INNOVATION
STATION

Policy Recommendations
for quality online and blended education activities

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1. Background

The educational system is not open to changes due to the lack of time and space for teachers to experiment new styles and methods, and to the lack of appropriate response towards the new trends and technologies. Students are taught to learn passively, without managing their own learning process and engaging in it. With the Covid-19 pandemic, many schools needed to adapt to digital tools and technologies, while not having proper staff digital education nor support on how to work with these technologies.

When this switch to online learning happened, the engagement of students became lower and highlighted challenges of educational systems such as the lack of learning-to-learn skills and attitudes such as autonomous learning, critical thinking, problem solving and curiosity. As a response to this, our project aimed towards the creation of a support system for both teachers and students to adapt to the digital challenges they are facing with online education and learning.

2. Introduction

2.1 Innovation Station path to Policy Recommendations

Innovation Station is a KA2 Erasmus+ project in which OBESSU, EuroClio, EGInA, HOU and Impossible Foundation worked together to facilitate and promote the digital competences of teachers by giving them resources and training materials. On the other hand, to enhance the learning competence of students to increase the autonomy of those while following digital and blended education. In order to achieve this, the project developed **Guidelines for Teachers** for online education. The Guidelines were a result of a well outlined process which included different key elements for its completion.

Kicking off the process, The DAISSy Research Group of the Hellenic Open University (HOU), the partner representing Greece in the project consortium, conducted a research, broken in two phases and aimed to offer an overview of the existing practices, tools, and methods for online blended teaching in European Union countries based on the experience of schools' closure during the pandemic period.

Accordingly, good practices of enabling effective distance learning environments for secondary and higher education teachers and students were explored and brought conclusions about the elements that encourage innovation in the formal education system of our era.

The two phases that resulted to the study's outcomes, included:

a) The first phase of the survey was a set desk research, a type of research where information is collected from existing sources, namely the literature review produced during the years 2020-2023. Suggested by all partners, more than 50 papers published in scientific journals and conferences covering a wide range of EU countries were studied to get initial ideas about specific topics and better understand the concept of online learning in formal education. Interesting conclusions were gathered, a pilot study was implemented, and the team was led to the next crucial research phase.

b) The second phase, being in process, is primary qualitative research which involves collecting and analysing data based on specific methods. More specifically, based on structured interviews, the researchers' study and analyse teachers' and students' experience to understand critical factors like how independent learning is performed by students, and how it can be developed and supported by teachers and the educational system. The research will provide more information about successful online teaching and learning alongside with the accomplishment of a prototype to be introduced to educational policy makers at European level.

The Innovation Station project builds its actions on the belief that it is fundamental to work not only on teachers' digital competences but also on the learning to learn competence of students. To meet those needs, the project on one hand created and promoted the **Guidelines** mentioned earlier, but on the other hand, it took a step further and put together a **MOOC on self-directed and self-paced learning.** The MOOC was and is **available on multiple platforms**, while to make sure the outputs reach the target groups in a way that also meets their needs, the Project held **three main activities**, of which two corresponding to the Guidelines and one corresponding to the MOOC.

The first two included a) an exchange seminar bringing together educators and students to discuss their needs in terms of online learning and digital education, that will mainly feed the guidelines for teachers but also the MOOC and b) Teacher training on how to use the guidelines and on digital competences and engaging methods for online education. The last activity set a Social media account with MOOC key content and tips and tricks on self-directed and self-paced learning.

2.2 Methodology

To dissect and analyse the EU policy environment on online and blended education, input was collected at each step of the project (events, research etc.) leading up to the final qualitative survey.

The input was collected mainly through the distribution of the qualitative survey at 2 OBESSU events gathering student representatives from all over Europe, and 2 project events, namely **a) the Staff Training**, where 20 teachers from different countries in Europe were trained on online and blended learning, and **b) the OBESSU Training of Trainers DemocraSEE the Change**, where 20 youth educators were trained on non-formal education methodologies.

All together, input collected helped not only understand the needs and measures that need to be put in place, but also to better understand how existing policies should be further adapted or if new policies should be put together to better respond to educators and learners needs and benefit the educational processes as a whole.

3.Defining Online and Blended Learning

Online learning
Online learning refers to a learning environment where the material and the interaction between students and teachers takes place online, through an internet connection and an online learning software such as video conferencing, often in concurrence of a wider virtual learning environment (VLE) along boards, resources, assessments and schedules.

Blended learning
'Blended learning' in formal education and training is the term used to describe when a school, educator, or student takes more than one approach to the learning process.

This definition build on the work of Norm Friesenm, who in 2012 stated:

> The meaning of "blended learning" has changed over time; only definitions from 2006 and later are to be considered current. Consequently, a suggested composite definition is: "Blended learning" designates the range of possibilities presented by combining Internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students. The coherence and consistency of this definition is illustrated through examples from the literature, and via a decision tree offered as a heuristic.

E-learning
E-learning describes a learning approach that emphasises the use of digital resources, often technological devices such as a laptop or tablet, connected to the internet.

4. Policy in the Making

Focusing on the European Union and the field of Online and Blended Learning, it is important to understand the continuity charactering EU policy making. Looking not so long ago, In 2020, the EU recognized the importance of digital education and skills for its citizens and economy, adapting the ***Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027***), which sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive, and accessible digital education in Europe.

The aim of the Action Plan is to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age, and to address the challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it is important to also acknowledge that EU's approach to digital education is based on three key principles, namely:

- **Collaboration**: The EU encourages Member States to collaborate on digital education initiatives, sharing best practices and resources,

- **Investment**: The EU provides funding for digital education projects, including teacher training and infrastructure development, and last

- **Flexibility**: The EU recognizes that Member States have different needs and priorities and encourages them to design their own digital education strategies accordingly.

As a result of the EU's efforts, there has been a significant increase in the adoption of digital technologies in education across Europe. However, there is still a great deal of diversity in the way that digital education is approached across different Member States. This diversity is due to several factors, including the different levels of digital infrastructure and digital literacy in each country, as well as the different educational traditions and priorities.

Some countries have been early adopters of digital education and have developed well-established digital learning platforms and curricula, while others are still catching up and are working to improve their digital infrastructure and teacher training. Despite the diversity in approaches, there are some **common trends emerging in the EU's approach to digital education**. These trends include:

- **A focus on blended learning**: Blended learning combines traditional classroom instruction with online learning activities. This approach is seen to provide students with more flexibility and choice in their learning, and to improve the overall quality of education.

- **The use of digital technologies to personalise learning**: Digital technologies can be used to track student progress and provide personalised learning experiences. This can help to ensure that all students are able to reach their full potential.

- **The development of digital literacy skills**: As digital technologies become more pervasive in society, it is important that all students develop the skills they need to use them effectively. This includes skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration.

5.Policy Recommendations

Education undoubtedly serves a fundamental function in all societies, and projects such as Innovation Station add to it, **providing research, insight and toolkits for educators and students**. Unfortunately this is not always reflected in the planning and financial resources that Ministries leading Finance, Education and Social Development assign to maintaining and developing educational systems.

This is particularly obvious when budgetary cuts are proposed by governments in the field of education and training. This reasoning misses entirely the point of **education as a human right** and as a way for **individuals and groups to contribute to society with knowledge and advancements**.

Building upon the project's finding, below there is a set of **12 policy recommendations**, outlining the necessary actions and strategies **to effectively implement online and blended education**, ensuring its seamless integration into the broader educational ecosystem.

Recommendations for European Level

1. **Establish a European Observatory for Online and Blended Education:** Create a centralised platform to gather, analyse, and disseminate data on the implementation of online and blended education across Europe. This observatory should serve as a knowledge-sharing hub for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to inform decision-making and identify best practices.

2. **Support the Development of High-Quality Online and Blended Learning Resources:** Invest in the creation and curation of engaging, evidence-based online and blended learning resources to support a wide range of educational needs. These resources should be accessible in multiple languages and adapted to diverse learning styles.

3. **Promote International Cooperation and Exchange of Experiences:** Facilitate collaboration among European institutions, educators, and organisations to share knowledge, best practices, and innovative approaches to online and blended education. This exchange should foster cross-cultural learning and enhance the quality of educational experiences across the continent.

4. **Advance Research and Development in Online and Blended Learning Technologies:** Encourage research and development in technologies that support effective online and blended learning experiences. This includes exploring innovative pedagogical approaches, adaptive learning tools, and personalization strategies.

Recommendations for National Level

5. **Develop National Curricula and Assessment Frameworks that Support Online and Blended Learning:** Adapt national curricula and assessment frameworks to accommodate the unique pedagogical approaches and learning outcomes associated with online and blended education. Ensure that these frameworks align with the European standards and goals.

6. **Invest in Teacher Training and Professional Development:** Provide comprehensive teacher training and professional development opportunities to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively implement online and blended learning. These programs should focus on digital literacy, pedagogical approaches, and assessment strategies.

7. **Support the Adoption of Online and Blended Learning Infrastructure:** Invest in the necessary infrastructure, including broadband access, digital devices, and learning management systems, to support the effective implementation of online and blended learning at all levels of education.

8. **Recognize and Reward Teachers for Their Contributions to Online and Blended Education:** Implement policies that recognize and reward teachers who excel in developing and delivering high-quality online and blended learning experiences. This will encourage further innovation and adoption of these pedagogical approaches.

Recommendations for Local Level

9. **Establish Local Innovation Hubs for Online and Blended Education:** Create local innovation hubs to support the development and implementation of effective online and blended learning practices within individual schools, districts, and regions. These hubs should serve as centres for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

10. **Foster Partnerships between Schools, Local Businesses, and Community Organizations:** Encourage partnerships between schools, local businesses, and community organisations to leverage local resources, expertise, and technology to enhance online and blended learning opportunities. This can lead to more personalised and engaging learning experiences.

11. **Provide Support for Students with Disabilities:** Ensure that online and blended learning environments are accessible and inclusive for all students, including those with disabilities. This includes providing appropriate assistive technologies and individualised support services.

12. **Engage Parents and Guardians in the Online and Blended Learning Process:** Effectively communicate with parents and guardians about online and blended learning strategies, providing them with the resources and support they need to facilitate their children's learning. This fosters a sense of shared responsibility and partnership.