

GUIDE Association: a model of excellence for academic cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

GUIDE Association - Global Universities in Distance Education – is a network of 71 European and international universities devoted to e-learning. The Association was founded by the Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi” to promote collaborative inter-institutional networks, better implement quality and achieve excellence in ODL universities.

Being networking a core concept for academic and research institutions involved in the transformation of traditional educational systems, GUIDE Association favours multiple interactions within a common space for the sharing of know-how and professional skills, answering to the current requirements of the new ICT society.

The introduction of such kind of cooperation model within universities implies the examination of the impact of new technology trends in the educational systems of different countries on both organisational and educational issues. To this end, GUIDE organizes a series of thematic workshops, especially focused on the analysis of the difficulties met by every single institution of a specific geographic area in the field of Information and Communication Technology. The meetings among members of the same area could include conferences, thematic workshops, seminars and discussion forums, which enable the establishment of a permanent communication system and a continuous professional interaction.

An integral part of GUIDE’ s mission is to highlight and favour the development of a new awakening strategy for the adoption of financial instruments, such as microcredit, smart cards and new modes of payment, intended to promote e-inclusion and e-accessibility.

Through the analysis of some microfinance interventions in developing countries such as Cameroon and Bolivia, the study intends to show the way in which education focusing on health and business has been integrated with microfinance.

Starting from such projects carried out in the fields of health, business, nutrition and finance in developing countries, GUIDE Association aims at promoting sustainable integration of ICT that would allow the access to higher education.

The workshops organised by the Association have also the scope of encouraging awareness of and confidence in whatever financial and educational services that are available locally.

In this framework GUIDE Association is currently involved in three main projects.

1. COOPERATION NETWORK PROJECT

International research is a process of inquiry that encourages critical thinking and international understanding for lifelong learning. Actively participating in research, creating a research network, and trying to enhance and strengthen such network through research contribute to your intellectual, personal, and professional growth. By the means of original explorations and a strong network, people will have the opportunity to produce new knowledge and contribute

to a global society. This is the reason why nowadays networking seems to be a core concept for academic and research institutions involved in the transformation of traditional education systems.

The introduction of such kind of cooperation model within Universities implies the examination of the impact new technology trends have on the education systems of different countries on both organisational and educational issues.

In this context, GUIDE Association is considering the need to foster a strategic approach to innovation, promoting the implementation of a culture of continuous exchange and the constitution of collaborative inter-institutional networks to better implement quality and achieve excellence in ODL universities.

Before starting any kind of cooperation though, it is absolutely necessary to advance a culture of cooperation that would spread beyond time and space. People coming from different countries should be aware that through the encounter with other cultures they would come out enriched and deeply transformed.

In a certain way culture and difference is revealed when another culture emerges. Clashing of differences gives rise to dynamism and creation reshaping the concept of academic knowledge.

Motivated by such an urge and thanks to the support of its members, GUIDE is conducting an in-depth investigation on the current development of e-learning and distance education cooperation research activities and partnerships.

The study has been accomplished through the submission of a questionnaire made of closed- and open-ended questions and has been designed considering four main areas of interest:

- ⇒ research models
- ⇒ research projects
- ⇒ international cooperation
- ⇒ international organizations

Each major area will raise a whole range of sub parameters.

The main objective of the questionnaire is to draw a clearer picture of the current European situation in terms of research cooperation network which can lead to the identification of common quality standards that should characterize the European area.

Starting with the analysis of the collaborative network models and research systems used and promoted by the 25 GUIDE European members, the study explores the possibility to define best practices for International Higher Education collaboration. As previously underlined, at this first stage the investigation is involving only EU countries to be successively extended to other areas like Africa, Asia and South America.

Considering the problems related to digital divide at local and global level and to the standardization and conformance in the implementation of ICT in training and research programs, ubiquitous networks seem to be the better answer to the needs of the environment of the new information society.

The main key issue is to establish common guidelines for an e-University cooperation model of excellence within a cross-cultural context, thanks to the sharing of best practices and professional expertise in the new networking technology.

The final result will be the draft of an official document signed by all participating universities which will represent a flexible instrument outlining some common principles for the definition of a suitable and efficient network infrastructure supporting information sharing, exchange and cooperation.

Other than supplying a possible good model for research cooperation network, the final document will attempt to underline the critical areas and could also be used to measure and track the quality standards of institutions cooperation network and to prioritise areas for potential improvement.

2. PROMOTION OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH MICROCREDIT

The second Project is a combined program constituted in collaboration with the *Comitato Nazionale Italiano Permanente per il Microcredito* called "Promotion of local development through microcredit". The program aims at promoting a local development in the Republic of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Republic of Haiti through Microfinance intervention that would include Awareness Actions, Capacity Building and Technical Assistance.

In particular the program intends to support the development of those countries where it is difficult to access credit and manage a small business by the strengthening of the institutional competencies and the promotion of financial inclusion especially for women and young people.

The reason for the development of such project lies in the enormous impact microcredit is having on those social communities that have already experimented it. Microcredit has awakened collective values such as faith, reciprocity and cooperation that constitute the productive sources of each society. Such instrument has demonstrated to be a great catalyst for those people who wish to grow as individuals. Nevertheless there are still many people who are excluded from it.

The main objective of the program is to contribute to the fight for poverty and social exclusion through the spreading of microcredit. For this scope it is necessary to consolidate the institutional competences of the interested countries and the improvement of the capacity to access microcredit and manage a small business of people who cannot give any real guaranty.

In order to achieve such goal a revolving credit will be founded on the 7th months of activities. In each one of the three countries the credit will be managed by a local credit institute that will be identified through the agreements signed between the managing institution, the executive institution, the financial institution and the borrowing Government.

2.1 Information and Awareness Activities

The awareness activities will take place through partnerships and information campaigns about microfinance and microcredit addressed to central authorities, local bodies, research organizations, credit institutions and financial associations.

Such agency will be conducted through the improvement of conventions and the organisation of workshops and seminars.

2.2 Capacity Building Activities

The Capacity Building is addressed to central and local bodies, credit institutions, GDL, steering Committees as well as to that part of the population who do not have access to credit. The activity is carried out through the constitution of a Steering Committee in each country who will have special functions; first of all that of defining the rules at the basis of revolving credit management.

Subsequently to such activity there will be the creation of working groups for social development (GDL) (one for each area and/or field of interest in each country) and the transfer of the necessary know-how to carry out one's own functions.

2.3 Technical Assistance

The technical assistance activity will occur through the development of virtual platforms between the Comitato and the respective countries as well as through the training of the platforms administration staff. The virtual platforms will be created during the first months of program activities since they can function as useful instruments also for those activities of technical support to GDL and Steering Committees. The aim is to ease the technical information and knowledge exchange as well as the access to specific data by promoting the dissemination of best practices and favouring the coordination of the involved institutions. Technical assistance will be available during the whole program and will be carried out through training sessions that will supply the necessary support to face the operative phase of the program. Specific activities will be technical and professional support to GDL and constant monitoring of the project. The Steering Committees, on the other hand, will be able to ask the executing institution to supply them with their consultancy and support of professionals on specific fields whenever necessary.

This program has been designed taking into account sustainability criteria. According to them development needs to offer basic environmental, social and economic services to all community members without threading the operability of the community system itself. Such balance has to be found within the program meant as a chance to supply possibilities of economic development without invalidating institutional, environmental and social systems that lean on such opportunities.

2.4 Institutional Sustainability

The activities the program promotes contribute to the sustainable development of the communities involved and of the local institutions.

The projects have been conceived following a precise approach that points at involving local stakeholders, being them representatives for the civil society or for governmental authorities in the training and responsibility process directed to the development of the three countries.

The activities of awareness and capacity building, the courses, the seminars, as well as the technical assistance, they all contribute to the development of a microfinance sustainable model. Hence such activation determines an important process of learning by doing.

2.5 Social and Cultural Sustainability

As already mentioned, the program intends to accomplish an objective of development destined to the implementation of those initiatives that favour the fight for poverty and the financial inclusion for those people who do not have access to credit.

The planning strategy follows the principle of equity and respects any social and cultural features of the beneficiary country. The meaning of equity the program is inspired to, reflects the pursuit of an economic development that would improve the life conditions of all those people who will actively participate to the projects without compromising the building capacity of those who will not be directly involved.

The attention towards equity issues is inspired from the concept of empowerment meant as increasing the possibilities of individuals and groups to actively control their own life.

The search for empowerment can be found in the whole program – (i) in the creation of opportunities that enable the weakest people and the underdogs to emancipate themselves from a condition of low responsibilities and low opportunities, where the relationship with the institutions is essentially characterised as public assistance – (ii) in a prompt agency such as the constant involvement of local human resources.

In this framework the field of financial sustainability will be also involved (it will be possible to employ less resources for travel and accommodation expenses).

Through microcredit the above mentioned projects want to open a great number of possibilities to fight poverty but we have to bear in mind that such a fight moves away from the logic of charity to embrace that of responsibility instead. A double responsibility that is able to involve microfinance institutions on one hand and the beneficiaries on the other hand in a mutual faith relationship. The financial resources become in this way instruments of social justice and empowerment.

3. FORMAMENTE PROJECT & BROAD CONCLUSIONS

The third project GUIDE is GUIDE Association's Official Journal *FormaMente*, published twice a year and dedicated to the multidisciplinary research in the field of the new Information and Communication Technologies and its application in higher education and e-learning sectors. Such project is not only strictly connected with the Cooperation Network Project in terms of mutual objects but can also be seen as one of the answers. *FormaMente* is indeed a qualified instrument oriented towards knowledge sharing, adoption of quality standards and promotion of scientific communication.

Providing contributions selected from high-level, specialized journals, and original articles, *FormaMente* harmonically combines the function of an international observatory of contributions of excellence and of an instrument of theoretical and practical thinking.

As an interactive tool for research dissemination and sharing of outcomes the review represents a common space where the different interested areas could cooperate and take actions.

The Journal aims at disseminating valuable information and research materials for professionals, students, teachers and researchers, improving the collaboration and knowledge sharing on issues related to the new information age and the role of higher education institutions in the globalized knowledge society.

Research themes of *FormaMente* include distance learning methodologies and technologies, e-learning applications, case studies and best practices, new technologies for education, e-communication, mobile learning, management of contents and courses, and universities cooperation.

GUIDE Association has found in *FormaMente* an effective instrument to foster its members' scientific communication in order to improve knowledge sharing, adoption of quality standards and exchange of good practices and project models of excellence.

The Journal is editorially structured in three fixed sections:

- *Research*, which includes articles and materials;
- *Applications*, which comprises case studies and best practices;
- *Highlights*, offering additional materials on selected events, meetings and conferences plus interviews with outstanding professionals and researchers in the Open and Distance Learning world.

FormaMente is a multilingual journal: articles and materials are published in their original language and are provided with keywords, a short abstract in English and an additional synthesis in Italian.

The review pays particular attention to bibliographies: any mentioned e-mail address is constantly checked and updated, whilst bibliographic items provided in the integral version, make the paper remarkable in the field of anthropological studies.

These characteristics together with the deep accuracy paid in the elaboration, have enabled *Formamente* to achieve the CNR's code ISSN – International Standard Serial Number.

In order to consolidate its own objectives, the review takes advantage of a Scientific Committee, set up by GUIDE Founding Members, who represent an international panorama of recently founded and well established Open Universities. Scientific Committees Members, who are skilled in different research fields, help to provide a sense of a "global" knowledge dimension, thanks to their different anthropological and cultural identities, institutional goals and students variety.

The cover page of *Formamente* is the image of one of the most representative statues of the ancient Rome, "the girl from Anzio", which is supposed to represent a young priestess offering Apollo, the God of creativity, the votive symbols of its cult.

The graphic has turned the image towards a symbolic confluence of old and new, where the statue's plasticity and the architectural solidity constitute the sign of a wish and comes to symbolise a revival gathered in its continuum, technological as well.

FormaMente is a paper review, but is also synthetically available online at GUIDE website. Its basic principle is that of a rapid and evolutionary information spreading whereas the review is intended as a sort of evolutionary editorial model of digital preprint, capable of satisfying the interest of GUIDE members with updated news, index and thematic abstracts.

FormaMente online starts a global and interactive action of collective and connective confrontation for the whole community, which is self-determining and active, just like a structure of continuous growing.

By this way GUIDE joins evolutionary methods and research paths to create a knowledge platform and a shared and prospective training.

The paper review proposes a particular mixed model: free publication upon request of GUIDE members, who, thanks to their authority, qualify and certify the quality of the original papers proposed and the selective publication of already certified papers, chosen from selected reviews of excellence and of technological innovation.

The above mentioned are the scientific intents and propositions that we intend to pursue.

It is difficult to evaluate whether *FormaMente* has achieved these objectives since, over the first year, it has published two double issues.

Number zero, the draft issue, has encouraged us to carry on, as well as the pleasant approvals, which our editorial office often receives.

Scientific Committee Members help us with their contributions and reviews, and accredited structures at international level recognise us the role of observers and qualified mediators of scientific information.

We believe that this ambitious policy of scientific information could be ascribed to criteria of eco-sustainability, cooperation and knowledge sharing, from which GUIDE takes inspiration.