

## Chapter 6.4

# E-Learning University Networks: An Approach to a Quality Open Education

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The achievement of coordination activities and the creation of university networks are considered to be fundamental mechanisms to bring together the different higher education systems as well as to promote synergies between less developed regions and more developed ones. ODISEAME (Open Distance Inter-University Synergies between Europe, Africa, and Middle East) is an interdisciplinary and intercultural e-learning project whose main goal is to create a Euro-Mediterranean network of universities for the cooperation in the design and development of tele-learning experiences. This four-year project ended in June of 2006 with its final phase when several multilingual and multicultural learning experiences were carried out in an efficient way. These experiences were developed in all the official languages of the participant countries, as well as in English, using a

Web-based multilingual virtual space. This article describes the ODISEAME project and the e-learning experiences derived from it and presents some conclusions from their evaluation. It finally shows the importance of university networks in the process of establishing the European higher education area.

### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of globalization is generating important changes. On one hand, it creates new markets, it fosters progress and economic growth, it makes greater scientific development possible, and permits universal access to culture and science. However, it is also believed that this phenomenon can bring the disappearance of cultural diversity, as well as economic imbalances and an increase in the existing gap between different countries in

terms of development. The European Commission maintains that, in order to build a common future, it is necessary to cooperate in the construction of a way toward change. However, the social and cultural identity of each agent should be kept. In fact, one of the main objectives established in the Barcelona declaration, which was adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in 1995, was to bring people of different cultures closer by means of partnerships in social, cultural, and human affairs with the aim of developing human resources, promoting understanding between cultures, and exchanges between civil societies.

EUMEDIS (*Euro MEDiterranean Information Society*) is one of the initiatives of the European Commission for the development of the information society in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It was designed specifically to bridge the digital gap that exists between the European countries and our Mediterranean neighbours. The group of priority sectors tackled by this initiative includes education.

Globalization has an influence, not only on the economic field, but also on the transfer of knowledge and higher education. The universal nature of higher education institutions will increase due to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and distance learning, as well as the increasing mobility of teachers, researchers, and students. In this respect, and taking the idea of the context of the European Higher Education Area, the collaboration networks among European Universities play a decisive role, just as the Spanish Ministry of Education states in the corresponding framework document (2003).

Consequently, the achievement of coordination activities and the creation of networks are considered to be fundamental mechanisms to bring together different higher education systems as well as to promote synergies between less developed regions and more developed ones (Commission of the European Communities, 2001; Spain, Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2003). Furthermore, it is widely believed

that all this process should be carried out with the maximum respect to cultural diversity.

The ODISEAME project, which was coordinated by CEDETEL, was framed within the EUMEDIS initiative previously described and sought to contribute to the improvement of higher education in the participant countries, applying new technologies to the educational process. Thereby, the project offered Web-based courses corresponding to education programmes of 12 Universities from Europe and the Mediterranean border. Specifically, the countries that participated in the project are Germany, Cyprus, Spain, Jordan, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey.

The base of the ODISEAME project was an interdisciplinary research on the application of ICTs to different aspects of the learning process, including the design of educational contents, their delivery, and the interaction among students and teachers. Students, teachers, content providers, service providers, teaching experts, technicians, etc., participated in this research project, which also involved important aspects such as intercultural and multilingual ones, especially in the development of the virtual learning experiences that were carried out with the participation of students and teachers from the different participant countries (Verdú, Verdú, Regueras & De Castro, 2005). These experiences were developed in a virtual environment in the language of every partner as well as in English.

The development of the ODISEAME project is described next and the results obtained during the e-learning experiences are analysed.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT**

The ODISEAME project underwent different phases from its onset in September 2002 until its end in June 2006. The final objective of the achieved tasks was the carrying out of intercultural tele-learning experiences through the

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