

SEEL Lisbon Conference Proceedings

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The first SEEL Project Conference held in Lisbon 18-19 May 2003 attracted 90 participants from 15 countries. The event was the first international conference on key issues of quality in (e)learning, innovation and regional development.

The principal aim of the conference was to identify priorities for regions in putting in place sound policies for quality assurance for e-learning.

Key priorities identified for the conference were to:

- Explore the organic link between
 - Individual learning
 - Community learning
 - Organisational learning
 - Institutional learning
 - Territorial Learning (learning regions and cities)
 - Societal learning
- Identify the kinds of services an e-learning region or city should provide to its citizens and enterprises
- Define a framework for quality for e-learning regions and cities
- Discuss how to reconcile quality and innovation

Introduction

Serge Ravet, Chief Executive of the European Institute for e-Learning (EIFEL), the SEEL Project Coordinator, pointed out that one of the challenges that the SEEL project has set itself is the need to identify the kinds of technologies needed to support learning regions or cities and explore how knowledge, information and learning technologies (KILT) create a unique opportunity to establish a continuum between different dimensions of learning. He observed that currently many of the technologies and the efforts towards standardization are based on 'old' learning models, based on the distribution of online contents – a kind of 'distance learning plus...' A response is needed that is better adapted to the nature of the Knowledge Society.

The **European Commission's** commitment to the importance of the links between individual, organisational and societal learning was underlined by **Brian Holmes, Principal Administrator eLearning, Directorate General for Education and Culture**, who is the Project Officer for SEEL. He reminded participants of the declaration of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 that Europe should become, by 2010, "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion."

The search for a new quality model is vital as the political vision sees e-learning acting as a catalyst for change:

- Transforming processes
- Breaking down barriers
- Lifelong & lifewide learning
- Opening-up access
- Supporting mobility
- Increased personalisation
- Greater flexibility in time & space
- Supporting intercultural dialogue
- Strengthening social cohesion
- Facilitating partnerships

The SEEL project is one of four accepted under the Commission's eLearning Action Plan. A new Call for proposals will be concerned with the following areas:

- Media literacy (~2 Million €)
- Support for ongoing efforts in Europe (~9 Million €):
 - 1) Peer reviews - exchange and analysis of good practice & policy
 - 2) Networks of collaboration - clustering of projects, special interest groups (SIGs)
 - 3) Observatories - comparative analysis, forecasting and foresight

Keynotes

Keynote: Policy issues for learning regions

Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin from the **OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (Directorate for Education)**, gave a presentation on Cities and Regions in the Learning Economy, drawing on research carried out by the OECD into 180 EU regions in order to establish policy principles to foster learning cities and regions.

The OECD results demonstrate the importance of studying the contribution of learning to regional economic growth. The study suggests that a central role for regional policy-makers would be to remedy 'path-dependency': unlearning particular practices and bodies of knowledge that prevent other learning processes from spreading through the region. Thus it is vital not to focus exclusively on particular areas of a regional economy but to promote coordination at individual, organisational and regional level. The learning region is characterised by regional institutions that facilitate individual and organisational learning through the co-ordination of flexible networks of economic and political agents. Therefore, if improvements in individual learning or changes in public research or industry services are

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to have a positive impact on organisational learning in companies, they need to be closely co-ordinated with the regional industry structure.

For policy-makers, developing a regional learning policy demands a fine balance between focused, interventionist, organisational and institutional design and support, and more general infrastructure policy, in order to facilitate bottom-up learning processes between networks of regional economic and social agents.

How is this to be achieved? The following factors are important:

- offering high-quality and well-resourced educational provision to ensure effective individual learning throughout people's lives
- the co-ordination of the supply of skilled and knowledgeable individuals through education and training and the demand for them within the regional economy (interestingly, it would appear that secondary educational attainment is more critical to economic performance than tertiary)
- the establishment of appropriate framework conditions for the improvement of organisational learning
- paying close attention to mechanisms for coordinating policies across what have generally been separate departmental responsibilities (for industrial development, R&D, science and technology, education and training and so forth) and between different levels of governance (regional, national and supra-national)

E-learning could play an important role in helping to co-ordinate the supply of skilled and knowledgeable individuals and the demand for them within the regional economy, since it enables regions to recruit beyond regional borders. (It must be remembered that regions do not always have full responsibility for all levels of education.)

The potential gains from the use of e-learning are high:

- help meet the huge demand for education and for flexible lifelong learning
- enhance the cost-effectiveness of learning
- increase learners' choice
- improve learning outcomes
- improve innovation in learning

Keynote: From learning to e-Learning regions

In his presentation, **Claudio Dondi, President of Scianter** explored the paradox of (e) learning regions. It is his opinion that while the concept of learning regions is well established, in practice they are not, yet, well implemented. For if learning regions demand interaction among all the key stakeholders, there are very few learning regions in Europe. Obstacles to the realisation of the learning region include the problem of coordination – for example of education and training, where responsibilities may be divided between a central department of education and the regions. Investment in continuing education and lifelong learning is another key issue. Behind the concept of lifelong learning we find very different visions of the world, and wholesale commitment to provision is still limited.

While there is currently much debate around the development of public/private partnerships, there is also the issue of public/public partnerships, which are not always as achievable as they should be. Indeed, Claudio Dondi suggested that sometimes it suits regions to keep the status quo and retain boundaries.

He reminded participants that most learning takes place outside formal learning systems and it is vital to take this into account. He stressed the importance of prior learning achievement – how much people have already learned and the problem of motivation to learn. There is a real divide between those who have learned a lot and continue to do so, and those who do not enjoy the benefits of learning. Unfortunately, ICT may have the effect of widening this gap as it can represent both a wonderful tool and a barrier – a new factor of exclusion. For this reason, it is important to focus on individual and not only group needs.

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Claudio Dondi raised the question of whether we are dealing with the *E-learning Region* or the *Learning eRegion*. There is one view of e-learning that sees it as simply doing the same things a bit more efficiently; another that sees it as transforming current practice. Thus e-learning may be a small and dynamic part of learning systems or it may represent learning in the knowledge society. Learning and innovation of learning systems lead to regional and societal development and in this case, the learning region does not need to have absolute borders but can act as a specific area around which to build some level of coherence.

Critical aspects of implementation include paying careful attention to stakeholders' perspectives, which may conflict, and also allowing sufficient time for adoption.

It must also be recognised that *quality* does not have the same meaning for everyone – thus the concept may mean different things to industry, to trainers, to learners or to policy-makers.

Claudio Dondi asked participants to consider whether we can achieve the e-learning region with the current system or if we need to challenge existing systems.

Keynote: From quality to e-quality

If we accept the thesis that there are very few learning regions, **Markku Markkula, Director of the Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli of Helsinki University of Technology**, set out to convince us that some are to be found in Finland, a country whose achievements may well serve to inspire other countries.

Mr Markkula began by outlining the paradigm shift that is the hallmark of the knowledge-based society and has brought about dramatic changes in work cultures and performance measures. He stressed the importance nowadays of strategic alliances, cross-boundary interactions and the growth of virtual networks.

For Mr Markkula, there are a number of key analytical lessons that can be learned from the Finnish experience:

- Increase investments in research and development
- Create new learning environments for working together
- Create models and tools for open source development of innovative teaching and learning methods and materials

Even if the content remains the same, learning is changing, since ICT is changing the way we think and learn. This naturally demands innovation in pedagogy.

Finnish progress has been based on a planned and long-established strategy. In 1997 the Finnish Government had established a *Strategy for Lifelong Learning* with a focus on structural reforms:

1. Strengthening learning foundations
2. Providing a broad range of learning opportunities
3. Accrediting learning achievements
4. Building learning paths by providing information and support
5. Bringing teachers' and trainers' skills up-to-date

A critical element in today's society is the ability to learn how to learn. All have to take more personal responsibility and at the same time co-operate with others. Competencies include creativity and innovativeness; learning and working together; anticipating the future; integrating knowledge; acquiring, processing and adopting knowledge.

Mr Markkula stressed the importance of having a 5-10 year vision. In Finland, between 1999 and 2003 the emphasis has been on:

- Information Society skills
- Networking as a learning environment
- Information Society structures
- Building the digital knowledge base

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This vision clearly allocates a vital role to the 'e' factor in learning and training: it challenges both learner and teacher. Skills and abilities to operate in the information society include basic information technology skills and individual and community learning skills. But beyond this, ICT is enabling a paradigm shift, for new learning and working environments will be based on effective knowledge management. The Finnish approach is to see information and knowledge as a personal system, where individuals have their own 'knowledge management toolbox'.

A new approach to quality is also needed. While the total quality movement in the 1990s focused on the quality of systems, processes and manpower, Markku Markkula stressed the importance of values in quality and pointed out the potential conflict between quality assurance and change. We are in the digital age where the focus is on the knowledge creation process: the challenge for implementation is to ensure that everyone is involved in reaping the benefits.

Keynote: Canada's E-learning Quality Initiative

Kathryn Barker of FuturEd Inc. and QualitE-Learning Assurance Inc gave a keynote presentation on Canadian Recommended Elearning Guidelines (CanREGs) an initiative sponsored by the Office of Learning Technologies, the Canadian Association for Community Education and a range of other prestigious partners.

The aim of the CanREGs initiative was to try to serve the interest of both consumers and producers, given the increasing range of options in an unregulated multimillion-dollar industry.

The CanREGs were produced following lengthy research and national consultation. They are recommended rather than mandatory but have national credibility, and have also been adopted by New Zealand. They address such fundamental questions as the difference between conventional and e-schooling; quality criteria for assessing courseware, and the implications for teachers as far as roles, responsibilities and conditions are concerned.

Questions raised on the issue of quality include:

1. Who defines "quality"? Who should?
2. What level of quality: comparability? acceptability? excellence?
3. Who assesses and certifies quality? Who should? How?
4. What happens if quality standards are not met?
5. What is the cost of quality assurance? To whom?
6. What are the benefits? To whom?
7. Should quality requirements be legislated? How?

The need to differentiate products and services emerged, as did the importance of distinguishing between e-learning as such, which is learner-focused, and the e-learning industry, which is concerned with content, design and production, delivery and management of learning and the management of students and programs. The initiative also resulted in the production of a Consumer's Guide to eLearning. This includes for example, the demand that eLearning suppliers make clear the intended learning outcomes and entry-level knowledge or skills necessary. It also contains questions that eLearners should ask themselves.

Dr Barker pointed out the need to recognize the 'Quality Paradox': providers must assure quality but they cannot provide quality assurance.

Quality assurance must be:

- objective
- professional
- credible
- recognized
- iterative
- continuous

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In achieving quality assurance, two perspectives need to be taken into account: what is desirable for the consumer and what is possible on the part of the producer. A variety of expertise required including evaluation and research; teaching and learning, and technology.

There is also a regional paradox:

- e-learning provision is global
- learning recognition is local

On the question of regional identity, it is Dr Barker's thesis that if there is nothing that makes you unique, you're not unique, and that regions are not about geography but products and services. Emerging e-learning policy is changing the nature of geographic education "regions" in Canada. The e-learning industry is shaping e-regions by content and skill level; demand and resources; ICT accessibility and public/private partnerships.

The impact of e-learning can be attributed to its capacity to deliver modularized and interdisciplinary content and delivery; cater for special needs and offer the possibility of authentic assessment, for example through use of digital learning portfolios. E-learning can provide personalized learning, which may be problem or project, based. It also lends itself to reciprocal teaching and is change-oriented. In the future it will promote learner-centered schooling and offer "seamless" education", which will be age-irrelevant and will take into account all learning experiences.

Parallel Workshops

Workshop 1 - Shaping the regional eLearning Policy

This workshop was chaired by **Margaret Simmonds** from the Yorkshire and Humber Region and moderated by **Walter Kugemann**, FIM-Psychologie, University of Erlangen.

Lisa Mikkonen, Development Manager for Naturopolis, Kuusamo Education and Development Services, provided a practical review of eLearning implementation in Kuusamo, a small town in north-eastern Finland. It is the most popular all-year-round tourist resort in Finland but the region has a high unemployment rate. With no institute of higher education in the region, e-learning has become well established: students can take advantage of data transfer technology and videoconferences, as well as lectures on CD-ROMs. They also have access to classroom-based practical exercises and receive a wide variety of support, both technical and pedagogical.

Requirements for eLearning implementation include strategic planning at a regional level; partners; technological solutions and support. E-learning programmes are available for college level engineers and professionals in tourism, and at university level, Open University and master's level courses. For example, a joint Master of Science programme in Information Processing Science has been developed with four other regional groups thanks to cooperation between the University of Oulu, Naturopolis Kuusamo Education and Development Services Unit and the Open University.

E-learning has brought the universities and polytechnics within reach of the local inhabitants, offering flexible and cost-effective education. Long-term goals include the extension of such programmes and the development of eLearning support services, entailing the creation of new enterprises - an e-learning business.

Lisa Mikkonen pointed out that there were issues associated with such provision. Studying is expensive in such a remote region. An important question is whether provision should be supply or demand driven, as there is a danger of outside suppliers 'hoovering' participants. Other issues include the availability of sufficient expertise, access points/services 'near to the learner' and embedded online services. She observed further that it is difficult to motivate individuals and easier to address existing communities. Finally, it is important to pilot projects, as regional partners need to learn how to cooperate.

Workshop 2 - Reconciling quality, change and innovation

This workshop was chaired by **Kathryn Barker** of FutureEd and moderated by **Serge Ravet** of ElfEL.

The expert contribution was made by **Dr. Anna Gammaldi of the Emilia-Romagna Regional Commission for the Certification of ODL Materials (CERFAD)**. The CERFAD Commission has been in charge of assessing the quality of ODL materials and providing certification to those that are considered appropriate to be used within the regional training system. Dr Gammaldi observed that in the domain of quality e-learning, we look for change and innovation – new technological standards for products and new regulations and competencies for processes. For policy we need key actors and strategies.

A territorial perspective demands

- more responsiveness from local administrations
- more actors involved
- more control on targets
- more control on results
- cost-benefit analysis

CERFAD's activities have included the establishment of quality criteria for paper, audiovisual and software based ODL materials; delivering and supporting ODL services; selecting Internet resources and online materials, and on-line communication systems.

The Emilia Romagna region's representatives stressed the need for a common understanding of what an e-learning region is, to help local players, develop innovation and enable transfer to other regions. E-learning has to become more attractive in order to help bridge the digital divide.

After the presentation from Emilia Romagna, the delegates discussed the issue of quality in relation to change and innovation. Three different domains were identified:

- Products – technical standards are useful, but at the same time, they might restrict the ability for future innovation
- Processes – existing standards such as ISO 9000 are very useful to ensure the quality of 'standard' services such as registration or assessment, but might restrict the need for change and innovation, especially at a time where new processes are constantly being re-invented
- Policies – what should be the role of a region: to ask learning providers to conform to standards or to apply to itself quality assurance systems to improve its accountability?

While the delegates agreed that we need to agree on quality indicators, it is important be able to use different assessment criteria, depending on the state of advancement of a region – e.g. Scandinavian countries, vs less advanced countries.

As with other workshops, there was a discussion on whether we should base our reflection on territories (physical and virtual) rather than region and city entities (administrative and political).

Workshop 3 - E-learning regions: how can organisations contribute and benefit?

This workshop was chaired by **Andrew Robinson** of the Open University (UK) and moderated by **Rachel Allen**, MRS Consultancy (UK).

The workshop expert was **Teresa de Noronha Vaz, Professor of Regional and Development Economics, University of Algarve**, who examined the case of small businesses in less favoured regions (LFRs). These companies face considerable difficulties including location disadvantages; the need to make structural adjustments, and the lack of consistent development strategies. The presenter observed that up to now, the research and development policy of the European Commission has given preference to most advanced regions and high-tech industries. Recent developments however have shown promising growth patterns based on co-operative practices and collective learning not only among economic agents but also social structures.

An e-Learning region may be seen as a territory that privileges links among the educational part (training systems), the research part (learning institutions) and the sectorial/entrepreneurial (industry) part in order to obtain knowledge transfer from the first two towards the third.

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E-learning can be a powerful change agent as it expands the regional knowledge base and has an impact on the internal capacity of firms to innovate. The advantages of e-learning confronting new models of industrial organization is that it provides an opportunity for all members of the region to take advantage of new technologies, and gain access to training and support to encourage entrepreneurial activity.

The on-line delivery mechanism provides the potential for educational institutions to develop the skills of local populations. For example, small firms across industries, especially in the LFRs, are severely lacking in key management skills, in particular financial management, marketing, entrepreneurial skills and human resource issues.

The challenge to deliver innovative approaches to LFRs involving the use of new technologies in small firms and in the domestic context is considerable. Problems include the capacity of the general population to handle new technologies; financing the provision of access to computer systems and the difficulty of convincing general opinion of the many new opportunities that can result from a collective use these new techniques. The unresponsive and individualistic behaviour of leading economic agents located in such regions suggests reluctance to adopt new practices.

The transformation of LFRs into e-Learning Regions involves strategic political choices, including:

- Infrastructure: build a robust common regional infrastructure by improving connectivity to increase and lower costs and strengthening the legal and regulatory framework;
- E-Society: enhance human capacity development through focusing on education and knowledge sharing and promoting local content and applications through:
 - a focus on basic education with the development of ICT and adult skill development;
 - increased opportunities for lifelong learning opportunities;
 - adoption of mutual recognition of ICT qualifications and removal of the barriers to mobility;
 - promoting the development of “Smart communities” and “e -champions”;
- E-Government: increase the e-awareness of senior policy makers, with emphasis on the benefits of e-Government for enhancing government services to constituents;
- E-Commerce: encourage a pro-competitive policy and regulatory environment with a view to generating self-sustaining growth and achieving development goals that include the encouragement of public-private partnerships in order to foster local enterprises, innovation and lifelong learning.

Workshop 4 - E-learning regions, cities and territories: competition or collaboration?

This workshop was chaired by **Pierre Desson, Ville de Partenay (France)** and moderated by **Kennet Lindquist, STPKC (Sweden)**

Expert input was provided by **Patrick Chevalier, Research Director of ElfEL**, who presented learning territories as:

- Territories that provide opportunities for individuals (citizens) and organisations (training institutions, education, consultants, companies, etc.) to learn
- Territories that are able to learn and use learning as a way to develop themselves

What are the factors that encourage competition or collaboration?

It is clear that an important element of attraction for companies and economic actors would be a favourable financial situation, with the availability of funding. As far as individuals are concerned, local culture and quality of life play important roles. While there is a certain amount of inter-regional competition, for example in the areas of the economy or tourism, it is also possible for regions to cooperate - in large-scale investment or to influence the national context. We can also then envisage a strategy to cooperate on e-learning.

Important issues include the nature of responsibility for education and training, and national attitude and initiatives towards local initiatives. How “specific or global” is the territorial policy? What are the

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boundaries of the initiatives taken at different levels? Is the region a local, national and/or international player? Is it a buyer of services for citizens? Or is it a supplier of educational, knowledge, services? Does it lead on Innovation? What is its quality policy?

Regions may choose to play the role of buyer or supplier. If they adopt the buyer approach, they may have a 'closed' strategy, with local buyers and providers sharing the resources between local providers. In this case they have a responsibility to help training providers to learn how to implement ICT and co-operate together. With an 'open' strategy, imports are necessary to develop the quality of the supply at regional level.

If regions adopt a supplier approach, they may develop a high value activity, developing technological expertise and developing competencies. They may also co-operate at national and international level, learning managing large-scale projects and subcontracting with partners. Singapore, for example, has become an e-region and an e-learning player, with the aim of becoming the hub of the knowledge society in South East Asia.

Achieving quality results with regard to collaboration and competition entails transparency of results and of contractual relations. Competition should be productive rather than negative, while inefficient competition should be avoided – indeed, co-operation is often a necessary step to prepare to compete. Potential areas for competition or collaboration include the organisation of the education and training system; the organisation of supply and demand; lifelong learning; personalised information and orientation services to individuals; the development of innovative and high added-value services, such as ePortfolios and knowledge management; the promotion of cultural heritage and collective knowledge.

As the primary mission of regions is to serve their citizens' interests, opportunities for selling services or products should not be in contradiction with these interests, while if better products exist outside the region, it is better to import them.

Discussion on the subject produced a consensus that a regional policy for e-learning is necessary. There is a need for regional (and local) provisional management of employment and skills and to help public/private cooperation.

The participants' list of 'Christmas wishes' included the encouragement of 'vertical co-operation' as sometimes co-operation between regional and national levels is impossible.

Competition on quality and new services between territories at the same level exists and is not a bad thing: it can be productive. However regions should have equivalent access to tools and this can be encouraged by European co-operation. The second Christmas wish list focused on the need for tools to evaluate the situation of the regions in e-learning, facilitate cooperation and clarify roles.

It was suggested that defining a methodology for learning regions involves addressing the following issues:

- How to implement an e-learning policy
- How to create a "one stop service" for regional players on e-learning
- Collaboration of public and private sector to implement new local public services

Workshop 5 - E-quality: excellence and accessibility for all

This workshop was chaired by **Brian Holmes of the European Commission**, and moderated by **Lance Spraggons**, BAOL (British Association for Open Learning - UK)

Linda Tomos, Director of the Wales Information Network, presented Wales as a case study. The country faces special challenges, with a bilingual population of around 3 million people, facing severe ICT staff shortages. The Welsh regional government, which has control over education and training, has made a wholesale commitment to e-learning, being forced in the process to rethink the essence of learning, its planning and delivery.

Key questions include: Is quality necessary to a good learning approach? And if so, how do we measure quality at every level from motivation to delivery? How do we measure the impact of high quality learning/e-learning services as an economic indicator, in terms, for example, of a higher skilled workforce or increased personal development and achievement?

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Wales has an e-Learning mission statement, which includes a commitment: *'to demonstrate excellence in connectivity, content, confidence and competence in the application of technology to learning'*.

Currently, the Welsh population has unequal access and opportunities as far as *connectivity* is concerned, and variable technical support. The aim is to create a national integrated e-learning network based on 'one to many' – all people being able to access all learning opportunities. The Welsh government is putting in place a delivery infrastructure and technical support to enable people to access e-learning at a location of their choice (measures include £180m broadband investment and free Internet access in all schools, colleges, libraries, community centres).

In order to tackle the problem of *content*, the aim is to have materials designed, built, procured and accessed by a variety of local arrangements and to support high quality e-learning programmes from content sourced locally. This entails organising national procurement policies and entering into strategic relationships for IPR and licensing issues. The Welsh are promoting interoperability compatible with international guidelines e.g. SCORM and Dublin Core, and establishing a national digital repository of learning objects and digital assets.

The challenge as far as building *confidence* is concerned is lack of knowledge and good practice, limited understanding of benefits and low exploitation of the commercial benefits. The strategy adopted is to

- Invest in options that provide excellence in learning support
- Ensure that all people involved in the development, distribution and delivery of e-learning obtain necessary skill levels
- Exploit opportunities provided by e-learning for economic growth derived from high quality products and services
- Implement a national programme of public understanding of the benefits of e-learning

There is an urgent need to address the issue of *competence*, which is currently insufficient to deliver excellence. The Welsh government has introduced a national plan to raise ICT skills levels; create a national observatory for intelligence gathering, research and dissemination to champion international good practice in e-learning; develop a national centre of excellence to promote networks to lead development, distribution and delivery, and develop competence in instructional design, graphics design and programming to produce high quality web-enabled bilingual materials.

A nationwide consultation exercise is underway. Discussion areas include:

- How can we maintain infrastructure to meet growing technical requirements?
- How can we reconcile detailed standards for design, production and delivery with encouraging individual teachers and communities to produce e-learning materials?
- How can we integrate e-learning into existing learning systems to manage the transition to where technology-based learning is ubiquitous?
- How do we manage the skills gap, which restricts opportunities to extend e-learning to all forms of learning?
- How do we engage everyone to promote the benefits of e-learning?
- How do we measure the difference e-learning makes?

Significant stress is laid on the importance of self-assessment and one of the most interesting initiatives is a plan for each citizen to have his/her own 'digital portfolio' - a progress file online.

Linda Tomos observed that defining a strategy and context for quality takes time. It has taken the Welsh government 18 months to develop their strategy.

Workshop 6 - The contribution of research and innovation to e-learning regions

This workshop was chaired by **Stéphane Vincent-Lancrin**, OECD and moderated by **Erwin Wagner**, EDEN (European Distance Education Network)

The expert was **Andrew Robinson**, Assistant Director, the Open University, who spoke on new drivers of change for e-learning and regions. As time displaces distance, regions are challenging and

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complementing nations with new regional and new learning policies. New eLearning providers will innovate and carry out research.

The research challenges include investigating the real nature of regional demand and supply. For example, learners are local, while students are increasingly regionally based, demanding quality blended-learning opportunities. This may lead to a demand for new, refocused national and regional suppliers and new market entrants. Andrew Robinson wondered whether regional providers and regional authorities would have to work with large ICT corporates to operate and innovate at scale.

Key issues include:

- How can eLearning help address and correct regional, social and economic imbalances?
- Will eLearning regions be economically successful regions?
- Bridging regional divides within regions
- Creating a new, sustainable lifelong learning culture
- Accessible learning pathways (anytime, anywhere) for regional needs, not tied to national funding streams
- Development of eLearning strategies: a new form of attracting investment, retaining graduates, and sustaining multimedia and creative industries within regions
- Creating innovative products marketable inside and outside home regions

On a political level, the EU's vision of the future was set out in Lisbon. The European Commission's 6th and 7th Framework programmes could play an important role in accelerating the Agenda. Andrew Robinson suggested that it might also be useful to have an EU regional policy for E-15 and E-25 that more actively encourages eLearning as a regional policy driver (perhaps progressing from a European Social Fund to a European eLearning Fund).

A subsequent discussion highlighted other promising aspects of the e-learning age for regions, such as its contribution to sustaining cultural diversity and social capital, as well as acting as a trigger for regional innovation. ePortfolios for communities and eResearch are examples of the way in which e-learning might transform current practice. At the same time, we need to avoid the danger of e-learning's bringing in its wake a new cultural imperialism that might undermine regional approaches.

Panel Discussion

Key issues arising from Conference panel discussion included the recurring question of the nature of regions, with one participant wondering if there was perhaps too much emphasis on territorial aspects, while there could be more to gain from breaking boundaries. It is important to come to terms with the mismatch between nice concepts and reality and to recognise that even the term *region* means different things in different countries. What about the relationship between town and region?

With the possibility of creating communities of practice, do regions need to be physical or can they be virtual? We are increasingly seeing networked e-learning 'supersonics', which may be aligned with regional 'sonics'. There are also competency networks that go beyond regions, for example, of universities. E-learning may provide a vital e-catalyst for change. Business is local, while e-learning can be local and global.

Regional representatives outlined key issues and challenges from their point of view. Linda Tomos from Wales stressed the need to convince individuals. Yorkshire and Humberside are working on raising the competencies of community and support staff. A priority for them is having a clear indication of quality assurance policies. Trento, which has responsibility for education and training, is focusing on trainers, taking a top down approach. Nord Pas de Calais currently has many different layers of initiatives and feels that a quality system might help to promote interoperability of networks, while Poitou-Charentes places the emphasis on the support to FOAD (*open and distance learning*) initiatives to improve access to learning opportunities.

What they are looking for from the SEEL project?

- Validation of current work in progress – whether their approaches, standards and models stand up to review outside region. Are there better ways?
- Help in rationalising complex systems – systemic ways of understanding quality. They are not seeking 'plug and play' quality initiatives. Systems should allow for innovation.

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- Sharing of experience, resources and networking opportunities
- Independent quality assurance and benchmarks for measurement
- Quality approaches to finance and social contracts

All agreed that quality processes were essential. It was necessary to have transparent indicators of what is expected, with all steps of chain described. All learning and training activities should be involved.

It was suggested that it would be useful to have workshops comparing different regional experiences with same approach.

Benchmarking e-learning policies and practices for regions

In the course of a session devoted to benchmarking of regions, the following elements were identified as being worthy of attention:

- Learning and resource centres,
- Research
- Contents
- Competencies
- Support structures
- Portals

It is seen as important to take into account all domains of learning, including informal learning and quality initiatives for both e-learning and learning in general.

Conclusion

The consensus among Conference delegates was that the event had been extremely useful in helping to identify priorities for the SEEL project, and ultimately for the regions themselves. The 2004 Conference will present the results of the project and plans for continuing the initiative after the project's end.