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In this issue:

**Virtual *Versus* Classical Universities: Conflict or Collaboration?**

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### **From the Editors**

Our regular readers are familiar with our editorial policy of publishing selections of papers reflecting the proceedings of international conferences organized by the UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES) and partner organizations. This time we are presenting those of an International Seminar on *Teaching and Organization of Studies in the Virtual and Classical University: Conflict and/or Mutual Reinforcement*, held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, from 22 to 24 October 2001. The collaborating partners were the Puerto Rico Council on Higher Education and the Hispanic Educational Telecommunications System (HETS).

What inspired the organization of this Seminar is the clear reality that the information revolution is imposing itself in a myriad of ways upon higher education, thus, rapidly and irreversibly transforming the ways we learn, teach, communicate, conduct research, and disseminate knowledge. While some higher education institutions are in the forefront of change in this regard, a large number of them are being prodded to take new initiatives in order to better profit from this technological revolution. An important new type of higher education institution has emerged, the virtual university, which, more than in the case of any other form of distance learning, is relying on the facilities provided by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

In various documents, such as, for example, the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century*, UNESCO has stressed the importance for higher education systems and institutions of adapting and using the information and communication technologies. It seems very clear that higher education institutions are faced with a major transformation in the systems and ways by which they deliver knowledge.

While such developments are generally welcome and needed, a set of important issues has nevertheless emerged. These need to be further analyzed in order for high quality course programmes to result from the teaching and learning that is occurring via the ICTs, particularly the Internet. The purpose of this Seminar was to explore these issues and to propose certain general recommendations regarding:

- (i) the complementarity of conventional and virtual higher education, *i.e.*, possible ways of developing and combining their respective strengths;
- (ii) the elaboration of principles of good practice in such areas of virtual education as quality of teaching and learning, certification of knowledge, costs, development and ownership of infrastructure, equity – for learners as well as for teaching staff - cultural and linguistic sensitivity, and in many others.

The Seminar itself, particularly the rich discussions that took place over three days, are analyzed in a comprehensive "rapporteur's" essay written by Lazar Vlasceanu of UNESCO-CEPES and John L. Davies of the United Kingdom. We present an edited version of this essay\* as an introduction to and overview of the Seminar and of the fifteen articles that follow, a number of which were originally delivered as conference presentations

These articles are essentially of three types. There are first of all those, four in all, that present the broad outlines of the emergence of virtual higher education and of the challenges that it presents to higher education in general. A second group, eight articles in all, consists more or less of case studies. The third group, consisting of three articles, is best described as offering caveats, particularly regarding questions of quality and equity. Given the nature of the topic and of the authors' responses to it, there is a good deal of overlapping among the articles in terms of these categorizations.

The first category is represented by articles by Sarah Guri-Rosenblit of Israel, John L. Davies of the United Kingdom, Annette Lorentsen of Denmark, and Ralph E. Gomory of the United States of America.

Guri-Rosenblit leads off by detailing the role of the ICTs in five organizational models of university-level distance teaching, including virtual universities. Davies details the challenges to "relatively traditional" universities represented by the use of the ICTs in education, *i.e.*, the virtual university. Then, Lorentsen, a special consultant to the Technology Commission of the International Association of University Presidents, argues that the process of turning universities into Net-based institutions, although inexorable, is complex and as much a question of changing mentalities as of introducing technology. Finally, Gomory, focusing on the United States, considers the ways in which conventional universities, through the development of asynchronous learning networks, can extend their reach and diversify their clienteles and offerings while still remaining what they have always been.

Moving into the case studies, Miroslava Misáková, Michal Brandeja, Iva Hollandova, and Jan Pazdziora of the Czech Republic briefly describe the introduction of an on-line administrative information system at their home institution, Masaryk University in Brno. David Karber of the United States describes the recently created on-line course programmes in management at California State University at Dominguez Hills. Juan Meléndez of the University of Puerto Rico describes how a grassroots movement among teaching staff at his institution is furthering the development of a virtual distance learning environment. Maria Christina García presents the Virtual University of the Monterrey Institute of Technology in Mexico that is assuming responsibility for the distance offerings in Mexico and internationally of the Institute as a whole.

Narrowing the scope a bit, Dieter Lohr of Germany describes a virtual course in German writing offered from the University of Konstanz in Germany to students at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași in Romania. Finally, Ryszard Tadeusiewicz of Poland (in an article submitted separately) takes the example of the virtual teaching and learning possibilities at the University of Mining and Metallurgy in Cracow, Poland, to consider the philosophical and moral aspects of the ICTs and virtual teaching and learning. For him, technology will serve as a powerful aid to teaching and learning but will never replace the human teacher.

All of these case studies, it should be pointed out, evoke the experiences of "relatively traditional" universities that are remaking a part of themselves in light of the possibilities offered by the ICT's (that are, in fact, necessities). Two additional case studies specifically illustrate the networking function of the ICTs as applied to higher education on a wide scale.

Robert Robinson of the United States describes the creation of the University of Texas Telecampus that opened its virtual doors in 1998. Now the virtual arm of the fifteen component campuses of the University of Texas system, it coordinates a number of on-line

course programmes that involve teaching staff from many of the component institutions of the system. An even broader initiative is the African Virtual University, an important effort greatly supported by the World Bank, that has emerged as a completely new venture, not one linked to a pre-existing conventional university. It is evolving into an electronic clearing-house through which already established (conventional) African universities and universities on other continents can co-operate among themselves, enrich their offerings, and reach a growing number of students by virtual means.

Three articles that offer caveats and recommendations close the series. Jamie P. Merisotis of the United States warns of the importance of maintaining rigorous quality standards for all higher education, including virtual higher education. Government strategies, so far as the United States is concerned, should promote equal opportunity for educationally disadvantaged populations as much in the case of virtual higher education as in that of conventional higher education. Jane Buck, President of the American Association of University Professors, who has similar concerns about the quality of virtual education, insists that its providers offer the same guarantees of academic freedom and security of employment to its academic staff as is the case for conventional higher education institutions.

The final article, by Kenneth Edwards of the United Kingdom, sums up much of the Seminar but also makes two very salient observations: In general, *the sciences have been much more amenable to instruction via the ICT's than the humanities*. The suggestion is that the more a discipline is quantitative, the more it is amenable to electronic systematization. On the other hand, the humanities reflect what the term suggests, enlightened human subjectivity and thus the required presence of the human teacher. But also, the peculiarities of ICT delivery of instruction being what they are, *they are instigating a re-evaluation of pedagogy in traditional higher education*. From being very teacher-oriented, pedagogy is being pushed into becoming increasingly learner-oriented.

If there is any conclusion to be derived from these articles it is that the traditional university will survive and even prosper into the foreseeable future. However, it will assimilate the possibilities of the ICTs and be changed by them. It will also have to share the field with purely virtual players that will nevertheless reflect their origins in traditional higher education.

We appropriately conclude this issue of **Higher Education in Europe** with a "Book Reviews and Studies" section featuring a collective study of four books dealing partially or totally with questions of virtual education.