



Pockets of Innovation

Tools and Trends

Webinars and Interviews

Training Opportunities

Upcoming Conferences

Delivering Learning to Students around the World through the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO in Italy



Opportunity

The Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO (International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (link is external)) in Italy evolved from a consortium of 43 Italian public universities, the Italian Telephone Company, and RAI, the national public broadcaster set up in 1992. Called CONSORZIO NETTUNO, its goal was to help traditional universities face the challenges of distance education and teaching with technologies. Two satellite television channels delivered recorded video lessons from the partner universities. In addition, each member institution set up a learning centre where students could borrow or watch the course videos. With the arrival of the Internet, the consortium opened an online portal for delivery of videos.

Distance education was introduced as part of formal education in universities in Italy, leading to a 2006 decision by NETUNNO partners to found UNINETTUNO as a separate telematic university with status equivalent to other universities as acknowledged by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. As an independent university, UNINETTUNO retains the use of the satellite TV channels and awards its own credentials. Nicola Paravati, Head of International Relations, underlines the importance of UNINETTUNO evolving from a consortium of traditional universities, with these connections continuing.

Innovation

UNINETTUNO's mission is to make university available to everyone at affordable cost and to help professors and traditional institutions face the challenge of using new technologies for effective teaching and learning.

The growth of the Internet led to the development of a pedagogic model for teaching and learning with technology. The UNINETTUNO approach is based on an understanding of psycho-pedagogy applied to distance education through technologies, video and the Internet. The University Founder and Rector, Professor Maria Amata Garito, led a research team in developing this model through almost 20 years of applied research. With a strong commitment to educators applying technology to education – not education following the lead of technology - the model puts the student at the centre of interactive and engaging education, with knowledge creation and sharing as core practices.

Video, supported by multiple other technologies for communication, resources, practice testing and assignments, remains the main delivery model, as inspired by traditional practices of universities.

Faculty includes three levels of professors who offer, organize and support online programs and courses:

- Professors who develop courses, create resources and assignments, and record video lessons are often senior professors at traditional universities trained by UNINETTUNO for distance teaching;
- Professors who serve as co-ordinators of modules, which may involve multiple professors are faculty at UNINETTUNO; and
- Tutors, who are faculty at UNINETTUNO, interact directly with students. There is generally one tutor for each class of 30 students, monitoring and encouraging student progress using data analytics.

Interactions between faculty and students and student-to-student are facilitated synchronously and asynchronously with chat, forums, wikis, and live streaming in which professors reply verbally to questions sent through chat. In 2017, tutors will be able to offer streamed classes or tutorials from home, with students communicating by voice as well as text.

Full programs are offered for first (Bachelor) and second (Honours) level degrees, as well as Master's, in communications, psychology, economics and business, engineering, law, information technology, and other disciplines. UNINETTUNO has six faculties and offers 25 degree programs.

Exams are held face-to-face at learning centres with partner universities in Italy and, where there are no partner universities, Italian embassies monitor exams. Globally, there are 140 exam centres. Students are required to actively complete online courses before they are permitted to take exams. Student activities, study achievements and participation are tracked by the online system and platform. Tutors are able to check and validate the details of student work and engagement before admitting them to the exams.

Partners around the world provide technological centres where students can access not only exams, but also high-speed access and technology to participate in classes. There are currently 63 technological poles.

Multi-language and multi-cultural delivery is essential to the mission of UNINETTUNO. Programs, courses, and the website are available in Italian, English, Arabic, French, and Greek, with resources under development in Russian, Georgian, and Rumanian. Courses are produced in these languages, not translated. Popular courses such as mathematics are produced multiple times – once in each language. Each professor brings not only a specific language but also a specific cultural approach to teaching.

In the Euro-Mediterranean Area, 31 partners – universities, technological companies and ministries – set up a technological and expertise network to share and contribute to UNINETTUNO curriculum. Partners come from Algeria, Egypt, France, Jordan, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey.

UNINETTUNO developed a portal for refugees and immigrants, University for Refugees: Education without Borders (link is external), offering a helpdesk and services in English, French, Italian and Arabic. The portal offers:

- Recognition of academic qualifications;
- Recognition of professional skills;
- Language teaching resources in Italian and Arabic;
- Healthcare service for medical assistance and contact with specialists in Italy; and
- Information on mutual rights and duties.

Motivation for this portal is described by UNINETTUNO's Rector Maria Amata Garito: "This is the only way to establish an open and fair dialogue, starting from the knowledge and mutual respect for different cultures and their differences."

Outcomes and Benefits

There are currently 15,000 students from 160 countries registered with UNINETTUNO, earning vocational and professional certificates and three levels of degrees. Credits are transferable to other European institution using the European Community's European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (link is external) (ECTS).

UNINETTUNO trained 7,000 professors in Italy and from around the world to use the UNINETTUNO model to teach effectively using technology. As an example, economics and business professors from Mongolia recently received 20 days of training in the UNINETTUNO model and then developed videos classes in Mongolian and English for upload by UNINETTUNO for education in Mongolia.

Each department at UNINETTUNO is involved in research, with more than 100 projects currently underway, often with international partners.

Challenges and Enhancements

UNINETTUNO, as with many online and distance education universities, still faces challenges in terms of perception of quality and equality with traditional institutions. This is despite courses offered by professors from traditional universities, a strong research program, and a model copied around the world. Nicola Paravati outlines the situation: "Educators, students and others think distance education is easy until they work or study with us – and then they realize it is in fact more challenging."

UNINETTUNO is often working as a 'missionary' for distance education when communicating with traditional universities which are more conservative and uncertain about the role of technologies in teaching and learning. With the worldwide success of MOOCs, attitudes are changing and inter-institutional cooperation continues to grow.

UNINETTUNO is not a publicly-funded institution but receives all of its revenues from student fees and international cooperation projects. This can conflict with its mission of bringing university to everyone with low fees.

As most professors who offer courses are from traditional universities, they are not ready for the design, preparation, and interaction requirements of online teaching. After their first lesson, they recognize how their teaching strategies have to change. UNINETTUNO provides training and helps them with the development of resources.

Potential

In looking at the future for university education, Nicola Paravati sees traditional universities integrating more technologies but doubts traditional, campus-based experience will be replaced. Blended learning will become more common, building on strengths of online and face-to-face delivery models.

Students will spend more time off-campus and take advantage of learning experiences in different countries and cultures. As they become more aware of online learning, they will demand options, making course choices that work for their circumstances. Currently in Italy, distance education is growing more quickly than traditional universities, which includes expanding student numbers at UNINETTUNO.

New ways of teaching are under exploration, including a 3D environment with avatars using Second Life (link is external) virtual world. The University may develop its own virtual environment. Mobile learning is also being explored with apps for accessing university services and communication among students.