ODL POLICY SEMINAR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Abstract

The following is not an article, but the executive summary of a Seminar on ODL policy run in Florence in October 1996 in the framework of the Socrates Programme. Among other issues, the summary highlights some basic issues related to the field of ODL, like the need for terminological clarification, the growing importance of learning-based paradigms in education and training systems and the tendency to integrate ODL in traditional learning processes. The summary addresses the concept of ODL market, stressing the specificity of education and training systems, mentioning the role of different actors involved and proposing some ideas for the development of an ODL market. Policy orientations influencing ODL supportive public initiatives are listed and it is stressed that policy orientations should always consider education and training perspective. The likely life-cycle of specific ODL policies in most European countries is briefly described. The summary furthermore presents enhancing and hindering factors for the implementation of ODL policy and indicates some guidelines for the development of an approach for policy assessment and evaluation.

Keywords

ODL Market
Policy Orientation
Policy Implementation
Policy Assessment

Basic conceptions in ODL

- At the beginning of the seminar it was recognised that the field of ODL requires a substantial amount of terminological clarification, due to the relative novelty of the field and to the need to accommodate different national "traditions" as well as the rapid change of technological and related pedagogical scenarios used. However, the objective of terminological clarification was explicitly excluded from the debate, while an agreement was reached on the use - during the seminar - of a broad meaning of ODL, including the use of information and telecommunication technology in the learning process even in conventional learning settings such as classroom and workplace.
- The aim of the seminar was agreed in terms of contribution to the establishment of a new "professional culture" for people involved, from different perspectives and various institutional levels, in the definition, implementation and assessment of public initiatives, measures and policies oriented towards the development of ODL and its integration in mainstream education and training systems.
- The debate was placed in the context of an observable trend towards the shift from dominantly teaching-based to dominantly learning-based paradigms in education and training systems. This trend requires a re-engineering of learning process in which learner needs, characteristics and contexts are put at the centre of the design of learning systems.
- Learning was recognised to be an emerging model of social action at all levels (learning society, leaning organisation, lifelong learning for individuals), but paradoxically not so much implemented within the education and training systems, that still tend to perpetuate their models of organisation and are, to a large extent, self-referential systems.
- ODL should be understood and proposed in a perspective of additionality rather than substitution: the observed emergence of "hybrid models" integrating ODL segments, classroom-based and work-based segments in the same learning path is an indicator of how ODL will enrich pre-existing models of organising the learning process rather than replacing them.

ODL market and policy

- The use of the concept of "market" was questioned in the debate, and then recognised to be useful, provided that some limitations are adopted, in consideration of:
  - the specificity of education and training systems, in which an institutional perspective is co-existing with market logics;
  - the blurred definition of the related "competition area", that is due to the proximity of the "ODL market" not only with the mainstream education and training contexts, but also with the publishing, multimedia, telecom service and broadcasting industries;
  - the limited level of development and structuration observable in the "ODL market".

- The existence of adequate users' organisations and associationswas recognised to be one of the conditions for the ODL market to be structured and work in an acceptable way.
- Suppliers of ODL were recognised to be tendentially weak, dispersed, unequally distributed in European countries, mostly unable to afford serious investment and to face the many challenges of continental distribution.
- Public intervention was recognised as useful to support a higher degree of market structuration and to help education and training institutions to find their strategy between the supply and the demand side of the ODL market and to establish those partnerships which can maintain their leading role in the provision of education and training services.
- The interest of European Universities in the use of ODL to accompany and support their innovation processes, and also in participating in the supply of ODL products and services was stated and specified by the intervention of University Rectors attending the seminar, who also warned about the persistence of strong resistance against ODL by a large share of academics.
- Some ideas for major initiatives to support the development and structuration of the ODL market were launched:
  - major plans to update civil servants in concomitance with substantial reform of the Public Administration taking place in most European countries;
  - use ODL to prevent new social exclusion that can emerge from lack of familiarity with information and communication technology;
  - integrate ODL in measures to fight unemployment and develop the new learning services that a lifelong learning society requires;
  - develop European awareness, human rights, multiculturality, democracy with the help of ODL.

Policy orientation

Other papers relevant to policy orientation:

- Claudio Dondi: Main trends in policy orientation
- Eric Barchechath: A tool for mapping policies (also in French version)
- Claudio Dondi: An approach to ODL policy from TRIBUNE (DELTA programme 1992-94)

- Several policy orientations could be recognised to have influenced public initiatives to support ODL and learning technologies:
  - first of all, the concern to innovate education and training systems by increasing accessibility and flexibility of learning opportunities, to rationalise expenditure and to introduce an investment perspective in the education/training expenditure;
  - the concern to add a European dimension to national education and training provision;
  - the concern to guarantee quality of supply and to "protect consumers" against bad practice and unreasonable expectations;
  - the concern to develop a market area for information and communication technologies;
  - the concern to develop a European multimedia industry able to compete in a global market.

All of these orientations were recognised as legitimate, but consensus was reached on the fact that education and training perspective should always be seen as a priority in policy orientation.

- The intentionality to bring education and training institution from a "production for internal use" to a "production for the market" approach was recognised to be relevant in many cases, but not to be generalised.
- The difficulty to bring a new concept like ODL into the agenda of policy makers (who never directly experienced it as users) was recognised; a specific critical point was identified in the lack of perception, by potential "winners", of the benefits that ODL can bring to them and in the consequent lack of interest convergence by beneficiary groups in requesting ODL development.
- It was recognised that specific ODL policy tend to have a life-cycle of about five years in most European countries: they emerge when spontaneous experiments have already taken place, they tend to support supply and infrastructure at the beginning, then quality and information and user-driven pilot projects, then they tend to migrate towards (or to be integrated within) broader policies to innovate education and training, to support economic development or to orientate industrial strategy. In a paradoxical way, they tend to extinguish themselves when they have succeeded, that is when they have achieved the objective of making ODL a "normal" component of

education and training systems.
- A significant "policy borrowing" phenomenon is observable among European countries in this field of action: several governments adopted similar schemes in a relative short period, and in many cases they took profit of the experience developed by those countries which moved first. The role of the European institutions has also played an important role to orientate national and regional policies in this field, especially in those countries where ODL experience was most limited.

Policy implementation

A paper particularly relevant to policy implementation:

- Walter F Kugemann: Policy making and implementation: two strategic phases for the uptake of ODL

- It was recognised that, in general terms, successful implementation of ODL policy entails the creation of solid partnerships (among similar organisations to reach a critical mass or a European dimension, but also among different organisations to integrate competencies and market assets), but some "distinguo" were made to point out that some partnerships may be used to prevent innovation or to protect a group of leading actors.
- Enhancing factors for the success of ODL policies were recognised to be:
  - political stability;
  - positive attitudes towards innovation at large expressed by target populations;
  - the consolidation of a habit to concertate policy decisions;
  - the fact that education/training organisations are exposed to a certain level of competition and do not feel unconditionally guaranteed in their continuity. Insecurity of education and training organisation, however, is both on enhancing factor for the uptake of ODL and an objective cause of difficulty in making long term plans for development.

- Administrative rules, especially those of the European Social Fund, which are still based on physical presence of learners in classrooms, on a reduced ratio preparation costs/implementation costs of training activities, on formal administrative rather than results control are a very serious difficulty for the large scale diffusion of ODL.
- Another major obstacle to the use of available ODL resources is the lack of a consolidated practice in trans-national transfer and adaptation of ODL products, but also the lack of rules and practical solutions to allow the re-use of products developed thanks to public funding, (the property of which is mixed): they constitute a huge amount of learning resources that are not systematically utilised just because no solution has been found for their distribution.
- Guaranteeing quality of ODL products was felt to be an important issue to give evidence of pedagogic value-added and respectability of ODL: it was agreed that such an issue deserves to be treated at European rather than national level.
- ODL producers should be encouraged to work with users (especially enterprises) in order to develop learning materials which are suitable for contextualisation and correspond to perceived needs.
- Public financial support to supply of ODL should not intervene in areas (subjects and targets) where private initiative and investments are already producing a significant provision, but rather focus on those areas that are lacking sufficient resources and opportunities; attention should be paid not to frustrate private investment by public provision of low price (subsidised) learning materials.

Policy assessment

An example of policy assessment:

- Elliot Stern: The evaluation of the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme of the UK Higher Education Funding Council

This theme was introduced by two presentations, but only shortly debated for lack of time; here follow some points of reflection proposed, but not discussed to the point of reaching agreement.

- Approaches to policy assessment, in general term as well as in relationship to the specific ODL domain, may be oriented towards one or more of the following aims:
  - to measure accountability/achievement of a public policy;
  - to measure effectiveness of implementation and management approach;
  - to develop a process of collective learning through participated monitoring off all activities, resources and outcomes.

The third aim was agreed to be extremely interesting and appropriate in the specific domain of ODL, that is characterised by a relative novelty, lack of consolidated experience among involved actors, high fluidity of needs, behaviours and contexts.

- In order to make significant progress in developing an approach for policy assessment in the ODL field, at least four theoretical points are to be developed or agreed:

- a theory of the actors involved and their strategic interest, motivations, behaviours, interaction;
- a theory of the domain of ODL, its definition and borders, its likely evolution;
- a theory of the public programmes that are to be evaluated, i.e. and understanding of their context, aims, assumptions, expected working mechanisms and results;
- a theory of change in a specific or broader field.

- Consensus was agreed on the opportunity to use participants' experiences and current initiatives to generate case studies of policy assessment, building upon which adequate practice can be established and generalised.
- Economic rationality should be recognised to be not the only key view on policy evaluation: transparency of aims and decisions and education of citizens, as well as policy makers, should be considered an objective of policy evaluation.