E-Learning: Support For High-School Networks in Albania

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Sommario – 1. Background. – 2. Situation overview: Educational System vis-a-vis Internet. – 3. The central theme: Drafting Policies for E-Learning at the High-School level.

1. Background

1.1 *The figures*

Albania entered the world of Internet in roughly the same way it entered the free market and the world competition; that is, through an unstructured, bundled set of occurrencies, that eventually projected it into the 21st century. Destitute of an own tradition in high-tech and electronics, it took some years until the real impact of the Internet era was felt in Albania. The boom years of the internet expansion coincided with a civil war scenario in Albania in 1997. The number of households connected to the World Wide Web through dial-up networking was approx. 12.304 in 1996 in a population of 3.120.000. The number started to increase after the conclusion of the upheavals in 1997; to the present, this number has doubled. In early 2000, the market of alternative internet services started to give signs of existence: the internet caffe was a phenomenon that boomed similarly to other thirld world countries, boosted by the increased penetration of financial and technologic capability at one side and by the trend to emulate Western Europe by the other. In Tirana, the capital of Albania, (820.000 inhabitants) there are some 369 internet caffes at present; that gives a ratio of one random internet access opportunity per 2222 inhabitants.

1.2 Competition

There is already some competition in place among internet providers since Albania was linked to the main optical cable that connects Bulgaria to Italy; the prices were lowered and more and more the state institutions and the universities purchased basic internet access, mostly on dial-up basis at a modest tranmission speed (75% of the providers offer 64kbps lines in their basic internet packages). The price factor is a main driver in the expansion of internet in Albania; the comparatively low fees for internet services driven down by the advent of more and more competitors in the market is accompanied by a constant economic growth. The GDP per capita in 1998 was approx 1098 USD; now it has reached the threshold of 2000 USD.

1.3 *Emulation*

An important aspect that cannot be accounted for by economics only is the "attitude of emulation" of the youth with regard to internet. Internet is a global phenomenon; it reflects in a myriad of local realities. In Third World countries it affects primarily the youth, as the main carriers of ch'ange and the main targets for the aggressive marketing of internet services. Therefore, Internet has to enter in the priorities of the educational policies of the government and the civil society in Albania, as it entered its market. This essay endeavours to draw attention on the need to structure the approach towards Internet in the educational institutions, in order to gain the optimal advantage from its low cost services in a world of very scarce resources such as the Third World.

2. Situation overview: Educational System vis-a-vis Internet

2.1 *Demographics*

The importance of the educational aspect of Internet cannot be stressed enough in the case of Albania; it has the second youngest population in Europe (it ranks second behind Kosovo); there are some 610.000 students and pupils integrated in the country's educational system in a population of a little more than three million. The educational system is literally very close to collapse at the beginning of every school year. The shortage of premises for the students in the high-school level has brought the number of students up to approx 45 units per classroom.

2.2 *Policies*

The policies adopted by the Ministry of Education withthe assistance of the World Bank envisage the establishment of large hubs of education, that is, very large schools that would eventually cover larger population areas. This solution would, on the other hand, face the problems of a poor infrastructure, not quite capable to provide a satisfactory response to the need for transport over longer and longer distances. Even if it could seem utopic at first sight, distance learning, if properly dealt with, could be one of the most viable options to deal with this unsustainable situation, especially in the high school and in the university level. The high education system in Albania comprises at present 9000 students in three Universities; the pedagogical staff counts some 1000 university professors and assistants. Albania has a comparatively low level of analphabetism (1%); in comparison to other sectors of social importance, education is better off.

An important development for the educational system was the Law on Private Education passed in early 2000. It paved the way to the expansion of private schools in all the levels of education. At present, there are 40 private high schools in Albania: a curious fact worth mentioning in this essay is the catchword "internet access". It was used extensively in the marketing campaigns and promotionals of the private schools. It gave the impression (not far from the reality) that private high-schools had the monopoly of e-learning in the sector of

education. But this is true to a certain extent, on the grounds of a negative basis for comparison. There is virtually no possibility of internet access in any public school in Albania. On the other hand, there is no possibility to have an overall policy to integrate e-learning in the private education. The Ministry of Education is overwhelmed with routine tasks and burdens; it seems very much the civil society should take a lead in drafting and proposing e-learning policies to the government and to the donors community in order to share those burdens.

3. The central theme: Drafting Policies for E-Learning at the High-School level

3.1 *Social Inequalities*

Disparity is the first keyword in describing the post-transition Albanian society; disruption of social cohesion is the second. To the present, the formerly egalitarian society, equally dispersed throughout the country in terms of wealth (very scarce, indeed) and population in Albania represents a melting pot of people centered in and around the capital. 7% of the population owns more than 85% of the country's wealth. It is an extreme ratio if compared with other countries of the region. No wonder Internet is a mere word for most newsettlers and their children that overcrowd ill-equipped suburban high-schools.

3.2 *Describing the Problem: Universities and High Schools.*

To the present, the Universities have received support in terms of electronic equipment that helped them create the basic inventory of hardware needed to run their normal activity. There is no national policy on e-learning: no networks of "universities online" exist. On-line resources in Albanian are not available for university students. Yet, whereas the Universities already have the human and (limited) financial resources in place to coordinate efforts and project themselves towards the new possibilities offered by Internet in terms of distance learning, eventually with the support of partner universities, the High Schools seem to be far from having any sort of reasonable access to the resources of internet.

3.3 *Is there an option for e-learning in the High Schools in Albania?*

There is certainly more than an option. The one I put forward is related to the options that are generated by a growing civil society in Albania. Education through Internet is very much en vogue almost everywhere; the need for it is huge in the public sector educational system. Cost sharing, NGOs networking, Community participation are the solutions that would naturally apply to the situation. But the issue that is certainly overdue is the strategy. To the present, no local or foreign NGO has come up with a strategy of cooperation in this field. To the perceived need for a strategy of e-learning for the high-school no response is being given. My essay echoes this concern: by missing the wide segment of students in the high-schools, e-learning misses the most active and receptive segment of population in the Republic of Albania.