Bridging Digital Education Hubs and Teaching and Learning Centres

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Riassunto

L'istituzione dei Digital Education Hub in Italia ha accelerato lo sviluppo di infrastrutture digitali a sostegno di un'istruzione superiore più flessibile e accessibile. Il contributo sostiene che la sola innovazione tecnologica non sia sufficiente a migliorare l'insegnamento e l'apprendimento, evidenziando il ruolo complementare dei Teaching and Learning Centres nella promozione della formazione del personale docente, dell'innovazione pedagogica e del cambiamento istituzionale. A partire dall'esperienza dell'Università di Trieste nel progetto ALMA, il lavoro analizza come l'integrazione tra infrastrutture digitali, competenze educative e supporto organizzativo possa favorire un'innovazione sostenibile. Vengono inoltre discusse le sfide emergenti relative alla governance, ai profili professionali e allo sviluppo di ecosistemi per l'insegnamento e l'apprendimento.
Parole chiave: Digital Education Hub; Teaching and Learning Centre; Formazione del personale docente; Innovazione didattica; Istruzione superiore

Abstract

The establishment of Italy's Digital Education Hubs has accelerated the development of digital infrastructures to support more flexible and accessible higher education. This paper argues that technological innovation alone is insufficient to improve teaching and learning, highlighting the complementary role of Teaching and Learning Centres in promoting faculty development,

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pedagogical innovation, and institutional change. Drawing on the University of Trieste's experience within the ALMA project, it explores how the integration of digital infrastructures, educational expertise, and organisational support can foster sustainable innovation. The paper also discusses emerging challenges related to governance, professional roles, and the long-term development of teaching and learning ecosystems.
Keywords: Digital Education Hubs; Teaching and Learning Centres; Faculty development; Educational innovation; Higher education

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The establishment of the three national Digital Education Hubs (DEHs), envisaged under Mission 4 of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), was intended to strengthen universities' digital infrastructures and attract prospective students requiring greater flexibility in terms of logistics, time management, and access to learning opportunities. This initiative addresses a broader and long-standing challenge in Italian higher education: increasing the number of university graduates and widening participation in university studies.

However, the provision of digital learning opportunities cannot be reduced to technologies, platforms, or content delivery alone. It also requires a rethinking of the ways teaching and learning are designed, organised, delivered, and supported. For this reason, the original PNRR framework also envisaged the creation of three national Teaching and Learning Centres (TLCs), intended to foster professional development, pedagogical innovation, and scholarly reflection on digitally enhanced teaching. Although this measure was ultimately not funded, the close connection between DEHs and TLCs remains highly relevant.

Within the University of Trieste's participation in the ALMA project, this relationship became evident from the outset, partly because the university's accession to ALMA coincided with the launch of its own TLC. This alignment offered a valuable opportunity not only to benefit from the expertise of institutions with more advanced experience in digital education, but also to reflect internally on the structure, mission, and priorities of the newly established centre. In this sense, ALMA provided both an operational framework and a reflective space in which to consider how digital education could be integrated into a broader strategy for teaching innovation.

This issue also intersects with the work of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI), which has established a dedicated working group currently drafting three position papers on TLC structures, the profile and

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identity of university teaching staff, and the assessment of faculty development initiatives. The first of these documents aims to provide guidelines for defining TLC architectures, including their financial and staffing requirements. This confirms the central role that educational innovation now plays both in enhancing the quality of universities' current educational provision and in reaching new student populations through more flexible and inclusive learning models.

At the same time, this transition requires careful consideration of the professional roles needed within, or in support of, TLCs. In this respect, the ALMA project highlighted the difficulty of recruiting appropriately qualified professionals, particularly instructional designers and faculty developers. It also confirmed the close relationship between two complementary dimensions: the technological infrastructures required to produce high-quality digital learning resources and the expertise needed to design such resources, support academic staff, and promote sustainable pedagogical change.

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