

DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR EUROPE: CLOSING REMARKS*

The European Conference: "Distance Education for Europe" dedicated to the debate of these problems was held on the 30th and 31st March in the university city of Coimbra in Portugal, under the joint aegis of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council and the Commission of the European Communities.

The main objective of this meeting was to provide an adequate follow-up to the adoption of the recent Commission Memorandum on "Open and Distance Learning in the European Community", by analysing different possible solutions to achieve the reinforcement of European cooperation in the field of distance education and training, of contributing to the structuration of this particular market and of providing appropriate funding to trans-European initiatives of extended scope and dimension. For these purposes, the European Commission invited the group of 24 national experts of the Member States to provide their views on this general subject, while another group of 40 personalities representing major operators in the field (including distance teaching universities, associations, consortia, networks and private companies and training organizations) were invited by the Organizing Committee of the Coimbra Conference to debate these issues. The two groups "Operators" and "Experts" met together, albeit with different roles, along the duration of the Conference: one group acting as main participants, the other sitting as observers, the roles being reversed according to the change of Chair, from the representatives of the Portuguese Presidency to those of the Commission.

The main points of the Agenda were: "Terms of Reference for a European Distance Education Structure"; "Operations Beyond National Borders: Facts and Prospectives"; "The European Market for Distance Education and Training"; "Assessment of Priorities for Transnational Operation"; "Political Issues: Free Competition vs. Mega-Network Operation"; "Funding for Transnational Operation"; "Community Actions to be Prepared Following the

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Commission's Memorandum". These various topics were introduced by invited speakers, being then discussed by the participants.

The main focus of the Coimbra event was the document produced by A. Rocha Trindade, with the same title (Distance Education for Europe) previously made available to the participants of the Conference, which proposed a number of alternative solutions to increase the synergy of cooperation between all active institutions and organizations in the field of distance education and training in Europe, without duplicating the existing structures, while trying to provide adequate funding to transnational, large-scope initiatives.

The main conclusions of the Coimbra Conference were the following:

1. From the contributions of both Operator and national Experts, we can infer that there is obviously a significant number of trans-European operations going on and that this is a field that will tend to bloom and to develop further;
2. A still significant number of barriers to a smooth transnational operation, like delays and bureaucratic complications on the crossing of national borders of learning materials, have been identified; it has been pointed out that these should be eased or totally removed whenever possible;
3. Some harmonization of designations of products or services should be looked into, in order to facilitate their clear identification by the users of this market and thus contributing to its development;
4. It was felt that diversified means of access to funding should be earmarked for transnational operations in the field of distance education and training; different hypothesis or solutions clearly exist, and they should be analysed in more detail, regarding their comparative value or feasibility, these solutions not excluding the intervention of private financial institutions;
5. Also, certain initiatives aimed at European special priorities of particular importance could be supported by appropriate Structural Funds, or Community Programmes within their respective domains of eligibility;
6. Finally, there was a general feeling about the absolute need for assuring quality in this field, regarding both products and services, in order to protect their consumers.