The Need of Lifelong Learning in the Knowledge-Based Society

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INTRODUCTION

The development of a knowledge-based society requires a technological infrastructure, availability of information as well as a workforce with the necessary skills, knowledge, and competences, supported by a well-structured initial education and by a continuous learning program. One can say that information literacy and use of basic technology tools is almost a prerequisite skill for participation in the new economy. Online access is arguably already a requirement for full social, economic, and educational participation.

In a knowledge society, the increase of productivity and competitiveness of enterprises, regions, and countries depends on the capacity of that workforce to generate knowledge and process information in an efficient way as well as to use the available technology. In this scenario, it is important to offer education and training solutions (including the development of skills how to look for information, how to process and apply it and how to use information and communication technologies) with quality and available to all citizens, including those whose circumstances prevented them from progressing through the formal educational process. This lead us to think that the major source of wealth of a nation depends on the quality of education and training and on the full integration of the whole population on the education and training system (Cardoso et al., 2005). Furthermore, knowledge has value only if it confers capacity to act. As a matter of fact, knowledge must be understood as a potential for action, depending not only of the information stored but also of the capacity of people to interact with it and use it (Lynn, 1998).

Taking into account this scenario, one understands the relevance and attention lifelong learning has generated in the last few years. In an environment where competition happens at the global scale, with the rapid pace of change in the technology and the challenges caused by the increase of productivity and competitiveness based on knowledge, one understands the call for the enlargement of the participation of people in activities of lifelong learning. These must be seen as an answer to the challenges of employability, as an education imperative to citizenship, to the equality of opportunities and to deepen social cohesion. However, these individuals have certain needs and difficulties that should be taken into consideration. For instance, they may lack knowledge and information literacy. They may not know how to use the new technology, where and how to look for information, and communicate using the Internet.

Furthermore, for some considerable time, universities were the domain of the elite
and only a privileged few had the opportunity to go on to a university. Recently, this situation has changed dramatically. Universities have now opened their doors to benefit from a wider intake. This expansion has allowed new groups of students, traditionally excluded or under-represented in Higher Education (HE), to participate in it (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Although these students may be rich in experience, they may have difficulty in adapting to the pedagogical approaches of learning and teaching. Furthermore, their attitudes and problems are not necessarily the same as those of traditional students. Nevertheless, they are still expected to fit into educational institutions designed for younger students.

Aware of the importance of people for the development of the knowledge society two European projects have been developed having as object of study the adult student defined as:

*adults over the age of 25 who left school with few or no qualifications, have been out of the education system for a long time, have no previous HE experience and come from a disadvantaged group (one or more facts may apply). This will, therefore, include adults who are working class, women, disabled, minority ethnic groups and adults across the age span.*

In the next section the objectives and a brief summary of the results obtained so far are presented and described.

**TWO PROJECTS:**
**LIHE AND PRILHE**

These projects were developed in the context of the European Commission Grundtvig Socrates Programme. This program — Grundtvig — seeks to improve the quality and European dimension of adult education in the broadest sense, and to help make lifelong learning opportunities more widely available to Europe’s citizens.

**LIHE — Learning in Higher Education (2002-2004)**

The studies concerning the expectations of non traditional adult students, their main motivations to enrol for the first time or to return to HE and the barriers found in this process, provide new information for policy making. The project *LIHE — Learning in Higher Education* (100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GI) explored in depth the difficulties experienced by non-traditional adults in HE. In particular, it aimed to promote lifelong learning in HE within a European dimension, to identify the learning experience and needs of adult students in HE, to raise awareness amongst practitioners and policymakers (institutional and governmental) of the learning needs of adults in HE, to promote institutional change through developing strategies, and to exchange and disseminate innovative approaches and practices to the learning and teaching of adults.

One of the results that emerged from this study was the reasons why people decided to return to HE. Some of the answers concerned an intrinsic willingness to learn and know more; others concerned social pressure and a need of a diploma in order to progress in a career. Generally speaking adult students are satisfied with the pedagogical approaches used by lecturers. These are mostly lectures and project work. These two different approaches satisfy both those that prefer to read and do work as well as those preferring to attend classes in a passive way and listen. As for the difficulties felt by those students, these concern mainly the lack of time/time to attend classes, time to study, to do the exercises, to live a family life.

As a result of this project a handbook was produced containing several activities and strategies to increase the number of adult
students accessing HE. This handbook covers the macro (national and European structures and policies), the meso (institutional issues) and the micro (learning experiences of adult students) levels. The issues concerned at this level are: (1) preparatory phases before HE, (2) personal study plans, (3) assessment, evaluation and feedback. A complete version of this handbook entitled “An overview of the different national contexts” is available at the LIHE project Web page (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/cll/research/lihe/).

This project also brought to the day light the need for those students to become independent and reflective as this would help them to learn continuously. However, the problem was to know how the institutions and lecturers could specifically help those students to become so. What practices and approaches could / should be used with these students? These problems were the basis of the following project — PRILHE — Promoting Reflective and Independent Learning in Higher Education. This project is still in progress. The next section introduces this project by describing it briefly.


Emerging data from the project LIHE demonstrated the importance for mature students of their own experience and how it is used in the way that they develop their learning and construct their identity as lifelong learners. Findings from that project showed that the learning aspirations of mature students are strongly influenced by a desire for self-development and for lifelong learning and that the development of an identity as an independent learner is a crucial factor in this process. It is already widely recognized that prior experience is a crucial motivating factor for non-traditional adult students in choosing to enter higher education. However little is known yet about the actual role of experience in learning, how it can most productively used by learners and teachers and how (much) it contributes to the development of independent and reflective learners in Higher Education and beyond.

This project PRILHE aims to extend the understanding of the nature of the independent and reflective learning and to develop tools for supporting this learning in a variety of contexts and in relation to a range of different disciplines. The objectives of the project are (1) to identify the learning processes which enable (non-traditional) adult students in HE to become independent reflective learners (to include study skills, self management, reflective processes and timings, learning to learn, analyzing learning and teaching styles, interaction with lecturers and peers, institutional support and structures); (2) to identify how this process could be better supported before, within and at the end of study in terms of materials, systems, staff/lecturers, Web support, peers, family/friends; (3) to examine the interface between learning from experience and academic learning — the overlaps and conjunctions — and how experience may help academic learning and future learning, including in the workplace; (4) to identify models of good practice in higher education institutions to share across Europe through workshops and conferences; and (5) to produce resource materials for both adult students and tutors (Prilhe, 2003).

As for the outputs, a Learning Toolkit and Student Handbook will be produced. These will be for use by adult students and tutors to enable and develop a managed learning environment within HE which takes into account the learning needs, attitudes, and aspirations towards independence of non-traditional adult students. The Student Handbook will consist of a description of learning strategies and approaches to enable them to become reflective independent learners and will include
examples of good practice while the Learning Toolkit, specifically for tutors/lecturers, will consist of teaching materials which can be used across disciplines. The latter will also include a section on key literature, the conceptual approaches and context of reflective independent learning across Europe and a summary of the key research findings and examples of good practice from the case study institutions and strategies and materials for good learning and teaching approaches in learning contexts where using experience is essential to the learning process such as APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning), work-based learning, professional development, and reflective learning. Both the adult student and tutor/lecturer materials will be translated in the language of each partner country. It is expected that these products will be available at the end of the project (December 2006).

These are only two examples of projects aiming to help adult students to fully integrate the society and participate in the challenges brought by the rapid pace of change. These projects mirror one of the main concerns of the European Union nowadays: the development of a workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competences in order to become active citizens in a knowledge-based society. In the process of development of competences, technologies may play a double role: on one hand, the competences to be developed must include the ones to correctly use technology. On the other side, technologies can be used as a mean to connect people and provide the training needed, for instance by e-learning. To bridge the digital divide we need to encourage a society that is devoted to lifelong learning. However, it may also be useful to view information technology learning within the policy construct of lifelong learning.

REFERENCES

ENDNOTE


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