ARE EUROPEAN EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS READY TO WELCOME OER AND ICT-RELATED INNOVATION?

The recent Communication from the European Commission on Opening up Education represents an important step in the already long history of the European Union support to open and distance learning, ICT in education, eLearning and, more recently, Open Education. Compared to previous documents produced in the last twenty years, it adopts a more systemic and authentically policy-driven approach to the rationale of using OER and ICT, referring to quality, relevance, efficiency and equity of overall education as the policy goals rather than the mere exploration of OER and ICT potential in certain specific niches of the education provision, to serve more specific purposes (ICT skills, access to higher education for disadvantaged students through distance education, etc.).

Will this document be able to attract and maintain the attention of decision makers, at all the governance levels that are expected to be involved in its implementation, or will it produce its impact only in a small part of the European education world? Is the policy ambition contained in the document accompanied by adequate policy instruments capable to stimulate, produce and evaluate the changes that are possible through the use of OER and ICT? There are some legitimate doubts, based on past experience and concrete observation of the present.

The policy attention on open education and ICT has certainly increased in the last two years thanks to the global Open Education movement and, even more acutely, to the perceived threat/opportunity of MOOCs, but there is no guarantee that it will remain so high for a long period: previous "waves of attention" have lasted two to three years and have then left the place to issues that were more familiar to the whole education community and the European population/electorate at large. The close link that might be established between ICT and general policy objectives regarding the modernisation of education and the valorisation of informal learning was probably not well explained or proved convincingly enough to maintain decision makers' focused on the subject for a long time. It must be remembered that major concerns have been affecting European education and have rightly attracted resources and attention, but the potential of ICT and open education to affect these key concerns was seldom seen in a systemic perspective.

At the level of the individual education institutions, many constraints were presented to explain the modest progress in really innovative use of ICT: lack of infrastructure, time and competences of teachers, financial constraints, lack of local stakeholders support to radical change, etc.. All these explanations are grounded, but are all based on the view of ICT and open education as something different from the core of education aims and processes. The so limited use of e-assessment in formal education, in spite of its recognised potential to support learning processes in new ways and document a broad set of learning outcomes, well represents this situation.

The combination of 1.innovation-enabling policies (innovation-oriented curricula, teachers'competences requirements, new official examination protocols, revised quality assurance frameworks), 2. innovation-oriented leadership at the single institution (allowing, encouraging and rewarding innovation) and 3.support to collaboration networks of innovative teachers is necessary to create the necessary "transformation temperature". Developing one factor at a time have hitherto failed to achieve significant results. The role of European Institutions, but also of European stakeholders networks is fundamental to keep Member States, where the core education competence lays, focused on a system view of what is possible (and necessary) to achieve - in terms of quality, relevance, equity and efficiency - with the help of OER and ICT.

Finally and more concretely, the possibility to support some large scale European initiatives through the existing Programmes and Funds should be considered, because achieving the necessary convergence of energies and process temperature also needs some visible and longer term flagship projects, probably difficult to accomodate in the present ERASMUS+ Programme typology of projects, to quote just one example.