

# PART II

## **Europe and Flanders: Partners in E-Learning? A Comparison of Public Policies**

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### **E-Learning Success: a web of actors and factors**

Working towards e-learning success in higher education, i.e. the institution-wide acceptance and use of ICT applications for teaching and learning purposes, means choosing an approach of *least resistance*. This calls for mutual agreements and participation of all those involved, both inside and outside the learning organisation.

Our starting position is that higher education institutions, whether colleges or universities, are affected by and interact with higher and lower decision levels (Dillemans *et al.*, 1998; LeBaron & Collier, 2001; Moonen & Kommers, 1995). The actual teaching-learning process takes place in the heart of the institution (the micro level), the second layer (the meso level) has to do with its organisation and management, while the e-learning culture of the surrounding society — either in global, national or regional terms — forms the third layer. Policies and regulations are set at this highest level (Kirschner *et al.*, 1995). At all three decision-taking levels, a number of variables, individuals and/or groups interact and play a role throughout the adoption process. Every actor has his specific responsibility to decide whether or not to incorporate ICTs for educational purposes or to work out e-learning policies, influenced by personal, institutional or societal factors (Valcke, 2000). The acceptance and use within groups or with an individual educator or student are determined by the interplay between these various (f)actors. To fully support education with adapted information technology one needs to manage it openly, as an interdependent system where all elements are important and interact. Failure or success is bound to the reality of this ‘cooperation’ (Claeys *et al.*, 1997). Consequently, an ideal research design will take into account all interrelated fields and will look for success factors, their influence and their mutual relationships. Figure 1 presents an overview of the different, most important actors and decision levels involved in e-learning in Flanders. The arrows indicate the interrelationship and supposed influences between the three levels.

### **Scope of the Research**

This article focuses on the macro or highest decision level. Two organisms have a considerable influence on policies in line with Belgian Dutch-medium higher education: the European and the regional government. Higher education is not subject to a common European policy. Europe’s policy towards educational inno-

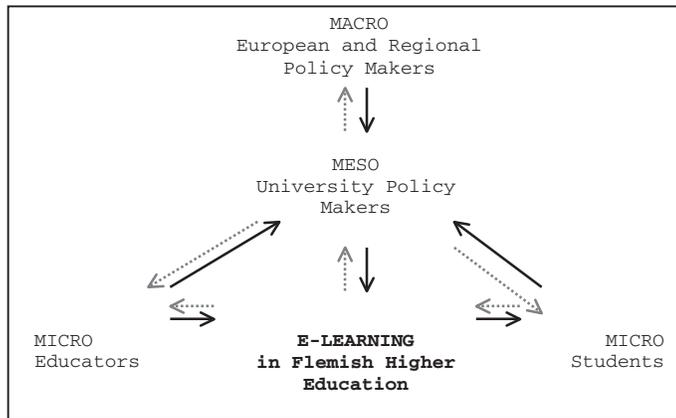


FIGURE 1. E-learning Actors and Decision Levels in Flanders

vation and e-learning contains general guidelines about the content and organisation of studies which are to be further worked out and filled in by the member states. In Flanders, the Flemish Department of Education and its minister have the main responsibility for developing an overall (e-)learning and teaching framework, while the universities are more or less free to establish their own ideas and operational plans. Here, I shall describe both the Flemish and the European public policy approaches.

If the policy-makers address the introduction and implementation of e-learning inadequately, both in intended strategies for implementation, any success of e-learning may be compromised. Internal and external consistency or at least complementarity in public policy seem crucial to e-learning success; there is no point in developing unrelated or competing visions and plans, neither within nor between different decision levels. This would significantly limit the chances of an effective, efficient and satisfactory implementation of e-learning.

The aim here is to describe the current European and Flemish e-learning public policy. On the basis of desk research with mostly online resources, I place one against the other and attempt to answer the following question: 'Are Europe and Flanders partners in e-learning?' By means of a document analysis, I trace policy options and strategies with reference to the use of ICTs in higher education in order to find out *if*, and to *what extent* they are attuned. Given that e-learning policy is embedded in a broader general policy on innovation and/or education, it has been decided to handle both aspects. In 2005, five different programmes were running: iEurope2010, the eLearning Programme, the latest coalition agreement and the Digital Action Plan of Flanders, together with the educational policy notes and plans distributed by the Education Department of the Flemish Community.

## **Innovation and Information**

### *Europe*

The foundations for the development of an innovative European Information Society (IS) are fixed in the eEurope Action Plans. These documents contain

policy options, strategic objectives, benchmarks and indicators for a suitable assessment. In eEurope2002, the elimination of the economic leeway and bringing Europe online were highlighted, and eEurope2005 concentrated on the expansion of a broadband infrastructure to provide services, applications and content. On 1 June 2005, Europe launched a five-year strategic framework (Commission of the European Communities, 2005a) which was presented as 'a locomotive for Lisbon' and was labeled as 'an umbrella' or integrated approach for broad policy orientations (Commission of the European Communities, 2005b, p. 4):

i2010 stands for a package of proactive policies to harness the potential of the digital economy to deliver growth, jobs and modern, on-line public services. It is a key component of the EU's renewed 'Lisbon' competitiveness strategy.

i2010 is a comprehensive strategy to guide information society and media policies. It states a common purpose for the various policy levers available to the Commission: regulation, R&D investment, innovation and deployment of information and communication technologies throughout the economy and society.

The Commission would like to create a market-oriented open digital economy, the 'Single European Information Space', with high bandwidth communications, rich and diverse content and digital services. Secondly, it hopes to increase 'innovation and investment in ICT research' by 80% 'to promote growth and more and better jobs' and close the gap with the world's leaders. Establishing a high-quality inclusive IS (and e-government) is the EU's third policy priority. All citizens should have access to and make use of ICTs. Lifelong learning, creativity and innovation should be promoted, while health, safety and consumer protection for all should be guaranteed (Commission of the European Communities, 2005b, 2005c).

How will i2010 be funded? By means of two specific EU programmes within the 7th Research Framework Programme and the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme. In total 2.6 billion Euros will be invested in (strategic) research, development and diffusion of ICTs (Commission of the European Communities, 2005b).

In order to comply with the objectives of i2010, member states were expected to present their national IS Priorities in National Reform Programmes around mid-October 2005 (Commission of the European Communities, 2005a) to allow the EU to compare, coordinate and assess policy issues on a broad scale. It is unclear if Belgium, or Flanders, has done this (Commission of the European Communities, 2005c).

### *Flanders*

We find a promise of the Flemish government with regard to this issue in a press release of July 22 2005 (Flemish Government, 2005). The Flemish minister for Media gave seven action lines which should stimulate Flanders to address the extension of its information society and bridge the digital divide, following i2010:

- 1) a Dutch language translation of the European i2010 action plan;
- 2) innovation as a leverage for ICT, with special attention to SMEs;
- 3) further digitalisation of information channels, content and services;
- 4) e-skills as a driving force of employment and a bridge over the digital gap;
- 5) better public service by means of ICT (e-government);
- 6) improvement of the quality of life thanks to digital applications; and
- 7) an integrated policy with reference to digitalisation.

How do they intend to reach these goals? Three 'efforts towards strengthening success' will be provided: measuring and monitoring eFlanders by means of an ICT-Monitor,<sup>1</sup> communication and awareness raising, and collaboration with other government levels (Europe, Belgium, regional). This constitutes the starting point of a future National Reform Programme and the further enlargement of existing IS initiatives (Flemish Government, 2005).

We find the initial impetus for a Flemish Information Society in a policy document of 2002. The *eFl@nders Digital Action Plan Flanders* or the Flemish version of the eEurope2002 plan was held above the baptismal font (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2002a, p. 4):

The Flemish government wishes to link up with its eFlanders Digital Action Plan Flanders with the goals and action lines of the eEurope 2002 action plan (. . .), and wants at the same time to go further and deeper. Further by not restricting themselves to the role of fellow traveller, but have the ambition to be among the leaders of the European information society. Deeper by avoiding the digital gap and fighting social exclusion, by striving for an inclusive and democratic information society in which everyone is actively involved and enjoys its advantages.

The link with eEurope2002 is indeed strong; and three action lines of the DAP Flanders are also mentioned in the European document. We can point out two differences: Flanders widens its terms of reference to all ICTs, not only the Internet; and widens its scope with the ideas of inclusion and democracy. Below is an overview of the four action lines:

1. High-quality and accessible infrastructure
2. Stimulation and reinforcement of e-government and e-economy
3. An inclusive and democratic information society
4. Investment in people and skills, with three specific aims (*learn, work and live in the knowledge society*) and eight subgoals:
  - ❖ Educate people to become ICT-skilled workers.
  - ❖ Increase ICT skills, knowledge and use; avoid and fight the digital divide.
  - ❖ Enhance the transition between schooling and work.
  - ❖ Promote and provide ICT-enabled lifelong and lifewide learning.
  - ❖ Stimulate innovation and inclusion by means of ICT.
  - ❖ Carry out an efficient labour market policy by means of ICT tools.
  - ❖ Create a culture of learning organisations.
  - ❖ Make available wanted and easy accessible electronic content and cultural facilities.

## ICT in Education

### *Europe*

In the past, IS frameworks e-learning received reasonable attention but it was more especially infrastructure, equipment and basic training that were stimulated. The educational chapter of the first eEurope initiatives can be found in the eLearning Initiative and its Action Plan (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, 2001). From then on, Europe further developed its objectives from an educational point of view, stressing the need for innovative pedagogical approaches (Goeman & De Vos, 2004).

Currently, the eLearning Programme, 'a Multiannual Programme for the Improvement of the Quality and Accessibility of European Education and Training Systems through the Effective Use of ICTs', is applied. Forty-four million Euros have been set aside to 'support and develop further the effective use of ICT in European education and training systems', and to reach four specific objectives between January 1 2004 and December 31 2006 (Commission of the European Communities, 2002; 2003a, p. 11):

1. to identify the actors concerned and inform them of ways and means of using e-learning for promoting digital literacy and thereby contribute to strengthening social cohesion and personal development and fostering intercultural dialogue;
2. to exploit the potential of e-learning for enhancing the European dimension in education;
3. to provide mechanisms for supporting development of European quality products and services, and for exchange and transfer of good practice;
4. to exploit the potential of e-learning in the context of innovation in teaching methods with a view to improving the quality of the learning process and fostering the autonomy of learners.

The second *area of intervention*, 'European Virtual Campuses', caught the attention of those who were interested in post-secondary education. It aims at providing a 'virtual dimension' to the European Area of Higher Education, building partially on the Bologna reform and existing institutional cooperation. The total budget allocated over three consecutive years is 10,500 million Euros, of which a considerable share of 6000 million Euros goes to the funding of transnational virtual campus projects (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). More detailed information about this action line is presented in the annex of the Programme. Europe wants to develop new organisational models for providing higher education in Europe and encourages projects of virtual mobility and virtual university initiatives. These include the design of joint curricula — based on both traditional and online learning methods — and a recognition of acquired competences. Therefore a standardised European credit system must be worked out, together with quality assurance and assessment procedures for e-learning courses.

Students, teachers, trainers and other educational personnel should be able to follow continuous training and receive support in their pedagogical use of e-learning and have access to e-learning resources. To conclude, Europe encourages public-private partnerships and supports projects that are intended to provide a better understanding of organisational change for implementing e-learning in higher education, and of its impact on assessment and guidance (Commission of

the European Communities, 2003a). Once again, the EU stressed the significance of e-learning in the framework of the expansion of the knowledge society (Commission of the European Communities, 2003a, p. 10):

E-learning has the potential to help the Union respond to the challenges of the knowledge society, to improve the quality of learning, to facilitate access to learning resources, to address special needs, and to bring about more effective and efficient learning and training at the workplace, in particular in small and medium-sized enterprises.

However, almost one year later the European member states got a 'wake-up call' (Commission of the European Communities, 2003b, p. 3):

(. . .) the level of take-up by Europeans of lifelong learning is low and the levels of failure at school and of social exclusion, which have a high individual, social and economic cost, remain too high. In addition to this there are no signs of any substantial increase in overall investment (be it public or private) in human resources.

According to the conclusions of working groups and the analysis of national reports on lifelong learning and mobility, it is time to act in order to attain the Lisbon objectives. Europe calls on all member states to include 'Education and Training 2010' as a central element in the formulation of their policies, based on the following four priority levers (Commission of the European Communities, 2003b): reform and investment; lifelong learning (already mentioned in i2010); competence qualification and mobility (here we find a link with the Bologna goals) and integral action and promotion. By 2005 at the latest, the EU government intended to put in place a mechanism to monitor progress achieved on the basis of annual reports. Therefore, all member states should have defined a strategy for all four priorities in a coherent national action plan for its implementation. Each country should publish its national policy priorities for the short and medium term, as well as in relation to the European objectives for 2010. With reference to the universities, they find it necessary to consider both research and education issues (Commission of the European Communities, 2003b).

### *Flanders*

To have an idea of the Flemish long and medium long period thinking, we fall back on the '21 Goals for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', subscribed by the Flemish Government and its social partners on November 22 2001, and the Coalition Agreement 2004–2009 (Flemish Government, 2004). Exactly like at the European level, we see a clear link between the innovation policy in Flanders, e-learning and socio-economic development. In both documents Flanders aims for an ambitious goal: to become a European top region via economic growth and employment. The education sector must focus on the development of talent and competence so that each individual has a chance to participate and contribute. It is clearly posited that 'Flanders should evolve further towards an entrepreneurial, innovating, learning and creative society' and ought to be one of the most attractive regions for the settlement of enterprises and development of commercial activities (Flemish

Government, 2004, p. 12). With regard to the innovation policy, the Flemish Government wishes to strive for maximum synergies by means of a horizontal policy that affects all domains. The first three policy options that are to be filled in before 2010 refer directly to education (Flemish Government, 2001):

- Flanders has further evolved by 2010 into a learning society. Lifelong and lifewide learning have been embedded in society. At least 10 per cent of the Flemish inhabitants between 25 and 65 take part in permanent training. A learning society recognises also competences equivalently, regardless of where and how one has acquired them.
- In 2010 the number of functionally literate people and those with ICT capacities rose to more than three quarters of the population. The number of young people leaving school with inadequate qualifications to start in the employment market and for social integration shall be at least halved by that time.
- By 2010 education will be more democratic. The gap in social cohesion is being attacked by guaranteeing access to learning initiatives for all and throughout the learning process unequal opportunities will be adequately addressed.

The Flemish government pleads for a competence-based structure and a modularisation of the education supply within accessible and high-quality higher education. The transition from education to work is receiving special attention (better cooperation between education-enterprises/companies, dual learning, internships), as well as innovation and professionalism of teachers and the board of directors. Lifelong and 'lifewide' learning are also central to this policy. The government aims to tighten the alliance between instruction and employment and make arrangements for efficient and effective labour-oriented training and education within the existing institutions and within firms, both for a first employment and for re-entry. Each Fleming ought to have access to a solid infrastructure and log in to the Internet as often as possible. The educational part of the coalition agreement ends with the following promise: 'We stimulate the extension of e-learning and distance education.' (Flemish Government, 2004, p. 21). Further explanation is absent.

In his policy declaration in September 2005, the Flemish premier, Yves Leterme, emphasised the need to reinforce the economic strength of Flanders. For that purpose, the Flemish government aims (Leterme, 2005): to foster entrepreneurship and business investments; to modernise products and processes more rapidly and more profoundly via support for competence poles and strategic research centres; to better exploit the logistic strengths of Flanders; to raise the professional activities by a better functioning of the labour market and to give more and better chances to all talents by means of a strong policy on the subjects of education, training and lifelong learning. A new financing system for colleges and universities is scheduled, as well as flexible study routes, rationalisation of studies and promotion of equal opportunities.

The policy document 'Education and Training' for the period 2004–2009 was recently published online (January 2005). The imperative of the current Flemish minister of education is to offer *equal opportunities* to all young persons to develop themselves, which is a lifelong exercise. In this respect, all higher education institutions are expected to keep on offering top quality. Four spearheads, of

which two are relevant for higher education, are elaborated to reach this fundamental goal (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2004, p. 40): 1) improve the connection between education and the labour market via an integrated education and job market policy, not only with the intention to consider education as an instrument for employment, but also to give youth and adults a broad range of competences ‘by which they can cope with daily life and find their way in society, as well as develop their personality and social responsibility’; 2) introduce a new financing system for universities and colleges, bearing in mind flexibility. The policy methods that are proposed can be divided into three categories, as shown in Table I.

TABLE I. Policy Methods of the Flemish Community for Education 2004–2009

<b>Scientific initial policy and practically-oriented research</b>	Construction of indicators. A Flemish policy for education and training on the basis of input of policy employees and research workers.
<b>Consultation and concerted action with other countries, policy domains and levels</b>	Maximum involvement of different partners and sectors (education, labour, social partners) in policy-making and clear communication. Offensive attitude towards Europe and other international policy bodies (OECD, Council of Europe, UNESCO, European Investment Bank, International Labour Organisation, World Bank, World Trade Organisation).

Frank Vandembroucke, the Flemish Minister of Education, explicitly favours the innovation policy of Europe and the strategy of ‘i2010’. He stresses the importance of knowledge, innovation, inclusion and sustainable growth within an integrated higher education area for Flanders. He wants to ‘develop a broad vision on the task of education and training in the knowledge society’, with attention to ‘more and better employment for strengthening social cohesion’ (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2004, p. 36) and sees advantages in a more active participation in the European education policy, e.g. for the development of output indicators. Vandembroucke’s policy document states a few more strategic lines for Flemish colleges and universities. At the latest in 2009 these should dispose of modular study systems, with standardised certificates and a transparent qualification structure, offer flexible study paths, and give science and technology a central role in their education. The rationalisation and renewal of curricula are also evoked: universities and colleges should not particularly extend their study offer in breadth, but in depth. They should invest in new study modes and modern learning environments so that new categories of students are attracted (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2004).

The reader will find Flanders’ view on e-learning, a pedagogical framework, its strategic and operational objectives, with a short overview for 1996–2002 and a look at the period 2002–2005 in parts six, seven and eight of the ‘Vision Paper: ICT in Education’ from the Department of Education (2002) and in a more obscure document from their official website (no date, no author). To strengthen the position of Flanders in Europe the Department intends to do more and better than in the past. Five policy strands are set (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2002b). In the first place, ICT policy is part of a larger educational innovation policy. ‘Lifelong learning by a flexible educational provision’ has

become the motto. ICT-literacy is considered a basic skill in order to function in the knowledge society. Secondly, education and society should strive for equal opportunities for everyone. A third policy mentions 'ICT as a core element of a powerful learning environment', while the fourth emphasises the crucial role of schools and teachers in the integration process of ICT in education. In order to make effective use of ICT in their daily practice, they need support. Teachers should acquire the necessary knowledge and skills as well as the attitudes to integrate multimedia in their subject matter. Schools must receive aid in order to develop their own ICT-policy. A last option refers to policies as partnerships between different actors (schools, teachers, the private, education providers, teacher training institutes).

The Education Department's policy aims at six operational objectives (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2002b):

1. Raising awareness in the educational sector (without imposing a top-bottom ICT policy, support for schools that set their own priorities on the basis of their educational philosophy);
2. Supporting teachers, with a clear link to eEurope2002's goal to give them individual access and train them to be skilled in the use of the Internet and multimedia resources;
3. Providing sufficient and adequate infrastructure;
4. Introducing ICT literacy in the attainment targets and learning objectives, adapting didactic formats;
5. Guiding schools to convert themselves into open learning centres;
6. Developing (minimum) quality standards and having them respected.

None of the mentioned action programmes, except for one, 'Innovation Projects in Higher Education' under the subtitle 'Training' refer to post-secondary education. It shows how the Flemish Ministry carried out an incentive e-learning policy; for some years projects were subsidised in order to develop new forms of higher education (Ministry of the Flemish Community, s.d.). For the future, a more proactive pedagogical approach is foreseen, but the minister and his cabinet do not explain *how* to reach this specific goal (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2002a, p. 28):

This means a complete break with the policy of the past five years. Although permanent efforts to fulfil the preconditions (infrastructure, training, digital contents) have to be made, attention is shifting towards the learning environment itself. It is our firm conviction that only in this way a successful and valuable integration of ICT can be carried through.

## Conclusion

### *Partners in E-Learning*

More than ever before, Europe's strategy is focused on growth and employment of all in an e-economy. The European Commission juggles with figures and statistics to underline the importance of the ICT sector and the anchoring of technology in all sectors of society. Flanders agrees; it also wishes to become an economic top region (see 21 goals), with more businesses (e.g. SMEs) where ICTs are given an important role.

Over the years, the role of ICTs has widened from a motor for development and expansion of the information society to a driver of inclusion and quality of life. The EU wants to supply more and more digital services, media and content, using the broadband infrastructure whose development is greatly supported. Europe wants a strong (new) link between IS and media policies 'to support technological convergence with "policy convergence"'. The policy framework is therefore enlarged (*umbrella approach*), regulations are more integrated. Social aspects like 'fighting the digital divide' are also more strongly promoted in recent documents. On the other side, the concept of 'ICT' is narrowed: from a series of applications to 'i' or Internet technologies. In Flanders a similar evolution in the political discourse is perceptible, both in innovation- and e-learning related writings.

Flanders has quite successfully converted the European general education and innovation policies to its own policy level. Table II shows the most important European and Flemish public policy documents, their summarised content and linkages. Both policy levels are on the same wavelength with regard to political views/options, strategies and action points. The European IS philosophy can be found in almost all Flemish documents. What differs is the pretext in time: Europe advises, Flanders agrees afterwards. One can find one exception: the idea of inclusion was already set out in the Digital Action Plan Flanders, while Europe incorporates this as from the 'i2010' texts.

The current interplay between Europe and Flanders is apparently not under discussion. There is no pure top-down policy-making where the higher policy level stipulates all decisions at the lower level. Both decision levels acknowledge the value of the open method of coordination: benchmarks and indicators are jointly agreed upon, but member states lay down themselves the path they will follow to reach these goals in harmony with their specific historical, pedagogical and political context. It is expected that the member states report regularly, so that all European Heads of Government can monitor the achievement of the objectives. This enables comparisons<sup>2</sup> and more complex scientific analyses. and can lead as such to more founded and adequate political views. Flanders realises more and more that such a working method offers advantages. Consequently, the need for criteria and standards in this region is raised.

The Flemish education minister also seeks links with Europe: 'If Flanders wants to evolve into a sustainable knowledge economy and an inclusive learning society, education and training are determinative.' (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2004, p. 24). Since the structure decree of April 4 2003 and the adaptations in 2004 and 2005, flexible learning routes are possible in all higher education institutes (at least with regard to content and advancement of the curriculum). In the close future a logical qualification structure must be elaborated. *Nil novi sub sole*. We find references for an univocal certification of competences (EVK/EVC regulation) since the first eEurope plans in the late nineties. Why this and the previous minister allow for a delay for this component, is not clear. A substantive renewed education but with an ailing recognition of competences is aberrant.

#### *Towards a Regional E-Learning Action Plan for Higher Education?*

Concerning the e-learning policy, we detected several, well-developed European strategic documents, intended for long and medium periods, with interim evaluations. The implementation aim was broadened throughout the years. Via the

TABLE II. Summary of Policy Options and Documents in Europe and Flanders

	Europe		Flanders	
	Policy Options	Documents	Policy Options Documents	
Innovation and Information	Development of an innovative IS	eEurope 2002 (2000) and eEurope 2005 (2002)	Development of an inclusive and democratic IS ⇒ High-quality and accessible infrastructure Stimulation and reinforcement of e-government and e-economy Investment in people and skills — <i>learn, work and live</i> in the knowledge society	21 Goals for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century (2001) and eFlanders Digital Action Plan (2002)
ICT in Education	Market-oriented open digital economy Single European Information Space Innovation and Investment in ICT High-quality inclusive IS	i2010 (2005)	⇒ Future Reform Programme Enlargement of existing IS initiatives	Coalition Agreement (2004) and press release Flemish government (2005)
	Innovative infrastructure, equipment and training Support and further development of effective pedagogical use of ICT Virtual dimension to the European Area of Higher Education Training, support and access to e-learning resources	⇓ eLearning Initiative (2000) and eLearning Action Plan (2001) eLearning Programme (2002)	⇓ ‘Lifelong learning by a flexible educational provision’ ICT-literacy as a basic skill in the knowledge society, equal opportunities, ICT as a powerful learning environment, support and training, partnerships	Vision Paper: ICT in Education (2002) and Flemish ICT Policy and Practice
	Reform and investment Lifelong learning Competence qualification and mobility Integral action and promotion	Education and Training 2010 (2005)	⇒ and sustainable growth An integrated higher education area Extension of e-learning and distance education	Coalition Agreement (2004) and Education and Training (2005)

⇒ = policy linkages

integration of new technologies, the European Commission wants to give access to all to up-to-date education and training. Internet and media literacy need to be addressed in schooling and beyond. The shift of the central point is also visible in the budget: as much as twenty-five percent is allocated to the division 'e-learning for fighting the digital divide'. Also, more attention is paid to the pedagogics of educational innovation, virtual mobility as an extension of physical mobility and the transition from education to the labour market. European authorities support certain trajectories for educational innovation and e-learning in the member states through the financing of projects, research into what is available and the subsidising of activities.

In Flanders, no real national or regional action plan for educational ICT integration exists. Public policy about e-learning for universities and colleges in the Flemish region is very restricted, almost non-existent. Some consistency was found between the programmes and initiatives of the EU and the intentions of the Flemish region. In 1999 the Flemish Education Department agreed to converge education according to the Bologna rules. While this reform was implemented at remarkably high speed, the reader in search of a detailed vision on educational innovation or e-learning in higher education will be disappointed. Two documents — one from 2002 — reflect the main principles of Flanders' vision on ICT in education. Here little news can be picked up. It translates the European policy to the Flemish situation and gives a résumé of present beliefs in a very abridged form. One must not search for a state of the art, a concrete implementation plan, or budget: there are none. In addition, most Flemish strategic options and measures are focused on primary and secondary levels and much less attention is given to tertiary education. From 1996 to February 2005 Flanders had merely an incentives policy approach; educational innovation at universities is supported by subsidising research and development projects (short contracts, similar to the so-called 'experimental gardens for educational innovation' in schools). This can be partly explained by the large autonomy that Flemish higher education institutes gained by a decree of 12 June 1991. Also the complexity of Belgian policy does not enhance the decision-making process. Where Europe asks for action plans on a national level, education is a matter of the Flemish community. Nevertheless this may not be an excuse for a total lack of planned intentions.

The most important question remains: will Flanders be able to work out a detailed and sound pedagogical framework for its higher education? It is evident that it envisages eventually an educationally justified implementation of ICT:

The central question should be: How can we better attain our learning objectives or improve the learning process through the use of technology?  
(p. 6)

In the ICT policy as it has been conducted so far, a single aspect, i.e. technology, was emphasised too much. If the introduction of ICT is to be successful and has to play a role in the broad educational innovation, other conditions have to be fulfilled: investing in ICT means also investing in a learning environment and especially in people (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2002b, p. 18).

The Flemish Minister of Education seems to be aware that higher education regulation does not come up to the mark. He acknowledges fragmentation and lack of coordination. To remove existing overlaps with other policies he wants to integrate in the future all relevant decisions in one decree for the organisation of higher education (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2004, p. 73). A separate section about ICT use would be appropriate, as well as a state of the art. There where the so-called 'Education Mirror' supplies information concerning the state of the art in the remaining education levels,<sup>3</sup> no attention so far has been given to the overall implementation of e-learning in higher education. Since the early nineties the whole of Belgium has been equipped with an extremely sophisticated Internet backbone. The question is however: 'How is this being used at higher education level?'

In sum, if Flanders' partnership with Europe is to last, the Flemish policy makers need a 'wake-up call' in order to develop an e-learning action plan, as already exists for employment<sup>4</sup> and as is encouraged by the European Union (Commission of the European Communities, 2002, p. 4):

At Member State level, most countries have their own Action Plan for encouraging the use of ICT in education and training; often involving direct support for local experiments at all levels of education and training, in particular for teachers' and trainers' training. There is a rich experience, in some cases reaching already the third or fourth "generation" of policy documents, based on the evaluation of past efforts and involving wide ranging consultation with educational practitioners. In all Member States, specific policies for the integration of ICT in education and training systems are considered necessary.

We expect the final and most important input for this ambitious goal will come from institutional policy-makers. The Flemish Department of Education will probably get in touch with the *field*, and we assume that universities and other institutions of higher education will — in imitation of what was recently demanded of schools — come forward with a (new) e-learning plan in order to answer the following questions: Where are we? What are we aiming at? And how are we to make this happen? (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2002b). Some call this 'slide off responsibility', others — in a more positive sense — 'listen to the voice of the (strongest?) university/ies'. Another possible scenario is that the Flemish government will make use of the recently developed educational development plans as keynotes for the coming policy development and implementation. Flanders regulates, the universities (will) follow, or vice-versa?

*To Be Continued . . .*

Seeking online information about European public policies was a *piece of cake*: for some considerable time this decision level has released its policy definition and determination via web portals such as europa.eu.int and elearningeuropa.info. Locating similar policy plans for Flemish-Belgium is definitely more troublesome: these are scattered on the web. Moreover, most Flemish e-learning texts are devoted to school education.

Finally, this descriptive analysis is based on what is available in print. More interesting research would include an analysis of the informal policy discourse, would involve more than two actors and one factor, and would survey the concrete implementation within this policy context. That brings us to our next question: 'How is e-learning implemented in higher education and how and to what extent is this supported by an appropriate institutional policy?'

## NOTES

1. Preparatory research was completed in June 2002; then the 'Final Report of a Feasibility Study' was published, whereby the usefulness of an ICT-Monitor for Flanders was investigated (Wintjes *et al.*, 2002).
2. See for example the ESIS and e-Watch reports for a comparison between member states in the field of IS policies and ICT integration in schools.
3. Two-yearly survey in schools and education institutes for social promotion about the available ICT infrastructure (hard- and software, internet and other networks), the use and integration of ICT in a learning context, the ICT skills of teachers, pupils and other learners and their perceptions about educational ICT use.
4. Every member state has drawn up a National Reform Programme/National Action Plan in the framework of eEurope which describes how the Employment Guidelines are put into practice at the national level (progress and measures).

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