

GLOBALIZATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION: SETTING A TRANSATLANTIC POLICY FOR COLLABORATION*

Europe is an old patchwork of States each one with a fierce determination of keeping intact its full sovereignty within its own borders; and this keeping in mind an ancient history of wars, invasions, occupations and forced migrations having as final result that there are many more Nations than there are independent States, each Nation characterized by its own tradition, religion, language and culture, all different from one another. This specific cultural identity, made more unique by ancient history, collective memory and material patrimony, makes it very difficult for any possible intent towards achieving homogenization, unity of purpose or even harmonization of interests.

It is almost a miracle that the presently named European Union is now able to boast a number of 12 European States, which will hopefully become 15 as of the next 1st January, including all the countries of Western Europe (excepting Switzerland) and reaching Austria as the most Eastern Member. It took almost 40 years to achieve this result, which began with a limited industrial agreement among five countries and just for the purpose of dealing with coal and steel production. Nowadays, the Treaty of the European Union covers a single unified internal market for all members, the free circulation of workers, goods and capitals, harmonized legislation dealing with many branches of law, an unified social security policy, an embryo of a single currency system, massive investments aimed at developing the least favored regions of Europe and, finally, supranational institutions of government like the European Commission and the European Parliament (as to the last one, on the Sunday 12th of June, close to 250 million European citizens will be electing their representatives to this Parliament).

This does not mean that there will be, in the near future, something like the United States of Europe, compared to your own format of Federal State. The Nations and the States within the Union are not keen on sacrificing even a minimum part of their self determination and sovereignty and only do that in fields they regard as minor ones – as compared to having their own King, Queen or President, their own language, culture and law. This is

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what is meant by the so-called "Principle of Subsidiarity" which could read briefly like this: "Europe as a whole will only intervene on fields wherein each State is not able to produce any effect by acting alone".

Being closely related to culture and to tradition, Education is one of the fields that fall within the scope of the Principle of Subsidiarity, meaning that each European country is free to have and to manage its own educational system, to establish its own priorities for the training of human resources, and to design the guidelines for the development and evolution of the educational system - without any kind of interference of transnational nature. On the other hand, you can count in Europe dozens of Universities having more than five hundred years of age; taking for instance the case of my own country – Portugal – the University of Coimbra has recently celebrated its 7th Century; of similar age you may count Oxford in the UK., la Sorbonne in France, Upsala in Sweden, Heidelberg in Germany, Bologna in Italy and Krakow in Poland.

In Europe, very old universities have a tendency to determine the existence of very rigid (not to say extremely conservative) educational systems - and I am not referring only to higher education but to all other secondary and primary levels. There is a tendency to frown upon too much innovation – and how much is too much is just a matter of opinion. This tendency is aggravated in the Southern part of Europe, as compared to the Northern; or perhaps this is just a consequence of the old Latin heritage that predominates closer to the Mediterranean.

Whatever the reason, the Southern European countries have a tendency for more stable curricula, more conservative methodologies and, possibly, an obsession for assuring the utmost "academic credibility" of their certificates and diplomas, this meaning a terrific number of drop-outs, irrespective of the educational level.

In higher education, the weight of tradition makes for university programmes that have scarcely varied in format or designation for at least half a century; and this, despite a very intense and dedicated activity of scientific research both fundamental and applied, in very advanced or innovative fields. The credit regime is the exception, not the rule and degrees have a tendency to take much longer than in the Northern part of Europe.

Transferring credits or diplomas within Europe, across national borders is an incredibly difficult task: apart from differences of language and of culture (both being considered of paramount importance), deviations – however small – in contents, objectives or designation of courses, the duration of programmes or the "credibility" of the evaluation methods, may

be considered as absolute barriers to the mutual recognition of diplomas pertaining to different countries.

Taking all this into account one might think that achieving a significant amount of collaboration between European countries in the field of education is a hopeless task; nevertheless, this is not true, even if it takes lengthy negotiations, hot arguments, delicate diplomacy and an incredible amount of patience. Experience shows, on the other hand, that it is easier to obtain results when negotiating below governmental level, between homologue institutions, by using the rather comfortable degree of autonomous decision most of them possess, like public universities actually do.

Distance Teaching Universities (or open universities, like they are currently called) are a very special case within the European higher education panorama. Due to the fact that they are quite modern in terms of their specific and technology-based teaching methods; also, by their tendency to seek democratization of education, rather than an aristocratic or elitist approach to the development of human resources; or, possibly by having always adopted a strategy of deliberate rupture regarding custom, tradition and institutionalized rule - open universities seem to be more open to new ideas or new models, more pragmatic in their approach to co-operating with each other, more daring in their attitude towards transnational collaboration.

From the very beginning of its existence, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (mostly known through its acronym EADTU) has shown this kind of openness: as an example, its first transnational programmes are called the European MBA and "What is Europe", this one being a rather comprehensive course in Humanities. Besides being protagonist in many R&D multinational initiatives sponsored by European Union funds, the EADTU has played a greater role in helping to design and to make visible the European policy on distance education and training, now recognized by the Council of Ministers of the Union to be a major strategic tool for the development of human resources in Western Europe.

We can find evidence of this tendency in the quite comprehensive (although now slightly outdated) "Memorandum on European Distance Education", published by the European Commission (1991); in the Treaty of the Union (the so-called Maastricht Treaty, 1992) wherein explicit mention to distance education is made; or in the "White Paper" by President Delors, aimed at fighting against unemployment in Western Europe, distance education and training being regarded as a suitable instrument to achieve this purpose.

Another transnational initiative, taken very close to the fall of the Iron Curtain, was the creation of EDEN, the European Distance Education Network, in 1991 in Budapest, aiming at the promotion of distance education and training in Central and Eastern European countries, through the co-operation of their national authorities with open universities and other distance education systems of Western Europe. The success of this initiative is very significant and can be measured by a number of "feasibility studies" produced to establish the most appropriate way to install this kind of systems in each of those countries and the actual creation of such systems in a number of cases. The Annual Conferences of EDEN have taken place in Budapest, Krakow and East Berlin; the next one will be held just a week from now in Tallin (Estonia), the Baltic Countries being this year the main target for EDEN attention.

Many more European associations, consortia and networks are operating at a transnational level: just to mention a few of them, the Association of European Correspondence Schools aggregate a large number of training organizations and non-higher education systems, mostly from the private sector; SATURN is the European Network for Open Learning, whose membership include open universities, private corporations and industrial companies; of very recent creation, EuroPace 2000 is the association of European satellite users and providers of education and training programmes.

As a collateral result of this drive for extended collaboration, several European countries have organized international conferences, sponsored by European authorities, on distance education themes, designed to promote interaction between the countries of the Union. Just to mention a few major ones: "European Multimedia Conference and Exhibition", Athens (Greece), 1991; "Distance Education for Europe", Lisbon (Portugal), 1992; "Flexible Responses in Higher Education", Brussels (Belgium), 1993.

My extended description of the distance education panorama in Europe does not mean an ethnocentric attitude, placing the Old Continent as the center of the world; nor does it mean favouring any kind of isolationist policy, related to the old concept of "Fortress Europe". To the contrary, I can assure all of you that most of my colleagues involved in distance education systems, methodologies or policies are becoming more and more interested in what is going on in this field in other parts of the world, namely in the United States.

To prove my point, many of us have been traveling extensively to visit other institutions and systems, to study new approaches they might be using, to establish protocols of collaboration with them, both by interchanging courses and materials and by putting together

research and development projects. A major player in this transnational strategy is (and has been for many years) the International Council for Distance Education, a non-governmental organization of class A level affiliated to UNESCO, and of which I am proud to be a member, as many of you also are.

The ICDE is the world organization of distance education systems, with a membership of many hundreds, both individual and institutional, including many regional associations, from Europe, Asia, South America, etc. Among many of its initiatives, the ICDE has invited to meet in my country, in Lisbon last year, the Presidents of all its member institutions, for the purpose of creating a collaborative strategy of worldwide reach, to deal with problems of global nature. The decision was taken, on that occasion, to institute the Standing Conference of Presidents (which we have christened in short as the ICDE-SCOP). You may be interested to know that its next Conference will be held in the United States, in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., next October 23rd. The agenda will include points such as the defense of environment, the potential of the new wideband communication networks in distance education and the relations between single and dual-mode teaching systems; I hope to find many of you in Saratoga Springs.

I personally consider the ICDE to be the appropriate environment to promote extended collaborations among the many nations of the world in the distance education field, from North to South, West to East, linking developed and developing countries and, to be faithful to the theme of this address, between the Old and the New Continent, across the Atlantic.

It is now appropriate to shift from the organizational perspective towards a more conceptual one, which might be stated as a question: is there any significant incompatibility between conventional, face-to-face teaching strategies and the more innovative ones, based on the intensive use of communication technologies and on a higher degree of self-learning? Or, otherwise stated: are distance education and mainstream education converging in methodology?

Most experts in Europe agree that the answer to the first question is no, and yes to the second: the methodologies are complementary, not fundamentally antagonistic; their mixing together will increase efficiency in learning and will provide an added social value by increasing flexibility of access to new categories of users, both in initial and in continuing education and training.

There is a very powerful and well respected European association of universities called the "Conférence des Recteurs Européens" (Conference of European Presidents of

Universities). A very recent strategy document of CRE proposes the creation of a Working Group on Open and Distance Education; the significance of the point lies on the fact that the overwhelming majority of the CRE are conventional universities, not distance teaching ones.

I personally believe that the tendency for the next decade is the actual merger of these two kinds of institutions, due to the obvious need to expand the number of users and to make education and training accessible for everyone, at the time of their choosing. Another, certainly more controversial view, suggests that the so-called "cultural industries", now mostly linked to providing entertainment and to occupying leisure times, will in the future include education and training, just by using the same kind of channels and equipment. Should this be true, we would be facing a situation wherein the free market of independent operators, regardless of accreditation, would compete with institutions in providing educational products and services, as common goods, to the public in general; consumer protection laws would take the place of academic boards of examination; personal access to communication networks would guarantee horizontal interaction among users, student support services, even evaluation.

I am aware that this kind of utopia, postulating an ultra-generalized learning system, irrespective of user place or country of residence, of timetables, of curricula, would look like perfect anarchy, resulting from the de-structuration of institutionalized educational systems; but I feel fairly confident that Man has always known how to organize perfect chaos, given enough time and motivation.