

A University for Refugees: Education without Boundaries

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Abstract: One of the hardest challenges in European countries, and especially in Italy, we are facing these days is the escalating crisis of immigrants and refugees coming from the Arab World and Sub-Saharan Africa countries. The history of universities tells us that the first Universities realized a networked model in which students shaped their own study path, moving from one institution to another across Europe in order to attend the lectures by the best professors from different Universities. The Medieval higher education system, therefore, acted as a bridge between different cultures, fostering knowledge exchange, sharing and construction based on a networked organizational model, and an educational model promoting discussions and debates (*questio and disputatio*). Nowadays, ICT technologies, and above all the Internet, allow Universities to re-create a network of knowledge and of students and professors, sharing experiences and competences from different social and cultural backgrounds. The International Telematic University UNINETTUNO developed and implemented an internalization model and a psycho-pedagogic model, whose main characteristics are described in this paper, promoting the collaboration among Universities from the United States, Europe, Asia and above all from the Arab World countries. Through this collaborations, UNINETTUNO developed the first higher education portal in the world which is available in 5 languages (Italian, English, French, Arabic and Greek), enrolled students from 163 countries of the world. The success of these international cooperation activities inspired UNINETTUNO in the creation of an Internet-based portal — The University for Refugees — Education without Boundaries — allowing refugees and immigrants to access the University for free from any place across the world and this will be presented in this paper.

Key words: refugees and migrants, higher education, recognition models, internationalization, distance university

1. Introduction

In a globalized and interconnected world, characterized by a technological revolution, affecting all countries, and by a landmark event, involving Europe above all, which is linked to the largest migration in the history of mankind, the Universities must discover a new mission, a new role and a new function.

Both of these events confronted the whole society with the need of learning a new culture of civil coexistence. This is the reason why all citizens need to have the cultural tools to understand, interpret and act in a completely unprecedented, at least by its size, intercultural situation. A new interpretation of reality is necessary also in order

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to identify the way to cope with the great revolution brought about by the Internet, the largest public space humankind has ever had available so far, which affects our mind's processes on a planetary scale. It is a truly landmark revolution that challenges our balances, our certainties, no longer bound to a single country, to a single nation. By now, in the global squares of the Internet, people from the whole world communicate with each others, but few are the countries which have homogeneous populations as regards race, culture, and only few universities are models of diversity. For this reason the Universities must be able to offer the citizens the cultural tools they need to live in the complexity of the XXI Century.

It is up to our Universities to design and implement an educational model in which, through shared study programs, different cultures can be compared, in the aim of broadening knowledge and learning how to respect and accept cultural, religious and political differences; knowing how to use the new technologies and the new languages; realizing how to blend professional skills and general culture competences, in order to make people live in the complexity.

The Universities should made available both their real and virtual spaces, where people of different nationality, religion and culture are able to produce new knowledge through research work and spread it though their teaching activities. Together, they must meet the educational needs of a globalized world, interconnected, though sharply divided. And, when I speak about universities, I mean all universities in the South and the North, West and East of the World. We should not forget that the first university was established in 859 in Fez, Morocco, founded by a woman, Fatima Al-Fihriya, and that later on, in 975 the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt, was born, while in Europe the birth of the first University, University of Bologna, is supposed to date back to 1088, and shortly afterwards there was the Sorbonne. It was precisely the Universities that played an important role in cultural relations between the Islamic World and Europe. If we focus on the manuscripts studied at the origins of Universities, we would be struck by how the skills and knowledge were spread globally: the texts were translated from Greek into Arabic, from Arabic into Latin. Study paths were common in all universities, including the disciplines of the *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, and those of the *quadrivium*: music, astronomy, geography and arithmetic. In the Middle Ages all the universities were open to people of all nationalities. The Universities represented a transnational network. Young people felt that, in order to get a valuable intellectual and scientific education, they needed to attend some universities, and for this reason they faced exhausting journeys on foot or on horseback; the reputation of the professor (the *Master*) led them, as well as their personal interest in the discipline. For centuries professors and learners have been producing and spreading knowledge, encouraging the rise of new ideas, keeping constantly alive the spiritual unity of Europe; moving from one town to another they contributed to the development of a culture without boundaries. Most of the Universities were born with the aim, which is still prevailing, of creating and spreading knowledge. In the Middle Ages each University was a separated entity, and all together they made up a European network of students, teachers and knowledge.

Universities have always been true instruments of peace and respect for differences, melting pots of international identities and makers of the most creative chapters in history. And today more than ever, in the turmoil of the contemporary world, the Universities can still play an essential role in the progress of humankind.

Global challenges require an equally global response in order to educate all of the citizens and ensure social security in an increasingly interconnected world.

2. The University of the XXI Century — A Necessary Transformation

The mission of the University has always been to improve and develop mankind and now, regardless of nationality, race, color or gender, the Internet technology can ensure that everyone can access knowledge and that everyone can contribute to the education of the global citizen. Though, to do so, the Universities are forced to revise their organizational model, their teaching model, the way they implement their research programs, the role and functions of teachers and students, their physical spaces, classrooms, research laboratories, even the spaces shared by the students.

In order to create the XXI Century Higher Education infrastructure, we must add a technological infrastructure to the physical buildings of the University, and this will also promote the development of a new pedagogical model and of a new model of knowledge production and delivery.

Thanks to the Internet, the new places of access to knowledge can be anywhere: using a PC, a smartphone or a tablet everyone can access knowledge with no limits of space and time.

The new university should be, at the same time, a real and a virtual place where, both remotely and face-to-face, the experience and competence of the teacher will be transferred to the students through a continuous interaction models; an interaction between youth and maturity, between the experienced and the inexperienced that can foster a critical development of information and thus its transformation into knowledge.

An example of this is the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO.

UNINETTUNO worked in the definition and implementation of common curricula and shared psycho-pedagogical-didactic models, shared among several universities across the World: European Universities, Chinese Universities, Universities from Latin America, from the Arab World, from Subequatorial Africa and from many other countries. Thanks to collaborations with professors from important Universities of various countries, UNINETTUNO created, on the Internet, the only educational portal in the World in 5 languages (Arabic, English, French, Italian and Greek), where you can find, in a digital format, about 2 millions of didactic materials and among which tens of thousands of video lectures recorded by the best professors coming from the Italian and international Universities. Here, students can attend university with no limits of space and time. From anywhere in the World, they can choose whether to study and earn a qualification recognized in Italy, in Europe and in their own countries.

The didactic, organizational and technological model and the Web-based learning environments of the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO are the outcome of more than 25 years of research carried out at international level, related to the application of information and communication technologies to face-to-face and distance teaching and learning processes.

The research activities allowed to produce theoretical knowledge and practices promoting a fair balance between technological-engineering and cognitive, methodological, cultural and educational aspects.

3. UNINETTUNO's Didactic Cyberspace

The Internet-based learning environments implemented in UNINETTUNO's Didactic Cyberspace, based on a systemic approach, were realized taking into account the results of the research activities carried on, and are constantly evolving as constantly evolving is the technology and, consequently, also the methodologies to be applied to the teaching and learning processes. The design and implementation of the educational processes are

focused on the students and on their learning communities. The psycho-pedagogic theories being applied are mainly linked to the theories of socio-cognitive constructivism and allowed to use the Internet to realize constructive and collaborative teaching and learning environments whose main features are:

- Synchronic and a synchronic two-way and interactive communication;
- Student's active participation in the construction of knowledge.

The learning environments of the Didactic Cyberspace were designed to encourage a collaborative construction of structured knowledge, focused on individual and collective educational tasks. In the Cyberspace students communicate their ideas and thoughts, ask questions, continuously exchange knowledge, which is shared by posting it in forums, wikis, in the interactive classrooms, and in the tridimensional virtual classrooms. A student can access various training materials, functional to a constructive and collaborative learning. Cooperation is the focal point of every interaction among and with all the actors involved (students and professors). The acquisition of knowledge is dynamic rather than static, hyper-textual rather than linear and systemic rather than systematic. The knowledge built by each student is the result of meetings and relations with the professors-tutors within their knowledge virtual space.

In the didactic cyberspace several learning environments were included, in each of which a training session was realized based on a specific methodology:

- With the video lessons, indexed by topics, we use a symbolic-reconstructive learning model linked to the teaching classic mode and, thanks to the links to various kinds of training materials, it is possible to study in a multimedia and hyper-textual way;
- With the virtual laboratories it is possible to check and enhance one's own knowledge and skills according to a "learning-by-doing" mode;
- With the forums, interactive classrooms, 3D environments systems, it is possible to promote collaborative learning with teachers and students belonging to different linguistic, cultural, political, religious and social backgrounds.

Within each environment it is possible to simultaneously integrate each single learning mode with the other ones. The learning activity is designed to promote the transfer of knowledge according to different modes:

- From simple to complex (video lesson and smart library);
- From theory to applicative projection (learning by doing in the virtual lab);
- From guided exercises to searching the World Wide Web (webography and bibliography);
- From individual study to interactive dialogue between teacher and students and among students (collaborative learning based on synchronic and asynchronic communication and sharing tools).

4. Collaborative Learning in Interactive Classrooms and 3D Virtual Classrooms

Collaborative learning activities are fundamental in UNINETTUNO models; they take place through the Interactive Classrooms system, as well as through the tridimensional worlds of the Virtual Classrooms on Second Life available on UNINETTUNO's platform.

These two collaborative learning environments both allow to adopt the "flipped classrooms" pedagogic model: students are led to acquaint themselves with the issues related to the planned discussion; then they study the video lessons, the reference texts, books, lecture notes, articles, essays, thus preparing themselves to face the debate with teacher-tutor.

In particular, the 3D Virtual Classrooms' environment, by handling variables such as space, the roles and interaction among the avatars of actual individuals, creates a setting that is characterized by a strong sense of reality. This teaching and learning model interprets, in a modern way, the teaching methodologies of the Medieval Universities: the *questio* and the *disputatio* stimulate a process of learning that arises from dialogue and confrontation; one learns from the others and reflects upon his/her own ideas.

The 3D environments and other immersive worlds allow for penetrating into the digital body to perceive oneself no longer as a person sitting before the screen of a PC, but, actually, as being in a virtual classroom animated by actual teachers and students. In UNINETTUNO Island of Knowledge debates and conferences among students, experts and teachers coming from other universities around the World take place. In these virtual spaces social, entertaining and recreational aspects are experienced as well.

5. UNINETTUNO's Models of Internationalization

UNINETTUNO's psycho-pedagogical model has rapidly become a global model which is recognized at international level. Several agreements were concluded by UNINETTUNO with Ministries and Universities of the North and the South of the World, in order to share curricula and create, jointly with countries having different policies and cultures, new training models aimed at meeting the needs arising from the globalized World.

UNINETTUNO, through its satellite television network, UNINETTUNOUNIVERSITY.TV (812 Sky channel and 701 RAI channel), which has a broad geographic coverage, actually democratized the access to knowledge by bringing knowledge and learning into the homes of all the citizens across the World. With no more space and time limits, everyone can attend the study courses to free herself/himself from the slavery of illiteracy and acquire new competences as well as consolidate a system of shared values. UNINETTUNO actually demonstrated that, in order to build and spread knowledge, thanks to the Internet and satellite TV, borders are blurred, frontiers are places of continuity and not of conflicts. Thanks to UNINETTUNO's model, teachers and students across the World can not only give an appropriate answer to the needs of internationalization of the educational systems in order to be able to prepare the skills required by the global labor market, but they can also help in transforming the University into an open system, capable of modernizing itself and integrating all the knowledge available on the Web, as well as to achieve a worldwide exchange of knowledge.

The UNINETTUNO University has made of internationalization one of its most important strategic pillar. The internationalization process has been developed and continues to develop according to quite different models.

The first model is characterized by a completely new phenomenon and is connected to the Internet: the Web users explore and select information and services available on the Web, by making choices mainly linked to their own interests. It is the users themselves who give value to the "network nodes" found interesting and worthy of being mentioned and recommended to their social network. It is through this spontaneous mechanism of networking word of mouth, a global one, not controlled from above, that in a few years the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO succeed in having enrolled students coming from 163 different countries around the world, giving its identity a truly global character.

The second model of internationalization is based, instead, on international agreements with universities and ministries of various countries in the world, aimed at creating, harmonizing and sharing curricula.

Dialogue among cultures is not a utopia but it is really possible: UNINETTUNO has really managed to create new alliances between universities and educational institutions to develop together real and virtual spaces,

to build common networks of knowledge.

Together, the minds of interconnected teachers and students of the North and South shores of the World create new knowledge and develop a network of skills and expertise, based not on imposing cultural models of the one upon the other, but on comparing cultures and educational models. Together they created a true laboratory for intercultural and inter-linguistic cooperation that enables the development of a new virtual space, where they produce the contents to be included in the study programs and teaching and learning models to make younger generations capable of becoming innovation and change leaders.

6. Migrants and Refugees

The new challenge for the institutions of the European Countries and for Italy, in particular, is represented by the escalating crisis of immigrants coming from the Countries of the Arab World and Sub-Saharan Africa. Here is only one figure to give a snapshot of the extent of this phenomenon: in the Mediterranean Area there have been 316.712 arrivals from the sea only in 2016. In the reception centers they often do not know about the educational background of these immigrants, about their professional skills and their health conditions, information that is needed to start a minimum integration process. In all the European Countries that are involved in receiving them, policies mainly consist in supply them with accommodation and food. The issue of forced migrations challenges the whole society to find solutions to improve the integration of citizens coming from countries with different cultural, religious and living backgrounds. In the last academic year the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO decided to give its contribution to promote a virtuous model for integrating refugees and immigrants.

The main feature of UNINETTUNO' distance teaching courses is basing the design and realization of the degree courses on the actual cooperation and actual involvement of the best professors coming from the Universities of the United States, of Europe and mainly from the best Universities of the Arab World such as the University of Aleppo and of Damascus (Syria), of Cairo and Helwan (Egypt), of Jordan and of Tunisia. These professors realized the video lessons related to their disciplines and the educational materials for these courses each one in his own language. As a result, UNINETTUNO is the only distance university worldwide that realized its own learning environments on the Internet in 5 languages (Italian, English, French, Arabic and Greek). This multicultural and multilingual setting characterizes UNINETTUNO University which, today, has enrolled students coming from 163 different countries of the world and which has rapidly become a truly Global University.

And it is precisely the success of these international cooperation activities which inspired UNINETTUNO in the creation of an Internet-based portal – The University for Refugees–Education without Boundaries – allowing refugees and immigrants to access the University for free from any place across the world.

The University for refugees allows for:

- Free-of-charge enrolment to UNINETTUNO's degree courses;
- The recognition of the study titles earned in their own countries to access the University;
- The recognition of professional skills;
- Learning languages such as: Italian, Arabic, English, German, Spanish, French, Greek and Portuguese;
- The access to online healthcare services and getting to know about reciprocal rights and duties.

There is a number of vocational training courses at their disposal; the degree courses, whose contents were

already produced by UNINETTUNO in several languages (Italian, Arabic, English and French), are all the 12 Degree Courses that are delivered by the Engineering Faculty and the 5 Degree Courses delivered by the Economics Faculty on an overall amount of 27 total degree courses of the University delivered by the following Faculties: Economics, Law, Engineering, Literature, Psychology and Communication Sciences, besides several master's courses.

At present, the students enrolled in the University for Refugees live mainly in Lebanon, Germany, Turkey and, of course, Italy.

The project main objective is promoting true integration for refugees and immigrants making them acquire the skills and knowledge that allow them to play a constructive role in the social, cultural and economy life of the hosting countries.

Even in a time of fear worldwide, the aim is to enhance and support the academic development of refugees and immigrants and foster their professional inclusion in the hosting country through UNINETTUNO's e-learning model and, therefore, through the new technologies.

The vision with which the University for Refugees was designed and realized is not based on a colonization model; thanks to the continuing work of international cooperation and to the active involvement of the Universities of the other countries of the World, carried on by UNINETTUNO, today refugees and immigrants find the digitized lessons about engineering in Arabic, English and French delivered by the professors of their own Universities, such as, for example, professors of the Universities of Damascus, but above all of Aleppo, completely destroyed by the war: Fadel Sukkar (professor of Computer Science at the University of Aleppo), Mohamed Kheir Ahmed (professor of Mathematical Methods for Engineering at the University of Aleppo), Ayman Hamadeh (professor of Databases at the University of Aleppo), Ousamah Douedari (professor of Electro-techniques at the University of Aleppo), Muhammad Gh. Aljalali (professor of Economics for Engineering at the University of Damascus), Fawwaz Mufdi (professor of Electronic Measurements at the University of Damascus). Among these professors who had to leave their universities because of the war and violence and who, as matter a fact, are unable to deliver their courses any longer, UNINETTUNO stored, in the Internet, their scientific expertise and made it available even to their own students who do not have the possibility of meeting and seeing them in their own Universities. Giving these opportunities to refugees and immigrants means giving them back their dignity and giving them the courage to go on trusting humankind.

Here are some testimonies of the first UNINETTUNO refugee students that can be representative of the many messages we received:

Harout, Syria, enrolled at the Three-year Degree in Information and Communication Technologies Engineering:

"I am 30 years old and I was born in the city of Aleppo, in Syria. I was a student at the University of Aleppo and UNINETTUNO's portal I found the video lessons of some of my professors at the University of Aleppo and now I do not know in which place of the World are. At present, I have the status of political refugee in Lebanon and, hoping that peace comes back again in my country, thanks to UNINETTUNO's University for Refugees, I will be able to realize my dream: complete the study path I began in Syria and earn a study title recognized in Italy and in Europe. I thank this University which gave me the possibility of resuming my studies to have a better life and leave the past behind."

Kokou, Gabon, Master in Marketing and Business Management (already graduated in her country in Marketing and Economics).

“This experience as a student at UNINETTUNO is like a divide between past, present and future. It is the most beautiful thing that happened to me since I came to Italy across the Mediterranean Sea.”

Diakaria, Mali, Earned a Three-year Degree in Media and Communication.

“I am a refugee from Mali, but I have been studying in Senegal up to last year, now I have the status of refugee. Thanks to the opportunity of going on studying that UNINETTUNO gave me and many other youths in my same situation a new hope for a better future looms at my horizon.”

Devon, Nigeria, Earned a Three-year Degree in Media and Communication.

“Following the University with UNINETTUNO is giving a new sense to my life. I hope, one day, I will be able to watch the youths of the entire world in their eyes, refugees, immigrants and be able to tell them that, no mind their condition and the violence from which they flee, everything is in your mind and in your heart and if you believe in your mission in the world, sooner or later, you will be able to achieve your goals.”

Today the University for Refugees is developing a big laboratory for true integration, to enhance good immigration, dialogue, a peaceful coexistence among peoples and struggle against terrorism. Only this way, jointly with them, we believe we can develop a future of peace.

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