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Flexible Learning in a Digital World

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Abstract **Concepts as flexible learning, lifelong learning, life wide learning, individualization, globalization are discussed. What does it mean and what are the consequences on HEI perspectives. The critical issue is who are the learners and the learning providers and what are their frames of references.**

Key words: eLearning, distance learning, ODL, Internet-based education, ICT, flexible learning, life wide learning, lifelong learning, quality indicators

Considerations

Initial position for this paper are some critical issues concerning flexibile learning, lifelong learning and consequences for HEI presented mainly in the recommendations by the European Commission (1-7) and also the book by Collis and Moonen (8).

Introduction

In this presentation I would like to reflect and raise some critical questions on the theme of my suggested title, rather than to try to get some objective overview over the theme.

I would also try to give a short overview and some examples concerning the situation of lifelong learning, life wide learning and flexible learning in Sweden (9, 10,11).

I am sorry to admit and I dare to say that unfortunately many of the words used nowadays concerning HE and lifelong learning are sometimes just anything else that prestige-words. You really have to reflect and raise questions over the meaning and the consequences of using them. In the following I will just try to do this, e.g. more raise questions, than to give the answers.

Flexible learning

Flexible learning is not a new phenomenon. Students in HE have for long time has had an enormous dimension of flexibility. Flexible learning is a concept which has became extremely "trendy" nowadays. You have to take into consideration on what level you talk about and also reflect on "flexible for whom or for what"?

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In many documents, mainly from the European Commission one talk about flexible learning in a broad meaning, with the key idea being learners choice in different aspects of the learning experiences. Collins et al already in 1997 (8) talked about different dimensions of learning flexibility, such as; flexibility related to time, flexibility related to content, flexibility related to entry requirements, flexibility related to instructional approach and resources and flexibility related to delivery and logistics. Collis and Moonen (8) introduce four key components related to flexible learning in HE, namely technology, pedagogy, implementation strategies and institutional framework. But to begin with, what is flexible learning? The concept is even very often taken as a synonymous with distance education (8, 12, 13). What does it mean in our frame of reference for our HE in the member states in EU?

The concept of learning may also be under reflection, in which frame of reference do we use the word *learning (*Booth, S. 2002). For example we have gone from industrialism to a knowledge society, we have a great variety of learning theories, behaviourism, phenomenology etc. In the same way we have different learning models. The work by Vygotsky and his Social Cognitive Development Theory (activity theory) has come more and more in use *(*Booth, S. 2002). The social interaction for learners is more and more important. We talk about learning and learners and not that much about teaching and content (1, 4, 9, 12, 13). Depending on which frame of reference we use, the concept of learning has different meanings.

Lifelong learning/life wide learning

The European Commission has (1) defined lifelong learning as "*Lifelong learning is seen as encompassing all purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence".* In its final communication on Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality (4) the Commission suggested a slightly modified definition of lifelong learning "*All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective".* The breadth of this definition also draws attention to the full range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activity.

The six key issues in the Memorandum are described as:

1. New basic skills and opportunities for everyone to obtain these. Attention is paid to ICT knowledge, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills
2. Increased investments in human resources
3. Innovation in teaching and learning
4. Valuing learning-the need to recognise and evaluate learning, especially non-formal and informal learning
5. Guidance and counselling-and giving access to information and advice of good quality on the opportunities for learning throughout life
6. Bringing learning closer to individuals-supplying opportunities for lifelong learning as close to "learners" as possible.

eLearning Action Plan

The strategic goal for Europe, set by the 2000 Lisbon Council is to become *"the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohension"* In the eLearning Action Plan (5, 6) three main challenges are explicit expressed; extending educational

opportunity, accelerating educational innovation and exploring public private partnerships. What will be the meaning of this for the partner countries?

The Commissions recommendations are to remove barriers to access and connectivity, support professional development, accelerate eLearning innovation and content development, address the ICT skills shortage, promote digital literacy and lifelong learning and explore sustainable public private partnerships.
Ten recommendations can be underlined:

- Connect everyone and everything from everywhere
- Adopt and participate in the development of open standards for eLearning
- Focus eLearning research on pedagogy, eContent and user-friendly interfaces and devices
- Create the conditions to sustain a commercial market for eLearning content development
- Increase investment in continuous professional development of educators. Enhance their status. Help them develop an understanding of and a pedagogy for eLearning
- Develop flexible curricula and assessment frameworks to provide individuals with the skills needed for participation in the Information Age
- Expand eLearning communities and forums
- Provide financial incentives to promote the take-up of eLearning
- Leverage financial instruments to support eLearning
- Explore the potential of public private partnerships

(5, s 4-6)

HEI perspective

What will be the consequences for HEI following the recommendations from the Commission and the policy for the different member states?

The three missions for universities can be expressed as where the 3rd mission is oriented to exploitation, application and creative, fig.1 use of the available knowledge to increase the innovative capacity of a region (after Marilyn Wedgewood).

The new challenge for HEI is to work with dynamic allocation of educational resources (Personal communication, Ericsson, 2002).

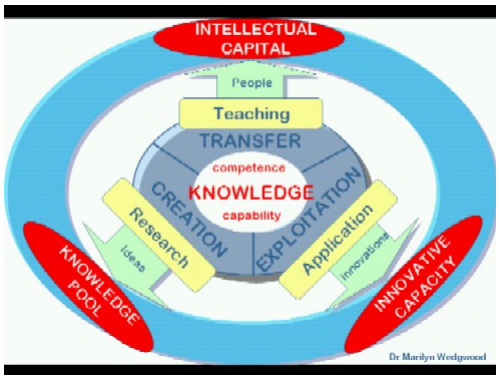

Fig 1. The three missions for the Universities (14)

Some of the problems with the 3rd mission in relation to the 1st and 2nd mission (research and teaching, respectively) are from a R&D-perspective that the problems involved are often inter- and cross-disciplinary in nature, embedded in the regional context, and difficult to address to a specific scientific discipline as an X-ological

problem. From an educational perspective the group of persons of relevance for further and continuous learning is very heterogeneous and have a mixture of varying backgrounds, experiences and personal ambitions for the future. The kind of education characteristic for the 3rd mission is confronted with difficulties in creating suitable classes on a traditional campus and there is a need for higher customization and personification of the learning process.

The competence needed to solve regional problems is a mixture of scientific disciplinary knowledge and industry-specific know-how. Often there is a need to establish formal proof of attained such competence with some kind of certificates or authorization making the individuals eligible to certain positions and jobs in which such qualifications are needed. These qualifications differs often from the conventional degrees and credits offered by traditional universities as they are related to emerging new competences (14).

Several authors, among them Collis and Moonen (8) mean that the most important step for HEI is to create strategies for changes. Elements to be included according to CRE, already in 1998 (aa) in the strategic plan would be to define pedagogical goals;, infrastructural requirements, evaluation, dissemination and debate, quality issues;, expertise for development, production and distribution; funding developments, resources of planning.

From research of over 200 studies in literature Collis and Moonen (8) found factors that influence implementation of technical innovation in an educational context. The 4-E Model (aa.s 53) expresses those four clusters and their sub factors. *Environment*, means the institutions profile with respect to technology use. Indicators in this cluster are the vision, the support and actual level of use within the institution for technology use for learning related purposes. The readiness to change among the people in the institution when it comes to the use of technology in education. *Education effectiveness* means how education gains from the technology use. Indicators here are both long-term and short–term pay-off sub factors, but also learning effectiveness sub factors. *Ease of use*, means just as the concept express, is the systems easy or difficult to use and produce for learning related purposes. *Engagement* means personal engagement about technology use for learning related purposes, e.g. self-confidence factors and pleasure with the www sub factor.

Intraregional networking

To reach the objectives concerning lifelong learning in HEI, intraregional networking and collaborative learning are more and more of importance. An initiative (R3L) from the European Commission has also recently been launched. From Lund University, SE a proposal (14) for this initiative has been submitted. Six countries, with their special regions will be involved as a pilot project.

The concept used for networking within the learning regions is called the Conversity-model (14), for the 3rd mission. According to this model fig 2, human competence is considered to have three components related to three higher social values:

- ”The Truth” – objective, critical examination of the world (critical questions)
- ”The Beauty” - subjective, experienced joy or utility (attractive solutions)
- ”The Justice” – intersubjective respect and empathy (sharing of goods and bads)

To create mixtures and synthesis of these values and their corresponding competences, a more intimate relation is needed between those who defend, fight for or represent

the different values. The Conversity-concept is congruent with the Triple-Helix-model but is based on another ground metaphor than the traditional Triple Helix concept (evolving living matter), namely *additive colour blending* (RGB-technology). Using additive colour blending, most other colours - including white -can be constructed by different mixtures of the three components. In a similar vein, the partners of a Conversity-alliance can generate a number of new colours or synergies by mixturing their different base values and competencies

Conversity©	*Gene*	*Organism*	*Environment*	*Composition*
Perspective	A. Academic	B. Business	C. Civic	A x B x C= Triple Helix
Colour	Green	Blue	Red	*White*
Competence	Academic	Business	Civic	*Intelligent creativity*
Higher Value	The Truth	The Beauty	The Justice	*The Sustainable*
Orientation	Theoretic	Practical	Social	*Innovative*
Type of Art	Questioning	Design	Communication	*Taking measures*
Motivation	Honour	Wealth	Power	*Welfare*
Base Activity	Thinking/Reading	Doing/Making	Acting/Talking	*Learning/Conversation*
Occupation	Student	Worker	Politician	*Professional Citizen*
Site/Place	School	Factory	Meeting Room	*Network*
Task	Make a Course	Do a Job	Settle an Issue	*Add a Value*
Benefit/Output	Certificate/Credit	Money/Income	Support/Mandate	*Trust/Shared Future*
Extra ordinary	Discovery	Innovation	Revolution	*Conversion*
Knowledge Base	Public Literature	Private Experience	Common Sense	*World Wide Web*
Representation	University/College	Industry/Company	Public/Authority	*Alliance/CoLab*

Fig2 Conversity Model, based on Triple Helix alliances (14)

Quality Indicators of lifelong learning

The European Commission stated in the Report on Quality Indicators (7) that "People are Europe's main asset and should be the focal point of the Union's Policies". In a knowledge society education and training rank among the highest political priorities. The overall strategic objectives will influence the development of education and training systems in Europe over the course of next decade. This means to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU. Second to facilitate the access of all to education and training systems and finally opening-up education and training systems to a wider world. This will really be a challenge for HEI, are we ready for that?

The commission has set up 15 quality indicators in four different areas. The role of the indicators could be to describe the present situation, to quantify the objectives which have been set, to provide continuous updates on progress towards certain objectives or to provide insights into which factors might have contributed to achieving results.

- *Area A: Skills, Competencies and Attitudes*

Literacy
Numeracy
New skills in the learning society
Learning –to-Learn skills
Active citizenship cultural and social skills

- *Area B: Access and Participation*

Access to lifelong learning
Participation in lifelong learning

- *Area C: Resources for Lifelong Learning*

Investment in lifelong learning
Educators and training
ICT in learning

- *Area D: Strategy and system development*

Strategies of lifelong learning
Coherence of supply
Counselling and guidance
Accreditation and certification
Quality assurance

The survey (7) distinguishes two groups of countries: those e.g. BE, DK, FI, DE, IT, PT, SE, UK who have a very good coverage, i.e. generally only very few indicators were missing for these countries. The indicators (based on PISA data) which were missing even for the countries just mentioned were access to lifelong learning, coherency of supply, counselling and guidance, accreditation and certification and finally quality assurance. The second group were countries which have not implemented any of these indicators or only very few. For Latvia six out of 15 indicators were fulfilled.

The Learners Choice

So many initiatives, recommendations and strategies to reach the overall objectives; active citizens, sustainable economy, sustainable and growing labour market, piece, harmony etc., but what are the learners perspectives and choice?

Flexibility to time, flexibility related to content, flexibility related to entry requirements, flexibility related to instructional approach and resources, flexibility to delivery and logistics are some indicators from the learner's perspective (8). Are HEI ready to meet those challenges? Are the learners ready to meet the challenges?

The Swedish Perspective

The Swedish response (9,10,11) on the recommendations and demands concerning initiatives on lifelong learning and e-Learning, both from OECD (1998, 2002) and the Commission of the European Communities (1,2,3,4,5,6) can be mentioned as following. One has indeed to pay attention to, that the Swedish education system and specially Universities has since many years ago, even before the above mentioned recommendations, worked in those directions and has for many countries been a model of good examples. Sweden has of course indeed, even to strengthen its strategies and implementation of lifelong learning in daily life and in the society and through higher education at Universities.

The Budget Bill for 2002 (Budget propositionen, 2002) states that there will be increasing resources for basic higher education, promoting of recruiting activities, new exams, e.g. Master education, shorter vocational education, pedagogic renewal, the Net University, supplementary education for students with foreign academic education, students with different kind of disabilities, increasing of courses in science and technical subjects as well as in rehabilitation and nursing, improvements of pedagogical resources and the education for teachers, co-operation with industry and enterprises both in the private and the public sector, increasing of research and doctoral studies.

In the policy from the government, stated it the Government Bill (9) interventions for promoting broader recruitments to Universities are described as follows:

- The government suggests that there will be special regulations in the Higher Education Act, concerning Universities duty to promote and widen the recruitment to Universities. The government suggests further that there will be a special delegation, aiming to stimulate and promote wider recruitment activities at each University.
- Each University will also establish special action programmes according to the plans for wider recruitment.
- Another activity supported from the government is the so-called college education, together with the Local Authority Administered Adult Education.
- The government also promote the new role of Universities, the role to stimulate lifelong learning, for example to stimulate judgment of real competence for qualification for higher education and even to state in the Higher Education Ordinance that real competence is adequate as well for qualification for higher education. Universities have to develop methods for judgment of competence, besides the formal educational system.
- Commissioned Education is one instrument to confirm the Universities role in the process of life long learning.
- There will be new possibilities for doctoral students, to study on part –time and also for students at licentiate degree, to be enrolled in research study programmes.
- The government also states different commitments for renewal of the pedagogic in higher education, as well as organization and structure. Also all lecturers enrolled in higher education will have a formal pedagogic education as well as in ICT and ICT /net pedagogy.
- The Swedish Net University was established in March 2002. All net courses from all of the Swedish Universities will be co-ordinated from the The Swedish Net University.
- From 2002 there is also a new organization for flexible learning (CFL), aiming to co-ordinate, stimulate and promote all flexible learning (The Old organization was the National School for Adults).
- New forms for distributed learning and also new alternatives for education will stimulate and promote possibilities for lifelong learning.
- The government also estimates that there will be a stronger concentration on additional courses for immigrants with foreign higher education qualifications.
- The wider perspective of internationalization mobility activities will also promote recruitment to higher education. Sweden will also through different activities promote and stimulate recruitment of foreign students.
- Universities will also, without the government's admission, get possibilities to prosecute education on mission, even from customers outside the EES-region.

Conclusions

To conclude I will give you the perspectives from Collis and Moonen (8) on scenarios for the future, fig 3.

	Where local and face-to face transactions are highly valued	Where global and network-mediated transactions are norm
In which the institution offers a programme and ensures it quality	**Scenario A** Quality control of a cohesive curriculum, experienced in the local setting (current situation) **Back to Basic**	**Scenario B** Quality control of a cohesive local curriculum, available globally **The Global Campus**
In which the learner chooses what he or she wants and thus takes more responsibility for quality assurance	**Scenario C** Individualization in the local institution **Stretching the Mould**	**Scenario D** Individualization and globalization **The New Economy**

Fig 3. Four scenarios for flexible leaning in 2005 and beyond (8, s 199)

Flexible Learning in a Digital World? It is worth to reflect and act as how we want the scenarios to turn up…

There will always be new challenges and opportunities relating to flexible learning and technology. The opportunity to learn new lessons will continue. With those taught I will close the presentation, but the learning experiences will continue…

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