

## Main trends in policy orientation

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### Abstract

In this article the author indicates the milestones in the development of distance learning in European countries by identifying the goals and common trends of the most important public measures undertaken in the last twenty years, including EC Programmes and initiatives. A tentative clarification of the overall aim of these policies sheds light on three major policy orientations: the innovation of existing education and training systems, the development of a new cultural industry for Europe and the development of telecom-based educational services through satellite and cable network operators.

### Keywords

Innovation of education and training systems  
New cultural industry for Europe  
Telecom-based educational services

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### Initial goals

If we look back twenty years and try to identify the goals of the first substantial public measures undertaken by European countries to develop distance learning we can synthesise them in the following way:

- in the Seventies the accent was put on the main goal of facilitating access to university level education by that part of the population that, for social, economic or geographical resources had not an easy access to it. The first generation of distance universities in Europe (UK, Germany, Spain) finds its origins in this period and in this broad motivation, that we might define "social" in an oversimplification effort;
- in the Eighties, after two serious oil crisis and the start of the technological revolution in industry, a new generation of policies was started, that paid much more attention to the need of accompanying the innovation processes in industry, to generate new skills and competencies required to adult workers in a turbulent working environment. The Open Tech Programme in the UK is the best known example, but similar measures were undertaken, in the second part of the decade, in France, Italy and Spain.
- Meanwhile, even the distance universities (both the "older" and the newer such as the Dutch and the Portuguese) paid much attention to continuing training as well as higher education;
- a parallel, technology-driven stream of policies can be found in many European countries since the Seventies, then reinforced on the Eighties. Here the main orientation was to modernise school and university through the use of new technology (subsequently video, personal computers, multimedia, telecom systems). Examples of these can be the national plans to introduce computers in schools undertaken in almost all European countries in the early Eighties and, at a European level, the first phase of the DELTA Programme. This marks the emergence of a new actor with its policy in the field of flexible and distance learning: the European Community.

Programmes like EUROTECNET, COMETT, LINGUA, FORCE, DELTA gave a new impulse to initiatives and to those actors who had hitherto worked in local or national contexts.

The formalisation of this process was achieved with the Memorandum on Open and Distance Learning, published by the European Commission at the end of 1991, and with the two articles of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 that recognise the role of open and distance learning in the European policies in the field of education and vocational training.

After that it became almost impossible to quote all the many European, national, regional and local initiatives to support flexible and distance learning. The growth in number is so relevant that it is difficult to identify the main policy orientations behind the individual measures.

### Common trends

Some common trends seem to be:

- policy orientations tend to shift from support to the supply in an early phase, to support to demand-driven pilot projects and measures to improve the working mechanism of the market (information, certification, resource centres, etc.);
- policies to support are more and more often integrated into main-stream policies concerning education and training or technological innovation, so losing some degrees of specificity but gaining relevance to main-stream actors.

The European Commission is also trying to co-ordinate its policies in the field and to integrate these into main-stream programmes. The Poitiers Conference in October 1993 and the joint call of 15/06/1994 represent the attempt to co-ordinate the efforts of DG XXII, of DG XII and of DG XIII in this domain. The Task Force on Multimedia Educational Software is a broader and recent example of this new trends towards integration of EU policies in this area.

## Policy orientations

What still remains to be clarified is towards which overall aim these policies are oriented. Three major orientations seem to emerge:

1. the innovation of the existing education and training systems; this approach is by large the most frequent in policies adopted by most Ministries of Education and Employment and by the Task Force Human Resources of the European Commission. It is based on the assumption that in the future education and training bodies will keep their function of intermediaries between sources of knowledge and learners. Training of trainers and pilot projects based on existing education and training bodies are the typical measures that such an approach entails, together with investment in technological equipment and resource centres to be installed by education and training bodies.
2. The development of a new cultural industry for Europe, able to compete with the Japanese and American giants of multimedia. Though not generated by educationalists, this is a legitimate objective of industrial policy, that entails investment of the public administration both in buying and in supporting the production of innovative multimedia products, encouraging synergy among publishers, specialised software houses, video producers.  
This policy orientation includes education and training as possible "protected" mass market for the new multimedia industry. Some signs of this policy orientation can be found in several European Union programmes of DG XIII; the long term scenario is one in which learners may access knowledge directly through publishers, without the intermediation of educational and training bodies.
3. The development of telecom-based educational services through satellite and cable network operators; this orientation is based on the support to the main technological innovation of the present decade, that is already influencing and modifying consumption habits of large populations in Europe, in the same way as it has happened in Northern America quite recently. Policy measures coherent with this orientation are the introduction of reduced tariffs for individuals who register in distance education courses, support to pilot projects based on telecommunication use in education and training. Also in this case the role of education and training bodies is not absolutely necessary, if telecom network operators provide a service based on published learning resources rather than "live" lectures and tutoring services.

Are these three orientations totally alternative and contradictory to each other? Probably they are not, as a DELPHI survey organised by the BEACON project seems to indicate by suggesting that the three macro-scenarios underlying the above mentioned policy orientations are all likely to happen within the coming 10-15 years.

The strongest education and training bodies will be able to innovate themselves and to integrate the use of learning technologies in pedagogically complex and certified learning systems; they will probably make use of telecom services and, to a lesser extent, of stand-alone multimedia products, but they will be the leading parties in the new partnerships. This will probably happen at school and university level, and for the most credible training organisations.

In other areas of vocational and continuing training, as well as in leisure-oriented education, where a formal title is not required, the other two scenarios are more likely to happen, and the role of traditional education and training bodies is likely to decrease very substantially to make room for non-mediated or telecom-mediated access to learning resources by individuals and SMEs.