



Virtual Schooling and the Future of Education: the VISCED Project

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1. Looking for a European concept of virtual school

Teaching and Learning have been rapidly changing over the last decades, with ICT playing a key role in re-inventing learning contexts and multiplying the ways people can access formal, non-formal and informal learning over life.

The “magic” of ICT stems in particular for the possibility it offers to increase universal access and intensive fruition of education, by overcoming the “time & space” constraints of traditional models whilst offering solutions which are becoming increasingly complex, enabling advanced learning experiences.

New mode of delivering education and of experiencing learning are emerging, bringing about substantial changes in education models as we know them. According to the VISIR project, with increasing complexity and multiplication of learning contexts and flexibility (web 2.0, mobile learning, augmented reality) the teaching/learning process is expected to undergo changes which address both the aspect of autonomy of (and in) learning and that of the unity of time and space as dimensions of traditional learning contexts. In turn, new scaffolding models in the teaching/learning process and in the construction of meaning are going to develop as a natural evolution of change in learning contexts [1].

School – although more peripheral when it comes to disruptive innovation occurring primarily in the informal learning area- is not exempted from these trends. In a time where education is demanded to adapt to the path-breaking transformations occurring in society, policy and decision makers are very much interested in exploring the potential of technology enhanced learning in school as mean to support more effective learning processes and increase quality access to education. This refers to the investigation of effective solutions to include diversely at risk students (drop-out, students from remotes areas, sick pupils) in education. It also deals more generally with identifying innovative TEL practices which fully profit of the potential of ICT to display more personalized and effective learning strategies, including flexible learning context and differentiated paces, able to match the current objectives of “learner centred” education, including a stronger focus on transversal competences, motivation and creativity of pupils.

That of school education remains however a sensitive ground, where traditional education models show a certain resistance to change, as they also reflect the key role of school in shaping the nation state identity and a sense of citizenship. In that respect, whilst rapid changes have been affecting other learning sectors (i.e. virtual campuses have grown in the HE sector), school has maintained so far – with different degrees – a certain “fordist” appeal, with classroom, timetable, teachers rotation regulated by the bell marking school-life of pupils and separating it from the world outside the school walls.

It is thus not totally surprising that the concept of “virtual school” – referring to formal schooling mostly delivered at distance through the internet - is not really familiar in Europe, and sometimes even cautiously regarded in some Member States. This education model largely supported by ICT and delivered through blended modality – against more traditional school contexts- is however an interesting concept at the light of the abovementioned drivers for change in the education domain.

Specifically virtual school refers to where pupils learn mainly at a distance over the internet and any activity in a classroom takes no more than around 15% of study time (1 day per week in a full-time school). The pupils will normally be based at home (and in special cases, in hospital, in the workplace, travelling or in a custodial institution) but in some cases they may be at a „physical” school – just not the school „at” which they study.

The VISCED project - a transnational appraisal of virtual school and college provision – is a two year initiative which is currently funded by the European Commission and aims to identify and understand virtual schools across the world, not ignoring the US but focussing mainly on Europe and to some extent on other countries in the world which are often seen as relevant to Europe. The ultimate goal of the project is a better understanding of the reasons why some countries foster virtual schools, others discourage them and a third group (a large group including many countries in Europe) seem to ignore them, so to provide recommendations in the field likely to support policy makers in making the best use of the most adequate education model for their needs.

Investigating virtual schooling in Europe is however a challenging task. While plenty of practices, experimentations and initiatives exist in the field of ICT for learning in school, that of virtual school seems to be a rather unknown concept and very few examples which can be defined as “mature” can be found in the European landscape.

2 The challenges of Virtual schooling

During its first year of activity, the VISCED project has carried out a significant amount of research to explore the size and impact of the virtual school phenomenon in Europe (and the world) and identify some interesting trends in a comparative education perspective.

This research has been essential to have a first snapshot of the current status of virtual schooling in Europe compared to the rest of the world, particularly the US, where it represents a rather consolidated practice.



As already mentioned, very few examples of virtual schools were found in European countries, although some interesting experiences exist and are going to be explored in depth with a case study approach with the purpose of advancing substantially in the understanding of a “European way” to virtual schooling and elaborate adequate recommendations for policy and practice.

Research has in fact started analyzing the “online-education” issue from both the teaching and the policy side, providing some preliminary results which will be enriched and critically integrated at the light of case studies analysis and through stakeholders’ consultation.

On the teaching/learning side, the critical issues in virtual schooling are fairly close to those affecting the current debate on technology enhanced learning in general. This is primarily concerned with the risk of any purely ICT-driven approach which overlooks the role of pedagogy and underestimates the importance of change in teacher attitude and competences. This has emerged for instance as a key concern through the activities of the STELLAR Network of Excellence, which has been working for 4 years now at defining a strategic agenda to push forwards technology enhanced learning in Europe.

VISCED research results highlight that e-learning and distance learning initiatives have often been too concerned with technology and technological issues, and suggests that teacher training towards successful distance education offers must focus clearly on IT pedagogy and development of skills different from those suitable for teaching in class or lecture rooms. The issues in teacher training for virtual school are all centered on questions of teacher roles and attitudes towards course and task design and towards the leadership role in respect to students. This calls in particular for attitude changes from teacher roles established in traditional classroom [2].

The critical transformation processes at stake on the teaching/learning side are only one side of the coin, the other being the needs for institutional and organizational frameworks and policy steering able to adapt to and support new and diverse school models- making smart use of technology and re-inventing learning contexts - which today could equally support effective pathways to lifelong learning and employability. This links to the broader issue of accreditation and recognition of learning acquired out of traditional context which calls for a strong change in attitude and the development of adequate mechanisms.

In that respect, the effort of the VISCED project is also meant towards better understanding the European specificities in order to elaborate recommendations for policy (see the set of preliminary recommendations by Phillips (2011) [3]. These shall be relevant to the creation of the institutional, financial and organizational framework which would make virtual schooling a quality option for European pupils and their specific needs within the broader political, social and cultural context where school education is grounded. Expected resistances need to be taken carefully into account in such in such a critical education sector.

This necessarily includes the need to find adequate quality and accountability criteria to protect such a sensitive and key education sector as school is for society, considered a public good. According to Phillips, Member States with support of the EU might bring virtual schools and colleges within a regulatory and accountability framework which protects but does not disadvantage learners – or the schools, when the latter contributes to the achievement of its educational, economic and social goals [3]. The same remains true when it comes to the development and consolidation of adequate mechanisms of accreditation of learning acquired through different learning experience.

In the case of virtual school, there is a need for clarity with regards to the “ownership” of qualifications achieved by students who have a physical host-school but who undertake supplementary studies at a virtual institution. The first “owner” of any qualification is the student. However, virtual schools often struggle to justify their value and their funding because they are not counted in “official” censuses of qualifications. Equally, host schools have been known to claim credit for qualifications achieved by their students at these “invisible” virtual schools. VISCED already has evidence of several thousand European students studying online across borders (outside of their home country). The Commission and individual Education Departments should clarify their positions in order to preserve the integrity of qualifications data [3].

3. Conclusions

As VISCED has so far demonstrated, thinking of the viability of virtual school as an integral part of the recognized education offer raises easily a number of issues which pertain not only to the teaching and learning process as such but to the wider cultural, political and institutional scenario where we imagine virtual education to take place.

We are touching a sensitive ground, as school as a public good is reluctantly seen as part of those transformations which include a diversification of educational offer, including new learning providers - either from the private sector - and new mode of learning which de-structure traditional classroom in favor of personal learning environments.

With the origin of “virtual schooling” to be found in the US, it is however logical to acknowledge the substantial diversity of context where the “virtual school” developed as a concept and as a model. This diversity ranges from the perception of geographic space up to cultural, economic and political factors, including the shared concepts of education itself and attached values.

In the evolving education scenario, virtual school remains a highly fascinating concept to be explored on this side of the ocean, provided that the investigation is carried out with an unbiased and open attitude. This will permit to understand the diverse factors which are key to consider when exploring a potential European declination of the virtual school concept and elaborating successful practices and policy support strategies.



The definition of virtual school term itself might be seeking some flexibility, being used in an open way as a litmus test to look at what exist and can be scaled in Europe when it comes to a smart use of ICT to empower the learning process and enhance school-life continuity, ranging from integration of ICT in the classroom up to “revolutionary” de-schooling models.

With this understanding, “virtual school” could be become a box for new and inedited models of education which can fit the european kind of needs for innovation, creativity, active citizenship, by building and develop further on local specificities and bottom-up drives in education for which ICT can play an enabling role towards valuable pedagogical and social goals.

References

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