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EDITORIAL

From November 18 to 21, CREAD (Consortio-Red de Educacion A Distancia, i.e. Consortium-Distance Education Network) convenes its second general assembly meeting in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic. In conjunction with the meeting, this DEOSNEWS issue presents an executive summary of a research study among distance education organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean. It also includes some information about CREAD, the organization that sponsored the study. The author of the report, Armando Villarroel, can be contacted on e-mail address: axv4@psuvm.psu.edu

Copies of the complete Research Report are available, at no cost, from the IOHE Secretariat, 3460 rue de La Perade, Suite 1.10, Sainte-Foy (Quebec) Canada G1X3Y5, telephone (418)644-6910, fax (418)646-3039. Information about CREAD and its newsletter is available from the same address.

One of the challenges that CREAD faces is to establish a communication network for distance educators in Latin America and the Caribbean. This editor is convinced that Internet is the best solution available, and

offers to support the establishment of a service similar to--or adjunct to--DEOS for Spanish speakers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE OAS-IOHE-CREAD PROJECT

Research Study
By Armando Villarroel

INTRODUCTION

Last November, during the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) World Conference in Caracas, CREAD (Consortio-Red de Educacion A Distancia, i.e. Consortium-Distance Education Network) was officially founded with the purpose of enhancing cooperation among distance education institutions in the Americas. Thanks to support from the IOHE (Inter-American Organization for Higher Education), OAS (Organization of American States), and CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) the first steps for the operation of the consortium have been taken.

From January to September 1991, a research study was carried out to identify priority needs for cooperation in the field. Results are to be presented to CREAD members during the Second General Assembly to be held in Santo Domingo, The Dominican Republic in November 1991. The present report is a summary of the main discussions, results, conclusions, and recommendations of the study in question.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following conclusions and recommendations were drawn from the analysis of data gathered from a sample of over two hundred and fifty institutions. The conclusions have been classified according to five specific objectives listed here:

OBJECTIVE I

To build a comprehensive, centralized data bank with information pertaining to inter-American cooperation efforts in the field of Distance Education.

Conclusions

A list of all the institutions participating in the study was compiled, with the corresponding names, addresses, areas of interest and programmes. The list constitutes the first Directory of inter-American programmes which are interested in participating in collaboration programmes in Distance Education. The characteristics of the programmes are:

- General characteristics:

Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil have a considerable number of Distance Education programmes as a result of decentralization.

Most of the programmes are financed by the institutions themselves.

Even when they have a large geographical coverage, the majority serve a relatively modest number of users.

The majority are designed for a university population, technological education, and professional and teacher training.

The non-formal educational programmes consist mostly of extension courses and continuing education programmes.

- Instructional Materials Used:

Mainly printed material supplemented by audio-visuals are used.

Audio-visuals, when they are used, are just as often produced by the institution as they are purchased from an external source.

Computers are not generally used for educational purposes.

Half the programmes do not use television. Those that do use television use it to broadcast pre-recorded programmes.

Few programmes have satellite receivers, which makes the extensive use of satellites for educational purposes difficult.

The methods of communication most often used for teaching support activities are the telephone and written correspondence.

- Services provided to the users:

The majority of the programmes have a network of institutional branch offices that offer users various services, which is an important finding since it indicates the existence of a significant, well-

established infrastructure.

Financial aid is not generally offered to users.

The support services that are most used, centrally and at branch offices, are libraries.

- The use of technology:

Word processors are largely used for transcribing written materials.

Computers are mostly used for administrative purposes. Few programmes use computers to prepare and grade exams or for academic research.

The various operational units (offices) of a programme mainly use the telephone and ordinary mail to communicate with each other. Facsimiles are used only moderately.

- Prospects for development:

Those responsible for the programmes believe that the programmes should emphasize those activities which they are already presently carrying out--namely, university and technological programmes in terms of formal education, and extension courses in a non-formal setting.

Regarding what they perceive to be the most positive features of their programmes, the majority cited the capacity to access isolated populations and the flexibility in their application.

The quality of the materials, the methods of training the personnel and the methods of communication were frequently mentioned as the aspects of the programme needing improvement.

Recommendations:

The register that has been created as a result of the research study should be used to begin a new data bank that will constitute the basic source of information of CREAD's planning. This data bank should be constantly fed with information. When planning future activities, and when considering the additional use of computers, take into account that institutional branch offices have already been established and, often, these offices already possess the necessary equipment.

OBJECTIVE II:

Based on the remarks of leading distance educators, to identify the needs of Distance Education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Conclusions

Regarding the institutional leaders' opinions on the needs of Distance Education programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean, the following were mentioned most often:

Training human resources

- in Distance Education:

- Distance Education courses at the postgraduate level and for general training in Distance Education;
- Courses in conventional classroom setting leading to a formal diploma in specialized areas (Master or Doctorate);
- Apprenticeships or training programmes;
- Courses in conventional classroom setting on the methodology used in Distance Education.

- in substantive areas of knowledge:

- Courses at a distance;
- Apprenticeships or training programmes.

- Production of teaching materials:

- Sharing of experiences on the methodologies used for the production of audio-visuals;
- Sharing of experiences on the operation of working groups;
- Exchange of produced materials.

- Means of support:

- Television;
- Radio;
- Newspapers.

- Telecommunications:

- Video-conferences;
- Communication networks;
- Teleconferences;

- Electronic mail.
- Use of computers:
 - Academic research;
 - Preparing exams.
 - Correcting exams.
- Student support:
 - Bibliographical and data-banks;
 - Libraries;
- Research and information:
 - Establishment of electronic forums;
 - Exchange of information.
- Conducting joint research:
 - Assessment of methodologies;
 - Comparative studies.

Recommendations

Now that the areas with the greatest perceived needs have been identified, specific projects should be carried out, ensuring that they include the participation of the largest possible number of people, have the widest coverage possible and encourage the independent development of the programmes.

OBJECTIVE III

To identify possible areas of inter-institutional cooperation in Distance Education between Latin American and Caribbean programmes.

Conclusions

The information that was gathered leads us to conclude that, in spite of their multiple needs, the educators in charge of the programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean have not succeeded in implementing a "culture" of cooperation amongst themselves. We hope to fill this void, which is one of

the network's "raison d'etre", with the operation of CREAD. Four aspects that would lend themselves well to horizontal collaboration should be mentioned at this point:

- Sharing experiences on the writing and design of printed self-instructional materials;
- Sharing experiences on the operation of working groups (for the production of printed materials);
- Sharing experiences on specific ways to administer distance education programmes at a distance;
- Elaboration of possible cooperation projects in the field of Distance Education.

Recommendations

Taking into account the four aspects mentioned above, planning of cooperation projects should be started between the Distance Education projects of Latin America and the Caribbean.

OBJECTIVE IV

To identify possible areas of inter-institutional cooperation in Distance Education between American, Canadian, Latin American, and Caribbean programmes.

Conclusions

It is interesting to note that the needs expressed by the distance education programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean are in concord with the areas in which Canadian and American programmes have indicated a willingness to collaborate. The areas in which the programmes from the latter countries have offered assistance include:

- Sharing experiences on the writing and design of self-instructional printed materials;
- Sharing experiences on the operation of working groups;
- Exchange of self-instructional materials;
- Teleconferences;
- Communication networks;
- Counselling services;

- Tutoring;
- Administration of exams;
- Distribution and storage of educational materials;
- Joint research;
- Assessment of methodologies;
- Elaboration of possible cooperation projects in the field of Distance Education.

Recommendations

Using the areas mentioned above as a starting point, cooperation projects should be elaborated as soon as possible between the Distance Education programmes of Latin America and the Caribbean with those of the United States and Canada.

General recommendations for the first four specific objectives

Initial efforts should concentrate on activities related to the design and writing of printed materials, the exchange of information on the administration of programmes, and the operation of working teams. Distance educators in Latin America and the Caribbean have indicated the need for assistance in these areas and, with the collaboration of Canadian and American distance education institutions, human resources training programmes and an exchange of materials could be initiated.

OBJECTIVE V

To identify the relation between Distance Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the educational offer in Social Sciences and the objectives of the Fifth Centennial.

Conclusions

It would appear as though most programmes participating in the Fifth Centennial have shown their interest by offering specific courses in the Social Sciences.

Recommendations

We must continue to encourage the study of history and geography, and Social Sciences in general, across the American continent.

IMPORTANT ISSUES IN THE OPERATION OF CREAD

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the CREAD network is that it has been conceived as a service organization whose mandate is to offer services to its members. The Consortium should be viewed as an entity that manages and facilitates activities and processes. It is not a supplier of resources nor a funding agency for infrastructures; these basic functions belong to the institutions participating in the network.

The following aspects have been identified as crucial to CREAD's operation:

a) Conceptualization and design

Information must be gathered and used in such a way that it will help support concrete activities that have been previously identified by participants.

In order to become a service organization, members must determine, and agree upon, the nature, form and priorities of the Consortium. A communication system must then be established, without delay, to permit a constant exchange of information between participants.

Regarding the support of concrete activities, CREAD's main function is to assist member institutions--specific tasks should be carried out by the institutions themselves.

b) Funding

The Consortium should continue to be affiliated to a recognized international organization such as the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE) and ideally, it will continue to receive funding from the Organization of American States and the Canadian government. Nonetheless, it would be advisable to start searching for other sources of financing.

The network should be funded from two sources: external entities and membership dues. On the first hand, the financial support CREAD receives from external agencies will depend on the nature of the proposals that are submitted and the level of participation of its members in the elaboration, implementation, and supervision of projects. And secondly, the network will operate on the premise that participating institutions have a regular budget to carry out their activities; that their participation in CREAD will increase the efficiency of their services, which will, in turn, imply savings for the institutions and a greater impact for their programmes; which therefore justifies the payment of membership dues.

In any case, given the cooperative nature of CREAD and the limited possibilities for funding, a concerted effort must be made to carry out the network's activities with minimum expenses. Since the activities basically consist of the sharing of experiences, methodologies, technologies and, in general, the exchange of information, this would seem quite feasible.

c) Control of quality in the services and products

As with any organization that offers services at a cost, the Consortium must control quality. Needless to say, it must carefully select the people who provide the services, whether they are members of the Consortium or external professionals, hired on contract. The network should periodically consult users to inquire about the quality and usefulness of its services, and seek external evaluations carried out by competent, independent experts.

d) Communication networks

As an immediate priority, CREAD should establish a mechanism of electronic communications. Fortunately initiatives, sponsored by the OAS, have already been taken toward establishing an inter-American, electronic network. Scientists have been following these efforts with interest.

e) Impact and evaluation

Insofar as Distance Education is a way of promoting concrete activities and not an end in itself, it is necessary to determine if, and how, distance education should be used. By supporting studies, the Consortium can help determine the circumstances that would justify its use in terms of its usefulness and impact.

f) Collaboration between networks

The information gathered in this research revealed two key issues: first, there are a number of networks operating in Latin America and the Caribbean; and second, most of them are operating in isolation of each other. Inasmuch as some of the networks are operating in areas of interest to CREAD, such as health, professional training, and university exchanges, the Consortium is fully justified in approaching other operating networks.

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