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THE ECOLHE PROJECT: A BRIEF SUMMARY OF A THREE YEAR LONG WORK

The ECOLHE project, co-financed by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (project n. 2020-1-IT02-KA203-079176), started on 1 September 2020 and after three years of fruitful cooperation among its partner has reached its conclusion.

The ECOLHE project aimed **to examine how the idea of an E-learning European HE Area** (in the broader framework of the Bologna Process) **has been translated into practice** at the national level by Academic Bodies. Through its activities, ECOLHE tries to enhance and promote high-quality e-learning standards in Higher Education.

The ECOLHE project was an **action research project** that aimed to create the best conditions for an **exchange of best practices** at the European level in **teaching digital skills** in HE, **training courses for teachers and tutors** for improving online teaching in HE in the logic of Lifelong learning (LLL), inclusion and innovation recalled by the High-Level Group on the Modernization HE; **recognition and validation of teaching competences** in HE for teachers' professional development; **recommendation for Academic Bodies**.

The project involved partners from different countries: the Digital Technologies Education & Society research centre of the Link Campus University, Link Campus Foundation, Entropy Knowledge Network & Roma Tre University (Italy), University of Patras (Greece), Laurea University (Finland), University College of Cork (Ireland), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain) and the European Association of Erasmus Coordinators (EAEC).

THE MAIN INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT OF THE ECOLHE PROJECT

The ECOLHE project was developed during the last three years by realising five Intellectual Outputs (IOs).

IO1 - DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN HE: FROM THE EUROPEAN VISION TO THE UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

IO1 analyse six case studies in partner countries focusing on how Universities develop their strategic approaches to digitalisation. The comparative analysis of national reports extracts six development topics (clusters):

- Digital innovation impact
- Digital innovation strategies
- Digital learning process
- HE institution digital innovation
- Pandemic's impact on the teaching-learning experience
- International Quality Standards

According to ECOLHE findings, **some partner countries with the highest Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) are ahead of others in digital innovation**. However, during the COVID-19 years, all HEIs faced difficulties caused to the rapid transformation from face-to-face learning to online learning. Common ground in all universities was their organisational problems during their fully online operation.

ECOLHE findings result that HEIs should follow the good practices of advanced countries, customised in a coherent legislative framework according to their national policies. They should be focused on improving: **digital skills of the academic community** (both in teaching and administrative staff); the **formation of digital teaching and learning policies** to support high-quality education; the promotion of **new teaching methods** which empower students' digital skills; the **independence and discipline self-management skills** of students and teachers. The digital learning process mainly focuses on people interaction. ECOLHE research revealed that countries below the DESI seem to pay more attention to digital learning.

The ECOLHE survey involved 1148 students from universities in Spain, Italy, Greece, Finland and Ireland. During the survey, students were asked to answer a carefully designed questionnaire to explore the following sections: teaching innovation, students' achievement, and students' experience. The analysis revealed five latent factors characterising students' digital maturity: digital tuning; teaching innovativeness; soft skills; employability; positive relationships. According to these factors, students are classified into seven clusters: self-realization focused; social; teacher centred; job focused; lone tiders; task-oriented; analogical tuned.

IO2 & IO3 - ONLINE TEACHING IN HE & ENGAGEMENT TOOLS FOR HE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In IO2, an online training course was implemented to **empower teachers' and researchers' skills in online and blended learning**, aiming at the qualitative dimensions of human interaction.

The proposed training, designed by teachers and researchers from the Open University of Catalonia, was developed in the framework of the ECOLHE project.

ENGAGING HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH COLLABORATIVE E-ACTIVITIES

Introduction

Digitalization of educational practices stands high on policy agendas at European and national levels. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the largest disruption of education in history, having an impact on learners and trainers in all levels and types of education. In this context, the ECOLHE project encourages the production, experimentation and sharing of new approaches and training methods in the field of digital culture through the online course "Engaging Higher Education students with collaborative e-activities" which will run, on a weekly basis, from **March 2022**.

It has been implemented in 6 European countries: Italy, Spain, Ireland, Greece, Cyprus and Finland. Open University of Catalonia (UOC), with more than 25 years of experience in online education, defines ten key components of online teaching and learning: student's active role; competencies; active and collaborative methodologies; wide typology of e-activities; asynchronous and synchronous communication; resources for teaching and learning; continuous assessment; teachers' role as a guide; planning; stable learning environment, and well-bounded tools. UOC team uses these ten key components in an integrated way and designed a pilot training course for European HE teachers.

During the pilot, participants were involved not only in receiving theoretical training on online teaching but also **designing, implementing and evaluating their online activities**. The training participants had an active role and will work collaboratively in teams, playing teachers' and students' roles in different training phases. Regarding its planning, the training pilot was structured into **two synchronous and four asynchronous activities**, with a total workload of 30 hours. Collaborative work offered the opportunity to learn from other colleagues' experiences. It was also important that activities the participants had already created or used in their day-to-day courses could be integrated or adapted. For this reason, training required an active role from the participants.

ECOLHE project investigated the **use of educational gamification tools in HE** (IO3), which can be defined as the use of game elements and game design techniques in educational contexts. Exploring teachers' attitudes towards gamification is extremely relevant for any HEI interested in implementing it to understand which are the more relevant drivers and barriers to its adoption and to implement adequate measures and strategies to support teachers in their effort to integrate game elements into their courses effectively. During the Pilot Training carried out as part of the ECOLHE project, participants were presented with a survey including a list of possible benefits of Gamification to rate and the opportunity to add their own.

Participants had the opportunity to use the suggestions from ECOLHE pilot training to improve gamification use in HEIs.

IO4 - SYMBIOTIC LEARNING PARADIGM (SLP): TEACHER COMPETENCES, METHODS & APPROACHES IN HE

In its fourth step, the ECOLHE project involved a pilot **Symbiotic Learning Paradigm** (SLP), used to co-design a curriculum in all partner countries. SLP was a collaborative and learner-centred approach useful to design lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities in higher education. As an approach to curriculum design, SLP aims to **bring the learner to the centre as a co-designer in the process, in collaboration with the teacher**.

The use of SLP is recommended in the curriculum design because it puts learners in the place of stakeholders in designing their curricula. It can provide a connection between HEIs and market needs and make students part of the design process, making courses more attractive to them, and that leads to the reduction of dropout course rates.

Symbiotic learning systems can be applied in HEIs to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of learning and decision-making. The effective implementation of digital pedagogy and symbiosis learning methods can significantly improve the quality of learning and teaching in the European HE Area.

IO5 - RECOMMENDATION AND GUIDELINES FOR ACADEMIC BODIES

The ambition of all previous ECOLHE IOs is to form a **useful guide for the Academic Bodies on their way to the digital transformation of their services**.

The main lesson learned is that digital transformation needs to be thought through and managed **to promote inclusion, innovation and lifelong learning**. The higher education system is called to play a crucial role in preparing people for future challenges.

These analytical and detailed research results were transformed into guidelines for Academic bodies.

These Policies recommendations were classified into those regarding the digital transformation of HEIs; HEI digital impact, both in Digital infrastructure and in Technical and Pedagogical support; HEI Digital Learning Process; HEI Digital Innovation & Strategies; the Pandemic Impact; Quality Standards; Digital Technologies in HEIs; Online Training model for improving teachers in HE, and the adoption of Gamification in HE. This extensive set of Guidelines and Recommendations based on the research constitutes an effective handbook for Academic bodies in the field of Online Learning Competencies.

Even before the pandemic, there was a clear awareness that the higher education system had to start dealing with more intensive use of ICTs in teaching and learning processes and in organisational ones. Today, the objectives and research questions of ECOLHE are more pertinent than ever. Digital maturity is a complex concept which has different facets, and sometimes it has nothing to do exclusively with the "digital" field. Being aware of the multiplicity of variables involved is necessary to explore deeply the differences that can occur between different case studies. The presented work aims at being a valuable tool towards this direction.

THE ECOLHE PROJECT RESEARCH RESULTS

All research results are available on the **ECOLHE project website**.
In particular, this are the direct link to download:

- **The ECOLHE final report**
- **The Digital Transformation in HE Road Map (Infographic)**
- **Empower Competences for Onlife Learning in HE – International Conference Proceedings**
- The ECOLHE final publication *The European Higher Education Area Facing The Digital Challenge*, Edited by: *Stefania Capogna; Gregory Makrides; Vassilis Stylianakis, Pasithee |* Library & Information Center | University of Patras (2023).

For more information, follow us on **ECOLHE Facebook** and visit **ECOLHE project website**.
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