ICDE 23RD WORLD CONFERENCE
FLEXIBLE EDUCATION FOR ALL: OPEN-GLOBAL-INNOVATIVE
MAASTRICHT - THE NETHERLANDS, 7-10 JUNE 2009

Arturo Lavalle

"Education for All" is one of the priorities to meet in next years, as indicated by the United Nations in the framework of the Millennium Development Goals. For achieving this particular goal, a rapid modernisation of the educational system supported by new information and communication technologies and by an increasing flexibility in the acquisition of new competencies is requested by the society, the labour market and individuals.

The 23rd Conference of the ICDE - International Council for Open and Distance Education, an organisation strictly linked to the United Nations educational programs, was held in Maastricht, The Netherlands, on 7-10 June 2009, dealing with this specific argument and starting with the consideration that the growing and diversified demand for higher education can not be satisfied by traditional instruments and institutions. Creativity and innovation are key factors to the improvement of the human and social capital of a territory. Innovative and flexible ways of learning as well as creating and sharing knowledge are required if every individual is to have the opportunity to maximize his or her potential and to contribute to the development of his or her own community.

In particular, in the specific context of the current economic and financial crisis, Open & Distance Learning can offer cost efficient and flexible solutions to meet the need of the economic growth at local and national level in the less favoured areas of the planet.

The ICDE Conference, which also included the annual meeting of EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities), was joined by a number of delegates coming from more than 70 countries who contributed to the debate addressing the following topics:

- Open & Educational Resources
- Virtual Mobility
- Quality Assurance
- Learner Support Services
- Teacher Training
- Employability
- Cultural Diversity
- Institutional Challenges within Distance Education
- International Development and Cooperation

More specifically, the different presentations highlighted how in the next future, several innovations, such as open educational resources, mobile devices, social software and virtual mobility will radically change the landscape of global learning and expand the global learning community.

The Maastricht Conference showed as those innovations present important challenges that must be resolved in order to successfully achieve the goal of a massification of education.

These challenges are:

- Technical Infrastructure: the potential benefits of the rapid development of ICT for enhancing the quality of open, flexible and distance learning can only be realized with adequate connectivity to the online world, which requires the availability of ICT infrastructure. In many parts of the world, this lack of infrastructure remains one of the key elements hindering the full exploitation of the opportunities afforded by networked technologies.
- Open Educational Resources (OERs): though OER's have made a real contribution to the free movement of educational content, several questions remain unanswered. How will the post secondary sector ensure the cultural appropriateness, quality and effective use of OER's? How can the sector ensure that they do not inhibit the creation, growth and renewal of intellectual capital? How will they be captured to ensure their preservation and use? How can they be made sustainable?
- Quality: the growth of distance institutions and the number of their graduates have led to concerns of quality, demanding internationalization of curriculum and learning by all distance learning institutions. Quality must be assured and demonstrated in measurable ways to ensure that learners acquire the knowledge they need and to reassure stakeholders of the correct implementation of this process.
- Mobility: internationalization is a hallmark of 21st century learning. Virtual mobility initiatives can increase access to educational mobility in cost effective ways.
- Private/Public Responsibility: in many countries over 90% of learning is provided through private not for profit and/ or for profit agencies. What is the appropriate mix of public

and private responsibilities for learning? What are effective business models? How can national capacity be developed to ensure service to the public?

The meeting of Maastricht put forward that the engagement of all associations, institutions and stakeholders involved in expanding Open and Distance Learning should be turned to searching effective answers to these criticisms. All countries should develop specific action-oriented agendas for a sustainable development of their respective educational systems.

In this regard, it is also worthy mentioning the results of the internal workshop on "Flexible learning and international development" that took place during a session of the Conference and whose discussion about crucial key-topics concerning Higher Education in general and OERs in particular, generated a Special Interest Group (SIG) aiming at contributing to find out possible responses and suggest concrete actions for the international development through distance learning.

The need to keep on, develop and extend the discussion raised from that workshop has made necessary the creation of a flexible and intuitive tool allowing the SIG to collaboratively exchange ideas and formulate strategies in an easy and performing way.

Due to its vast experience in the field of ICTs and international development, GUIDE Association, which actively took part in the workshop, was asked to create a suitable instrument in this respect.

In such a way, **M-blog 2009 - International Development and open, distance and flexible learning** (referring to Maastricht Conference) has been designed and implemented by the Association for the settled purposes.

To start the interaction, a specific agenda has been set up including 9 crucial items:

- Making open professional development resources for open and distance learning available online
- Sharing knowledge about existing repositories of open educational resources
- Sharing examples and evidence of best practice in learning for development
- 'Globalising' English language resources by translating them into other languages

- Identifying content gaps in available open educational resources
- Developing tools to support the development of effective partnerships
- Developing programmes for priority groups, particularly Lifelong Learning for Women
- Establishing a 'Virtual Research Institute' online as a cooperative research laboratory
- Sharing systems, tools and training for the recognition of prior learning

Further topics can be obviously suggested by participants in order to extend the range of debate and action. **M-blog 2009** is fully operational and can be freely joined at
http://www.guideassociation.org/mblog_2009.
Even if thought as a blog at the beginning, this new device has assumed the shape of a platform in which not only leaving posts or comments but also sharing contents, proposals, news and additional data to enter via personal username and password provided by the administrator. In order to obtain them, those wishing to be full members can contact mblog@unimarconi.it.