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USING TECHNOLOGY TO PROMOTE LEARNING ACROSS AN ENLARGED EUROPEAN UNION: EXPERIENCE EMERGING ACROSS THE NEW EUROPE

Based on findings from the ALPINE European Socrates (Grundvig) funded project (2001-4). **Project Number: 85715-CP-1-2000-UK-GRUNDTVIG-ADU (2001-2004)**

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Abstract

This paper summarises the aims and goals of the ALPINE project, a project involving partners in 20 European countries. It examines how the project used technology and further to enhance project learning and the problems and opportunities created by this approach. The paper refers to the work of one of its working groups, the ICT and Community outreach group. The paper shows how providers of adult learning in universities can come together and form new partnerships which themselves can promote learning by creating new open, distance and e-learning opportunities.

Background

Developing a Europe of knowledge is an essential factor for economic development, for social and human growth and for consolidating and enriching European citizenship. Since the 1990's the emergence of a European strategy to develop and implement a coherent and comprehensive strategy for lifelong learning has raised new questions for higher education. The strategy raises questions about the role of universities and other higher education establishments in developing lifelong learning and how they might provide for the needs of adults of all age groups and from different backgrounds.

The 'Adults Learning and Participating in Education' project, known as ALPINE, recognises the need to involve more adult learners in higher education and to find new and innovative ways for involvement. The project set out to examine the existing provision for adults in European higher education and to determine the barriers which prevent adults from participating. It sought to determine how issues in increasing and widening participation are being addressed in twenty European countries and to report on new ways to enable adults to take part. The findings are reported in a book (1) and in an e-manual (2). The aims and goals of the ALPINE project are closely related to European Commission thinking (3-8) on strategies and practical measures for lifelong learning. The project benefited from expertise in twenty European countries. The ALPINE Project is a three year European funded Socrates (Grundtvig) Project beginning in May 2001 and completing in June 2004. The project has 35 partners from 20 countries (including 8 new EU members joining May 2004 and a further 2 applicant countries).

Most adult education policy makers, managers, researchers, teachers and students are currently not familiar with the expanding field of Adult Education outside their own countries. There is a growing demand for analyses that describe the field authoritatively and that identify good practice, while also engaging in a theoretical critique of the transformation of Adult Education and of its contribution to lifelong learning generally.

The research outputs of the project presented have generated interest, both from practitioners developing educational policies and practice and from academic researchers working in the broad field of lifelong learning.

The ALPINE Book

The book begins by examining existing European perspectives on lifelong learning and the problems and possibilities in increasing and widening adult participation in higher education institutions across Europe. It then presents in detail the situation in each of the participating countries as seen by national experts there. Each national chapter sets out to examine, as far as it can, how the provision for adults is organised in higher education institutions, the barriers which prevent adults participating in higher education there (including the problems of particular adult groups) and the policies and practices adopted at the national and institutional levels, which seek to involve more adults. Each chapter highlights examples of innovative practice, including special initiatives for specific disadvantaged groups where possible. While many of the problems faced by adults across Europe are similar, the ways of dealing with them vary considerably. The concluding chapter provides an overview of the issues and problems. It summarises the special problems experienced by adult students in higher education institutions across central and western Europe and seeks to draw general conclusions on the possible ways of overcoming these. As well as the European audience, the content of this book provides useful information for Adult Education planners, researchers, teachers and students worldwide.

The ALPINE E-Manual of Good Practice

The e-manual of good practice looks in greater detail at the practical issues in increasing and widening participation for adults in European higher education institutions. These issues, including summaries of key points and case studies of good practice, can be found on the ALPINE Project Web site: www.qub.ac.uk/alpine.

The issues that are re-examined in this case include the curriculum appropriate for adult students, adult student support and guidance, community outreach, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool to reach adults, engaging non-traditional groups, adult teaching, and learning language and culture for adults. Several other key issues such as assessment and accreditation, funding of adult learning etc. might also have been added to the list, but given the restriction on time and funding, and the expertise within the group, it was decided to focus on the key themes above.

This manual presents information on good practice for managers and teachers who have a role in developing adult provision in higher education institutions. It should also be of value to policy makers and administrators with responsibility in adult higher learning, staff of national agencies with a role to play in increasing adult participation in higher education institutions, staff trainers and indeed anyone with an interest in widening participation in the higher education sector.

Together, the manual and book provide a compendium of ideas for increasing and widening participation for adults in European higher education institutions. They show how countries, and their individual higher education institutions, are increasing adult provision. This includes meeting the needs of underrepresented groups of adults and highlights the many problems that have still to be overcome. It is hoped that these twin resources will assist higher education institutions to manage the process of change in increasing the numbers of adult students more effectively. It should also improve the quality of provision for adult students in European higher education institutions generally.

Project management & methodology

The process of working was established at the projects first meeting of all the partners in Belfast in May 2001. The project had six face- to face meeting at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, U.K, the University of Debrecen, Hungary, Lund University, Sweden, The University of Tartu, Estonia, the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece and Stirling University, Scotland, UK.

A series of dissemination seminars have subsequently been organised in Tartu University, Estonia, Bratislava University of Economics, Slovakia, University of Craiova, Romania, University of

Chemical Technology and Metallurgy, Sofia, Bulgaria, University of Limerick, Ireland, and the University of Helsinki, Finland. These seminars will be completed by the end of June 2004.

The Project Director, based at the Institute of Lifelong Learning at Queen's University Belfast provided overall project co-ordination. Ongoing e-mail contact was maintained between the project partners on both academic and financial matters throughout the project. A project web-site and an e-mail group list were established to communicate with the partners. The web-site included general project information including information about each project partner and their university, information about project meetings, and follow up reports from meetings. Links with other relevant sites such as the home university of each partner and the Commission's web sites were established. All the information on the web -site was available for anyone to view.

At its first meeting in Belfast, the project members agreed a method for gathering data for the book and manual were discussed. It was agreed that the ALPINE book would comprise individual chapters from each participating country who would gather data and write a national report on participation in adult learning in its universities. Guidelines for writing reports were drawn up and agreed at the meeting and these guidelines were subsequently reviewed at subsequent project meetings over a two-year period. The e-manual would comprise of six working groups each with a group leader who would be responsible for the overall management of group activities between meetings – for example, apportioning of tasks, communication with members, providing support and encouragement to members etc.

The target group of the study

It was also thought to be important to define a common understanding of what was meant by the term 'adult' in the context of universities. It was agreed to examine provision for students who had completed their initial education followed by a period when they had not been involved in formal education. The kind of education provision examined was that geared towards the non-traditional learner which might include both vocational and non-vocational provision, i.e. courses where the motive was to develop skills and knowledge for work, or for personal development, or for social and community development. It was also felt that groups which had traditionally suffered disadvantage, such as those experiencing rural isolation or immigrants, should be a particular focus of the study as relatively little information has been published in this field. The project partners used existing information that was readily available in their countries as there was insufficient time and resources to carry out new field research. It was also possible to draw on experience from another European study which focussed on the recent development of university continuing education in Europe (9) Where possible relevant information was integrated into the present book in order to present as broad a picture as possible of adults in higher education in the national and European contexts.

Rationale for widening participation

Raising people's educational level is an essential requirement for creating a successful transition to a knowledge-based society and its achievement has major implications for the involvement of adults in universities. Lifelong learning closely links with a wide range of policy goals including economic and social advancement. These include, for example, providing skills for the labour market, reducing poverty, assisting community development, enhancing citizenship, and promoting social and cultural development.

The EU has acknowledged the importance of promoting lifelong learning through widening participation in education. The Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (3) notes:

“Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts. The coming decade must see the implementation of this vision. All those living in Europe, without exception, should have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change and to participate actively in the shaping of Europe's future.” (3, p3).

The emergence of lifelong learning onto the European policy agenda has undoubtedly influenced the development of access to higher education. The importance of changing higher education in order to promote greater equity through wider access was noted at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education. The forward to the Conference noted:

“It is now clear that, to fulfil its mission, higher education must change radically, by becoming organically flexible, and at the same time more diverse in its institutions, its structures, its curricula, and the nature and forms of its programmes and delivery systems.” (11, p.2).

The ALPINE study sets out to answer questions about how a wider participation in lifelong learning might be achieved, through involving more adults in universities, particularly adults from excluded groups.

Project Evaluation

Provision for internal project evaluation was built into the ALPINE project proposal. Two external consultants (one from the Finnish Council for Directors of Continuing Education and the other from the Continuing Professional Development section of the University of Turku, Finland.) were engaged to provide guidance and support and to evaluate the success of the project on an ongoing process. The evaluation process highlighted both the successes and problems which arose and makes suggestions on how the project management might be improved for the future (10).

Two evaluation questionnaires were sent out to project members (in April 2002 and again in March 2003). A response rate of 78% was achieved on the first survey with a slightly higher figure in the second survey.) The project evaluators note (p.6) that partners who did not answer were largely those who might be classified as drop-out partners who had not participated in the project activities. A final evaluation meeting of all the partners was held during a dissemination conference in Stirling, Scotland in December 2003 and both positive aspects and unsuccessful elements were discussed and analysed.

Virtual & real -life communication

The Alpine project used a blend of face-to-face meetings with ongoing use of virtual communication between meetings to further the project aims. The face-to-face meetings each succeeded in focusing on critical issues at different stages of the process and were a factor in determining the success of the project. As most of the work in a project like ALPINE has to be done between the face-to-face meetings, so the use of time between meetings becomes crucial. The project evaluation paid particular attention to methods of communication and use of time both in meetings and between meetings using virtual communication. The project evaluation showed a very positive picture of commitment with 73% of project members indicated they were satisfied with the work that has been done between meetings.

The role of *group leaders* in promoting activities had an important impact on the group work. Most of the group leaders made contact with group members, using e-mail to discuss day -to -day issues. The main issues that the working groups discussed between meetings were objectives, content and the working process related to the specific tasks of the group.

Between meetings all of the communication between partners was using virtual communication methods such as e-mail and the project web-site. The project members commented on the high level of good communication between the project manager and the partners with 89% describing it as excellent or very good. In particular, they commented on the openness of discussion. The project partners were, however, more critical about communication between themselves. While some indicated it was at a good or excellent level (40%), others indicated that it could have been better (48% of respondents) and a small number (12%) felt it had not been good.

Participants were asked about the work of other groups in the project. 44% of respondents indicated that they had very little knowledge about what was going on in other groups. The apparent lack of

knowledge calls into question the benefits of using the web-site as an exclusive means of communicating information about the work of other groups.

The project website was seen as useful, with 70% of the project members indicating it was 'very good' or excellent'. The website had clear information and offered an opportunity for sharing information. The website was also seen as a vehicle for wider dissemination of progress and information arising from the project. Some felt that the web-site had been mainly 'process' orientated and could have been more 'outcome' orientated. Websites can be successful both as a forum for sharing information and views and supporting progress between partners or for presenting outcomes. While the ALPINE website supported the development of the ALPINE project, its limitations was its lack of attention to dissemination features during the project.

Improving learning

The aims of the project were to find ways of improving and developing educational practices, to find new ways of integrating adult education within the university and to strengthen learning opportunities for adult learners. The project also offered an opportunity for learning to happen in a European context by bringing people together from different countries to share knowledge and experience.

In the ALPINE survey about 34% felt they had been able to share their knowledge and expertise. A significant number felt they had only been partly able to share their experience (54%) while 12% felt that the sharing was insufficient. It would seem that a number of participants would have welcomed a greater opportunity for sharing knowledge. One of the problems was that sharing knowledge using the website and e-mail had its limitations. Members' knowledge of written English was not necessarily enough to overcome all the barriers of communication.

While well organised meetings are one way of sharing information. Another is improving the virtual learning environments for dissemination purposes, for example, through establishing discussion groups and by developing an interactive web-site. The survey showed that while the use of technology to communicate messages was generally seen as good, some partners would have liked more innovative use of e-mail lists, use of 'net meetings' and 'video conferencing.'

ICT & Community Outreach in European universities

The ICT and community outreach (CO) group was one of six working groups that examined the role of ICT and community outreach in widening access to universities for adults. The group examined the various meaning of the concepts of ICT and community outreach and produced a series of reports focussing on developments within each participating country. These reports can be accessed on the project website www.qub.ac.uk/alpine

Obstacles that hinder adults from participating more actively in higher education vary a lot from country to country and also within one country. Starting from practical questions like lack of money or suitable courses, and ending with attitude-related issues like considering oneself too old for studying or finding no need for studying, or considering oneself not suitable for higher education because of social class, parents background, etc. One group of problems is related to the flexibility/non-flexibility of the courses on offer. The easiest solution for the universities is to organise adult education together with its ordinary teaching activities. This is done in many places and is obviously suitable for some adults. However, many universities try to be more flexible and organise adult oriented courses in evenings or at weekends and through traditional distance learning methods. But the flexibility can go even further. Two ways was examined for different countries– ICT-based teaching and community outreach activities that makes university adult education even more flexible and accessible. While ICT-based teaching and learning is nowadays hot topic for most of universities and its application helps to vanish the borders between traditional and adult-oriented university education (although building the barriers - „the digital divide“- in other places), community outreach is a costly additional activity to the main functions of the university.

In the lifelong learning perspectives ICT and CO are one of the most efficient ways for reaching adults and widening their participation in HE. Following key messages was summarised from the findings:

- ICT is a tool for lifelong learning. Delivering courses through the net, there are a lot of additional effects for adults besides the concrete aims of the course, e.g. to reach the eWorld.
- Although ICT-based teaching is time-and money-consuming, it might help to bring adult learners to universities.
- Research and experiences on ICT-based teaching in universities show that it is especially suitable learning method for adult learners, providing better access and qualitatively better learning results.
- While delivering courses in the regions, co-operation with local training institutions might be useful.
- Instead of becoming extremely flexible and offering 100% web-based learning, one might think about blended learning while many adult students like face sessions and are ready to travel and take time in order to meet fellow students. Combining CO activities with ICT-based teaching might thus be a good option.
- When deciding to offer ICT-based courses to adult students, think about their opportunities to use necessary technology.
- Neither ICT nor CO help to overcome the problems of adult participation related to attitudes.
- Although offering courses outside of the university buildings in big cities might reduce the fear of some adults related to the “ivory towers”. Introduction courses to HE, online service and a strong infrastructure can be opportunities for overcoming attitude problems.
- ICT and CO can be used as effective delivery methods especially in isolated regions and with language minorities living in a wide geographic area.
- The 5th generation of eLearning focusing on *what, where* and *when*, the intelligent flexible learning model, characterized by flexible in *time, pace* and *space*. Materials and interactive delivery can also be an opportunity to overcome obstacles bringing adults to HE.

Conclusion

The ALPINE project has shown that the use of technology in European projects has many benefits. As well as improving adult education provision in Europe, it can assist with the development of a common understanding that will help promote greater integration in Europe. However, a number of factors can affect success such as language & culture, level of development within individual countries and appropriate funding to carry out tasks. The task for the future will be to further develop new technology to enable teachers and adult learners to benefit more fully from experience across Europe.

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