

D&ST Issue Paper: The Future of Education in Europe until 2010

Executive Summary

It is widely accepted, by individuals as much as by their governments, that education is now the most important investment they, and their societies, make. That at primary and secondary level within the formal education sector is already universal. The remaining part of this sector, that of Higher Education (HE), is however still some way off saturation across the EU. Accordingly, this will be the main national government funded element due for significant expansion. The current level, of around a third of young persons participating in it, is likely to double over the next decade. The rate of increase, leading to saturation at around a half to two-thirds of these young people - covering those who may be eventually able to benefit from this level of education, will be dependent largely on the rate at which funding is made available for this by national governments. Assuming that the cut-backs in infra-structural investments over the past decade are reversed in time to avoid a collapse of the various national systems, new developments in technology may cover subsequent shortfalls in teaching resource. Such is the priority given by national governments, though, that we should expect - unless a major recession develops - saturation in this (HE) sector also to come about by 2010AD. The EU's role is likely, therefore, to be only that of co-ordinating national programmes and ensuring that standards are acceptable in the pan-European context.

The most dramatic expansion will, however, be seen in the on-going education following on from formal qualifications; that of Life-Long-Learning (LLL). The emerging need for this is most clearly underwritten by the predicted need to radically retrain 80% of EU workers over the next decade - as their existing jobs are destroyed by radical changes in technology. This training will, though, shift from the existing conventional forms of in-house on-the-job experiential training. Instead, in the knowledge society, where in addition employability is now the prime factor, the need will be for longer-term education - providing intellectual frameworks for individual development - rather than shorter-term training - providing immediate job skills for employers. As there are, as yet, relatively few commercial providers, it is likely that existing HE institutions will be required to meet this demand; though few are yet planning to do this. The expansion of numbers in this sector - typically provided at present by short courses - will be dramatic, out-stripping those needing degree level tuition in the formal level sector, and may even outstrip the resources of the potential providers. The EC's initial role, therefore, may be to stimulate providers (in the HE sector) by publicity and, in particular, by pump-priming. It will then need to set and monitor standards, where much of this may - in the age of satellite links - be delivered across national boundaries, and the resulting new 'qualifications' will need to be recognised across the EU. An important extension to this process will be to 'certify' providers, so that their 'customers' can reasonably put their trust in them - where distrust of the unknown may otherwise dissuade students from participating. The large numbers of new providers, especially when commercial providers are drawn in, will pose a major challenge to regulators such as the EC; and the pan-European dimension may leave only the EC capable of this role. On the other hand, much of the core material - in the form of distance-teaching packages - may be provided by a small number of leading institutions.

These may be the recipients of EC pump-priming funds, which in turn may be used to underpin some of the key standards and, indeed, to raise such standards overall. Direct funding should not, however, be a problem where individuals - or their employers - are likely to pay for this (LLL) education.

The third sector, that of informal education, will rapidly grow in importance where individuals now rate personal development more important than even career development. The new technologies, especially those of ICT, will be especially important in this sector. These will allow large numbers of providers to offer specific packages - ranging from whole programmes of post-graduate education down to the equivalent of a 100 page text - tailored to individual needs. Paralleling these Internet developments will be those resulting from digitisation of television, which will significantly overlap the informal education sectors. Once again, students will fund their own education in this market-driven sector. Accordingly, the EC's prime role will be to 'regulate' the large numbers of providers, to ensure again that pan-European standards are maintained, and that students may reasonably be able to put their trust in EC 'certified' providers.

Overall, then, the most dramatic increases in numbers will occur in the LLL sectors, for short courses and informal education, where the EC's role will initially be to stimulate developments, with some pump-priming. It will, though, eventually be to 'regulate' standards and to 'certify' providers; which, in view of the large numbers of these, may demand the creation of new EC infra-structures.