

Open and distance higher education in Europe: a call for innovations and synergies
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by
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Open and distance teaching universities in Europe

- Since the establishment of the British Open University in 1970, open and distance teaching universities are created in many European countries: Fernuniversität Germany, UNED and UOC in Spain, Open Universiteit in the Netherlands, Universidade Aberta in Portugal, Uninettuno and other telematic universities in Italy, open universities in Greece and Cyprus. In other European countries, conventional universities are organising distance education, often in cooperation with open universities (Belgium, Austria,...) or in the framework of national networks or associations: Lithuania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Norway, Finland... Two million students are studying at a distance in Europe.

Also in other countries, open universities were created: Anadolu University, the Open University of Israel, Athabasca University in Canada, Shanghai TV University, and very large initiatives in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Korea... In countries like Bresil, Russia, India, and increasingly also other Latin and African countries, we witness a growth of distance higher education in conccentional universities as the only solution to respond to the needs for knowledge.

European benchmarks for higher education – Europe 2020

- In Europe, all member states and the European Commission have adopted the Europe 2020 Strategy, including two important benchmarks: the participation of 40% of the population in higher education and the participation 15% of the 25-60 years old people in lifelong learning initiatives. Both benchmarks can't be reached without drastic innovations in the national higher education systems allowing the access of many people to higher education by means of open and flexible education.

This movement will be driven by:

- the needs of people in a knowledge society
- the needs for innovation: European SME's are currently not enough knowledge intensive
- he opportunities to enlarge and open the learning environments of the universties to regions and companies by technology enhanced leaning

Also, most of the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives require new learning and new learning provisions as is made clear in: the Innovation Union, Youth on the Move, New skills for New Jobs, The Digital Agenda, the Industrial Policy in he Globalisation Area, the European Platform against Poverty and Soial Exclusion,...

Investments in lifelong learning

- Hence, open and distance learning/lifelongopen and flexible learning should be part of any European higher education system. This requires investments, which are realised indeed sofar by the countries that organise open universities. The state funding there is varying from about 50% to 70% of the total budget, whereas the total student fees are ranging from 12% to 60 % of the total budget with an average of 35%. Some legislations in the member states stimulate

the organisation of higher education for working students (+25 old age cohorts) and promote the use of innovative educational technologies for lifelong learning.

The triple track approach

- Open and flexible education for lifelong learning will comprise a triple track approach:
 - free and open knowledge circulation in a region and internationally which is already activated by open access, open innovation and open educational resources
 - open and flexible degree based courses which are provided by the current open and distance teaching universities
 - non formal flexible education for external clients (companies, businesses, public services,...)

This triple track approach will be in the core of the activities of EADTU for the next five years.

International cooperation

- International cooperation will enhance the quality of learning and learning provisions. Not everything we do by ourselves, we do better, although confidence in our endeavours is a condition for successful achievements. We should complement each other with regard to content, curricula, technologies and provisions. We should be sensitive to what others do better in order to deliver a better quality of our provisions and to stimulate a broader, deeper and more relevant knowledge for our students.

Mare Nostrum

- Societies are built by good politicians and good policies (top down), but not without building (bottom up) cooperations and synergies in the civil society. This is in particular true in international cooperation. When civil societies don't meet and cooperate, nothing sustainable will be achieved. It is also true with university cooperation. International cooperation should:

- enlarge knowledge in regions and therefore envisage impact for many people (by creating accessibility, openness, flexibility)
- should include innovation and regional development, beyond academic cooperation
- hence, is not only based on mobility of a few, but also on formal and informal knowledge networking and curriculum cooperation to the benefit of many.

Therefore, let's envisage cooperation in open and flexible higher education with all countries around Mare Nostrum, the Mediterranean area. Uninettuno has paved the way, with EADTU we examine the continuity and reinforcement of this movement (EADTU Conference in Anadolu University - November 2011).