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Sistema Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Maricruz Moreno Zagal

Especialista en Educación Superior

Asociación Nacional de Universidades e instituciones de Educación Superior

Mexico

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Abstract

Distance education has considerable experience in Mexico; however, its development in the higher education level has depended on the support and interest of each institution, with no national policies. This results in major problems that restrain its contribution to goals increase of coverage and quality of education in the country.

After an extensive process of analysis and reflection with specialists from the National Network of Distance Higher Education of the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education, ANUIES (Association of the 149 institutions of higher education with higher quality in Mexico), the problems of this modality were characterized as follows:

- Different levels of quality: distance educational programs range from reproduction of face-to-face school models until those characterized by their innovation and quality.
- Dispersion and disarticulation: there is a wide range of models and strategies in higher education distance which hinders their connection.
- Lack of regulation: this has led on one hand to an exponential increase in educational offerings without quality assurance and on the other, that

government funds for the improvement of quality only recognize efforts in distance education marginally or do not recognize them at all.

- Little articulation with the presence mode: despite the growing trend towards the generation of hybrid models.

In order to overcome these problems and therefore generate the potential to contribute appropriately to quality and coverage levels increase in higher education, the creation of the National System of Distance Education (SINED), Mexico is proposed.

The System foresees uniting all aspects related to the development of distance education through: institutions, states, resources, policies, programs, legal instruments, economic and administrative entities, and as such, anything that may help to its strengthening. For its implementation, we have considered the establishment of two entities: SINED Council and the National Assembly of SINED. These will provide institutional support and allow operating sustaining and boosting programmes for this form of education.

SINED is a novel and unprecedented answer in the international context since it articulates efforts in the academic, technological and management fields that conjugate themselves into distance education., altogether with the actions of all bodies involved in the development of the modality, i.e., institutions, government, consortia, networks, programmes, technical resources, and so on. The system is not a distance educational institution or a ministry for the sector, or a specific government agency and is not limited to the introduction of a regulation. The system is a linkage and coordination of efforts of distance education in Mexico.

For its creation, the needs and context expressed by the managers themselves of the modality were considered. It is a proposal that seeks multidimensional transformations aimed at helping to operate a flexible, efficient, and high quality system of higher education, so that it works hand in hand with face-to-face education to foster holistic education.

Mexican education authorities are supporting the shaping of SINED and incorporating it as one of the strategies to fulfill the national education goal: “Promote the development and use of information and communication in the educational system to support students’ learning, expand their life skills and favour their insertion into the knowledge society”, as expressed in the Sector Program of Education for 2007-2012.

Therefore, SINED has the political and financial backing that ensures and provides the institutional feature to its actions.

The Council of SINED has foreseen its operation within five strategic areas in order to manage the whole coordination of core actions.

Planning and Policy

Educational Services

Research and Development

Media technology and communication

Administration and management

The support for the operation of these strategic areas is the network collaboration. Initially, three major projects have been developed:

- Information System on Distance Education
- Program for Strengthening the Professional Development in Distance Education
- Evaluation Model of the Quality of Training Programmes in Distance Education

An electronic environment is the prototype of the core actions of SINED and is a dynamic, constantly evolving site, where regular users and specialists in the distance mode participate, collaborate, share and interact. This interaction entails a significant contribution in the areas of management, developers, support and expertise to achieve the constant updating of the WEB-SINED.

The fundamental value of SINED lies precisely in collaboration; their actions are viable only with the committed participation of educational institutions with distance education programs. Nevertheless, the joint of efforts among all the areas involved, i.e., government, institutions, networks, consortia, alliances, and so on, is only a first step, undoubtedly a crucial step in order to undertake an extensive process of dissemination in all social sectors. We intend that the benefits of the system have a high impact on the social fabric at the time of incorporating pre-service personnel, particularly, those less advantaged who seek the integration to educational processes, as well as to encourage the construction of emerging knowledge communities.

Communication purpose

To present the National System of Distance Education (NSDE) in Mexico, as a strategy arisen from the managers of distance education aimed at strengthening this educational modality in order to contribute to the solution of its main needs regarding: quality, equity, relevancy and coverage.

The precedents that gave birth to the project of the System are given, as well as its conceptualization and proposed model of operation which involves the main initial actions carried out for its implementation.

Precedents

Education is an indicator of worldwide development; particularly the Higher Level entails the national capacity of formation of professional, technical and scientific resources that sustain the competitiveness and the growth of economy. In addition, it expresses the capacity of meeting social demands in regard to the offer of suitable and sufficient educational opportunities to the new generations.

Education appears to be a national priority in Mexico and therefore diverse programs have been developed to overcome the backwardness in all educational levels, nevertheless there persist the historical challenges of coverage, terminal efficiency, equity, quality and relevancy.

Particularly, in the pre-university and undergraduate levels it is urgent to find new formulae to reach major coverage with a more equitable distribution of access opportunities to diverse social groups and within higher educational quality. An action that is considered suitable to be adapted to help to meet these challenges is distance education. Actually, this modality is becoming increasingly relevant in the educational and cultural development of many countries.

Distance education has considerable experience in Mexico, notably the Higher Level has launched projects in this field since 1972, when the System of Open University (SOU) was created by the National Autonomous University of Mexico. In regard to distance education, the first experience took place at the Pedagogic National University in 1979, where the System of Distance Education (SDE) was devised. The SEAD opened this educational modality with a program of in-service teacher training in basic education.

A substantial increase in the development of the modality on the part of the Higher Education Mexican Institutions was precisely observed right from middle of the nineties, when many of them started to offer graduate or continuous education programs in this modality, as well as to incorporate information and communication technologies that are in full summit.

Nevertheless, this significant increase of the offer of distance higher education has depended fundamentally on the interests of the institutional projects themselves, since we have no national policies for the modality, and consequently a lack of support or strengthening strategies for these programs. Before the above mentioned situation the development of distance education in the Higher Level undergoes core problems that hinder its possibility of helping to overcome the goals of coverage, equity, relevancy and educational quality.

After an extensive process of analysis and reflection with specialists of the National Network of Distance Higher Education of the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education, NAUIGE¹, the problems of this modality were characterized as follows:

Diverse levels of quality: distance educational programs range from reproduction of face-to-face school models until those characterized by their innovation and quality.

Dispersion and disarticulation: there is a wide range of models and strategies in Distance Higher Education which hinders their connection.

Lack of regulation: this has led on one hand to an exponential increase in educational offers without quality guarantee and, on the other, that governmental funds for the improvement of quality only recognize the efforts in distance education in a marginal way or do not recognize them at all.

Little joint with the face-to-face modality: despite the growing trend towards the generation of hybrid models.

¹ (ANUIES in Spanish) is an Association that nowadays involves 149 institutions of Higher Education, which meet the 80 % of the Higher Education matriculation, and 92 % of the research in Mexico.

In order to meet a solution to these problems, diverse measures have been designed aimed at achieving a better coordination, systematizing and collaboration among the actors involved in the modality of distance education in the national level. These measures would not find any solution in the matter in the past since they were only bureaucratic regulations such as:

a) The Coordinating Council of Open Systems, created in 1978, by means of the SEP Agreement N° 14, signed on July 28, 1978.

b) The Council Coordinator of Open Systems of Higher Education, created in 1982, by means of the SEP Agreement N° 69, signed on May 27, 1982.

Likewise, at the beginning of the 90s the Interdisciplinary and Interinstitutional Commission of Open and Distance Education was created on the part of the General Direction of Extracurricular Education, which worked as an important authority of coordination and promotion until in 1995 until its disappearance due to lack of institutional support.

These collegiate instances stopped operating without an official reason and nowadays there is no an organisation or entity that possesses the capability to organize the efforts of this educational modality.

It is well known that diverse worldwide strategies are also intended to systematize and organize distance education. In some countries the integration of national universities of distance education was chosen; in others the creation of special departments to encourage and regulate the modality; while others opted for the regulation, either by creating new laws or adapting the existing ones.

After analyzing the situations and experiences before mentioned, as well as the potential that this modality has proved to have in our country, where a favorable scene exists for its development, it has been considered to be pertinent to design a strategy that allows to take advantage from the own strengths of every educational institution, share resources and link actions of improvement for which the creation of the National System of Distance Education (NSDE) was proposed at the beginning of the year 2007

Conceptualization of the NSDE

The System foresees uniting all the aspects related to the development of distance education through: institutions, entities, resource, policies, programs, legal instruments,

consortia, networks, technological resources, economic and administrative instances, and finally, all that that contributes to its strengthening.

NSDE is a novel and unprecedented response in the international context since it coordinates the efforts in the academic, technological and management fields that conjugate themselves in the distance education, altogether with the actions of all bodies involved in the development of the modality and the encouragement of collaboration among them.

The System is not a distance education institution or ministry for this sector, or a specific government agency and it does not restrain itself to the establishment of any regulation. The system is a linkage and coordination of efforts of distance education in Mexico. It is an offer that looks for multidimensional transformations aimed at operating on a flexible, efficient, top-quality system of education, which runs in parallel and coherently with face-to-face education in order to foster holistic education.

It constitutes an innovative project somehow if we consider that it emerged from the specific needs, context and proposals expressed by the own managers of the modality, then it was extended and received by the educational national authorities. Tejada Fernandez (1998) states that many novelties arise or are originated from innovative previous experiences that later, like oil stains, they spread across the system affecting it at the same time. Furthermore, the main challenge in this type of innovative experiences is their going beyond or becoming institutionalized. In case of the NSDE, the proposal emerges from the managers of the modality, in addition the educational national authorities support it institutionally, and the challenge now is its dissemination and appropriation on the part of all the actors and involved sectors.

Last year, after a process of conceptualization of the NSDE, which was generated by a group professionals working at ANUIES, the offer was presented to the Secretariat of Education and the agreements of collaboration supporting its implementation were signed. Later on, a process of lobbying was developed in a joint way, between ANUIES and the SEP, with the Deputies' Chamber, resulting in the assignment of some budget that will allow the accomplishment of the first actions of national scope.

On the other hand, the Secretariat of Public Education stated its support and eagerness to collaborate in the strengthening of the modality, establishing an aim to the Sectorial Program of Education 2007-2012, which declares:

"To stimulate the development and utilization of the information and the communication in the educational system to support students' learning, to extend their life competencies and to favor their insertion in the society of knowledge" (SEP, 2007: 39)

The Sectorial Program establishes two strategies to achieve this purpose in the Higher Education:

3.5 To foster the development and use of the information and the communication in order to improve the environments and learning processes, the operation of networks of knowledge and the development of intra and interinstitutional projects.

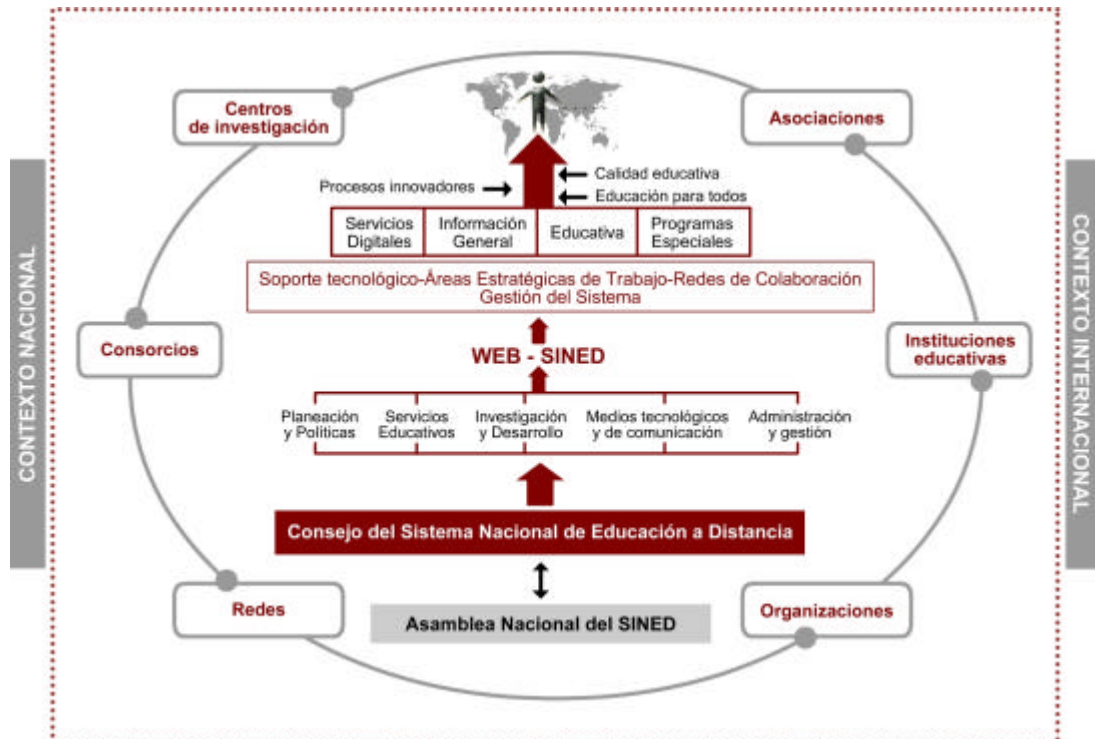
3.6 To stimulate open and distance education with criteria and permanent standards of quality and innovation, with special emphasis in the attention of regions and groups lacking access to school services. (SEP, 2007: 40).

The conformation of the National System of Distance is one the main actions that will be supportive in the fulfillment of those strategies..

It is worth highlighting that in the current six-year period the distance modality has been supported in a remarkably and unprecedented way, not only in political terms but also with financial resources that should guarantee the strengthening of distance education.

Operation of the NSDE

SINED will coordinate all the aspects referred to the modality in order to promote innovative processes and quality educational programs, by means of which the ultimate beneficiary will be the own individuals who need educational services, specially those that belong to the least favored social sectors. In the following scheme the proposed model of operation of NSDE as well as the relation among all the involved instances are shown in a graphical way.



National Context

International Context

Research centres

Associations

Consortia

Networks

Organizations

Educational institutions

Innovating processes

Educational Quality

Education for everybody

Digital services

General information

Educational

Special programmes

Technological support – Estrategical Areas of Work – Colaborative networks



- Management of the system
- Planning and Policy
- Educational Services Research and Development
- Media Technology and communication
- Administration and management
- Council of the National System of Distance Education
- National Assembly of NSDE

The operation of the System is foreseen in three levels joint to meet the following goals:

- The central level, in which the actions related to: the agreement and establishment of policies, the search and channeling of supports and the national coordination of actions based on a National Plan for the development and strengthening of the modality. In this level two main instances assume leading roles: NSDE Council and the National Assembly of NSDE. These provide institutional support and allow to operate on programs of sustain and promotion of this educational modality.
- Decentralized, that focuses mainly on educational institutions in order to operate academic programs and offer services of distance education in a direct way.
- Network is intended to recover the actions and results that have been achieved by means of collaboration and that will constitute the basis for the operation of the actions at the central level. By means of this work, the coordination of regional, thematic and transverse programs is foreseen, as well as the standardization of criteria for mobility, and the promotion and operation of joint programs.

The following chart synthesizes the function or concrete action of the previous operation levels:

Centralized (Council and Assembly of the NSDE)	Decentralized (Educational Institutions)	In Network (Consortia and collaborative networks)
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<p>To agree and dictate policies.</p> <p>To seek and to canalize supports.</p> <p>To encourage spaces for national coordination.</p> <p>National Planning.</p>	<p>To operate academic programs.</p> <p>To offer services directly.</p> <p>To certify studies.</p> <p>Institutional Planning.</p>	<p>To coordinate regional, thematic and transverse programs.</p> <p>To agree on mobility criteria.</p> <p>To promote and operate joint programs.</p>
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The Council of NSDE, will be constituted as a public organization, decentralized of the federal government, as a sector of the Secretariat of Public Education, and with the following principal aims:

- To foster existing resources by means of cooperation, linkage and joint of institutions and organisations related to Distance Education.
- To contribute to the perception of Distance Education as valuable strategic factor for the socioeconomic development of the country.
- To establish policies that help to guarantee the quality, relevance, coverage and equity in the distance educational offer.
- To orientate and promote the creation of public and private funds for the development of Distance Education.
- To develop strategies and encourage the opening of spaces that make possible the creation of innovative systems of education which meet national needs.
- To carry out studies by which the population is informed about the impact and advantages of the embarked actions of Distance Education, both in national territory and in the world.
- To reinforce the profile and the position of NSDE by means of the construction of strategic alliances and cooperative agreements with other similar organisations in the field of Distance Education.
- To provide innovative and relevant information to the members of NSDE for the correct functioning of its programs of Distance Education.
- To create a technological platform sustained in a system of management of information and communication that supports the interaction among NSDE

members and all those entities that stimulate the innovation of Distance Education.

The constitution of this Council will be given across several moments, which initiates with the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between the parts involved and arranged to being employed at the conformation of NSDE. This Memorandum is not any more than the expression of wills to walk ahead in the field, but that turns out to be fundamental for the formal opening of its actions. A following moment will be the decree of the Union Congress and / or of the Federal Executive with which the Council would remain officially constituted as a public organisation decentralized with juridical personality and proper patrimony.

Another instance to be constituted is the National Assembly of NSDE, which is conceived as an auxiliary organ of the federal government, in charge of the definition and establishment both of the general macro policies as well as the budget to foment Distance Education.

This Assembly will be created across a constitutive summons that may be carried out by means of any of the following mechanisms: for emission of a Law of Distance Education on the part of the Union Congress, which foresees its creation, functioning and operation; for Presidential Decree; or for Agreement of the Secretariat of Public Education, in an unique way or in conjunction with another secretariat involved in the promotion of this educational modality.

Organizational structure of the Council of NSDE

The Council will be shaped by a Board of directors, a Headquarter of the Organisation, which holder will be designated by the President of the Republic, and strategic areas of work. A Consultative Committee will support its operation. Five strategic areas are:

- **Planning and Policies.** This will focus its activities on the regulation of the National System of Distance Education, proposing in an agreed by consensus way directives, indicators, criteria, procedure and strategies for the optimization and the strengthening of this educational modality.



- Educational services. It will supervise that programs and educational resources offered through the System meet the established requirements and quality criteria, based on the results of strategic studies. These will promote the generation of new programs by means of the integration of networks of collaboration and the search and grant of supports for academic programs that coincide and fulfill NSDE objectives.
- Research and Development, through the emphasis on: the development of educational emergent strategies and models, programs of educators' formation, innovative use of the TIC and offers of administration and educational management, among others. This will give a better support to the generation and application of knowledge in the issue of Distance Education.
- Communication and Technological means. These will manage the efficient use of the resources and technological means, based on the generation of networks and alliances among institutions; stimulating the development of applied investigation of new resources and technological tools that improve the educational quality of the programs; which in turn encourage the adoption of a safety culture and confidentiality in the management of the information generated through diverse programs as well as that regarding its users.
- Administration and management. This will seek the most suitable employment of own NSDE Council resources, by looking for new and different alternatives of financing for the modality, across the coordinated and synergetic development of all the strategic areas of this Council, and the alertness of the services that are offered to the population, in such a way that they are pertinent and of easy access.

Network collaboration

As it was stated previously, the sustain for the operation of the Council of NSDE lies in the collaborative factor, therefore the National Network of Higher Distance Education of ANUIES has started launching three fundamental products:

- System of Information on Distance Education. In order to be able to count on relevant, reliable and pertinent information to define actions and strategies to fulfill NSDE's mission, an automated system of indicators for Distance Education is being devised so that it allows the management of information, the production of reports of diagnosis and follow-up across long periods of time. These indicators will reflect the Higher Education Institutions with programs and distance educational projects.
- Program of Strengthening to the Professional Development in Distance Education. Undoubtedly, the training process of the personnel for the development of the modality has been a permanent need; generally the modality is developed with professionals from other areas qualified with the needed new methods, technologies and instruments. But in spite of these efforts, the increasing demand of coverage of Distance Education and the emergence of technological innovations yield into insufficient and not well qualified personnel needed to meet the demand. This situation originated the creation of a program of strengthening to the professional development for Distance Education. This program has three fundamental axes: it is a program based on the network collaboration and the utilization of the existing and already experimented programs in the Higher Education Institutions; it is a program that conceives in an integral way the professionals who collaborate in the modality, right from the tutors up to the people in charge of the design and technological development and of the academic and administrative management; and finally, it is a program sustained in the detection of needs of formation(training), for which already an instrument of diagnosis has been elaborated.
- Model of Quality Evaluation of the Programs of Formation in Distance Education. Undoubtedly, the promotion of qualitative programs is an aim of NSDE, with this intention the staff has worked for a couple of years on the establishment of a frame of reference and a methodological proposal that can serve as a basis for the self-evaluation of the programs of Distance Education. An automated system of the indicators has been developed which appears to be a valuable tool for the development of self-evaluation processes.

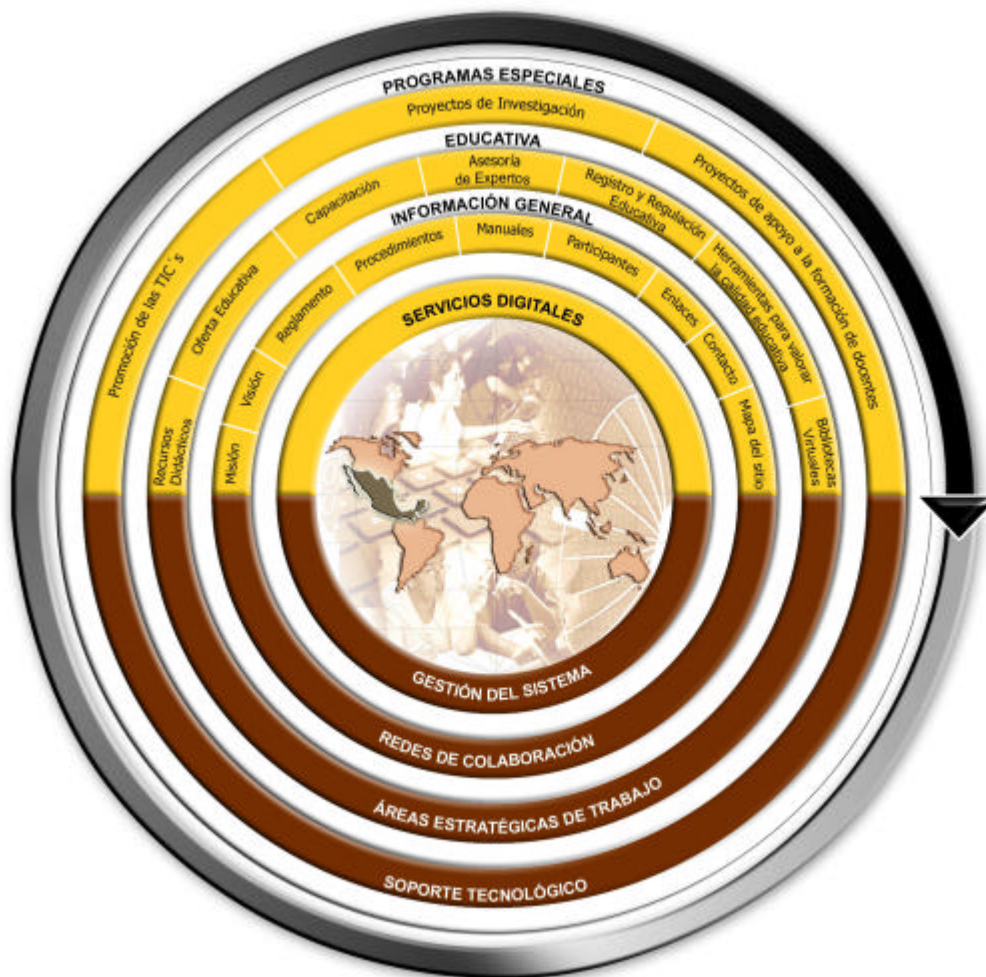


The reference frame and the establishment of indicators depart from an own construction, though the different offers were checked worldwide, we worked on a proposal that was helpful for the own context and development of the modality in our country. The evaluation of the programmes involves all the actors: students, undergraduate, tutors, managing administrative officers, persons in charge of technology, etc. in order to obtain a global and integral valuation of the processes and successful results achieved.

WEB NSDE

An electronic environment is the prototype of NSDE actions and is a dynamic site, in continuous construction, where the regular users and specialists in the distance modality will take part, collaborate, share and interact. This interaction involves a significant contribution in the areas of management, developers, support and experts to achieve the constant updating of the WEB-SINED.

This environment will be designed by taking into account the actions of the community that integrates it and the strategic areas of work. Here, some tools will be allowed in order to promote collaboration and management, as well as the interoperability with other applications.



The Web of SINED will operate in two dimensions:

First dimension. – It will allow network and internal collaboration among people responsible for the management of the own environment; as well as the external collaboration with other institutions, experts, nets and associations interested in taking part, since their architecture foresees spaces adapted for such effects. These zones will remain in an area of restricted and controlled access by means of profiles of revenue.

Second dimension. It will be constituted by the public space offering digital services that they will allow the participant to accede to a diversity of resources derived from the programs of Distance Education. At the same time, it will make possible to



identify the foundations, scopes, procedure and limits defined by NSDE in regard to this matter.

Final reflection

The fundamental value of NSDE lies precisely in the collaborative issue, its actions are only with the committed participation of the educational institutions with Distance Education programmes. Nevertheless, the joint of efforts among all the involved areas, i.e., government, institutions, networks, consortia, alliances, etc. is only an initial step, undoubtedly a fundamental step in order to undertake an extensive process of dissemination in all social sectors. We intend that the benefits of the System have a high impact on the social fabric at the time of incorporating subjects in distance formation, specially those less favored in joining educational processes, as well as in the promotion of the construction of emergent communities of knowledge.



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