A New Online Learning Engine of Italy
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Distance learning is a new and exciting experience for all those people who choose to carry out a multidisciplinary and flexible learning path without any time and space constraints. You can acquire and further develop educational knowledge and professional skills while at the same time work at your own pace and fit your coursework according with your professional or private commitments. In this short paper I will present three interrelated initiatives that emerged lately in Italy.

The Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”

The Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”, established in 2004, is the first Italian private and non-governmental “Open University”. It is designed to create a new learning methodology, offer high-quality university courses in all knowledge fields through the use of new digital technologies and the Internet.

As a matter of fact, studying at the “Guglielmo Marconi”, prepares both young students to enter the job market and professional adults to enhance their professional expertise and improve their curricula. Information and Communication Technologies are used to reach students who live in disadvantaged areas of the country and those who, for different reasons, cannot regularly attend traditional classes.

In order to meet the needs of different targets of students the University has been developing and experimenting an innovative learning methodology by merging e-learning, m-learning and t-learning solutions. The main aim is to provide a blended, flexible and dynamic system focusing on a student-centred learning process conceived to fit the different training needs of users by taking advantage of three learning processes based on different multimedia solutions:

- the Virtual C@mpus, a Virtual Learning Centre able to support a whole range of learning activities online (video streaming lessons, simulators, virtual classroom, videoconferencing, online library);
- the m-learning Platform promoting ubiquitous and on-demand learning thanks to different scenarios such as Administrative Services, Didactic pills and Tutoring;
- the t-C@mpus Platform, an interactive television which uses home TV as a communication tool with students through an innovative synergy between TV and PC.

The university has also its research branch, the National Research Centre, which started its activities in the international scene of academic studies with a double aim: meeting the needs for research imposed by digital and communication technologies for the development of the social, economic and productive system, and creating a cooperative network of institutions, able to initiate interdisciplinary knowledge sharing processes, in order to educate human resources with considerable learning skills. The University conducts research activities in collaboration with national and international partners, achieving important results in many different didactic fields and is constantly involved in several integrated projects within the most important European and international programmes.
GUIDE Association

The abovementioned intentions were the driving force of the International Meeting “Open Universities: National Models for a European Model” (October 2004) which hosted about 30 distance learning academic representatives: both well established institutions and those which were founded more recently. The same objectives became the basis of the first International Conference GUIDE 2006 - Global Universities In Distance Education. The Conference took place in Rome in February 2006 at the National Research Council CNR and gathered approximately 100 contributions, expressions of a multiple and varied geopolitical identity, creating a sort of comparative dialogue on the main research themes and governance issues for distance universities.

The success of the Conference has led to the establishment of GUIDE Association, the definition of the Association’s Articles and the procedural regulation. Both these formal acts emphasize the aim of strengthening the international cooperation between worldwide universities and institutions linked to distance education and lifelong learning.

GUIDE Association intends to promote an innovative approach to education and research in the sector of new technologies and learning methodologies by encouraging cooperation between private and public bodies and supporting critical studies on the current research macrolines. The association also offers its members support and assistance in the adoption of new modernization strategies for the educational and cultural system both at local and global levels.

Since 2005, 50 founding members from all over the world have joined the GUIDE Association and an operative structure organised in geographical areas favouring systematic meetings of excellence has been adopted. These area sessions are specially focused on the analysis of the difficulties met by institutions belonging to a specific geographic area, with the purpose of enabling a permanent communication system, and a continuing professional interaction between its members. GUIDE Workshops encourage a cooperation between the joining universities for the creation of shared networks and linked development programs, offering the opportunity to compare the research results achieved at a global level in the fields of methodologies and applications of distance learning, e-communication and networked universities.

In this geographical framework GUIDE Association started its activity with the organization of the first European Area Workshop that took place in Cracow at the Tischner European University in March 2007 where prof. Krzysztof Gurba, responsible for the e-learning development at the Tischner European University, was appointed Representative of the European Area. The main focus of the conference, at which 24 European University took part, was the comparison of the outcomes achieved in the field of didactic methodologies, innovative application, tools and services for e-Learning. Participants shared the common concern about reaching a balance between technological innovation and well established methodologies through the adoption of a measure of a universal teaching method and the definition of an institutional framework for new e-learning applications, services and contents. Another point of discussion was quality standards and the definition of valuable practices and procedures for the use of technological tools and methodological models constantly changing and updated.

GUIDE Association keeps on these activities with the organization of the Thematic Workshops concerning the African and Middle Eastern and American areas that will took place respectively in November 2007 and February 2008. The main aim of these Workshops is to enhance a cooperative and multicultural approach to higher education and e-learning also thanks to the adoption of Microcredit and Microfinance interventions and the introduction of ICT for e-inclusion and accessibility.

**FormaMente**

In order to improve knowledge sharing, adoption of quality standards, and cooperation for the promotion of good practices and project models of excellence, the GUIDE Association founded a journal *FormaMente*.
*FormaMente* is the official Journal of GUIDE, published twice a year, in collaboration with the Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”. It is an international academic research publication in the field of new Information and Communication Technologies and provides contributions, articles and reviews, selected from high-level specialized journals. *FormaMente* publishes also original, scientific contributions and articles from the Association members, submitted to a peer review committee. *FormaMente* harmonically combines the function of an international observer of best work in the field, and of an instrument of theoretical and practical reflection. 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, knowledge management of contents and courses, knowledge organization and networked universities.

The journal is structured in three main sections: *Research* which includes research articles and materials; *Applications* which comprises case studies and best practices and *Highlights* offering additional materials such as interviews with outstanding professionals and researchers in the Open and Distance Learning world, book and journal reviews. It also provides information and reviews on selected events, meetings and conferences. *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.

Together, The Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi” [www.unimarconi.it](http://www.unimarconi.it), the GUIDE Association [www.guideassociation.org](http://www.guideassociation.org) and the journal *FormaMente* create a new important vehicle of online learning in Italy and, through regional GUIDE workshops, even globally.