

INNOVATIVE LEARNING FOR EUROPE

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We live by what we do, not by our institutions. Nevertheless institutions and technical arrangements are important. They serve us, or they fail us. Eden is a structure, an institution that is at the service of its members, who in turn are at the service of Europe and of the people of Europe. If you serve them, you deserve to prosper. If not, then you will have to move over and let someone else have the space.

Europe at the service of its people

The European Union has served its members over 50 years. We need to remind ourselves just how far Europe has been developed, for the good of its people.

In 1970, Europe was divided in 5 blocs:

- fascist dictatorships ruled several countries;
- the communists were leading half the continent down a blind alley;
- the non-aligned countries were rather distant;
- the nascent Common Market was in deadlock; and
- there was an anti-bloc, that some thought was in the lap of America.

In 2008 there is just one bloc – the European Union, plus some would-be members and a couple of countries who are out but in - who do what we do, but have renounced any influence. Within that EU bloc we have democracy and the rule of law; we have a free market, with a single space; a single currency (plus some bits); and policy cooperation with room for diversity.

Europe today, thanks to the EU, has prosperity and freedom like we never knew. We can move across frontiers, products go from one to the other, students think nothing of enriching their experience with a stay abroad.

I will be leaving my job in a few days, to spend a year at the European University Institute in Florence. I can do it with scarcely any prior paper work and hardly a frison!

Above all, we have brought to bear on the problems that confront us Europe's greatest strength: the creative, innovative potential that comes from being multi-cultural: the riches that comes from having 27 answers to every question.

I recall my experience in the Uruguay Round. Unlike many others, if the European negotiators were faced with a blockage, they had no problem finding alternative approaches. We had 15 to choose from!

Look at Europe's great successes – like Airbus. Wherein lies its greatest strength? In the creativity of multi-cultural Europe.

Bill Gates said he looks to Europe for creativity. Our cultural mix encourages it!

But we have to be critical, too. Wherein lies our greatest challenge? In the risk that multiculturalism descends into administrative chaos, nationalistic tugging at the blanket.

Too often we move through crisis. But we have moved a long way forward!

Learning for creativity and innovation

How is this relevant for us, in this conference, in your business of distance learning, in my business as (still) director of education policy?

It is in this: that our society is confronted with problems. And that overcoming those problems depends on the knowledge, on the creativity, on the innovativeness of its people.

Where there is a material problem, innovation is the answer. Learning for innovation and creativity is a challenge to us. But in education, too, we must be innovative.

Education as a service

Education is a service. Its provision is intended to deliver an outcome; to enable students to acquire new competencies: to extend what they know, understand and can do.

Education is a service of great importance to the student. But it is also of great public importance. For education is crucial to the success of our society.

Education is costly to provide. But the return on education is high. It determines how we develop as individuals; and how our society is able to meet the challenges that confront it. That is why the quality of educational delivery matters.

Quality assurance is about creating confidence. Confidence that a particular course we enable me to acquire the announced learning outcome. Confidence that our education system is providing the service it announces, both effectively and efficiently. Confidence that it is constantly reviewing its own performance, in a continual effort to improve delivery. Confidence that higher education is achieving its aims and ensuring that its aims are correct.

There is much to be proud of in the education systems of the EU. However, we must not be complacent. For the way in which our education system delivers its services will be crucial for the success of the EU in meeting the wider challenges of the years to come.

The context of education

Our education system has to work in the context of our times. I believe that 4 conditions determine the context in which education has to operate.

(i) Globalisation.

Globalisation is here to stay. Education systems will be judged not just against their own past performances but against the performances of education systems elsewhere. So we must be in constant discussion with others and benchmark our performance against that of others.

We have about 60% of our population aged 5-29 in education. That is on a par with the US and 18% higher than in Japan.

Our indicators show that the EU is in the small group of world leaders on education, with Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US and Korea. But the EU has a wide spread of performance within it. Ireland, Finland and Denmark are world-beaters, but some others do less well.

(ii) Creativity, innovation and competitiveness.

In a world where knowledge is a key asset, the capacity to innovate is crucial. Having been Director of Innovation Policy, I am acutely aware of the danger that education kills innovation. Innovation is so often the result of the improbable association of apparently unrelated ideas.

Globalisation reinforces the need for education that encourages creativity and innovation and enhances competitiveness. We have 13 million more higher education graduates now than in 2000. But how creative are they?

(iii) The demographic context.

The EU has low birth rates and high levels of immigration.

1 in 10 pupils aged 15, 1 in 7 aged 10 are immigrant children. In cities like Rotterdam, Birmingham, Brussels, half of school pupils are of immigrant origin. In Ireland, Italy, Spain the numbers of migrant pupils have tripled since 2000.

On average, migrant pupils perform less well in education.

The problem is not the kids. It is the system!

Teachers are confronted with needs that are hard to satisfy. If the children of migrant families are confronted by language and cultural barriers that make it difficult for them to get the best from education, it is hardly surprising that on average they have a lower education performance than their peers.

If we wish to build a society that is well-integrated, we cannot ignore these issues.

(iv) Scarce resources must be used in a way that is sustainable.

Education is a major consumer of resources. In the EU, it consumes over 5% of GDP.

Education has to fight for resources. It has to attract, train and retain teachers. The teaching profession has an advanced age profile. Can we attract the young, committed, specialised teachers we need?

We can only sustain our educational ambitions if the resources required are sustainable. An education system whose aims are recognised by society, whose methods are understood and whose professionals are highly regarded will be relatively well placed to ensure that its resources will be sustained.

Strategic choices for education policy

Within this context, education policy in the EU is undergoing major changes. I believe that 4 strategic choices will underpin our education policy for years to come. The EU is in the early stages of implementing them. They require long term commitment if they are to be successful. But I believe that the strategic choices have been made and will be sustained.

(i) We are committed to life-long learning.

Lifelong learning reflects the need for individuals and society to adapt constantly in a world that changes ever faster.

Lifelong learning can be reduced to a slogan: *from the cradle to the grave*. But it is more than a slogan. It challenges higher education, vocational education, continuing education. Perhaps

the biggest challenge is to persuade those for whom education has been a zone of failure to try again: and to find a medium in which they can succeed.

Higher education has often been content to teach teenage undergraduates, to support young researchers and to target its service delivery on these groups alone.

But lifelong learning requires education to meet needs that develop across life. Lifelong learning is about completing, updating, and reviewing and certifying the knowledge acquired and required by people of all ages and of divergent experience.

The Member States are committed to adopting a strategy to achieve lifelong learning. So far Sweden, the UK and Denmark have impressive strategies; and Slovenia, Finland, Austria, Belgium and Spain are close behind. Participation in lifelong learning is everywhere on the increase. But we will not meet the benchmark that was set for 2010 without more effort.

(ii) Learning must become student-centred.

This is as dramatic a shift as lifelong learning. But it reflects a deep truth: it is students that learn, not their teachers.

Student-centred learning is about meeting the needs and ambitions of the student, in life and at work. It changes the model, from the student who learns what the professor is pleased to impart, to the teacher facilitating the student's learning process. It is about learning outcomes, not inputs.

ICT has much to offer to student centred learning. The networks to make this a reality are in place, but so far the content, the new learning material that can be so effective, has been slow to emerge. We need to exploit these tools better.

Quality assurance has much to contribute to both lifelong learning and student centred learning.

Can we find ways to identify and certify the non-formal or informal learning which is the source of most of what we know? Can we confidently assess what has been learned? Can we find flexible pathways, adapted to the needs of the student, to complete and improve that knowledge?

But there is still more. For by the development of instruments such as

ECTS (Educational credit transfer systems)

EQF (European qualifications framework)

ECVET (European credits for vocational education and training)

we are developing a system in which it will be progressively easier for a learner to acquire knowledge from different institutions in a flexible pathway; to pick and choose what suits best or is most accessible and to combine it, have it certified and recognised – and the use it across the EU.

(iii) Education must be equitable.

The challenge of equity is not new, but it is unending.

There are still serious inequities in our educational systems. 1 in 7 young people are early school leavers. 1 in 6 children still do not go to pre-school, which is important for establishing basic competences.

Equity is about ensuring that every member of society is given the educational opportunity that is best adopted to their capacities and their needs.

But 25-64 year olds are 3 times as likely to participate in lifelong learning if they have completed upper secondary education. The trouble is that with a third of our workforce low skilled, they have an important need for continuing education.

Equity is about ensuring education for girls and boys, men and women; for the intellectually brilliant and those equipped in other ways; for home populations and for migrants.

Innovative methods are vital if we are to meet these challenges. e-learning and distance learning has much to offer.

Education is about equipping people for life; a major part of life is work; all people need to be equipped, or society will fail.

We have a long way to go! The best predictor for educational achievement remains the parents' educational achievement.

But we are comforted by the research result that equity is quite compatible with efficiency. To support excellence, it is not necessary to deprive others.

(iv) Education policy should be evidence-based.

I have spent a life working in areas where governments spend resources. Never have I found one where the investment in research on policy has been so small. 5% of GDP goes on education. Less than 0.5% of this goes on research into policy and assessment of evidence.

The alternative to evidence-based policy is assertion-based policy. The stakes are too high to build our future on someone's assertions alone.

ICT, e-learning and distance learning

Into this context comes Eden, with all that ICT, e-learning, distance learning offers.

I am speaking to a specialist audience, but let me share my thoughts.

ICT has not yet achieved full impact

Although ICT has had a major impact on education and training at all levels, its impact has not yet been as great as we hoped and expected. The task of transforming the teaching and learning process is still just beginning. Some innovation content is there: but not enough.

New business models are needed

Making the best use of new technology in education and training is not going to be achieved just by applying new methods in old contexts. In this, the education and training community is no different from any other. Think how Amazon has changed the bookselling business. It does not just enable you to order books from home. It introduced a new approach to browsing and assessing books. It changed the business model.

In education and training, using new technology and new approaches means we must be prepared to change the model to get the best.

Formal, informal and non-formal learning

ICT with its e-learning, distance learning, interactive potential offers the chance to develop a learning continuum, embracing formal, informal and non-formal learning. This may be coming, but it is not yet there. We need it.

Education has to become innovative itself

One of the joys of the education business is that it is not enough to influence others: you have to influence yourselves. That is to say that you must develop innovative tools for teaching and learning; and you must renew the educational business model to support the personal learning patterns of individuals; to provide the resources they need; to encourage and facilitate them all down their lives.

You in Eden have to innovate and to change. If you don't, there is no use thinking that you will be able to equip others to meet the innovation challenges confronting our society.

Conclusion

Allow me to leave you with something that has been a motivation and an ambition in 35 years as an official of the European Union. It is this.

Europe is its people - you and me, and all the others.

Our task, in the European Union is to create a space, to provide the instruments and to give the personal support and encouragement that brings forth, liberates, facilitates and sustains the creativity, the social and individual talents, that make us all human; and to provide a space in which the sense of wonder that raises us above the level of beasts is developed and can flourish.

Europe has within it a wealth of culture, a richness of heritage, a store of individual talent, a creativity of spirit that is certainly not alone in the world, but is second to none.

This is our challenge in the European Union. It is not different in nature from the challenge facing Eden, any more than it is different from the challenge I have faced and others face as director of a team of talented individuals.

Learning. Encouraging. Helping every individual to realise their potential, and collectively to contribute, not just to each other, but to our Europe, to the world, as a whole. That is the challenge facing us.

It is the challenge that faces education and training policy across Europe, that has to be addressed by teachers and by officials: and by the e-learning and the distance learning community.

We can only address that challenge if we ourselves all can learn, can help others to learn, and in doing so innovate in learning.

If we do so, we will render sterling service to Europe.