Policy Recommendations – Portugal

VISCED

A Transnational Appraisal of
Virtual School and College Provision

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Abstract	Using the example of Ensino a Distância para a Itinerância- EDI and drawing on insights from the project coordinator this document reviews the policy opportunities and challenges raised by this kind of virtual education for the 14-21 age range. It presents reflections and presents policy recommendations to policymakers and leaders in Portugal. This should be considered in the context of the overall Europe Policy Recommendations Report D3.9. Separate supplementary reports will provide policy recommendations for England, Estonia and Finland.
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1 The brief

This is deliverable D.3.9.D of work package 3. The deliverable title is: *Policy Recommendations (Portugal).*

The work package title is: *Analysis and recommendations.*

Deliverable 3.9 is summarised in the work plan as follows:

This report is the final deliverable from subtask 3.4. It again has p2 Sero as lead author, with help from p10 TIEKE and p7 EITF . The lead author person will again be Barry Phillips, formerly at the ministry (DfES) in the UK. It is based on updating the earlier deliverable (D.3.5) in the light of new input and discussion with stakeholders.

Partners discussed the format of this final report and it was decided that it would be clearest if the over-arching report on Europe to the commission was presented as a single document, with separate reports for England, Estonia and Finland, the three countries specified for individual recommendations in the work plan. Following the first year of research, it was also decided to produce an additional report for Portugal, which has had input from MENON, the overall work package leader.

The four supplementary reports, of which this is one, are numbered D.3.9.A (England), D.3.9.B (Estonia), D.3.9.C (Finland) and D.3.9.D (Portugal). These supplementary reports should be read in conjunction with the main report, D.3.9.

2 Background – the aims and objectives of this document

VISCED is a European project aimed at analysing the phenomenon of Virtual Schools in Europe, as compared to other regions of the world – namely the US – where distance schooling has a much longer tradition and a highly different breeding ground.

During its first year of activity, the project explored and analysed existing virtual schools and colleges in Europe, considering also projects and initiatives offering distance education for students aged 14-21. The institutional, pedagogical, socio-cultural and political dimensions have been carefully analysed to go deeper into the different European "understanding" of virtual education.

Based on its research results, VISCED has been working on recommendations for policy on how to support virtual schools and colleges, where these could positively contribute to match old and new goals and challenges of education systems.

Policy recommendations have been produced at both country and EC level. Among countries, VISCED has decided to focus also on Portugal, as a southern Europe member state which has been struggling since the 1975 revolution with combating early school leaving and raising the educational attainment of its population.

The Portuguese initiative Escola Móvel (Mobile School) - now called "[Ensino a Distância para a Itinerância](- EDI" (Distance Learning project for itinerant children and adolescents)- in an interesting example of virtual education at compulsory level run by the state to support inclusion of groups at risk (namely children and adolescents from travelling families who suffer discontinuity in school attendance). The initiative – originally developed as a small experimental project – has undergone several changes since 2006. It is currently in a crucial phase of reform aimed at making the project more sustainable and integrated. This circumstance is thus a fruitful one to discuss the scope for virtual schooling in the country given that a reflection and negotiation is now open and on the way.

The EDI initiative is a good starting point to understand which policy recommendations could be drawn from that experience and could support distance education in a way which is favourable to the overall quality and effectiveness of the Portuguese education system.

This document collects the results of an interview with Fernando Albuquerque Costa – the coordinator of the EDI initiative – and summarizes them in a set of policy recommendations on Virtual Schooling which are specific to Portugal. The latter are derived by the author of this document based on the opinion collected through the interview. In terms of research methodology and focus, this paper differs from the Policy Recommendations for England, Estonia and Finland which are broad commentaries on national policies. However, given the valuable experiences and insights of the interviewee, and the Portuguese Government's apparent support for innovative projects such as the EDI it was felt that these reflections will be of worth to policymakers, leaders and practitioners in Portugal and elsewhere. <u>The views expressed in this document shall thus not be considered as strictly reflecting the view of the interviewee nor an institutional view, but an elaboration based on informed opinions.</u>

At the end of this document, the questions which were used to guide a semi-structured interview are reported as an annex.

3 Virtual schooling in Portugal

The main challenge for the Portuguese education system is the need to raise educational attainments of the general population and combat early school leaving so to ensure full social inclusion and participation in the knowledge economy.

The heritage of the Salazar period – which saw low investment in education, including insufficient territorial coverage – still affects Portugal and a high number of adults have never completed compulsory education. The percentage of Early School Leaving (ESL) in Portugal was at 31,2%[1] in 2009 on the EU definition, with 40% having completed only primary education, although significant progress has been already achieved to reduce the ESL rate in the country.

The Portuguese state – which according to the Constitution is responsible for ensuring educational opportunities to everyone – could profit from the opportunities offered by distance education to ensure completion of compulsory education and engagement in further learning of the groups at risk.

The set of recommendations which follow are intended to support a public initiative of distance schooling to be integrated in the public school system and offered as a reliable and valid alternative to physical schools. A state-led virtual education initiative – rather than state-regulated private virtual education – is in fact reckoned as the most suitable and effective way to integrate alternative educational models to match challenges of the education system.

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[1] Eurostat, *Labour Force Survey*

4 Policy Recommendations

4.1 Work in partnership to design and implement virtual education

Competences, experiences and resources for distance learning already exist in the Portuguese system, though they are distributed among different Ministries, departments and areas of society.

The Portuguese Ministry of Education could work in partnership with other Ministries and organisations to design and deliver virtual schooling in Portugal. This could ensure that the resources and competencies for distance learning which are now distributed come to a synergy and are effectively devoted to specific virtual schooling initiatives.

In particular, the Ministry of Education could act as the leader and coordinator of an interministerial group involving also actors from society. The group should certainly include:

- The Ministry of Defence, to build fruitfully on its longstanding experience in distance learning for its soldiers and the human and infrastructural resources developed in that field;

- The Ministry of Welfare and the social services;

- Higher Education Institutions and their relevant Research Departments, some of which already have successful experience in distance learning;

- Portuguese Open University.

4.2 Apply the same regulations to virtual schools and bricks-and-mortar schools

This is important, in order to build up trust and image among the Portuguese population.

To build up the image and reliability of virtual schooling in Portugal, it is essential to show to families and students that the distance education option is subject to the same rigour and quality procedures of the face-to-face option and offers an alternative which is equal to normal school.

Virtual education should thus be subject – at least for the first years until full public acceptance is achieved -to the same regulatory framework as physical schools, including not only accreditation, quality assurance and inspection regimes but also assessment of students and qualifications. These regimes in Portugal are not necessarily unfavourable to distance education and can be easily applied to virtual schools.

4.3   Support experimentation by favouring autonomy and flexibility

The experience of EDI has shown that distance learning in school can be an area of experimentation and innovation and that "traditional" schools can learn from virtual ones. The risk connected to school as a rooted institution is however to "domesticate" innovation and absorb it before it can produce real change.

Portugal should build on the provision of School Autonomy which is already a keystone of its education system to ensure that virtual schooling can act as a real area of experimentation and innovation, safeguarding the flexibility and autonomy of those who work in distance education projects (including teachers' selection and further training).

4.4   Ensure virtual schools autonomy and choice in teacher recruitment

Teachers in EDI were recruited within the national teacher recruitment system as for any other normal school. In a system like Portugal, this included randomness in the appointment to a school and high turn-over, two elements which place particular challenges for in virtual schools.

In that respect, teacher recruitment in virtual schools should enjoy a derogatory regime with respect to the national recruitment system. This derogatory regime should cover the duration of the service and the criteria to be applied to teachers selection (including preparation for distance teaching, motivation etc) to ensure preparation, continuity and planning.

4.5   Support Universities which offer teacher education for distance learning

The Ministry of Education should support the Portuguese universities which already offer Masters degrees in distance teaching to ensure *ad hoc* preparation of teachers who will work in virtual school programmes. This might be done in the framework of the partnership which the Ministry should build to design and run virtual education in the country (see recommendation 1).

4.6   Invest strongly in research into virtual schooling

The key to success is to invest in a programme of action research.

The Ministry of Education should support research into virtual schooling - taking opportunities from new projects and experimentations - to investigate which are the best pedagogical and organizational solutions for distance learning addressing young students in compulsory education.

 While distance education for adults is quite well known, research and evidence are missing when it comes to children and adolescents, and this is essential to support the most effective framework for virtual schools.

In that respect, it would be important that each virtual school or programme is offered the support of a university partner able on the one hand to support the teaching team pedagogically and on the other hand to monitor, study and evaluate the school and advance research evidence on virtual education for school levels.

5 Annex

Questions of the interview

1) Which are the main challenges that education in Portugal is facing and is going to face in the near future? In which way initiatives such as EDI could contribute to match such challenges?

2) How shall the opportunities offered by "distance schooling" be identified and directed to match existing challenges? Who shall take initiative on this and who shall be involved in the design and implementation of initiatives?

3) Which have been so far – if any - the institutional elements of the Portuguese education system which created obstacles and bottlenecks when implementing distance education for school? Which on the other hand proved to be favorable?

4) Which reforms or measures are necessary to remove obstacles or, on the other hand, build upon positive elements in order to scale up distance schooling in the country?

5) EDI in the future is meant to be based on a network of schools providing distance education, how was this choice developed and which is the rationale behind?

6) For initiatives like EDI to be successful and become an integral part of the education system, how shall they be framed within existing regulatory frameworks for schools? Is it necessary to design ad hoc regulatory frameworks or can the same provisions as for Portuguese "brick and mortar schools" apply to "virtual schools"?

7) How shall Quality be ensured for this type of school? Can the same inspection regime apply to virtual schools? How shall accreditation be regulated?

8) How does/shall assessment work? (on-line, in presence)

9) How shall students be guaranteed in terms of equity and quality with respect to those in traditional schools? Should students be submitted to standards national examination as their peer from brick and mortar schools?

10) In EDI the recruitment of teachers is the same as in normal school, thus teachers in the virtual school have no special preparation for it and high turn-over exists. When willing to scale up the initiative, would it be necessary to change teacher recruitment regulation?

11) Do you think that teacher training for virtual schooling could become a specialization in Portugal or that all future teachers shall be endowed with e-learning related competences?

12) EDI is a publicly funded initiative managed by the Ministry of Education. Would it be possible also to consider the flourishing of private virtual schools in Portugal complementing the public offer and supporting the state in meeting social and educational goals? How should they be regulated?

13) What kind of future (if any) do you see for mainstreamed virtual schooling in Portugal? Would the choice to offer virtual schooling as an alternative to classic schooling imply increased or decreasing investments in education?

14) Is there any issue in Portugal with the credibility and image of distance education and virtual schools as compared to traditional education?