

AROUND THE GLOBE

Steve Wheeler

University of Plymouth, UK

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Toward the end of the 1980s, reforms in the Soviet Union heralded the demise of communist influence over Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the intervening decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former Eastern Bloc nations have been subject to economic, social and political upheavals. These unprecedented changes have been all-pervasive, affecting every aspect of society. The Eastern European states have emerged from the shadow of communism into the brave new world of the information age and are now quickly catching up with their Western counterparts. My recent tours of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic and Romania gave me evidence that educators are beginning to exploit the potential of information and communication technologies, forging new flexible education paradigms based on the promise of technology-supported learning. Distance education provision may be embryonic in areas, but it is growing as a potent force in Eastern Europe, epitomizing the changes in teaching and learning approaches that are presently underway. Two reports highlighting

these changes are presented in this issue. The first is by Helena Zlamalova, who is Head of the National Center for Distance Education at the Technical University of Liberec in the Czech Republic. Zlamalova's report offers an insight into the present state of Distance Education in her country.

STATUS REPORT

Helena Zlamalova

National Center for Distance Education, Czech Republic

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Distance education appeared as a new educational technology in the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 1990s. The changes that were experienced were also reflected in the sphere of education and new ways of communication where cooperation between the countries in Eastern and Western Europe could be applied. At that time, a significant decrease in the supply and offer of external studies opportunities was witnessed. The majority of universities,

• **Steve Wheeler**, Graduate School of Arts and Education, Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, Douglas Avenue, Exmouth, EX8 2AT, United Kingdom, E-mail: swheeler@plymouth.ac.uk

The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 1(4), 2000, pp. 351–354
Copyright © 2001 Information Age Publishing

ISSN 1528-3518
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

and a great number of high schools, cancelled extramural studies that were rather ineffective and very demanding for both the students and the educational institution. Subsequently, however, it has become evident that the demand for external forms of study is very high and that the interest in such programs is continuously growing. This is why new, more effective forms of external studies were necessary. At the same time, new information and communication technologies found their way through and distance education as one of these new technologies appeared.

In the second half of the 1990s, several universities started preparing and running distance education courses, mainly in the sphere of lifelong learning. Later on, first efforts to create courses and realize a good-quality gradual study program using distance education technology appeared. The majority of universities in the Czech Republic have now joined in the efforts of preparing distance education courses. It is obvious, however, that technical universities and younger regional institutions are much more progressive and flexible in doing this. The traditional universities are much more conservative in accepting new technologies and in using them in the teaching process.

The main problems that had to be faced were the legislature limits and lack of information available among the public and the teachers themselves about distance education technologies, their principles, functionality, and about the opportunities that arise with the use of this particular technology. Carrying out different activities whose aim is to inform and disseminate the technology help us narrow this problem. The National Center for Distance Education (NCDE) has been running a training course on online distance learning technology for the employees of educational institutions for four years.

The new Higher Education Act, which came into effect on January 1, 1999, put the distance education model on equal terms with face-to-face education. Thanks to that we experienced a greater interest from the sphere

of higher education institutions which since then have promoted a broader use of this technology. The new Act regarding lifelong learning is still being discussed on the expert level.

The NCDE runs educational courses for teachers and employees of educational institutions to introduce the principles of distance education technologies. It presents how to process teaching materials and how to organize the studies, and it trains distance education tutors. Various activities take place at the NCDE during the year—special seminars, discussions and lectures for both Czech and foreign experts.

There are several courses delivered using the distance education method in the sphere of further education of teachers. These are in the fields of economics (management, marketing, business), information technology, and other disciplines. Most of these courses are delivered in a combined form—part of the course uses the face-to-face form and the remaining part uses the distance education technology. There are 53 different programs and courses registered in our database, which are run by both the state and private educational institutions. The offer of distance education programs, however, still represents only a minor share of the educational provision in our country.

We believe that the situation in other countries in central and Eastern Europe is comparable to that of the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the situation in the Czech Republic might be considered slightly above average, bearing in mind the number of programs already carried out and in the legislative support as seen in the new Higher Education Act.

The Phare project “Multicountry Cooperation in Distance Education” constituted a great support and a significant help in the process of introducing and developing distance education technology in the Czech Republic. All the funds that were provided were used effectively, with emphasis on all aspects of future development. The NCDE and the four regional Distance Education Study Centers form the backbone of the National Network of Distance

Education, which functions well and is very effective. It has to be stated, however, that the subsequent support from state funds is very limited, and thus the development has slowed down. We would mostly need funds to cover the preparation of study materials, as a great number of those institutions that are interested in using distance education technology and would be able to realize such projects cannot finance these activities themselves.

Links to the Phare Project Website can be found at: <http://www.dante.net/phare.html>

The second report for this issue of "Around the Globe" comes from Romania, and is provided by Susan English, who is an online tutor for the British Open University. This year's workshop was held in late June at Sumuleu Ciuc, Transylvania, in the beautiful northeastern Romanian countryside. Previous events have attracted academics and experts from the UK, Asia, Germany, Spain, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as several Eastern European countries.

CONFERENCE REPORT

Susan English

Open University, UK

Romanian Internet Learning Workshop (RILW2000): The Internet as a Vehicle for Teaching and Learning. June 26-July 8, 2000 Sumuleu Ciuc, Romania

Details of the conference can be found at: <http://rilw.emp.paed.uni-muenchen.de/>

The fourth Romanian Internet Learning Workshop was based this year at a new and tranquil venue in the beautiful countryside of Sumuleu Ciuc. The Workshop experience mirrored previous events, which have consistently been of a friendly and informal nature involving fruitful professional discussions as well as several cultural excursions and social occasions.

There are three dimensions to RILW: an international conference for the dissemination of knowledge and experience; a "summer school" for students; and a forum for commit-

ted individuals to work together in the exploration and promotion of learning and teaching on the Internet. Support and organization has involved the following institutions: the Cultural Society- POLYGON; "Ludwig Maximilian" University of Munich; "Babes-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca; Teacher's House, Cluj; the University of Bucharest and the Socrates/Erasmus program. The workshop chairman, Mihai Jalobeanu, and co-chairman, Nicolae Nistor have been driven by the need in Romania for a reliable information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure combined with new thinking regarding education—especially teacher training.

This year there were 40 delegates and students listed as participants and it was, as ever, a valuable opportunity for old friends and new from Romania, Moldova, Germany, Israel, Italy, the UK, and the United States to meet and learn from each other. Nicolai Nistor, of Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, gave the opening presentation in which his paper, about the authenticity of problem-based learning (PBL) in virtual learning environments, was discussed. His thesis argued that problems given to learners needed to be relevant to their experience and that the informational context, in which learners solved the problem, should display realistic features. Other papers and tutorials given by him included perspectives on cooperative learning and computer-mediated communication.

Preparing teachers to use ICT was another theme of the conference. William Lindsay (University of Strathclyde, UK) identified challenges and presented examples of strategies employed by teachers when using the Internet in the classroom. Issues regarding the immediate environment of an IT facility, the technical support available, skill development, and access and nature of Internet use were discussed. The latter issue of Internet use for learning and teaching was also featured with regard to higher education studied from a distance: The Tutor's Perspective (Susan English, Open University, UK) on a Web-based degree program in technology which involved the use

of FirstClass conferencing, and a design and delivery perspective involving the WebCOSY system—online degree programs in beam physics (Bela Erdélyi, Michigan State University, USA). The recently implemented web-aided courses in a school of technology (Israel Zilberstein, Open University, Israel) reported a similar outcome with regard to increased communication and workload for tutors that was experienced by the Web-based technology course at the Open University, UK.

A model for Web-based teaching in a classroom situation—specifically designed for language teaching and learning (Uwe Richter, Anglia Polytechnic University, UK) gave focus to the developing teaching methodologies and how they supported different learner types. These theoretical issues were augmented by a tutorial offering a deeper exploration in relation to psychological theory and in particular, transactional distance (Steve Wheeler, University of Plymouth, UK) which offered an explanation for aspects of communication characteristics without visual signals so often experienced in on-line teaching and learning.

The workshop this year was marked by an additional activity involving all the participants who produced a mission statement for RILW, which will be central to future funding and support efforts of the organizing committee. The aims of RILW were defined as:

- Promotion of Internet use in education and training, including resources and evaluation;
- Skill development in on-line communication;
- Encouragement of access to education and training for disadvantaged groups;
- Exploration of the ethical implications of Internet use;
- Enhancement of links with the international educational research community; and
- Promotion of intercultural awareness and exchange between Romania and other European countries.

RILW is provisionally planned in the same place for August 2001. We hope the unique nature of this conference will attract a greater number of sponsors and participants.

End Note

This regular column provides reports on international distance education developments. Contributions are invited from all readers, in any field of distance education practice, and can be about innovation in practice, new technologies, events or resources, and news about people. If you wish to make a contribution, please send it in MS Word format as an attachment to: swheeler@plymouth.ac.uk for consideration.