Towards a Knowledge-Based Society: The Need for a Continuous Life-long Learning Programme – The PRILHE Project

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The development of a knowledge-based society requires the contribution of a technological infrastructure as well as a workforce with the necessary skills, knowledge and competences, supported by a well-structured initial education and a continuous learning program. The individuals in this workforce must be autonomous, independent and reflective learners, because this is the only way to take advantage of a life-long learning programme and, in so doing, remain in employment at a time of global change. How can we help our students to become more autonomous, reflective and independent? What kind of strategies should be used in the classroom? What are the best practices? This paper sets out to answer these urgent, contemporary questions.

Project PRLIHE – Promoting Reflective Learning in Higher Education [113869-UK-2005-G1] - developed under the framework of the European Commission Socrates Programme - aims to identify the learning processes which enable adult students in Higher Education to become independent and reflective learners, to identify how this process could be better supported, to examine the interface between learning from experience and academic learning and to identify models of good practice in higher education institutions across Europe.

To achieve these objectives, a consortium was formed, with partners from Germany, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, Spain, Poland and UK. The consortium developed a questionnaire and distributed it to students and lecturers; this was then backed up by face-to-face interviews. The answers and opinions obtained have been compiled into a Handbook for Students and a Toolkit for Lecturers.

Some of the results reveal that students learn better when they are able to build bridges between life / work experience and the topics to be learned, when they share different points of view, when they discuss with others, when the learning process occurs in a supportive environment, when there is teamwork / interaction, when they see the practical use of what is being taught. For some of them, the guidance or instructions are an important issue; for others, it is important to be on their own. They prefer to explore the topic alone. One can also say that some of the students prefer to work alone while some others prefer to be in groups and discuss the contents with their colleagues. Anyway, there are different routes to become an independent, reflective and autonomous learner. One step in the right direction involves the discovery by the student of his / her best way to learn (and

be conscious of that) as well as the help of the lecturer in a supportive environment. Of course, we realize that this process is not easy. Lecturers are, generally speaking, aware of this problem. They try to bring the experience of the students into the curriculum and use it to make the learning process more successful. However, there are difficulties that prevent success. Some of these are:

- as students work, they do not have a lot of time (time to study, time to attend classes, to be with the family, …), they are not able to arrive on time to classes or they miss classes. They have some difficulties reconciling family, profession and studies.
- Difficulties related to their academic background – they have a lack of knowledge to understand the subjects, they have bad learning habits (acquired in the past) which prevent their progression, they are more sceptical in relation to what the teachers say and so they have more difficulty in changing their opinion.
- they have more enthusiasm than the traditional students but they give up more easily, it is difficult to help them to change their study habits, some have lack of motivation, lack of objectives. They work at different rhythms and have different objectives; the standardization of subjects and contents do not meet all the interests of each individual. It is difficult to initiate them into critical reflection.

Although we realize that some of these difficulties are real, we also observed that there are lecturers who do not try to change the way they lecture – maybe because they have a lot of work (lack of time to prepare new lessons) or just because they are lazy (they have been in this profession for so long that they just repeat the contents without updating it). Anyway, we feel that there are still a long way to go in preparing the workforce for the knowledge based society; this involves students, lecturers and the institutions.

In this paper, we present project aims, objectives and methodology. We also report the lessons learnt and best practices identified. We believe that the preparation of the knowledge based society starts at school, helping students to become autonomous and reflective learners.

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