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INTRODUCTORY WORDS TO THE CONFERENCE ON DISTANCE LEARNING – A 110 YEARS OLD NEW ENTITY

It is a great pleasure to be invited to this prestigious and important conference and it is a wonderful thing to see that this conference is addressing one of the most important and vital educational methods that based on the distribution of knowledge through technology and multimedia.

The term distance education represents a diversity of educational models that have in common the physical separation of the faculty member and some or all of the students. As with all types of education, the various distance education models are built around the central components of the instructional process: presentation of content; interaction with faculty, peers, and resources; practical application, and assessment. Each distance education model uses technologies in various ways to address some or all of these components. The various distance education models differ not only in the types of technologies that are used, but also in the locus of control over the pace and place of instruction. In some models, the faculty and institution have primary control, as is the case in a traditional classroom environment. In others, the control rests with the student.

For the noblest of reasons, some countries have created a system of free education. A good portion of the government budget is used to support this huge educational system. This is certainly, in theory, a wonderful attempt to help the general population. However, depending on certain high school exams, many students are placed in colleges not of their choice and where they cannot major in their chosen field.

Some say that these students, when they cannot get into the free college of their choice, should just apply to one of the private colleges. Unfortunately, the cost of education at most of these private schools is well beyond the ability of the vast majority of the population. Here it comes the advantage of the low tuition of the Distance learning programs.

A statistic done before the year 2000 by UNISCEO indicated that every working person must go back to school after graduation at least three times during their working life, otherwise their knowledge will be outdated. After the beginning of the new millennium the number of times changed from three to five. Of course with long working hours everyone has, a classroom attendance become difficult if not impossible; but if we bring the classroom to the office or home, it can be a solution.

Also in countries where teachers are rare, the classroom education is limited to the views of a few people.

In the above cases, distance learning holds a great promise. It can bring education to people who cannot afford the more expensive schools, or to attend the class-

rooms, and it can bring an education framed by many minds into the classroom. As one of my Colleagues told me, "I am preri smart and I can quote maybe two or three hundreds experts. But a student with Internet access can get quotes from a thousand experts!"

It is true; the Internet can give us the accessibility to unlimited sources of knowledge and it is worthy to know that the Internet users in December 1995 were 16 million and in February 2002 are 544.2 million, it is 34 times.

Of course, raw information needs guidance with which to make sense of the data, and that's why the teacher always comes into play. Distance learning doesn't improve on the teacher; it just gives the teacher a wider way to reach students.

If faculty chooses to give written examinations, students will have access to a proctored examination site. The originating institution provides Proctors. Proctors check student photo ID to verify the identity of the test-taker and monitor the process to ensure that the same conditions apply in all locations. Examinations and its security is always a concern. Well the exams for distance learning students are exactly treated as for those in the residence one.

In some countries they prefer that the student attend one day per week in the classroom to go over the course with the teacher. Those students who attend one day on campus, or those who do not wish to come to the classroom will have access to academic advising services. Advising can be accomplished by telephone or e-mail.

Faculty members typically have office hours on the net during which time they deal with questions and concerns of individual students. If the students wish to ask questions after office ours, they have to send their questions via e-mail and wait-not more than 24 hours- to get an answer.

Much of the planning for traditional course delivery assumes easy access to campus-based resources such as library holdings, science laboratories, and computer software and hardware. In distance education, the faculty and administrators work together to think creatively about how to accomplish the educational objectives when students may not have ready access to all the campus-based resources. Solutions to particular problems may involve altered assignments, inter institutional resource-sharing, special services at off-campus sites, and greater use of computer technologies and networks.

Faculties are likely to be more confident and effective if they understand why & what they are being asked to do. They need to know the capabilities of the technologies available to them so that they can use these tools effectively to meet their instructional objectives. Orientation and training are scheduled well in advance of the beginning of the semester to give faculty sufficient time to redesign, modify, or adapt their course and assignments specifically for the new delivery mode.

One of the most challenging aspects of distance education is to provide students who are not on campus with experiences that are equivalent to those of other students in fully equipped laboratories. A critical initial step is for faculty to determine how crucial a hands-on experience in a laboratory setting is in ensuring that students achieve the desired learning. For example, it is possible to design activities that teach students the skills of close observation without conducting lab-based experi-

ments. In the same way, they might go to decentralized locations - study centers or regional campuses - to do lab assignments.

There are many more questions that must be considered: such things as transfer of credits, maintenance of equipment, distribution of texts and other materials, But there is one question for which the answer must be YES! Do the students learn? Well, it has been proven that the students who goes out looking for information and depends completely on themselves are better quality than most of those who were just fed the information by the teacher.

One other important issue is the accreditation. The Distance Learning universities in the States can't be accredited by any of the regional accreditation agencies, at least for two simple reasons, one is the residency requirement and the other is a Library with twenty thousand books. The Distance Learning universities realized how important is the accreditation to protect the ligament universities from the fraud ones, therefore they have launched their own accreditation agencies some of them are nationally and the others are internationally, however they all understand that the employer care about the quality of the employee's work not the accreditation of their degree.

Please allow me to mention one successful model, which was created to work out this problem. We started a dual degree program with a several traditional universities worldwide. The main aim of the program is to provide students with quality and low tuition of American Education at the student's own country. A delegation from the affiliated university and us gets together and approves one joint program in which the student will study. Upon completion of the degree requirements the student will earn two diplomas. This program has been successfully working with notable universities and academic institutions in the following countries: Spain, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, China, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapour, and USA. I am willing to further explain the program in details, after this session.

Distance learning may be the future on our doorstep, but we must remember that the most important word in the phrase "Distance learning" is *learning!* It is learning that will bring the whole world into the future, not just the technology.

Before I finish I would like to mention that the university of Chicago started the first distance learning program in 1892 therefore I am reminding those who didn't start Distance Learning program in their university yet that they are 110 years late.