

## INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING AND COOPERATION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION\*

This presentation aims at reviewing the current developments of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in different regions of the world and to establish the corresponding global trends. This concerns the organisations of systems, teaching and training methodologies, pedagogic uses of Information and Communications Technologies and expected changes, both in priorities assigned by governments and transnational organisations to this mode of operation and in the new actors intervening in this field.

A review of the concrete initiatives taken by the International Council for Open and Distance Education, ICDE, to cope with and to provide leadership in relation to these trends will be presented, as it is fitting to the world-wide organisation dedicated to Open and Distance Learning.

A strong emphasis will be put into the recognised need for international networking and transnational co-operation, in order to increase the spreading of benefits of ODL operation and to optimise investments made in this field.

Together with pointing out the advantages of this mode of operation for increasing the productivity of processes and initiatives leading to massive human resources development, a point will be made concerning linguistic and cultural aspects imbedded in ODL.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an expression meant to include very different forms of operation of both education and training organisations. Instead of drawing the dividing line between formal and non-formal education; between different levels of institutional teaching (primary, secondary, higher or advanced education); between initial and continuing vocational training; with or without pre-requisites of formally acquired knowledge and skills — all these different contexts and their specific target populations can learn following the general methodology expressed as ODL.

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As a very short and necessary incomplete definition, this means that acquisition of knowledge is based on the general availability of quality learning materials, this being made possible by an efficient method of diffusion of these contents, possibly through a diversity of communication means: paper or electronic publishing, radio and television broadcasts, audio and video magnetic recordings, computer software, all these in between the oldest and the most advanced communication systems, current mail and INTERNET.

By using these materials, students learn, mostly by themselves, outside the conventional classroom. This does not mean that the self-learning process can efficiently take place entirely without person-to-person interaction: this applying to a number of subjects requiring actual laboratory work, field training, actual handling of tools and equipment or just a real interpersonal relationship.

On the other hand, students and trainees should not be left to themselves without mechanisms able to solve their difficulties, to encourage them in moments of distress or lack of confidence; to clarify difficult points in the learning curriculum. A student-support mechanism ideally based on both a network of de-centralised Study Centres and accessible telecommunications provides the answer to this requirement.

This was the basic philosophy used by a very large number of institutions, in operation since more than one century and which nowadays benefit from the quick evolution of communication media, making it easier for the final user the access to the opportunity and to the benefits of learning.

Using more and less sophisticated communication means and reaching wider or smaller numbers of potential users, ODL systems have increased in number enormously in the last decade, in all the regions and in most countries of the world, mostly in the public sector in what respects higher education but also in the private sector in what concerns vocational training and basic and secondary school systems and all kinds of non-formal education.

The International Council for Open and Distance Education, the world-wide NGO, affiliated to UNESCO, with specific co-ordinating responsibilities in this field, estimates that probably more than 5,000 ODL systems exist all over the world, possibly serving in excess of 10 million end users. It is difficult to be more precise than that, taking into account that many organisations actually using ODL methodologies do not consider themselves to be an ODL education or training system.

Considering the case of Western Europe, six dedicated Distance Teaching Universities serve an excess of one million students. Besides that, a large number of conventional universities in all countries in Europe are launching distance teaching initiatives in parallel with their conventional classroom operation. Their number will increase sharply in the next few years, judging by the interest shown recently by the highest authority in European higher education, the "Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conference", which commissioned a study on global trends in this field to a special Working Group of national experts, each appointed by the corresponding Rectors' Conference. This Working Group has just delivered the Report "Trends in European Open and Distance Learning", including their recommendations.

In what respect Central and Eastern European States, distance education is spreading very quickly due, on the one hand, to a very active co-operation with similar organisations in Western Europe and on the other, to massive investments made by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, which put a strong emphasis on the new priorities for education and training, albeit imposing a private sector, market-oriented perspective to the new organisations created therein.

A similar orientation seems to prevail in Russia, a number of private, large dimension organisations having been installed recently, while most conventional Russian universities are showing interest and some initiatives of dual-mode operation, co-operating intensively with ODL systems all over the world.

In North America, both Canada and the United States have a long tradition and experience in distance education: very sophisticated, large, dedicated ODL systems exist in Canada, in both education and training, as well as an increasing number of organisations of smaller dimension operating in this field. In the USA the tradition was mostly focussed in non-formal (adult and community) education until more recent years. However, the interest of conventional universities has since grown significantly, many large and prestigious conventional universities becoming active in the ODL field (as a lateral remark, some influence in this was due to the growing interest and political attention given to "The Information Super Highways", expression that stimulated clearly the imagination and creativity of organisations and individuals). On the other hand, even large-scale multinational corporations dealing with telecommunications, computers and information technologies and even the media and entertainment networks have shown an acute interest in ODL matters, obviously looking at a very profitable market of many millions of potential clients in education and training.

Latin America and the Caribbean is no exception in the American panorama, most countries having already their own national ODL systems and the remaining trying to give the first, although very determined steps in this field.

The same can be said about Australia and Oceania, the former having reached a high level of development (both in terms of technology and pedagogy) in ODL matters, by using mostly the dual-mode of operation, by which conventional universities also act in the distance learning mode. In New Zealand a very successful Correspondence School takes care of a very large number of isolated communities in the rural areas, at basic and secondary education level. Many Island States of the Pacific have their own distance teaching system, frequently in close co-operation with Australia and New Zealand.

The landscape is also encouraging in Asia. Besides Pakistan, India, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, The Philippines, Indonesia, Japan and Korea, having large, national, dedicated distance education systems (several just for India), the case of China, through our present host, the China National Radio and Television University, is perhaps the most interesting, given its huge dimension and well organised mode of operation (it would be presumptuous for me to comment on this particular issue). The dedicated systems operating in Taipei and Hong Kong have also shown a high level of success.

The situation is not so positive in the Middle East and in Africa. Besides Israel, with a well established Open University and the Open University of Palestine which just began operating at a very small scale, only in the Southern part of the African Continent, in the Republic of South Africa, strong distance education systems exist. It deserves special mention the case of UNISA, the very first distance education organisation in the world operating at higher education level. (It is only fit and proper that, besides this mention to a pioneer initiative, another one will follow, from a different part of the world: the case of the British Open University which was the initiator breaking the way for the pedagogy-based, media communication supported organisations, of nowadays Open and Distance Learning).

To deal with this very large and diverse number of ODL systems, many of them direct members of the ICDE or indirect, through the membership of several large regional associations, which they might belong to, the ICDE had to adjust its Constitution to the new worldwide panorama and future perspectives of distance education. A minor change in words (but not so in conceptual terms) changed the name of the organisation into International Council of Open and Distance Education, even if keeping its well-known acronym, ICDE, and this to make explicit the widening of scope of affiliated member

organisations and institutions and to include all kinds of vocational training systems, sometime described as Open Learning entities.

Types of membership also changed: two new categories of institutional members, Educational Authorities and Corporations, were meant to answer the expression of interest shown, on the one hand, by Governments, in many countries, wishing to get reliable information on the development of ODL systems; on the other, by large organisation in the private sector, operating in the fields of modern communications, computer and telematics, radio and television broadcasting and even news and entertainment, which are considering their potential for intervention in distance education and training, given the huge potential clientele in this field.

A new category for individuals is student membership at a reduced fee, aimed at bringing in the ICDE the new generations, thus lowering the average age of ICDE members.

A major change concerns the new composition of the ICDE Executive Committee which now includes, besides the President, the Secretary-General and 6 Vice-Presidents representing the geographic regions of the world, 4 more representing different linguistic and cultural regions. The corresponding election process has just been concluded, the elected new members make felt the presence of the Francophone, the Malay-Indonesian culture, the German-speaking and (it pleases me to announce, in this particular context), Chinese language and culture.

The ICDE recognises the paramount importance of networking between its members and, for that reason, created new structures aimed at this purpose. The ICDE Standing Conference of Presidents (SCOP) is the consulting body dedicated to enlighten the Executive Committee about the recommended institutional strategy and policy for the Council. The ICDE Forum of Academic and Professionals (FAP), dedicated to the individual membership, creates opportunities for debating their most demanding questions of today's world and to provide opportunities for the formation of special interest groups, like gender issues. The ICDE Business and Education RoundTable (BERT) provides two-way information between these different kinds of institutional partners, allowing for the creation of strategic alliances between the educational and the corporate world.

A very special new structure, the Network of Networks (ICDE-NN) will be dedicated to identify and to support large-scale initiatives taking place within these networks. Just to give a few examples, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, the Association of European Correspondence Schools, the Inter-American Distance Education

Network (CREAD), the Asian Association of Open Universities and the Australian Open and Distance Learning Association – are very powerful and active regional networks to which the ICDE is in the process of addressing invitations to join the Council as special invited members and to create therein their own space for exchange of information, debate and strategic decision at macroscopic level.

The set of initiatives taken have produced visible results: membership increased very sharply, the Council activities have increased manifold as has received prestigious invitations for active collaboration from international organisations like the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF and intergovernmental or transnational Agencies like the Commission of the European Union or the Southeast Asian Conference of Ministers of Education, just to give a few examples.

The official invitation China has graciously addressed last year to the ICDE President and Secretary-General to visit the biggest country in the world and to study its national ODL system is another symptom of the new image and visibility of the Council.

Another one is the many offers we have received to install official ICDE branches in many countries in the world, hosted by very prestigious local institutions. These branches are now working, in close relationship with the Secretary-General, in France, Germany, Russia, the United States, the Republic of South Africa, India, Korea and Australia.

The ICDE is not an ODL operator on its own, acting in this field only through its institutional members or networks. Its role as a global Non-Governmental Organisation is clearly of a strategic and political nature providing co-ordination of action, leadership and influence in the field of Open and Distance Learning all over the planet, in view of supporting the ideal of lifelong education and training for all peoples in the world.

Another of its responsibilities is to identify new trends and to foresee new developments in ODL, in terms of technology, pedagogy, methods and organisation. In this particular scope, the Council has contributed visibly for the growing awareness about distance education and its potential, both in developed and developing countries, as a strategic tool for human resources development. We were able also to detect a convergence between the classroom-based learning paradigm and the distance learning one and to foresee its major consequences. The most visible of these is the adoption by conventional universities, almost everywhere in the world, of distance learning methods and actual operation, in one of its two conceptually different regimes, one of which we have named *mixed-mode* operation besides the already considered *dual-mode* regime.

Dealing now with this models of organisation, with special importance in the higher education field, we fully understand that the creation of new Open Universities as fully dedicated institutions, acting mainly according to the ODL (single mode) method of operation, represents a huge investment, both in financial and human resources, which makes governments hesitate to decide upon. Less demanding is the solution of having the new method of operation to be hosted by a large, existing conventional university or a number of them. This has been done for many years, mostly in the richest developed countries, current examples being France, Canada, the United States and Australia. However, the trend has been in the past to consider the ODL operation almost separated from the conventional classroom-based one and dedicated to a different type of target population. Besides regular students, able to attend classes along the academic year, another one, consisting of extramural ones, was basically involved in the distance learning process. That is why the term "dual-mode", with its connotation of two different tracks running in parallel with different populations passing through, is very apt to describe this mode of organisation. It also happened sometimes that there was a specialisation in contents and the nature of programmes for the two kinds of students, ODL activities tending to be related more to non-formal courses and programmes and conventional studies more dedicated to formal education, diploma and degree programmes.

The convergence of paradigms we mentioned before leads to the concept that there is no reason to keep separated, in terms of methods and contents, the two populations of prospective users. What we called the mixed-mode regime means that current students may have the opportunity to choose between the learning regime they consider more favourable to them or that, in a given programme, some courses will be classroom-based and other ones taught at a distance.

This model of operation is still not very current although we know for sure that European Presidents of Universities consider the mixed-mode more suitable to solve their current dilemma of facing a sharp increase in demand of higher education while their operation budgets are being significantly cut down. A very favourable cost/benefit ratio, characteristic of the distance learning operation, offers favourable perspectives for the trend towards massification of higher education without incurring in a proportional increase of costs.

Perhaps the most significant change in ODL operation will occur through the massive use of the new information and communication technologies. Many initiatives are taking

place, everywhere in the world, to use INTERNET as a major tool for both the diffusion of learning materials and for assuring good communications between distance learning students and the corresponding teaching system. We believe that the many existing attempts to create a truly "Virtual University" will succeed in the short term and perhaps then would be the time to reconsider our current notions about ODL and its main modes of operation.