

Bologna and the challenges of e-learning and distance education. The contribution of non-classical learning and teaching forms to the emerging European Higher Education Area'

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On behalf of the Ministry of the Flemish Community, department of Education and on behalf of our partners, Ghent University, the Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation, the Ministry of Education of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Institute of International Educational Programs of St Petersburg State Polytechnic University, it is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to our seminar 'Bologna and the challenges of e-learning and distance education. The contribution of non-classical learning and teaching forms to the emerging European Higher Education Area'.

Since the Bologna declaration in 1999 a lot has happened in European higher education. The intermediate results of the Bologna implementation process are already quite impressive. The six initial action lines have developed into ten. The awareness of the importance of the Bologna process for the future of European higher education has grown considerably.

In this seminar we wish to draw attention to the challenges e-learning and distance education pose within the framework of the Bologna implementation process and the emerging European Higher Education Area. We consider distance education and e-learning to be very valuable instruments for this process. We firmly believe that the

European Higher Education Area will not be complete without a strong, elaborated distance education and e-learning component. Indeed, we feel that an efficient and productive European Higher Education Area will in many respects be an *Open* Higher Education Area.

Distance education and e-learning are forms of open education and distance education has a long tradition in Europe. Open education can be defined in a number of ways, but seeking for a common denominator we quote Derek Rowntree who states 'The most widely agreed beliefs are about opening up learning opportunities to a wider range of people and enabling them to learn more congenially and productively. This involves reducing barriers to access and giving learners more control over their own learning'. We believe that the added-value of distance education and e-learning lies precisely there: in widening access and in facilitating more learner control with all that this entails.

How have distance education and e-learning been considered within the Bologna process so far? It is obvious that lifelong learning, distance education and e-learning are considered important. We all acknowledge the importance of opening up learning opportunities to a wider range of people and about giving the learners more control over their learning. We all agree upon making European Higher Education more flexible in order to attain this goal. We recognize that distance education and e-learning can play a role in making higher education more flexible. At the same time it seems that when elaborating the Bologna action lines, we very often do this with traditional teacher settings and with an audience of generation students in mind. Do we take the specificities of distance education and e-learning sufficiently into

account? And are we fully aware what doing so would entail in terms of the Bologna implementation process?

Is it enough for instance just to give more people access to the standard mainstream programmes? Or should we develop new programmes that fit the needs of the mature learner? Shouldn't we be thinking about appropriate teaching and learning forms as well, not to mention appropriate ways of student counselling and ways of student assessment that go along with these? Shouldn't we consider the technical aspects and the security aspects that are inherent to e-learning more profoundly? And if so, how does this all fit in with the way for instance quality assurance has been elaborated so far within the Bologna implementation process?

How should we consider virtual mobility? What challenges does it pose in terms of recognition and ECTS? Introducing e-learning and distance education in a developing European Higher Education Area implies examining the interaction of e-learning and distance education with the larger societal context. How can e-learning and distance education contribute to regional development?

These are some of the questions arising when thinking about e-learning and distance education in the Bologna context. The aim of the seminar is to pose, consider and debate these questions.

I wish you a fruitful seminar.