

e-Learning integration in our European Higher Education Area

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In this paper we try to express the very important role that will occupy e-learning like means to make real the aims raised in the new European Higher Education Area. This way, the possibility of offering degrees, criteria and comparable methodologies and of developing a credit system as way of promoting the mobility so students as teaching staff, it obtains in e-learning a methodology that allows to satisfy the new needs of the current Europe directed to the exchange of students and towards the team work. One of the premises of the new European Higher Education Area is the training along the life so the integration of new methods of education -learning such as the team work they become indispensable if we want to train as the European Higher Education Area sues, competent persons inside the labour world. For all this, we consider of vital importance to direct our efforts as professionals of the education to the integration of these two elements that emerge in the current society.

Key Words European Higher Education Area; e-learning; methodological innovation, team work.

1. European higher education area

Only a few years ago in Europe, each country conceived its educative systems' curriculum and structure in a different way. So, depending on which was the prevailing culture in each country, education contents were worked out in one way or another, some degrees were established or not, credits were laid out in a certain fashion, etc. Therefore, Career Space (2001) points out the existence of two great education systems in Europe:

- The continental system, based on two types of university programs:

- The Long Education Program (generally five year long with more theoretical orientation).
- The Short Education Program (generally three or four year long with more hands-on orientation).

- The Anglo-American system, based on two consecutive cycles of university programs:

- The pre-degree program (generally three or four year long).

- The degree program (generally one or two year long).

At the present time, these Higher Education systems are being rethought and will be soon finished. The increasing ongoing exchange of university students and qualified workers outside our borders, the need of a comparable credit system in all European countries, the European cooperation fostered to promote the quality of criteria and methods, etc., result an additional incentive that stimulates, together with some other reasons, the need to pull off unity among European countries on the educative field the same way it happened in 2001 with the monetary union.

The *Magna Carta of European Universities* (Bologna, 1988) mentioned the critic role universities would play in European societies as a way for cultural, scientific and technical development, proving the universities' ethical and scientific independence and the special focus on research within the education field. Moreover, it referred to the reciprocal exchange of information and documentation, the mobility of teachers and students, creating a general policy of equivalence in subjects such as exams, degrees and scholarships. So the principles of independence and autonomy in European university institutions established in Bologna in 1988 were the cause for these institutions' leading role in creating the new educative area that we are now taking on.

Precisely, it was 1998 when a need was revealed for creating an European Higher Education Area that allowed a centralized regulation of various university institutions' grounds from different European countries.

A year later, the idea was materialized on the Declaration of Bologna which established the principles that would prevail in this new European area on education matters: "quality, mobility, diversity and competitiveness" (European Union, 1999). It also added two objectives; the employment rise in the European Union and the conversion of the European system of higher education as a way of attracting students and teachers from other parts of the world (European Union, 1999).

Two years later, the *Declaration of Prague* (European Union, 2001) indicated which would be this new space's characteristics, reaffirming the goals in the *Declaration of Bologna* and adding other new objectives such as an implementation of a similar grading system, supporting the participation of universities and students in the process of the European Higher Education Area and a learning process throughout life, an objective which has been proposed for some years in different legislations and regulations developed. In fact, on the 19th *General Conference of UNESCO* in Nairobi (1976), it already mentioned the concept of 'permanent education', thought as a global project designed to comprise all dimensions of life, all fields of knowledge and practical experiences that allow a personality development. Delors has said that "education has to offer everyone throughout their life the means to reach a better balance between work and learning, so they can actively experience their citizenship (1996). It is a matter of attaining a build-up of knowledge through permanent education that allows the individuals to create their own judgment for interacting with their social environment.

2. E-learning: new ways to learn, another way of teaching

At the same time this new educative area was forming, they started speaking about the ICT application on education, its advantages for the students, and a new concept known as e-learning. The integration of Internet (and its numerous services) in our daily life and our own lives has rendered us the possibility of having new environments to carry out educational activities. E-learning provides more flexibility to the space-time issues and to the students' way of learning, since they can work at their own pace and decide where and how they want to do it. Moreover, the knowledge they attain through the Web may have better quality than the one acquired in other learning environments, since they usually add, among other things, a bigger interaction and a number of diversified materials. For that reason, one of the basic requirements for education in the XXI century will be getting the students ready to participate in cognitive economy where knowledge will be the most important resource for social development (Harasim and others, 2000).

E-learning allows the development of personalized activities with each one of the students using educational materials and user-friendly technological tools that can be updated and are suitable for each individual.

The student will be able to handle and to learn more and better as long as he/she maintains high levels of interest, commitment, willingness to work and a feeling of belonging to the virtual group. In addition, to integrate e-learning processes means to give the computer an important role since the teaching-learning process will take place through it.

For that reason, as a consequence of integrating e-learning, we can speak of a new concept of learning; the interactive learning, "which comprises a big range of activities in which participants of an event (discussions, exercises, role plays, simulations and games) interact with others for education and learning purposes (Salinas, 2000:203).

In this context, virtual universities have an increasing role, being conceived as organizations without physical existence but developing virtual activities, the curriculum is usually flexible and allows access to a great deal of information through virtual libraries.

According to Hanna (2002), virtual universities take advantage of the Web in a way that lets teachers and students maintain a simultaneous and consecutive interaction while offering a new and cheaper model based on a technological approach, aimed to reduce physical and psychological distances between teacher and student.

In fact, this technology approach is defining the changes produced on the society, university institutions and the actors who are part of it.

Nevertheless, we cannot advance a definition of the virtual university if we do not do so before with the definition of all the different elements that comprise it, such as putting the ideas and principles that de-

termine the actions in context. The virtual university will adopt different ways depending on the context and the concept from which it will try to become a reality (Area, 2001). The issue here is that, although each virtual university inevitably will maintain ties with a certain context, if we really want to develop a true virtual university, it will have to satisfy the cultural needs of all those who are part of it, independently of its context. If we really want to create universities that go beyond geographic borders we must try not to impose any one culture, although it has been present in each one of the actions that are carried out.

3. Conclusions

In the above described environment, where the IT and communications technologies are pervasive in all social aspects, including the educational, due to the need of getting information from beyond geographic borders, and giving rise to new educational practices such as e-learning, we deem necessary to account for an integration of a new European Higher Education Area that encourages in a more official way practices which have only been carried out at odd times so far. The exchange of training experiences, scientific knowledge, and educational activities beyond educational institutions is one of the issues that the European Higher Education Area promotes, and might be developed taking advantage of the e-learning implementation. For all the reasons mentioned, the concepts of interactive learning and flexibility of space-time issues, which benefit from e-learning, are the more suitable for our educational systems if we look at them from the European Higher Education Area, the same way principles of mobility, exchange of information beyond borders, and standardization of degrees, methodologies and evaluation, are more suitable if they are developed with the help of e-learning.

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