

AROUND THE GLOBE

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On the first day of May 2004, the European Union initiated its largest single expansion, welcoming 10 new member states. Several of these, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the three Baltic states were once former Soviet satellite states. Any visitor to these countries will note that the climate of change is palpable, with much needed infrastructural funding being poured in to improve such areas as transportation, telecommunications, and education. It was against this social and political backdrop that the 13th European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) annual conference took place in the beautiful city of Budapest, Hungary, in June 2004. The clearly apposite theme of the conference was “New Challenges and Partnerships in an Enlarged European Union.” The event attracted over 400 delegates from some 45 countries, including almost all of the new member states. In this article I report briefly on some of the highlights and key events of the conference.

REPORT ON THE 13TH EDEN ANNUAL CONFERENCE, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY, JUNE 16-19, 2004

The EDEN Organisation

EDEN was established in 1991 to provide a community of practice within the European continent for professionals and academics engaged in the practice of distance education. Since then, it has held annual conferences all over Europe and has recently also conducted research seminars across the continent. EDEN is the most comprehensive European association of its kind, and last year boasted a membership of 110 institutional members and over 500 individual members in 41 countries. It also has members in eight countries outside of Europe, including Canada, the United States, and countries in Asia and Africa. EDEN's recent change in name from Education to *E-Learning* was a clear indicator that the emphasis for this conference was geared toward elec-

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tronic delivery. Many of the 11 keynote addresses and 140 papers presented at the conference emphasized this shift in perception that distance education is blurring the boundaries between distance, time, and place. Some speakers debated exactly what the “e” stood for in e-learning, and some challenged the notion that distance was still a useful word to use to describe the work they were engaged in within their respective institutions. Generally, the feel of the conference was one of quiet anticipation of what the next few years would bring in terms of innovation, changes in practice, and technology to enhance and extend the experiences of students in all fields of education.

Budapest

Flying via Amsterdam into Budapest for the first time in 7 years, I erroneously anticipated that the city would be much the same as I left it in 1997. My first trip to the city was to attend the 6th Annual EDEN conference, and this is due mainly to the fact that the General Secretary of EDEN, Dr Andras Szucs, lives and works in Budapest, and it is here that the EDEN secretariat is based. Budapest has a long and illustrious history. The first town, built by the Celts in the first century B.C., occupied about 30 hectares along the slopes of Gellért Hill. It was called Ak Ink (literally “a spring rich in water”). Archaeological finds suggest that it may have been a densely populated settlement, with a separate district of craftsmen specializing in pottery and bronze. It may also have been a trading center, as the coins from different regions would suggest. The town was occupied by the Romans in the early Christian era, but was then overrun by the Goths in the fifth century and then the Huns. It was also a part of the Ottoman Empire under the Turks, before becoming a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire prior to the Great War of 1914-1918. Budapest is actually comprised of three ancient towns, Obuda, Pest, and Buda. Sadly, the citizens of Budapest have endured violent struggles through two world

wars in which it has been regularly partitioned. In 1956, there was an uprising against the Soviets, resulting in running street battles. The scars of the bullets can still be seen in the walls of some of the older buildings in the city even to this day.

Much of the city of Budapest is still the same as I remembered it, including the exquisite Hotel Gellért, my own lodgings for the week. Gellért has its own natural spa beneath the building and a façade that dates back several centuries. In the past few years, Hungary has seen an upturn in its economic fortunes and there is clear evidence that the country is beginning to emerge from its post-Soviet doldrums. Now a part of the expanded European Union, it is eligible for substantial European Social funding to improve its infrastructure further and begin to compete in the global economy. On the outskirts of the city, new industrial estates, business parks, and high-tech facilities have been built, and it was to one of these that delegates were directed for EDEN 2004.

The EDEN Conference

The conference venue was inadequately signposted and hard to find, and in the heat of a Budapest summer it is particularly undesirable to trudge around for an hour or more trying to find the place to register for the conference. However, once there, all visitors had to agree the conference venue was quite impressive. The Conference Aula is a newly constructed conference center located in the Information Park just half a mile away from the host institution, the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. It is surrounded by dozens of other contemporary buildings and boasts all the leading-edge technologies regular conference-goers would expect, and purpose-built conference halls that hold up to 500 delegates. The conference was formally opened in the afternoon of June 16th, with the president of EDEN, Ingeborg Bo (Norway) welcoming delegates to the conference and introducing the rector of the university to us.

Akos Detrekoi (Hungary) welcomed us formally to the event and wished us a successful conference.

The first keynote speech was delivered by Umberto Paolucci (Italy), vice president of Microsoft (Europe, Middle East, and Asia region) who presented on the subject of "Developing eLearning Communities in the European Union." He took an industry perspective, which was warmly received by many, but perhaps not by some of the academics present, who preferred to avoid consideration of *push technologies*. This speech was followed by the second keynote, presented by David Vincent (UK), who is pro-vice chancellor for strategy at the British Open University. Vincent talked about regionalization and educational policy, providing a counter foil to the earlier technology-led message.

The evening was opened by a welcome reception at the nearby university, where a buffet meal and drinks were served. Delegates were able to mingle and get to know each other a little better prior to the commencement of the main conference.

The second day of the conference, June 17th, dawned bright and sunny, and delegates made their way to Conference Aula along the banks of the dark, slow-moving river Danube. Four keynotes were presented back-to-back in the morning session, which represented a predominantly political agenda for the event. The first speaker was the Hungarian Minister for Education, Balint Magyar (an appropriate surname—it means "Hungarian") who addressed the audience on the issue of how Hungary would apply the pan-European education initiatives. He was followed by Muruja Gutierrez-Diaz (Spain) who is the head of unit for Multi-Media, Culture, Education and Training at the European Commission. She presented e-learning as a panacea to the problems and challenges current within the EU. She made a somewhat techno-romanticist argument that e-learning can be used as a strategy to reduce early school leaving and provide a more effective environment and culture for lifelong learning.

Our third keynote speaker was Angelos Agalianos (Greece) also of the European Commission, and responsible for research into the Knowledge Economy and Society. He spoke on the theme of the use of ICTs in education in Europe and presented some findings from a social science perspective. His main message was the technology is deterministic and that as educators we should be moving toward a more pragmatist conceptualization of technology in education. Our final keynote speaker for the morning session was an advisor to the Lithuanian prime minister. Renaldas Gudauskas presented a paper on the theme of distance and e-learning in the context of the knowledge economy. He made the key point that unlimited learning is the next generation of anytime, anywhere learning, and that we should "make the future of distance education, rather than defend its past." While these may appear be excellent sound-bites, this reviewer detected the underlying political rhetoric and wondered how much actual substance lay behind this thinking.

After a break for refreshments, the parallel paper sessions started, and with themes such as "State of the Art Perspectives," "Integration of ICTs and e-learning into Universities," "Structuring Digital Knowledge," and several focused workshops, delegates were spoiled for choice and some expressed their disappointment at having to miss papers when two or more were presented simultaneously in different sessions. Nevertheless, the quality of the paper presentations was fairly high, and speakers were well-supported by the excellent technical staff and administrators throughout the event.

After lunch, taken in a large white marquee outside the conference venue, sessions continued with headings such as "Innovative e-learning Solutions in Schools," "Networked Virtual Universities," "Development, Implementation and Evaluation of Virtual Environments and Laboratories," and "Capacity Building through e-learning in the New Member States." Delegates entered into lively debate in the sessions I attended, and much was made of the interna-

tional audience's experiences and backgrounds for a truly dynamic forum of discussion. Sessions continued until 6 pm, after which delegates were free to sample some of the culinary delights of the city, including the famous goulash, and a huge variety of poultry dishes familiar to visitors to Hungary. Dining out in Budapest is reasonably inexpensive and, provided one can avoid the intrusive violinists who seem to frequent some of the restaurants, a splendid time is usually guaranteed. Except, of course, for the unfortunate German delegate who was showered by a full litre of pilsner beer by an inept waiter during our later-night soiree!

The third day of the conference continued in much the same vein, with five keynote speeches in the first session. Some delegates complained that five consecutive keynote speeches was perhaps a little excessive, but most agreed that the quality of the presentations merited the discomfort of sitting for over 2 hours in the same place. The first keynote speaker was Werner Herrmann (Germany) a senior advisor to the director for policy issues at CEDEFOP. Herrmann spoke on the subject of e-learning in a global society and challenged the delegates to decide whether e-learning is a vision or a practical model with which to realize the dream of anytime, anywhere learning. He was followed by Michelle Selinger (UK) who is the education manager for Cisco. Selinger gave an impressive presentation on the cultural considerations of e-learning and made the important point that not all e-learning is globally transferable, but that language artefacts such as idioms and cultural interpretation are barriers that need to be addressed. The next issue of QRDE will present an extended interview with Michelle Selinger, expanding upon her vision of e-learning for the near future. Our third keynote speaker was Michael Hill (Canada), who presented a talk on the conceptualization of *place*. This was a keynote that appealed to all social scientists present, as it challenged our preconceptions of exactly what place and space actually mean in light of the new virtual and

communication technologies. However, his bald statement that "cyberspace is not a place" caused a little dissention, particularly as what students perceive generally tends to dictate how they behave, and this is true also in virtual environments. Claudio Dondi (Italy) one of EDEN's two vice presidents, followed with a critical review of e-learning in light of the Lisbon process. The final keynote of the morning was presented by Johan Van Oost (Belgium), who eulogized about the power of e-learning and its capability to cross social classes and boundaries. The delegates then took a welcome and well-earned coffee break.

More parallel sessions and workshops extended into the early evening, with themes such as "Measuring and Improving Quality and Effectiveness of Electronic Distance Education," "E-Learning and the Legal Environment," and "Sustainable Digital Environments." Delegates then returned to their hotels to prepare for the Annual EDEN Conference dinner. We were taken down to the water's edge where we boarded a boat, and then were treated to a short cruise up the Danube before landing on an island named Ladik Csarda. The restaurant on this island is picturesque, with a thatched roof, and wooden carvings throughout. With a resident troupe of dancers and musicians all dressed in traditional Hungarian costumes, the evening was a tremendous and memorable event for EDEN 2004. And the food was excellent, too.

The final day of the conference is traditionally a time when delegates are preparing to leave by checking out of their hotels in large numbers. Several parallel sessions took place in the morning and, although the conference halls were a little depleted of delegates, there were enough remaining to sustain the discussion and maintain the liveliness of debate. Many of the delegates were talking about staying an extra few days to take in the many sights of Hungary. Special trips had been organized by the EDEN secretariat to transfer delegates to mountain resorts and other beauty spots in the vicinity of Budapest so that our host country could be more widely appreciated. EDEN

2004 will be remembered for its charming surroundings, long keynote sessions, excellent food and drink, and an environment within which over 400 delegates from 45 countries enjoyed a stimulating and challenging series of debates on the nature and future of distance education and e-learning in an enlarged Europe.

This year's annual EDEN conference took place June 20-23, at the Dipoli Congress Centre, near Helsinki, Finland. To visit the EDEN

Website, go to: <http://www.eden-online.org>
and to visit EDEN's online journal EURODL
go to: <http://www.eurodl.org>

If you have any news, conference reports or information relating to the international context of distance education, please send your contributions to *Around the Globe* at: steve.wheeler@plymouth.ac.uk for consideration.