European Initiatives in Open and Distance Learning*

1. "The" Big Bang of Distance Education

For a long time the problem of teaching large number of learners, scattered across an extensive territory and without assigning a sufficient number of teachers to each individualised group of students has remained unsolved. With the creation and subsequent improving of mail services, correspondence education as a first approach to this question received appropriate answers. However, most of these pioneer correspondence schools were dedicated to spreading of the Bible teachings and only later on they began to deal with other matters, from general education to the level technical training.

In the 20th century correspondence education continued to improve and to diversify the nature and level of courses; but a major breakthrough occurs with the creation of UNISA, in the Republic of South Africa as the first real University in the world teaching at distance. The creation of the British Open University (1969) adopted, for the first time, the model of association between high-level education, the extensive use of multimedia learning materials and an appropriate network of local study centres designed for face to face students support. The success of this distance teaching university was followed by the early creation of two other major ones: UNED in Spain and the Fernuniversität in Rhein-Westefallen, Western Germany. Nowadays, most EC and EFTA countries have their own national distance education system although not all of them have adopted the same model of organisation.

The same tendency occurred in many countries in the world and most of them rely on distance education systems to cater for education at all levels (from advanced higher-education to informal elementary education) this happened mostly during the last two decades which could be called, in a cosmic scale of time, the "moment of the big-bang in

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distance education"; its actual namesake will continue to expand, on and on, until there will be no more limits for its uses.

2. Current Priorities For Distance Education and Training (DET)

2.1 At National Level

We are very far from reaching a situation where by the supply of education and training will be enough to take care of the demand in this field: social, cultural and economical development, on one hand, and the evolution of technologies and of trade, will increase exponentially the need for better general education and more competitive professional qualification in all the regions of the world. The need for education and training will be felt by populations, as a condition to economic survival. Distance education matters are indispensable for mass education and training; however the DET systems being expensive to create and to operate, there is a critical dimension of population within the radius of influence that make them cost-effective: this has been loosely evaluated at something in between 2 and 20 million inhabitants - which accounts for most of these systems having "national" nature.

Homogeneity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds; of applicable law and custom; of management and organisation praxis make these systems (very complex in themselves) easier to operate within a national space.

From another perspective, priorities in education and training are widely different from country to country, due to current difficulties with the development of certain regions, to special contexts of labour market, and even due to ideological differences of governmental practice from country to country.

It is to be expected, that the development of distance education systems and the priority target populations they aim at would be widely different, leading to different model organisations of DET systems and of their main thematic areas of operation.

2.2 At World-wide Level

There are problems that afflict humanity in general and which are not so different between developed and developing countries, North and South, East and West. They are related to the plagues that infest the mother earth and its creatures, from pollution to the

scarcity of energy, from drugs to AIDS, from unemployment to illiteracy and from racism to bloody wars. However much governments and international organisations put the best of their efforts and resources to solve these major problems of humanity, a joint effort is necessary to be made. Most of it is closely related to education: not just for children in the schools, for social and political agents and decision makers, but for the whole population of the planet.

The International Council of Distance Education, the UN ONG has just taken two major initiatives in this field. IMAGE is a project aiming at putting together major suppliers of distance education and main "donors" (foundations, international and national agencies, etc.) especially involved with education in the developing world as well as in critical regions. Taking care of educational problems for refugees and displaced persons is one of the targets of the ICDE IMAGE project. The second of such initiatives is the possible creation of a Permanent Conference of Presidents of Open Universities and Distance Education Systems world-wide; the first of such Conferences will take place in Lisbon on the 25 - 26 October this year, wherein some of the really big problems of humanity will be briefly presented, in the hope that an appropriate approach, using distance education systems, might be adequate.

2.3 Distance Education in Europe

Whereas in Northern and Western Europe distance education has been expanding consistently, both in the public and in the private sector, as well as in the scope and nature of courses and self-learning materials they deliver, the same does not occur in Central and Eastern Europe. Due to the very nature of their former political regimes, the few existing State - controlled distance teaching institutions had (and still have) a bad image, for they were frequently used for ideological indoctrination - along lines that are today hardly popular. Nevertheless it is widely recognised today that distance education and training is probably the only way to cope with the need for achieving a quick and smooth transition from planned to market economy and from autocracy to the democratic rule.

In the whole of Europe, in spite of it having national structures of education and training (including DET), more or less adequate to current needs, there is a feeling that much more could be achieved by creating some degree of intertwining among existing distance education systems. As a matter of fact, most observers agree that the DET market

is far from structured within the European scene: the supply of DET products and services is not exactly determined by the demand side of education and training and some effort should be put into the improving of the situation – which is actually being done.

2.4 European Initiatives in DET

At EC level, some ground has been covered since the first recommendation of the European Parliament on Open Universities, therein recognised as a major asset for part-time education and training, until the (almost ratified) Maastricht Treaty, which includes a specific item on distance education, within the innovative approach to the field of education it includes. From one till the other many interesting facts have occurred, which we will describe briefly within two main headings: the creation of the European Networks and the effects of the Community Programs.

a) European Networks in the Field of DET

- The Association of the European Correspondence Schools (AECS), the first of such networks to be created, counting more than 120 members in this field representing both public and private institutional operators, aim at improving the collaboration among them, mostly in the non-higher education and training fields.
- The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) created in 1987, joins seventeen major operators of DET in the EC and EFTA zone countries, either having an open university format or the federating associative or consortium model. Higher education is their main field of operation. The EADTU has been instrumental in increasing the general awareness of decisions makers, both at national and EC levels as to the benefits and advantages of developing distance education in Europe. Its main initiatives relate to the joint development of courses with a strong component of general European interest matters (What is Europe?; European Law; European Masters of Business Administration) which are near completion; the creation of "Eurostudy Centres" aims at complementing the ERASMUS Programme through the "travelling" of courses and diplomas across the inner borders of the Community.
- SATURN - Europe Open Learning Network, created for the purpose of creating the bridge between DET institutions and industrial and entrepreneurial

organisations, now has around 80 members. It has dedicated most of its initiatives in the fields of thematic development of infrastructural interest to DET, namely in the fields of copyright transfer, market studies, quality, international project management and DET workshops. The European projects PALIO, INTELEC, TRIBUNE, BEACON, etc. have been developed within research and development EC Programs.

- EUROSTEP is the association of satellite users for dissemination of DET programs, aiming at the creation of a significant component of satellite-distributed distance education courses. The inherent difficulties of assuring the complementary part of face to face students support for a system which is not (or has not been as yet) an institutional teaching system have delayed the fulfilment of this goal.
- EDEN European Distance Education Network - This network of recent constitution (1991), aims at fostering the collaboration between the DET organisations at higher and non-higher education level from Eastern, Central and Western Europe, as well as assisting the decision-makers in the creation of DET systems in the former socialist republics. It has now circa 90 members, including most of these countries (unfortunately, no representatives from the area of the former Soviet Union). Many new bilateral initiatives, joining Western DET systems and Eastern operators, both governmental and private, have already seen the light under the umbrella of EDEN. Some synergy may come from formal associations or privileged relationships already established between EDEN, SATURN, AECS and the International Council for Distance Education.

b) CEC Programmes Relevant to DET

A number of initiatives have take place under some of the CEC Programmes, under the 3rd Framework Programme: DELTA, ESPRIT, RACE, IMPACT. Among these, DELTA was specific for developing advanced learning technologies, although it might be considered that it has been more useful for creating an experience of collaboration between universities and research centres and industrial partners from different countries, then for producing a significant breakthrough of innovative products or services. Among the Section Programmes, COMET has been useful for introducing the concept of UETP and the triad EUROFORM/NOW/HORIZON, together with FORCE and EUROTECNET have been active in the different fields of training.

However, none of these programmes have been specific for DET and, on the other hand, some of their features (like the amount of co-funding and the particular duration imposed to the projects) are some times just not appropriate to the specific characteristics of the distance education context. Unfortunately, the present guidelines of the 4th Framework Programme do not include any specific dedication to DET, either.

As a synthetic final remark, it should be recognised that the Commission has been instrumental in encouraging and financing an enormous number of different initiatives related to the organisation and the development of DET in Europe and in increasing the awareness of both the national authorities and the public opinions throughout Europe, on the real and potential benefits of DET.

3. Functionalities and Technologies

DET being extremely complex in constitution and ways of operation, it might be useful to recall the main functionalities one such fully integrated system (like an Open University) should provide, in keeping with the creation and the teaching of a new course based on multimedia learning products:

1. Feasibility study.
2. Curricular design and media selection.
3. Authoring.
4. Production.
5. Distribution.
6. Course support.
7. Enrolment of students.
8. Teaching/Learning.
9. Tutoring.
10. Monitoring.

Barring the trivial use of information and communication technologies for general purposes (including management) within the institution, some of the above functionalities are closely related to a specific use of such equipment and materials, namely: (4) production of multimedia materials in print, audio, video and informatic support imply the use of both classical and advanced technologies; (5) distribution by means of which the learning materials

reach the end-users and these may include the use of broadcast, telematic systems and computers; (8) the learning process itself may involve the intensive use of work stations or interactive equipment, as well as the tutoring functionality; (9) which may be based on video or computer conferencing and the use of e-mail or on-line tutoring and counselling.

It is a serious mistake to assume that, in the general case, new or advanced technologies should replace the conventional ones: each media and each communication language has its own potential of pedagogic efficiency, depending on the exact nature of the subject, behaviour or skill to be acquired. As a general rule, the total combination of different media would be the most efficient one for learning; we take exception of all the obvious special cases, like the use of audio for learning music and the computers to learn informatics; the printed word, still remains one basic component for the learning materials.

Complex multimedia workstations have, obviously, an enormous potential for improving learning, provided that the courseware, the curriculum and the methodology are up to the same standards. However, two factors converge to explain the slow development in this field. The first relates to the considerable cost for developing good quality multimedia, interactive courseware with a complex inner structure; the second is the result of the fact that both theory and experience in the field of conceiving and designing such materials with good pedagogic quality are arts still in their infancy.

Another consideration deals with social problems related to the option of imposing the use of a given advanced technology to the end-users of DET: this might lead to an undesirable result of creating an economic filter in the access to education and training. The situation is different in the case of an institutional user, which provides, as a mediator between the teaching system and the end-user, training services for its employees, for the latter do not take the burden of having to buy terminal equipment or expensive courseware.

The same applies to the extensive use of costly telecommunication services, for instance for the purpose of improving student tutoring and counselling. It is to be taken into account that the students in the more underprivileged regions (and, naturally, farther from conventional schools or faculties) have to pay more for phoning or faxing to the tutorial centre.

4. Cultural and Political Questions related to DET

It is not just by a chance, nor due to a significant flow of time, that distance education systems vary so much in models of organisation, internal structure, spectrum of courses

offered, entrance requirements, methodologies, technologies and strategies. Were it the case such systems would be simpler, smaller, less expensive (and still be able to be useful and cost effective - which is not the case), there would be a higher degree of homogeneity among this type of institutions. As it is, the major effort required to install and launch such a system makes a visible dent in public (or private) moneys and causes a major worry in opinion-makers, politicians and final decision-makers; an integrated system like the Open University is too visible, too conspicuous, too transparent before the public's eyes that it has to fit into the general cultural background of a nation. Some brief examples to illustrate the point. Wherever conventional universities have long tradition, a good public image, associated with prestige for their degrees and their owners - the launching of a oddly-shaped, bizarre-looking new institution will cause opposition, suspicion, if not total rejection.

A very rigid general scheme of entrance requirements in higher education, in a given country, will bar a new distance education system, operating at this level, from being totally "open", due to conflicting legal rules.

A long tradition of low level correspondence education in a certain region might jeopardise the creation of a high-level DET system, for the latter would be naturally identified with the former.

Political constraints might also cause difficulties: universities have the supposedly dangerous tradition of having at least some degree of autonomy in respect to the governing powers; if one should add to this the need for intensive and open use of mass communication systems, as open universities require, the mixture becomes, in the minds of the more fearful and conservative-thinking of the politicians, nothing less than explosive.

Lobbies may act in favour or against distance education systems: if in a given region the credible teaching and training institutions are sparse, this is a favourite ground for the expansion of a strong network of schools and colleges of dubious quality, for which the creation of a high-standard distance teaching university would turn out to became an economic disaster for those operators.

Governments tend, on the other hand, to regard DET systems as a panacea for some problems of difficult solution, like the overflow of candidates to higher education, the problems of adult education, the insufficient number or quality of teachers in all levels of education. Some of these problems might be approached using distance education methodologies and possibly solved, given enough time: training or re-training the teachers, training the trainers, creating a first generation of educators of good quality – and hoping

that they would be a major factor of change for a weak educational system; but it will take time.

From another point of view, governments (and, mostly, ministers with portfolios of finance and budget) tend to frown upon the financial needs of DET systems. They are, indeed, peculiar: academic staff is needed, not to give courses, but to develop educational products; even having available a qualified number of academics covering the subject of a programme, some few years are necessary until the first students in this field could be enrolled. The structure of the budget is oddly-looking, staff expenses being much lower than usual in conventional universities and other running expenses much higher.

5. Final Note

It is difficult to reach a conclusion from this set of facts and opinions: a possible one relates to the extreme diversity of possible solutions, models and strategies in the field of distance education and training; another one is that the final decision on important matters related to this field (like creating a new system or developing a new approach to it) has to be strongly influenced by external parameters, not related to the system in itself, but to the characteristics of this particular society, taken as a whole.

But one thing is reasonably sure to happen: distance education methodologies will increase their value, new and better systems, and much more systems will be created in the future, for the "Big-bang" is still active, and expanding.