

The Euro-Mediterranean Distance University

Maria Amata Garito assesses a new project aimed at the sharing of knowledge across borders...

NETTUNO (Network per l'Università Ovunque), in the framework of the EUMEDIS project (Euro-Mediterranean Information Society) launched by the European Commission to foster the development of the Information Society in the Euro-Mediterranean area, devised the Med Net'U project (Mediterranean Network of Universities) aiming at the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Distance University.

The EUMEDIS programme derives from a long thinking process carried on by the countries involved in the project and the European Commission. This process was meant to raise the consciousness on the part of governments and organisations on problems and possible solutions related to the development of the Information Society.

Today museums, cultural centres, internet cafés, campuses, etc. are the new places where the information already disseminated throughout the towns is distributed, locally, but they are also points of access to a globalised knowledge. New technologies create new spaces among people; telecommunications networks allow working together, and the development of new knowledge by means of research, but also new competencies through education.

The problem, then, is not whether education reproduces social disparities; today, the problem shared by all universities in the world is how to better adapt this system and how to create, in the context of a globalised economy, systems that could develop integrated teaching and learning processes, using different languages to communicate knowledge and to create open systems, having no space and time barriers. The entire world is involved in this big change and, as far as education is concerned, there is a widely shared commitment to create new organisational systems for universities at local, national and international level that integrate presence and distance.

In this new context, therefore, the Med Net'U project allows the sharing of the Mediterranean countries' different cultural settings to create new alliances among universities and educational bodies, and develop together new real and virtual spaces to build common networks of knowledge

Project objectives

The Med Net'U project aims at creating a new model of Euro-Mediterranean distance university that derives from co-operation among the best traditional universities of the many countries involved, as regards higher education and vocational training. Actually, this proposal envisages not only the delivery of university courses co-produced by the different partner universities, and short courses to allow students to acquire specific skills in the different fields of economics, tourism science and computer science, but also the development of the competences and skills that people need in the 21st Century.

The changes produced by new technologies involve all of society: women and men, rich and poor countries, start from the same level and should be able to solve complex problems, learn new technologies and their terminology, and develop knowledge of different languages and cultures in order to learn how to respect differences, etc.

Partnership

The Med Net'U project is the final outcome of the collaboration between NETTUNO and 25 partners belonging to 11 different Euro-Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey).

There are 15 university partners (universities, research agencies and polytechnics), nine vocational training partners (ministries, vocational training institutes, specialisation schools), one technological partner (Eutelsat) and three associated technological partners (Alenia Spazio, Alcatel and Iyad Computer Co.).

Project architecture

The project is divided into three subprojects: the Technical Architecture and Psycho-pedagogical Model subproject; the University subproject; and the Vocational Training subproject.

The Technical Architecture and Psycho-pedagogical Model subproject

The activities of this subproject are transversal and are the basis for the creation of distance teaching and learning

courses in the framework of both the University and the Vocational Training subprojects.

This subproject has the following objectives:

- Set up the network structure;
- Set up the technological structure;
- Identify a common psycho-educational didactic model.

Structure of the network

The organisational model upon which the Euro-Mediterranean Distance University is based is that of a consortium among traditional universities, continuing vocational training institutes, administrative bodies, institutional bodies and ministries involved in the project.

The consortium structure allows for the creation of a distance teaching system based upon the traditional universities' didactic mode in order to:

- Allow the partner universities to play the role of protagonists in the products, processes and structures innovation;
- Make the places where the research work generates knowledge coincide with those where knowledge is transmitted by teaching processes, that is to say universities responding successfully to quality training needs;
- Enhance educational offers;
- Enhance and innovate didactics also in traditional courses;
- Bring the educational world closer to the production world, promoting co-operation with companies during both the definition and the implementation phases of a course, interweaving theoretical speculation with practical work;
- Allow for a high-quality selection of teachers, educational issues and themes;
- Allow, through the new telematic and satellite technologies, for a more democratic access to education and training, and mobility of ideas as well as the mobility of people;
- Give immediate answers to the educational needs of the countries involved.

This model involves the creation of a true network that can allow for the transfer of knowledge not only from an institution (a supplying university) to a group of students located in different geographic areas, but also from organisations other than universities, equipped as technology access points, to individual learners or organisations.

Students can choose from a wide range of courses to match locations and times to their own specific needs. The benefits for the network partners lie in the fact that a

limited effort on each single partner gives way to a wide global offer, and that scale economies make the development and the delivery of teaching materials synergically profitable.

From the organisational and structural viewpoint, the Med Net'U project is based upon the following structures:

- The Med Net'U Euro-Mediterranean Centre, which is located in Italy, near the NETTUNO headquarters in Rome;
- A national centre per country, located near the offices of one of the partners;
- Local centres at each partner's site, with: administrative and didactic secretariats, university technology access points, continuous Vocational Training Technology access points, university and continuous vocational training production centres;
- Home technology access points.

From the operational viewpoint, the envisaged structures are organised on the basis of the NETTUNO model, adapted to an international dimension. The plan is to set up:

- A Euro-Mediterranean co-ordination centre that will define the organisational and didactic guidelines and strategies to be implemented;
- National centres in each country to guarantee the co-ordination of the activities at the national level and the co-operation with the Euro-Mediterranean centre;
- Supplying universities to carry out all the students' enrolment proceedings;
- Production centres for the production of didactic materials;
- Technology access points that will be set up near the site of each partner to allow the distance courses delivery and provide a series of services for users/students.

Technological infrastructure

Med Net'U intends to set up a network structure based on common technological infrastructures and common technical quality standards – such as satellite technologies allowing both television and internet-via-satellite broadcasting – that will be adopted by all involved partners.

During the initial phase of the project, NETTUNO will broadcast the Med Net'U video lessons on one of the two NETTUNO satellite channels. The structure suggested in the project derives from the NETTUNO psycho-educational didactic model, already tested and working in Italy since 1992.

Psycho-pedagogical didactic model

From the methodological viewpoint, a didactic model will be implemented, able to ensure a synchronic and diachronic teaching and learning system.

The didactic model suggested is a mixed one, developing from a new psycho-educational model that fulfils the requirement of flexibility and manages to avoid the isolation of the student. This is a mixed model that empowers traditional systems by using a way of teaching unencumbered by spatial-temporal limits, but still maintains direct interaction.

Distance learning didactic methods

The Med Net'U project provides for the integration of the different media's didactic-educational available possibilities and the creation of an open and flexible learning environment, that allows:

- The starting, also at distance, of new communication relationships between students and professors, promoting the shift to a one-way kind of communication to a two-way one, also in real time;
- The ending of the one-way communication of knowledge, and start of a new line of communication that allows the student to access dynamic knowledge that can be enriched by him or herself and that he or she can put at other people's disposal;
- Use of an internet-via-satellite PC as the focus of a system where different contributions from different media converge, which allows the creation of a true integrated and open multimedia model. The PC allows transmitting directly from the university to the student's desktop, lessons, multimedia products, databases, tutorials, practice work, evaluation and auto-evaluation systems.

The Med Net'U project puts forth a didactic model with a method of teaching/learning that is both synchronous, where teaching and learning happen at the same time but not in the same place, and diachronic, where training and educational processes are no longer tied to the same time and place.

Traditional didactic methods

By planning different distance teaching and learning activities, it was taken into account that distance teaching through mass media does not solve many students' and users' problems, with their difficulty in relating to a remote and impersonal structure.

Therefore, in order to prevent this from happening, times and places have been given so the student can take the initiative and take advantage of such direct meetings. In particular, the traditional method provides face-to-face meetings for direct interaction between student and teacher or tutor. Traditional tutoring undoubtedly has the advantage of allowing shortcomings to be dealt with on the spot through the relationships teachers and students establish in the Med Net'U HQ, Med Net'U branches and learning centres.

The ability, on the teacher's part, to ultimately motivate the student by creating a positive and open climate is surely

one important element of direct contact. At the same time, the face-to-face method breaks up the student's isolation and permits him or her to 'socialise within a group'. It also creates opportunities for collaboration, exchange, discussion and debate with other students, and, therefore, collaborative learning processes are developed.

The University subproject

The University subproject aims at the setting-up of a consortium of European and Mediterranean public universities to create the Euro-Mediterranean University.

The activities envisaged by the project are:

- Immediate use of the 25 NETTUNO Distance University courses and the 400 NETTUNO didactic modules for students who, even though they live in different countries, desire to enrol with the NETTUNO University, to attend distance courses by television and internet, and to obtain a final university qualification recognised at European level;
- Setting up 11 national centres;
- Setting up nine production centres in the following universities: University di Djillali Liabes – Algeria, Helwan University – Egypt, Jordan University – Jordan, University Cadi Ayyad – Morocco, Damascus University – Syria, EGE University – Turkey, AEGEN University – Greece;
- Setting up of technology access points in the 15 partner universities;
- Training of professors on the distance didactic field;
- Training of technical staff on new technologies utilisation;
- Adapting 12 of the already-produced courses into multilingual modules;
- Co-producing 30 new multilingual modules in the field of a degree related to information engineering, allowing the recognition of credits and qualifications at the European level.

This consortium, bringing together universities of different countries in the Euro-Mediterranean area, provides a richness of content, experiences and competences, ensuring the high quality of final products, thanks to this co-operation model. Moreover, this model offers the opportunity to choose as professors of the distance courses, teachers coming not from only one university but the best universities involved.

The Scientific-didactic Committee, including teachers of all the engineering faculties of the universities involved in the project, has already identified the Information Engineering curriculum and the following elements:

- The different modules' content;

- The guidelines for preparing and delivering the didactic modules and all related multimedia materials;
- The guidelines related to all practical exercises;
- The selection of video lessons teachers;
- The identification of distance tutors (for both online and face-to-face modes);
- The guidelines for the evaluation tests.

Each course will be subdivided into didactic modules and each module will be structured in:

- A variable number of video lessons, depending on the educational objectives of each course;
- Exercises and evaluation tests, delivered on the internet in an online or offline mode;
- Distance tutoring sessions, in both a synchronic and diachronic mode, via audio/video chat, satellite videoconferencing, forums on the internet;
- Face-to-face tutoring sessions.

The teachers from the universities involved in the Med Net'U project, not only design and produce together the Distance University courses, but develop a network of competences and create a real intercultural and multilingual co-operative laboratory that will become a European privileged environment compared to the rest of the world.

The Vocational Training subproject

The Continuous Vocational Training subproject aims at updating, qualifying and re-qualifying, and creating new competences in the job sectors requested by the Information Society: computer science, management, tourism, cultural assets, economics and environmental assets.

The vocational training courses are produced together with the universities, and are aimed at high officials, executives of public administration, business managers, entrepreneurs, and executives of chambers of commerce, trade unions, employers' organisations, etc.

The activities designed and planned by the scientific committee for the vocational training are:

- Setting-up of two production centres in the following institutions: Foundation Sophia Antipolis – France, Ministère de la Formation Professionnelle – Morocco;
- Setting up of eight technological poles by the offices of the vocational training partners;
- Training of trainers;
- Training of technical personnel on how to use new technologies;

- Joint adaptation of eight modules in a multilingual version among modules already produced by the partners;
- Co-production of 20 modules in the areas in which partners are interested.

Conclusions

The Med Net'U project will contribute to the sharing of human and technological resources of each partner, encouraging the collaboration and the exchange of knowledge between countries belonging to different cultures.

The Med Net'U project aims at stimulating a deep reflection and an intense confrontation of ideas deriving from different cultural realities, in order to identify common methodologies and strategies in order to develop the Information Society still respecting all cultural and political differences and avoiding imposing previously realised models.

There will be the opportunity to create new cultural and scientific spaces, and to develop together new competences through research, but also developing new competences through education and teaching.

With Med Net'U, the Mediterranean countries can re-evaluate their ancient culture and realise that similarities are far more relevant than the real differences. By harmonising tradition and technological innovation, peoples can learn how to better understand each other and try to identify the common patterns that accompanied the manifestations of thought between East and West.

The most important characteristic of the Mediterranean region relies in being a very important crossing and exchanging point. Even if, today, countries are delimited by strict boundaries, new technologies and communication networks overcome the boundaries between men, allowing the dissemination of knowledge and culture.

The Euro-Mediterranean Distance University Med Net'U will create a common space to support the development of education and knowledge, guaranteeing the balance between unity and diversity. It will become a university moving under open skies and without boundaries, a university that will foster the internationalisation of culture and knowledge, and the creation of new knowledge and new values, but also a common vision for the future.



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