

The Metamorphosis of Distance Education in the Third Millennium *Institutions, Programs, Technologies, Roles... The Same?*

Profound transformations are taking place world-wide, and the Open and Distance Education institutions must play a leading role in the promotion of innovation in academic and professional training.

The Latin American region faces a number of challenges in reaching consensus over action lines for Open Distance Education institutions in the future. This is due to the diversity of problems and national and local contexts that ODL actors must cope with at the present time. In order to develop common strategies and coherent action lines, comprehensive analysis is needed.

These current problems of the Open and Distance Education institutions must be highlighted in the context of the values and the priorities of the region as well as their previous history and framework of relationships that determine different ways to face these problems and to solve them.

In this transition period, the national situation and each institution's own situation is extremely different and, therefore, each case requires a determined will, effort and creativity to reach the levels of desired growth and evolution.

Although many voices affirm that the future is too complex and uncertain to try to predict it, there are others like the one of Federico Mayor Zaragoza (1999)¹, former UNESCO Director General, who thinks that "the uncertainty of the future could only be acted on based on our ability to foresee the future and act accordingly".

Knowledge is the key factor of the future: its production, application and use in the different fields of life. Consequently, education is the main instrument to guide societies through complex processes of transformation and modernization. In this context, Distance Education plays a leading role due to the richness of alternatives, opportunities and possibilities it offers.

Many studies indicate that well developed countries are built on effective education systems that include solid and ongoing programs for innovation and growth. This statement acquires special importance for the case of Latin-America, where many of its more important institutions are showing serious limitations to adjust their models, structures and procedures, in order to adequately respond to new demands of the society. Educational institutions are therefore a decisive instrument for development, and they can not afford to further postpone the needed transformation of the institutions themselves or their networks and channels for cooperation.

With this background, the International Council for Open and Distance Education will organize its next International Conference in Mexico, that will be hosted by the Toluca Campus of the Technological Institute of Monterrey, from October 3 to 5th, 2007.

¹ Mayor Zaragoza, F. (1999) **Los escenarios y Alternativas de América Latina y El Caribe en el Horizonte 2020** en López Segrera, Filmus, coordinadores (2000) *América Latina 2020*. FLACSO-UNESCO - Temas Grupo Editorial. Buenos Aires.

The main idea is to think on the challenges of the region in the 21st century in terms of capacity training through the Open and Distance Education modality. The conference will emphasize the importance of incorporating different instruments, tools and concepts, in order to propose substantial and integrated changes to the resources and models used.

Prestigious experts in this field will meet to discuss the main problems that nowadays concern the Open and Distance Education professionals and institutions in Europe, Latin America and North America. The discussions will aim at making concrete proposals for researchers, academics and decision makers.

The intention is to bring together the knowledge, experiences, opinions and points-of-view of various experts in the field and debate the different sub-topics proposed for the duration of the event:

a) The developments of Distance Education in different Social, Cultural, Economic contexts.

b) The new profile of distance programs in the third millennium.

- Is there a hegemonic profile?
- What changes are required for future programs?

c) The role of technology in the transformations experienced by this modality.

- Does it promote such changes or does it just a necessary compliment?
- Does technology direct the changes or do the modalities spur changes in the technology?

d) The structural configuration of institutions that develop Distance Education.

- Are "mega-universities" really the institutions of higher learning in the future?
- Does the structure of Virtual Universities correspond to the model of the University as we know it?
- Is the bimodal configuration the answer to the current challenges facing the development of the modality in the University?
- What role can consortiums play in the current development of Distance Education?

e) Distance Education's Image in Society in the Third Millennium.

- A New Image? What factors would favor the acceptance of this modality today?

f) The actors in Distance Education.

- New roles or reinvent the classic ones?

g) Does F2F Education promote the "culture" of Distance Education?

- Projects supporting Distance Education
- Should there be a combination of modalities apart from the use of different techniques in F2F Education?

The ICDE International Conference in Mexico will be a significant platform for debating different issues of the region. It will be an excellent opportunity to strengthen or to establish solid institutional partnerships, to explore new alternatives of cooperative work, to listen and to learn about the latest research in the scope of education. We look forward to welcoming you in Mexico! Bienvenidos!

Marta Mena

Buenos Aires, March 2007