Building a society of life-long learning

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are opening up access to education, training and learning resources, while also establishing avenues of self-learning. This is why the European Union believes the proper use of such technologies may contribute to Europe's shift to a knowledge-based society.

The European Commission eLearning Initiative was launched in May 2000 in order to speed up the effective integration of ICT in the education and training systems in Europe.

E-learning is the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by providing access to resources and services, as well as remote exchanges and collaboration. It concerns everyone; pupils, students, employees, employers and also teachers and trainers who are themselves seeking to improve upon their own capabilities.

The eLearning Initiative has four plans of action:

* The deployment of the necessary infrastructure and equipment for sparking the growth of e-learning;
* Specific training at all levels and particularly for teachers and trainers;
* The creation of the necessary conditions for the development of quality educational contents and services;
* Hastening the networking and co-operation at European level.

Most of the resources made available for these priorities are at a national level. The role of the European Union is to identify issues of common concern, barriers and opportunities, fostering and financing research, creating fair conditions for a European market, supporting Member States' efforts and fostering European co-operation. The focus is on the quality of the educational content and the teaching methods.

Although most of the resources made available for these priorities are at a national level, the European Union has a role to play. It supports member states' endeavours, encourages transnational co-operation, helps to disseminate best practices and sets the basement for the creation of a European market in the e-learning field.

Projects in the vanguard

The eLearning Initiative also supports projects that are testing and exploiting all manner of possibilities in e-learning. Most of those projects are pilots, that is to say they are test schemes that exist to analyse what works well in e-learning in a particular field and what doesn't. The best and most suitable elements can then be adopted by educational institutions on a more permanent basis, with the longer-term view that overall education through ICT will improve.

The 43 pilot projects listed in this brochure run between 2001 and 2004 and operate in fields such as media, science education, astronomy and teaching.

And, since **learning is a lifelong process**, they function at all the levels in which individuals learn; from the school classroom and university to the workplace.

For example, the Greek co-ordinated EUDOXOS project in the School to Work section is built upon a real scientific laboratory and promotes and teaches concepts of astronomy, astrophysics and cosmology to students. From their desks, students control a remote controlled robotic telescope set on a Greek island to bring live footage of space into the classroom. The project simultaneously improves teachers' skills in applying distance learning to their syllabuses.

Other projects deal with **media literacy**, an important issue because it concerns our ability to communicate competently in all old and new media, as well as to access, analyse and evaluate the power of the media's images, words and sounds. The aim is to give young people the necessary instruments and knowledge to distinguish between information and advertising, and between fiction and reality.

That's what a project like Histoire does. It gives students the license to imagine. In the classroom, they choose a particular character in a script and can imagine a virtual life in which they pretend to live in any place, situation and time and are limited only by their imaginations. As they set out to invent their virtual lives, students learn to manipulate images and photographs and this helps them to develop critical thinking about media and to use the Internet to collaborate on international projects.

Finally, some projects deal with "transversal issues", which can apply to almost any target audience, and which scrutinise the quality, analysis and teaching methodologies of ICT-based training. For instance, the European Quality Observatory (EQO) project has been developing and implementing a framework to collect, analyse and compare quality approaches in European e-learning. EQO has created a 'European quality framework' that takes countries' different approaches into account and then encourages a transnational exchange of experience. At the same time, its framework promotes much-needed standardisation.

Impact on a changing society

All projects reflect how ICT has impacted on how we retrieve information, how we communicate and how we teach and train ourselves. It is changing our education systems and our industries.

In supporting pilot projects, the *e*Learning Initiative is also keen to encourage continuity so that the results of the past can benefit projects of the future. In this regard, another 70 pilot projects will be launched in 2004 with the support of the EU.

The *e*Learning Initiative is improving our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of e-learning and is providing many examples of good practice to schools and universities. The modernisation of Europe's education and training systems is the goal and each of the projects in this brochure is contributing to that.