



Growth and development of Lifelong Learning European policies, the role of e-Learning and its programmes

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Abstract

The present review is about the education and Lifelong Learning policies of the European Union in the last fifteen years. The objective of the present document is to offer an interpretation of European choices and developments that have spurred the creation of a Lifelong Learning Action Plan and confirm existing plots between Lifelong Learning and the use of ICT. The 2000 Lisbon Strategy and e-Learning Programme is the setting of the present review. In the last few years, European documents and activities have progressively gained relevance in informal learning contest and ICT. At the same time, a wider sensitivity to social matters and participation, such as active citizenship issues have become part of European education and learning Policies

1 Introduction

In the last fifteen years, the interest in Lifelong Learning and its economic and social implications have been at the centre of European Education and Training policies. The stages, which have led to the formulation of Lifelong Learning Strategies, are indicated in the publication of three green Papers between the years 1993-95. The first one, by Jacques Delors called "Growth, Competitiveness and Employment – the challenges and ways forward into the 21st Century" (European Commission, 1993) introduced the Lifelong Learning concept; the second, entitled "European Social Policy – a Way forward for the Union" (European Commission, 1994) focus on the role of third sector to promote the informal training, and, finally, in the 1995 green Paper, "Teaching and Learning – Towards a Learning Society" (European Commission, 1995), Lifelong Learning represents

the key factor for the future creation of a Knowledge Society in Europe.

In addition, the 2000 Lisbon Strategy marked a fundamental step in the role of ICT in training and innovative interventions in order to define the importance of the Framework Programmes with regard to a long term planning phase. The Lisbon Council collected the green Paper suggestions and defined European policy on education and training up to 2010.

In the present setting, the e-Learning Framework Programme (e-Learning 2004-2006) represents an initiative to promote a transversal and open learning environment. It has also been the preamble to the creation of the Learning Programme (2007 – 2013) in which Lifelong Learning occupies a central role which transversally affects each sub-programme of the European Lifelong Learning Action Plan (LLL).

2 The contribution of Green Papers and the Growth and Development of Lifelong Learning

From the middle of the '90s, European Education and Training Strategy underwent various changes. The first of political relevance, is represented by the importance of training policies for the economic growth of European Member States. The 1993 Green Papers underline how the education of the European citizen guarantees an increase rate of European Employment. Education must be time flexible and suitable to constant changes in the global economy. The 1994 Green Paper is about the relevance of an integrated approach by actors and agents of Training and continuing education. In these years, the programmes of the European Social Fund represent the principle operative tool to support training, education, competencies updating and mobility of the European population. The 1995 Green paper is entirely dedicated to lifelong training and its strategic function. In the 1995 green Paper, the Lifelong Learning context is also associated with social values. Lifelong Learning also aims to promote awareness, critical and analytical competence throughout an individual's lifetime.

3 The Lifelong Learning in Lisbon Strategy

The 2000 Lisbon Strategy gathers White Paper instructions from the beginning of the '90s and it underlines some strategic aspects in education and training. Lifelong Learning represents a guarantee with regard to updating and improving competences and skills of European citizens as a key factor of European growth and development. The principle objectives of the Lisbon 2000 Strategy focuses on economic and social matters, as explained by the three pillars:

- An economic pillar preparing the ground for the transition to a competitive, dynamic, knowledge-based economy. Emphasis is placed on the need to adapt

constantly to changes in the Information society and to boost research and development;

- A social pillar designed to modernise the European social model by investing in human resources and combating social exclusion. The Member States are expected to invest in education and training, and to conduct an active policy for employment, making it easier to move to a knowledge economy;
- An environmental pillar, which was added at the Göteborg European Council meeting in June 2001, draws attention to the fact that economic growth must be separate from the use of natural resources (European Council, 2000, p.23).

By means of the Lisbon Strategy, ICT assumes an important role in relation to the innovative methodology of teaching and learning, as a tool to offer an educational system closer to the population's needs and to guarantee a wide accessibility to training and learning environments. In this context, the terms e-Learning as tool, methodology and learning environment able to give answers to Lifelong Learning studies and research before and after 2000 year, become part of the European Union programmes.

4 E-learning initiative experience

After a time of preparatory actions the e-Learning programme launched in December 2003¹, represents an example to promote the Lifelong Learning principle through ICT. Its fields of intervention have different approaches and objectives:

- To reinforce cooperation between the various actors involved, in particular by fostering public-private partnerships.
- To exploit the potential of e-learning in the context of innovation in teaching methods with a view to improving the quality of the learning process and fostering the autonomy of learners.
- To exploit the potential of e-learning for enhancing the European dimension in education;
- To identify the actors concerned and inform them of ways and means of using e-learning for promoting digital literacy and thereby contribute to strengthening social cohesion and personal development and fostering intercultural dialogue (Decision n°2318/2003/CE pp. 8-10)

The action lines of the Programme are: Digital literacy, Virtual campus and town twinning Schools programme.

The programme was operative in May 2006². Its results and best practises are published in the archives of the European Commission webpages³.

1 Cfr. European Commission, (2003) DECISION No 2318/2003/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 5 December 2003 adopting a multiannual programme (2004 to 2006) for the effective integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme), Bruxelles.

2 Cfr. Official Journal of the European Union, III (Information) EACEA/01/06 (2006/C 75/11) 28.03.2006

3 To visit http://ec.europa.eu/education/archive/elearning/programme_en.html

5 Towards the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007 – 2013

What are the European Commission's new trends and programmes in Lifelong Learning?

Within the second phase of the European programmes (2007 – 2013) and after a period dedicated to analyzing and to studying the situation of education and teaching in Europe (at all levels), the European Commission created a specific framework programme on education and training. The objectives of the programme include:

- Improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU;
- Facilitating the access of all to education and training systems;
- Opening up education and training systems to the wider world (European Commission, 2006a, p.54)

The innovative character of the LLL framework programme is represented by the transversal approach to learning. Each individual in each moment of his life must have the chance to update and to improve skills, knowledge and competences. In particular, the programme has kept the previous Socrates programme area of intervention plus the four “key activities” in which foreign language, ICT, cooperation and Dissemination/exploitation constitute the new focus of the LLL programme. With reference to ICT, the programme underlines the role of New technologies “as a catalyst of social and educational innovation and change. It is not about technology but about how learning can be enhanced through ICT - eg simulations; discovery learning; attracting drop-outs back to learning; enabling learning outside the school environment; flexible lifelong learning to bridge the digital gap”. (European Commission, 2006, p. 32)

The other innovative concept in the LLL programme is represented by the social value of training. The new learning and communicative environments represents an opportunity for entire European populations to access the formal or informal learning field. In particular, we read in the programme that “ICT enables individuals to enhance their social networking and this has the potential enhance their learning. Learning is mostly a social process. Self-learning and informal peer-learning are important ways of developing e-skills and competences”(ibid.) The principle of social inclusion has become part of the education and training policies of European Union.

6 Conclusions

Lifelong Learning, from its origin up to the present, has received constant attention from European policies and it has assumed different connotations in comparison with the ideological point of view of promoting Lifelong Learning

policies. From an economic viewpoint linked with the principle of growth and development, learning and education has become a field in which active citizenship values and the improvement of widespread knowledge are at the center of European trends. At the present time, ICT enters the educational environment as a tool to promote ethic and social principles for all European populations. New technologies such as the funding programme devoted to ICT and for instance the e-Learning programme emphasize the social and cultural diversity of European citizens and underline the right to have digital competences.

The recent document of the European Commission dedicated to inclusion in the i2010 annual report focuses on learning as a fundamental tool to promote an equal and active participation of the European population. A new era of European education and training policies just started, and inclusion and social cohesion are central values for all future initiatives and programmes.

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