

Higher Education's New Frontier for the E-University and Virtual Campus

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INTRODUCTION

Technologies entered in education since their first appearance and were used both for improving the efficacy and efficiency of traditional teaching and for creating new teaching-learning opportunities (Galliani et al., 1999). The definition "educational technologies" was coined in the 1950s to describe the equipments to be used in teaching-learning controlled environments. The introduction of the computer in teaching led to the definition of "new educational technologies" to mark the overcoming of traditional systems like audio-visual media (i.e., cinema, radio and television) with the new digital medium.

In the 1970s the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) formulated the definition of instructional technology as "... the theory and practice of design, development, utilization, management, and evaluation of processes and resources for learning. ... We can think about it as a discipline devoted to techniques or ways to make learning more efficient based on theory but theory in its broadest sense, not just scientific theory".

The Internet in the 1990s introduced further elements of innovation in the use of technologies for education with an exponential growth of instruments and resources leading to the transition from face to face (f2f) teaching to online teaching-learning experiences.

The Internet more than other technological experiences entered in the educational systems all over the world and is today marking a revolution in continuous education and lifelong learning.

Universities, like many other institutions, have been fully invested from the innovation in teaching-learning processes and often participated in the transformation of distance education in on line education. Among the best examples on this regard are the Open University and the Phoenix University online, where people can earn they degrees fully online.

After delay, Traditional universities are concerned today with the use of technologies for the improvement of the efficiency of their courses, the monitoring of students' careers and the access to continuous education opportunities.

In what follows a survey of the Italian situation as an example of the more general European context will be analyzed and the research funded from European Commission will be reported.

ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES AND E-LEARNING

European universities have met the challenge of modernisation by introducing e-learning activities in their organization. The governments also encouraged the establishment of e-learning in higher education by supporting the digitization of the infrastructures of their institutions.

The ELUE project (E-Learning and University Education) belongs to the initiatives approved and funded from the European Commission for the promotion of e-learning and aims at the diffusion of e-learning in the university in Finland, France and Italy. The study reports the results of a joint survey carried out on the universities of the respective countries by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI), by the *Conference des Presidents d'Université Française* (CPU) and by the Finnish Virtual University (FVU).

The project belongs to the set of initiatives designed to foster the creation of an European Area of Higher Education (as referred to from the European Community action in the Bologna Process) and its main ideas and aims can be summarized as follows:

- The systematic analysis of e-learning experiences and their sharing could help in the achievement of a progressive convergence of the university

Table 1. Participation of the Italian university system in the survey

	Universities	%
Universities which filled in the questionnaire	59	76.6
Universities which didn't fill in the questionnaire	18	23.4
Total	77	100.0

- systems in the individual countries towards the establishment of a unique European model, The collection and the dissemination of statistical information on the state and role of e-learning in the universities of the countries involved in the project are the main information to be shared. The project also aimed at the individuation of elements useful in identifying, understanding and implementing an observatory on e-learning evolution in the universities.

The results of the investigation were published in 2006 and are available online on the Website of the CRUI (2006).

In what follows some data on the participation in the survey of the Italian universities is reported and the information considered relevant for what follows is discussed.

In Table 1 the percentage in the distribution of Italian universities in the survey is shown.

When limiting to the universities participating in the survey (59 on 77) it emerged that only 64% among them (i.e., 49% of total number of universities) stated that they had an e-learning policy. Figure 1 depicts the percentage of universities reporting the presence of an e-learning policy.

It has to be noted that assuming 51% of the universities without an e-learning policy is realistic because the lack of an answer to the survey is widely synonym of a lack of policy on e-learning.

Furthermore the presence of ICT centres has been investigated and 84% of the universities answering to the survey declared the existence of at least one structure of this kind (i.e. 64,37% of the Italian universities). In Figure 2 is reported the graphic of the distribution. This datum has to be completed with the number of ICT centers in the Italian universities as reported in Table 2.

Figure 1. Percentage of the universities reporting the presence of an e-learning policy

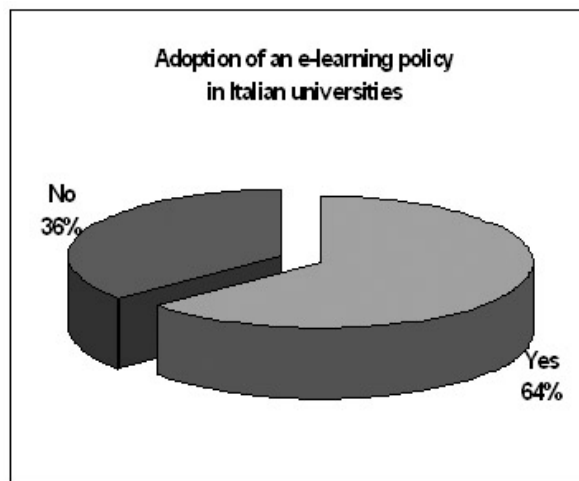


Table 2. Distribution of e-learning centres in Italian universities

Number of e-learning centers	Absolute value	%
One	26	33.77
Two	14	18.18
More than three	19	24.68

The only remark on the data in Table 2 is the lack of completeness of the same data, because it cannot be automatically deduced that universities which did not answer to the survey did not have one or more e-learning centre (they could have them in the faculties or in other structures).

At last when asked to indicate if research activity was made on e-learning and ICT use in the university only 49% among them declared they had this activity in their agenda (i.e., 37,55% of the universities).

Figure 3 reports how universities make or plan to make research on e-learning and ICT use in education in the Italian universities which answered to the survey.

It is clear from the data reported until now how complex is the context of the e-learning presence in Italian traditional universities where e-learning is present in single structures and is object of study and research but is not an integral part of the university management strategies in teaching.

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