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THE EU STRATEGY ON THE  
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CHALLENGE ALSO FOR  
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HIGHER EDUCATION

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# **THE EU STRATEGY ON THE KNOWLEDGE BASED ECONOMY AND INFORMATION SOCIETY AS A NEW CHALLENGE ALSO FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE EU HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with some experiences as gathered especially from our recent EU projects that have been funded by the EU under the 6FP and its IST – Information Society Technologies Program and the current 7FP and the related ICT program. For more details about our particular EU funded projects please visit the web site of our e-Europe Research & Development Centre at //erdc.fm.uniba.sk. From the point of view of our experiences from these and some other similar projects we are trying to assess needs for modern education as the absolutely necessary basis of any progress to be achieved in the development of the EU as a future information society and knowledge based economy. Unfortunately, education in spite of all political declarations on its importance as yet so far has not been in the main focus of implementation of the Lisbon strategy and its innovated i2010 strategy or the future Europe 2020 strategy on the EU level and in particular not in the EU member states that are mainly responsible for education as it quite surprisingly so far still does not belong among the common policies of the EU. In brief the EU as a future knowledge based economy and information society needs not the existing CAP but instead of that the future CEP!

## **Key Words**

Information society, e-Europe, e-education, life-long education, i2010, Europe 2020, Lisbon strategy, knowledge based society, informal education, formal education, CAP, CEP.

## **1. Introduction**

The Lisbon strategy of the EU as adopted at the Summit of the EU member states leaders in March 2000 has stipulated as its main goal by the year 2010 that the EU should become the most advanced and competitive “knowledge based” economy in the world with more and better jobs ... cheap Internet as the main backbone of the whole Lisbon strategy and the future e-Europe with ... modern public services on-line ... dynamic e-business environment, etc. [6]

However, the further development has quite quickly and clearly demonstrated that the main goals of the Lisbon strategy have probably been too ambitious for the current stage of the EU and especially for the national governments of the EU new member states and their general development strategies. Almost all of them have been a lower development stage than the 15 so-called old EU member states and of course that has negatively effected also the overall process of modernization and internationalization of the education in the EU in general and its higher education in particular. .

## **2. Education as an Integral Part of the EU Lisbon, i2010 and Europe 2020 Strategies on Information Society and Knowledge Based Economy**

In addition to the above already mentioned problems with the ongoing process of enlargement, there has also been some other and equally important problems related to the EU as an information society and knowledge based economy to be fully benefiting from the system of modern education, etc. One of the main such problems has been that there has not been any whole range and comprehensive implementation strategy for the e-Europe on the EU and especially not on the national i.e. member states levels. One of the main problems in this respect has been the fact that most of the problem areas belonging under the Lisbon strategy are not among the common policies of the EU but belong among those where national governments of the member states are the main stake holders and the main decisive authorities. Unfortunately, among such sectors belongs

also education where also as in the entire implementation process of the Lisbon strategy has been adopted the so-called open method of implementation based on voluntary coordination and initiatives of the member states. As it has been in this connection quite evident from the very

beginning, the whole Lisbon strategy in terms of its implementation has had some shortcomings especially regarding its insufficient financial, institutional, legislative and other necessary support. Also that “voluntary” and “open” approach from the EU member states has very soon shown to be interpreted by individual members as too much open and voluntary.

As it has been quite clearly stated in the W. Kok’s Mid Term Evaluation Report of the Lisbon Strategy in November 2004 [5]:

“member states have made some progress in one or more areas but none succeeded consistently across a broad front...halfway to year 2010 the overall picture is very mixed...Europe needs to step up its efforts considerably in order to meet the Lisbon’s main objectives by the year 2010 ...otherwise, the Lisbon strategy will become a synonym for (an another) missed objectives and failed promises...”

On the basis of these and other evaluations, the EU finally adopted a revised and somehow less challenging strategy of i2010 with the main objectives basically defined as “a European Information Society for Growth and Employment [2] i.e. strategy that has been focusing not on becoming the most advanced knowledge based society but to become by the target year 2010 an Information Society that will be able to achieve the steady and higher overall macroeconomic and socio-economic development with higher employment. And thus it should lower unemployment that currently in many member states of the EU and EU regions has been rather too high hovering on the high levels of 10-12% in average and in some less developed regions even over 20-25% of the total workforce. Unfortunately, again many member states especially new ones have interpreted this change in strategies as the simple fact that the original Lisbon strategy and its main objectives are just dead and as such do not need to be part of any of their strategic development and implementation objectives. That simplification in the general approach of some EU-27 member states is definitely not correct as the Lisbon strategy as such has not been abolished at all and it has just been modified to less demanding final objectives but e.g. in education in principle does not been changed anything substantial.

Although there are some differences between the original Lisbon strategy and its less demanding “softened” i2010 strategy there are still some identical strategic objectives and one of them being quite logically paid to education. According to the original Lisbon strategy one of its four main objectives has been also the substantial increase in investments into people and education and thus to prepare them for the challenges of their future place in the future information and knowledge based society of the EU. Within this main objective several other partial objectives have been stipulated viz.:

- to implement a modern and flexible education i.e. modular type of education that will be able to react efficiently to the rapidly changing requirements for qualification of the future workforce
- to develop an Internet based e-education that would open doors for education also for those who for various reasons cannot study in the standard traditional class-room based education program
- to increase the general availability of education i.e. open it for everybody who is eligible for the particular form or degree of education without any administrative and other restrictions, etc.
- to provide for everybody a long-life education as the current and mainly future needs for qualification will definitely be not possible to achieve just during the regular schooling age
- to achieve the so-called European dimension in education consisting of mobility of teachers, students, multilingual, ICT based with mutual recognition of diplomas, degrees, common educational projects and EU curricula, etc.

As for the i2010 strategy, it is true that it does not contain among its three main objectives i.e.:

- a single European information space
- innovation and investments in research
- inclusion, better public service and quality of life

any explicit tasks and objectives regarding education. But it is also quite clear that all above three of its main objectives equally clearly and implicitly are based on the highest attainable education of the EU citizens as without the proper and modern education nobody could enjoy any advantages of the single European information space or be able to benefit from the rapid progress and results achieved in research and not at all to be able to be a part of inclusion into the future information and knowledge based society with modern e-based public services, etc. Hence any of the above simplified and opportunistic approaches of some EU member states that the above main Lisbon strategic objectives in education are “dead” equally as the whole strategy and that in the i2010 there are no objectives regarding education are totally wrong and by themselves very dangerous for the particular member states and especially for their citizens as that is the “best” way how to become excluded from the future EU as an information and knowledge based society with better jobs and thus higher standard of living, etc. Especially NMS and in particular also Slovakia has to be more active in implementation of the objectives of the Lisbon strategy especially in education according to the original open and initiative method.

The latest one of the so far adopted key strategies of the EU regarding also education has been the Europe 2020 strategy that basically except shifting the overall horizon of the previous two strategies to the end of this decade i.e. to the target year 2020 has not brought anything quite new regarding its objectives regarding education than defining the future EU as an Innovative

Union and its educational system to becoming a modern and innovative one being based on the latest achievements of the R&D, etc.

### **3. Some of the Main Problems in Implementation of the Lisbon and i2010 Strategies Regarding Education in General and its Higher Level in Particular**

Due to the above not quite correct approach of some EU member states towards the Lisbon as well as misinterpretation of the i2010 strategies, most of the above strategic objectives in education have so far remained more in the form of nice declarations than not so much in respect of their implementation into the educational practice of the EU and especially of its new member states.

Although the “knowledge based economy” has been the main goal of the EU for the whole decade 2000-2010 there has not been so far created anything like a “common policy on e-Europe” in its support similarly like it is in the case of the CAP i.e. the common agricultural policy or the common foreign and security policy or the common policy in justice and home affairs, the common regional policy, etc. Most clearly this lack of support could be documented by the EU budget that has - still by an evident paradox - been destined mostly for the old fashioned and currently already out-of-dated CAP and not for the development of the knowledge based economy and especially not for its main precondition and instrument i.e. education. Almost 50% of the EU budget i.e. 45-50 billion Euro goes annually still to the CAP and its subsidies, direct payments, etc. and finally to farmers especially in some old EU-15 member states who in general represent nowadays in the EU only a very small sector of 2-3% of the total workforce and that contributes to the EU’s GDP also only with about the same share. In this respect quite surprisingly some very negative role has been played also by NMS that in the process of preparation of the EU budget for years 2007-2013 rather supported direct payments to their farmers in spite of the facts that their subsidies are only a fraction of those going to their “old” colleagues than to increase EU funds for support of the future knowledge based and information society.

It is then no surprise that the whole 6FP as the main executive program for the EU’s research and development program and as such being also responsible for the Community support to the implementation of the Lisbon strategy on e-Europe in its crucial initial stage of years 2002-2006 has had totally only 17.5 billion Euro. The current 7FP for years 2007-2013 has a EU budgetary support of 51 billion Euro what is more than double of the annual allocations for the previous 6FP but still only a fraction of amounts that go annually to the CAP.

In general it is a well known fact that practically all EU policies have been well known for its support to comprehensive institutionalization of the processes of the European integration, However, by a certain paradox, the Lisbon strategy although being the most important development strategy for the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and at the same time also for the beginning of the 3d millennium has some evident deficiencies in this respect. The most important one being the fact that there is no specifically strong coordination of the implementation strategy on the community level and in this respect the entire institutionalization in this respect has been left again fully as a responsibility of the national governments. As a consequence then in some member states specialized ministries of informatics have already been existing like e.g. also in Slovenia, the Czech Republic, as two examples of the NMS, while in most of them such ministries have been missing including e.g. also Slovakia so the coordination has been in such cases left on several other central organs of the state administration what evidently is not the best way of coordinating the most important development strategy of the EU on the national level that in this respect has to substitute also the lack of institutionalization on the Union level.

Although the whole Lisbon strategy is based on the knowledge i.e. education, research, innovations, development and science, in addition to the overall insufficient budgetary support to R&D as we have already illustrated that above, there has not been any more systematic attempt to create anything like a common educational policy although a portfolio for education in a post of the current European Commissioner for Education has already been existing since 2004. Unfortunately, in spite of that first ever existing post of a Commissioner for Education, etc. so far we cannot see any whatsoever evident progress in this respect on the EU level:

- there has not been any systematic effort regarding strategic objectives in structuring and categorization of the overall educational system in the EU into some key basic categories like e.g. formal education, informal education, life-long education, basic and higher education, postgraduate and doctoral studies, etc. There are some results in this respect achieved under the framework of the so-called Bologna process but even that one has started already before the Lisbon strategy and not as a part of that strategy and is limited only to the higher education and not only in the EU and definitely not with any specific respect to the needs of the future information and knowledge based society
- the curricula for all various forms of educational systems in the EU so far still to the large extent remain mostly on the level of individual national educational systems without having any common EU core bases that could be further on the national levels of individual member states further developed according to some specific needs of individual members
- the existing mobility programs are basically still the same or only slightly modified those that have been existing in the EU long before any Lisbon strategy has been adopted. In any case the new EU mobility programs need to respect needs of the contemporary EU development strategies i.e. those that first of all are supporting mainly mobility in the key areas of the future knowledge based and information society i.e. in subjects, courses, studies related to ICT, foreign languages, international i.e. mainly EU business and economics, European studies at large, etc. In any case, the contemporary and

especially new future mobility programs need to be cleaned of any of the present often existing formalism, inconsistencies, individualism, etc.

#### **4. The ERASMUS as the EU flagship mobility program in the higher education**

In general we could state that the ERASMUS mobility program for teacher and students in the higher education has been one of the most successful one among all various other educational programs of the EU like e.g. LEONARDO DA VINCI for vocational education, COMENIUS for school education, GRUNDTVIG for adult education, TRANSVERSAL program for languages, ICT, etc. and JEAN MONET for European researchers. One of the most evident positives of ERASMUS has been its popularity among students and teachers regarding their possibilities studying and/or teaching in other EU member states:

- This kind of students mobility has grown between the years 1987 to 2009 from 3244 students to 168,193 students studying in other EU member states for about one semester regarding the length of their studies abroad
- As for teachers mobility, there has also been some growing numbers but not that abrupt like in case of students. In years between 1997 and 2009 there was growth in number in teachers mobility from 7797 to 28,615 however the main problem was in the length of their visiting teaching that has been in average only between 6.9 in year 2000 but only 5.6 days in 2009?!

Some evident problem has been also in the chosen host universities for mobility of students ad/or teachers. In difference to general expectation that the most desired host universities would be those most respected ones in the UK, Germany, France or Nordic countries, the most popular are not internationally recognized universities and/or colleges in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Malta, Greece, Cyprus i.e. in the countries with a nice climate, a bit more relaxed life style, etc.

In addition to these some shortcomings of the ERASMUS mobility, there are still existing other evident shortcomings as follows:

- For example students coming to study to other EU universities under the flagship higher education mobility ERASMUS program have in many cases problems with finding suitable courses as there is no EU nomenclature of the courses that would on the EU level clearly state what courses are obligatory and prerequisite for attending subsequent (higher) courses, etc. As a consequence then students are choosing mainly courses that are offering the most of credits irrespective of the fact if they are prepared for attending such a course by their previously completed ones
- There is no language preparatory tests and/or courses, hence very often also this author has to teach visiting students who have really a very poor command of the language of instruction i.e. English. And the same problem is also in many other countries as e.g. students like to go under the ERASMUS to study to Portugal where most courses are in Portugal although almost no one of them has any eve the minimal command of that languages
- As a minimum to prevent such a big language problem would be if the ERASMUS would require from every student going for study abroad to pass at least as a minimum some language test in order to be able to follow and understand lectures and classes in general in the particular language of instruction
- As for the mobility of teachers the main problem has been that their visiting stays at host universities are too short and as we have seen above now even being more shorter than before with the average length of only 5.6 days i.e. in principle one working week only. It is clear that during such a short period of time it is very difficult to achieve from such "visiting" stays any specific results in research or lecturing
- Mostly then the program of visiting teachers under the ERASMUS has been limited to one or two lectures to be given to students of the hosting university. Although e.g. this author has already managed to deliver a crash course of 25 hours during such an one week mobility but evidently it is more an exemption than the general rule as it require from both sides some specific specifically organized preparatory stage that not always is possible to carry out. But our personal experience is a proof that if there is an interest from both sides i.e. teacher as well as the host university it is possible to prepare also such a short but otherwise complete "crash" course

In general what is most missing in this connection it is a more support to the ERASMUS mobility program from the EU institutions and in particular from the European Commission where as one of the commissioners has been already also one being in charge of education together with the particular Directorate general but...

In general we cannot just simply speak about development of the knowledge based economy and information society without a real revolution in the EU's educational system that only could prepare especially young people for more and better jobs as it has been stipulated in the Lisbon strategy. Just to create a new portfolio in the EC is definitely not enough, moreover, if by a certain paradox the entire educational systems is left as a national and not as a kind of a common community policy. In addition, education similarly like medicine or other highly specific sectors requires also that at the helm of education are educational specialists, professionals and not political nominees. And it should be so irrespective if it is on the national or community level! Otherwise, it could not happen such a paradox that at the helm of education - in the period of implementation of the Lisbon strategy when all the effort had to be devoted to expansion of the Internet based education in all schools - are educators whose main priority has been to introduce the religious education as one of two elective but obligatory subjects together with ethics as it happened also in Slovakia?!

Then it is no surprise that under the system of informal education there are not offered any free Internet courses for general public. Especially many new EU member states are very slow and inefficient in offering any Internet based benefits not only on the level of various courses regarding e-education but the same also regarding some daily practical applications in e-government, e-health, etc. so citizens of the EU do not see any justified reason they should invest in the home based Internet connections, services, life long education, etc. Just to read newspapers or check train and bus time-tables through Internet is not an adequate compensation for still rather high costs of Internet installation, operation, utilization, etc. Moreover if some new member states with a very high unemployment, low wages of about 400 Euro in average are still not having the standard of living that would correspond to the age of information society, etc.

Quite surprisingly also the legislative support to the processes of development of an information society and a knowledge based economy in the EU is rather weak. Although in many other areas especially again in agriculture, but also in food protection, environment, in protection of animals during their transport or in protection of birds etc. the EU is very active in introducing community legislation e.g. also in the recently adopted legislation on “protection of air passengers” with all those dishonest body and checking-in luggage controls that to some extent is even in contradiction to fundamental human rights or dignity, etc. the Lisbon strategy lacks in many cases even the most elementary legislative support as e.g. already mentioned institutionalization but also more practically oriented legislation on mandatory utilization of an (unified and cheap) electronic signature as a basic precondition for any more wider utilization of Internet for daily needs, etc. Especially weak is the EU “acquis communautaire” i.e. community legislation in legislative support to education. For example among altogether 42 legislative acts as existing in support of the Lisbon strategy no one (!) deals with anything related to education although right the European Commission and thus also Commissioner for education are those who have legislative initiative in preparing the community legislation?!

Internet as a backbone of the entire Lisbon strategy and also of the EU as an information society with its common information space especially in the new member states (NMS) has still many deficiencies not only regarding technical aspects like e.g. a still rather low availability of the broadband but also in its direct support to education. Although all schools e.g. in Slovakia are already linked to Internet the access of pupils and students is still rather limited because of location of PCs or the lack of qualified teachers, instructors who would guide pupils in using computers after their regular and rather limited classes. The access to Internet in schools has still not been available for parents or the public from that community as it is a common practice e.g. in all schools in the USA

On the most general level, there is still not existing any national and/or EU program for informal long-life education in ICT and Internet and no whatsoever educational programs for citizens of all age categories including ever growing population in the post-productive age in order to explain them advantages of Internet benefits for their practical needs as citizens of the EU i.e. to help them to be included already now into the ongoing process of the preparation of the future knowledge based and information society of the EU of which also they should be an integral part!

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations: Instead of the CAP the EU needs the CEP**

Our experiences from the EU funded projects have clearly demonstrated that so far adopted a rather extensive general approach to the implementation of the Lisbon as well as i2010 strategies under the previous 6FP but also current 7FP has had many deficiencies especially in the area of modern contemporary education i.e. area that is primarily responsible for the preparation of the citizens of the EU for their future proper place in the EU as a knowledge based economy and information society. One of the main problems in this respect is the fact that in spite of its importance, the education does not belong among the common policies coordinated by the EC but it belongs among the competencies of the national governments of the EU member states. It is more than clear that sooner or later and better immediately it is necessary to promote the area of education in general to the status of one of the priority common policies of the EU with all the needed organizational, financial, personnel and other support. Especially, in this context it is necessary to support the future so-to-say CEP - “Common Educational Policy” similarly as it is in case of other nowadays existing EU common policies i.e. e.g. in the CAP – Common Agricultural Policy with the strong legislation on the level of particular directives or even better of regulations. They only could force the EU member states to pay due attention to implementation of the particular EU legislation in the systems of national legislation and their enforcement including legal actions through the European Court of Justice as the last resort. It is of course also equally important that this EU education related legislation will be further supported also by the particular budgetary provisions not only in the national budgets of the EU member states but also from the EU budget similarly as it is again in the case e.g. of the current CAP that in the future in this respect should be replaced right by the proposed Common Education Policy i.e. on the level of 40-50% of the EU budget expenditures. Otherwise, all objectives of the original Lisbon as well as i2010 and also the latest Europe 2020 strategies on the knowledge based economy and information society will remain just what was stated already in the W. Kok’s Report in 2004 i.e. being missed opportunities and failed promises. Without above completely new and innovative strategy, approach and policy regarding education no

evident progress can be achieved in the development of the EU as the future knowledge based economy and information society.

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