LEARNOVATION Open Forum, Brussels, 27 May 2009.** The result of the previous phase has been condensed in 26 “imperatives for change” (that are presented in the next paragraph), a list of actions that should be taken in all the four areas tackled by the project plus some general transversal imperatives. These 26 statements have been discussed and improved in small workshops and then have been voted in terms of relevance during the **LEARNOVATION Open Forum**, organised in collaboration with the European Commission in Brussels on the 27th of May 2009. The main result of the Open Forum has been a list of the most relevant 10 imperatives in the opinion of the selected stakeholders present at the event.
- 3. Online consultation (July-September 2009).** Following the Open Forum, with the aim to involve in the consultation all interested European stakeholders (targeting in particular E&T professionals and practitioners), the 26 statements have been at the centre of a broad online consultation, conducted through the eLearning Europa Portal and promoted through the main networks in the field /EDEN, EFQUEL, etc...). The consultation has involved more than 1100 participants and has resulted in a new list of 10 top imperatives for change, plus in a high number of bottom-up comments, ideas, and concerns.

¹ This has been possible thanks to the Learnovation Roundtable, an informal cooperation platform that gathers 8 key European networks in the field of ICT and innovation in learning. For more information see www.learnovation.eu.

² The proceedings of these events are available at www.elearnineuropa.info/learnovation

4. **Delphi Consultation (July-October 2009).** To complete the consultation, the 26 statements have been included in the DELPHI Survey that LEARNOVATION has conducted in the period July -October 2009, that was focussed on the future of European E&T in terms of ICT, innovation and creativity. This has allowed a restricted number of selected experts to give their view on the 26 imperatives “with an eye on the future”.

The results of these four phases have then been analyzed by the Learnovation consortium, with the aim to transform them into a set of practical recommendations that can contribute in shaping future learning and learning-related policies at the EU and at national level, by instilling the needed level of innovation and creativity, discretely but substantially supported by ICT, in E&T settings. Chapter 3 of this Report presents these recommendations, together with some very practical ideas that could contribute to increase the level of innovation and creativity in E&T settings.

The LEARNOVATION Commitment

Finally, given the interest raised by the exercise and the relevance and potential impact of the resulting recommendations, LEARNOVATION commits to make this open consultation a permanent exercise rather than an exceptional event. In this sense, the Learnovation consortium and the Learnovation Roundtable (www.learnovation.eu) will explore partnership possibilities with European and national stakeholders to make sure that the 2009 consultation can be remembered as the first important step of a systematic bottom up policy agenda definition process involving stakeholders in the debate on the role of learning for innovation and creativity and for shaping the future of Europe.