FUTURE OF LIFELONG LEARNING (LLL) IN A DIGITAL CONTEXT

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LIFELONG LEARNING (LLL) AND CONTINUING EDUCATION (CE)

A definition of LLL by the European Commission is that LLL is designed to enable people, at any stage of their life, to take part in stimulating learning experiences, as well as to develop their education and training. LLL will become the predominant enabler for all persons, ages and universities [1].

Education transforms lives and is at the heart of UNESCO's mission to build peace, eradicate poverty and drive sustainable development. UNESCO believes that education is a human right for all, throughout life, and that access must be accompanied by quality [2].

EUCEN – European University Continuing Education Network was created in 1991. The definition adopted there was that Continuing Education is education and training acquired beyond that attained by attendance at educational or training institutions in accordance with formal national requirements [3].

Universities have been providing Continuing Education and Professional Development for adults since the XIX century. Most universities have been developing activities beyond the education of young students and have been researching towards providing training and education for adults. Universities have been researching and cooperating to develop structures, procedures, teaching methods, forums and know-how to provide the framework for adult education and training within the perspective of LLL.

In the past decades, several networks and associations such as EUCEN (www.eucen.eu) and UPCEA (http://upcea.edu) have been active in developments. Adult Education and Learning, Andragogy and Gerontology are areas researched by member universities and their centres for education and training. These are research areas that enable the appropriate methods to address adult needs and learning profiles. A large number of universities have created centres, departments and external bodies to handle the provision of LLL training and education. These universities have been working for years in this provision of (LLL) education and training for a large sector of the population. Examples of this panorama are the ALLUME project (http://allume.eucen.eu/) and its follow up, COMMIT (http://commit.eucen.eu), as well as the initiative of the European University Association Charter of LLL [4].

Universities and other HE (Higher Education) institutions have been addressing the use of Open Educational Resources (OER). The latest advances have been in MOOCs (Massive Online Learning Open Courses), that create free access to courses in most areas of knowledge. These MOOCs represent an effective development open to all in LLL. The enrolment at courses includes learners from all over the world, without prerequisites in terms of previous education and training. Such courses address different levels in the educational system, although a major portion are produced by HE staff.

Initiatives are successfully spreading around the world, where some courses have enrolments of hundreds of thousands of learners. Examples are Coursera (www.coursera.org) and EdX (www.edx.org).

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Most of these successful OER initiatives are led by prestigious universities, leading to a visible improvement in the quality of the available education and training. This is a motivation for all potential attendants.

Universities and HE institutions have led research in terms of evaluation and quality assurance in LLL. Some examples are projects such as EQUIPE (http://equipe.up.pt) and DIALOGUE (http://dialogue.eucen.eu/). HE institutions have also enabled the recognition of prior knowledge of learners. This recognition addresses informal learning and non-formal learning (for instance, work based learning and work place learning). The accreditation and validation, associated with the recognition, are relevant for qualifications in either professional or academic realms. Universities have played a large role in research and innovation, in the definition of methods of assessment, as well as the validation of qualifications acquired outside the formal educational system. This also leads to accreditation of the competencies acquired, which can be a further motivation for all to continue their LLL.

Many initiatives have been undertaken by universities or groups of universities to promote the advancement of recognition of prior learning. Some examples are OBSERVAL and OBSERVAL-Net (http://www.observal-net.eu) and URPL (http://www.u-rpl.eu/). Many countries, such as France, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Portugal, Germany and Australia, have published specific legislation to promote the recognition of prior learning carried out at universities. In most cases the accreditation of such prior learning leads to partial qualification towards a degree, but it is a major incentive for all to continue LLL.

Some HE institutions have been leading this process by including in their usual learning paths the learning and training acquired outside the traditional educational system. This innovation is possible also for other levels in educational systems and can be replicated in the primary and secondary sectors.

ONLINE LEARNING AND LLL CHALLENGE

Characterisation

Technology developments have been influencing daily life at an unexpected rate, with tremendous changes in the areas of learning and teaching. Communication media is playing an important role in changing the format and the quantity of information available for educational purposes. Such changes require a series of reflections and thoughts regarding the future role of learners and teachers. A specific area where transformations are more radical is Online Learning.

Most used media systems adopted for use in Online Learning are based on computers, smartphones, tablets and include communication using email, social networks, cloud storage, data collected from the WWW, dedicated software and connections with other audio visual media. Online Learning takes advantage of these electronic platforms to provide educational resources to those who would otherwise not have access to them.

Learners presently have the possibility of continuous access to specific information and dedicated learning tools. Therefore, in a classical educational system, teachers, researchers and administrators will face a rapid change in education methodologies, affecting course profiles, teaching procedures and other institutional issues that are connected with Online Learning practice. Open Education Resources (OER) have played an important role in providing access to many learners. OER models and platforms have been developed including some business for profit models [5].

The characteristics of Online Learning Courses imply that some initiatives are created as a replacement for face-to-face tutorials and treated as the primary teaching medium. Others are accomplished for purposes relating to student access to learning centres and as complimentary learning tools. Some important questions relate to the availability of computers, smartphones, tablets and to technical support and the allocation of teaching staff to produce these materials. Most attempts at implementing Online Learning courses in educational settings have added on to already existing course materials, rather than revising course structure and content. Generally, Online Learning materials become more integrated when the course is designed specifically for the particular medium [6].

Factors to be considered for Online Learning course design are: the maturity and profile of students, the interface friendliness, the active interaction with other students and tutors, and the flexibility of the learning pace. Another typical characteristic of Online Learning is that it may promote co-operation between learners if a group is set regularly to address joint projects/tasks or problems. This is a fundamental change from the vertical structure of classical educational systems and in some cases, such as adult education, may represent an enormous added value to teaching and learning.

In Online Learning courses there are materials that are permanent and reusable, unlike face to face instruction. This has advantages such as the chance for all learners to have access to the whole set of information and data, for students to study at their own pace, for Online Learning courses/modules to be better prepared than traditional ones and for enabling interaction between learners and tutors in a more open communication environment [7].

For teachers, the overload of students may be unbearable if there is no fixed upper limit to the number of learners interacting with each Online Learning course tutor. As additional tasks to the traditional teaching responsibilities, it may be a heavy burden if the workload is not adequately defined and limited. Since learners can incorporate outside resource materials into their response, it can improve the level of discussion but also increase the complexity of the tutoring process. In some cases, this may be a barrier for the involvement of tutors/teachers/mentors in Online Learning, for instance if learners are active professionals.

Online Learning teaching requires some reorganisation, despite the fact that much of an instructor's expertise in face-to-face interaction or distance teaching will have to be generalised properly to the Online Learning environment. Online Learning tutor training might occur through procedure manuals that explain the differences between Online Learning and face-to-face interaction, a basic list of right ways and wrong ways, examples of Online Learning interactions and analyses of basic communication problems and possible solutions. Some issues are particularly relevant, such as the techniques used to moderate and facilitate discussion and interaction between the learners and tutors, or adequate procedures to train instructors in effective ways to teach using Online Learning. Another concern is the effective pace of work of the learners using Online Learning material, which has to be chosen and controlled so that it will meet the deadlines or learning rate qualifying factors and pedagogical/andragogic requirements [8].

Seven challenges for Teaching and Course Design

Challenge 1: Flexibility - Some materials for the courses are requested by a number of learners with very different educational backgrounds. Therefore, the courses have to be prepared with enough flexibility to support a range of different learning demands. The materials need a degree of user friendliness to meet many different attitudes towards the learning medium used, such as people being afraid of using computers or falling asleep watching an educational video.

Challenge 2: Universality - The Online Learning materials have production costs that can only be met if their use is as large as possible and must therefore be prepared for a mass audience, enabling a potential use that guarantees the elimination of geographical frontiers. This means that they must also consider cultural and educational characteristics inside or outside the country(ies)/region(s) of production that may represent a barrier to the use of Online Learning materials.

Challenge 3: Innovative Models - The new technologies available for Online Learning courses are, in some cases, the opposite of traditional courses in terms of structure, organisation and evaluation. The teaching and learning models adopted have to be innovative and adapted to these media and tools so that courses make use of the full potential of Online Learning. There is a great need to rethink the teaching models in the design and delivery stage and to create new pedagogical guidelines to achieve proper learning.

Challenge 4: Co-operation - The production of Online Learning courses and their materials should be executed in cooperation with other institutions and groups of users, such as industrial and associations of professionals. In this way, the product will be guaranteed a certain degree of success in terms of destination group. The industry and other educational/training stakeholders in society have a cooperative role that may improve the quality of the courses and their use. Cooperation between teachers from different institutions is also highly desirable since it will contribute to lower costs and increase the potential target group of the courses.

Challenge 5: Teaching activities - These are the most difficult challenges since the motivation of academia to change their teaching methods is traditionally low. The new activities have to be considered as new tasks for the instructors and not as additional work on top of the existing tasks. Any additional task should be rewarded in accordance. In cases where activities involve a new type of work for instructors, there should be an adequate training phase, where they are now learners of the new learning and teaching technologies.

Challenge 6: Organizational infrastructures - The production of Online Learning materials requires new administrative infrastructures together with equipment facilities for the type of course delivery. The established system will suffer considerable changes that must be addressed adequately by the administration, allowing the Online Learning teaching and tutoring functions to be implemented with the necessary support, including trained technicians to manipulate the new equipment and technologies.

Challenge 7: Learning evaluation - Online Learning requires a new and appropriate system of quantifying the learning progress. Considering the different forms of learning achievements such as skills, knowledge acquisition or understanding, the assessment and evaluation has to be designed to measure the full amount of learning achieved by the learner. This evaluation can be open mode, but it must address the characteristics of the Online Learning course and the types of learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

Online Learning courses and materials are an inevitable development in the future of teaching activities and this challenge must be faced as soon as possible. The consequence of being outdated on this issue may mean that universities fail in the public service they are supposed to fulfil because others have already prepared Online Learning materials that may better fit the needs of the expected clients. Another danger is the demise of traditional teaching, possibly leading to teacher unemployment, since the learners in Continuing

Education/LLL are in most cases capable of using the Online Learning material and the information technologies without direct tutoring and teaching.

Quality assurance must be present in the production of Online Learning courses, since its absence can be a major obstacle to the acceptance of this type of learning by both teachers and learners. Some of the Online Learning courses have been designed based on the innovative capabilities of the supporting medium instead of the course pedagogical value. The challenge of quality evaluation and learning effectiveness of the Online Learning courses must be a priority in the course design and delivery. Without generalized quality control in the Online Learning courses, the learning achievements will not be guaranteed just by the use of sophisticated media.

It is envisaged that teachers will be trained in Online Learning technologies and pedagogy/andragogy together with organizational changes that allow the implementation of Online Learning courses in the classical teaching institutions. These are complex issues that need rethinking and adaptation, but the future of the learning environment is evolving rather rapidly. The future of Online Learning courses is not only in Continuing Education/LLL, where the learners are working and educated are therefore more likely to succeed, but also in the traditional basic education. The approach to Continuing Education/LLL Learning must be adopted by all and, first of all, by teachers, who have the duty and the responsibility of being the leaders in this change of attitude.

Other major interests of study were firstly, the main barriers that can prevent open education policies (or, for countries where there is no policy, open education initiatives) from fully succeeding, and secondly, the potential enablers for open education [9]. The research team believes in fact that understanding the barriers and enablers to open education can help policymakers who are both currently running policies and planning future initiatives in the field to better steer their actions. The main barriers identified by the interviewees are: low digital tools-readiness, low policy priority assigned to open education, fragmentation of initiatives, lack of institutional support, resistance to cultural change, lack of awareness about open education, low open education capacity within the teaching population, and the absence of an open licenses national recognition scheme. The main enablers for open education to thrive are: a clear policy priority assigned to open education; awareness-raising on open education, targeting leaders and educators; capacity-building on open education for educators and other stakeholders; measures to empower educators; and Online Learning platforms and advocacy communities.

EUCEN has addressed these issues in several projects related to the use of digital tools and Online Learning. Recently, at the Bergen Conference in June of 2018, EUCEN announced the creation of a Community of Practice (eCoP) to share good examples and useful tools for the digitalisation of LLL. This eCoP will focus on existing examples of application of digital tools in an ULLL environment from cradle to grave. The goals are to:

- link with other organizations involved in this type of actions, such as EDEN and IACEE;
- be a repository of contributions in events, conferences, chats, fora, blogs, projects, websites and publications;
- select examples and/or case studies relevant for this group;
- attempt to promote virtual discussion through live debate or forums;
- provide a collaborative newsflash;
- present and analyse the Swiss Universities initiative on quality of digital learning

This eCoP is for professionals who have interest in digital transformation of education and training and who are willing to cooperate and to collaborate. Especially those with genuine interest in improving quality of LLL using and exploring new approaches to LLL.

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