



Alliances for Knowledge: A Strategy for Building the Future of University in the Digital Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the transformative potential of the Internet in redefining the structure and purpose of traditional universities. It underscores the challenges posed by technology, globalization, socio-economic development, and evolving training needs, and highlights the importance of reinvention for universities to remain relevant. It argues that universities must transition from a conventional pedagogical model to one that fosters collaborative learning, enabled by digital technologies, and provides a platform for the exchange of knowledge that transcends geographical boundaries. Through the case study of UNINETTUNO, the paper elucidates the implementation of an open, inclusive, and flexible educational model offering courses in multiple languages, fostering international relations and mutual understanding. Further, it advocates the establishment of a global network of public and private universities, emphasizing shared knowledge, resources, and mobility of faculty and students. The paper concludes with a compelling call to democratize access to knowledge, promoting the use of the internet to create a worldwide, open system of teaching and learning. This vision challenges the status quo and paves the way for an educational future where learning truly knows no bounds.

Keywords: Distance Education, Globalization of Higher Education, Online Learning, Internationalization of Universities, Democratization of Knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is defined by new communication technologies that have accelerated the processes of globalization in our society and created a new interconnected world that functions locally but operates globally. [1]

The "psycho-digital" journey on the Internet, where the global and the local intertwine, allows us to externalize consciousness at a planetary level. Even in our past, in the depths of time, we formed a collective, but we were not aware of it. Today, we have the opportunity to rediscover and experience, with all its complexity and challenges, the fundamental unity of all humankind, and, most importantly, to instil this awareness in the minds of those who will inherit the fate of this planet.

On a global scale, the political choices and strategies of governments to materialize a new model of society and development that fosters synergy between technological innovations and human values are not yet visible. Significant organizational changes in the structures that characterize

governments and societies have yet to be seen, as well as the emergence of institutions capable of generating productivity, flexibility, solidarity, security, participation, and responsibility.

Enriching humanity with knowledge is the true resource of the globalized and interconnected world. Unfortunately, it is evident that politics has not fully grasped the value of building new organizational models for schools and universities.

TRANSFORMATION IMPERATIVES FOR UNIVERSITIES

In this context, the very concept of education and training is undergoing a transformation, necessitating targeted interventions by public authorities. It is crucial that, alongside a new model of social ethics, new systems and public policies emerge to facilitate the development of innovative organizational models for schools, training centers, and universities at the local, national, and international levels. These models should integrate both physical and virtual presence, enabling them to effectively address the complex training needs of individuals in the 21st century.[2]

Curricula should encompass knowledge from different countries and languages, equipping individuals with the tools to respect cultural, religious, and political differences, as well as to effectively utilize new technologies and languages. The integration of professional skills with general cultural competencies is essential, enabling individuals to navigate complexity.

The recognition that an individual's knowledge, know-how, and skills are the source of all other wealth is widely acknowledged. Today, the intelligent use of new information and educational technologies provides easy access to training. Therefore, training becomes the means by which citizens actively participate in constructive change.

Today, more than ever, we require individuals capable of envisioning a new societal model, contributing to the advancement of knowledge, and finding solutions to the complex challenges facing humanity. The evolution and progress of society also rely on the new possibilities offered by the Internet to communicate with others, share our knowledge, acquire new insights for an interconnected society, and collaborate in shaping the future.

Governments worldwide need to allocate sufficient economic resources to reform the education system, fostering collaboration between national and local authorities as well as between governments and international institutions [3] [4]. Additionally, the development of a global science and technology network is imperative; a network that allows to collect and share knowledge, but also to guarantee users regarding the scientific validity of the contents they access, even those contents generated by the latest generation AI thus trained on reliable knowledge bases because they are scientifically guaranteed by the network of universities and research centres itself.

Across the globe, there is ongoing consideration of how universities should adapt to meet the educational needs of a new societal model. Society itself is still grappling with the profound contradictions brought about by globalization, as it seeks to define its true identity [5]. In this historical period, individuals from around the world connect in the global marketplaces of the Internet, yet few nations have homogeneous populations in terms of ethnicity and culture, and few universities serve as models of diversity. Universities still largely operate as products of

their respective nations, organized according to legislative frameworks tied to local and national educational requirements, while the world of business, work, and communication thrives in a global arena.

Universities should occupy a central position in the interconnected knowledge society, emerging as strong drivers of economic development and the globalized world. Knowledge and skills have always been the strategic resources upon which to build the progress of humanity.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A CATALYST FOR INNOVATION

There is a global need to establish a new model of intangible capital for development, one based on knowledge and expertise that transcends national boundaries. The widespread reach of the Internet has effectively imposed an international dimension on education. In the 21st century, citizens must possess the ability to interact and cooperate in a reality where cultural, political, and religious diversities significantly influence various aspects of their lives. [6]

When constructing new university models that align with historical realities, it is important to recognize that technology is not a divisive factor but a crucial connector. The notion of a "digital divide" between technologically affluent and technologically disadvantaged countries no longer holds true. Opportunities for mutually beneficial international partnerships exist between developed and developing nations. The collaborative nature of technology promotes understanding between nations, and the benefits extend far beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge.

Through the utilization of new technologies, universities can directly reach students in different countries, provide remote training for global labor markets, and act locally, nationally, and internationally [7]. By doing so, universities not only assume a vital role but also facilitate the internationalization of businesses.

Technology, globalization, internationalization, cooperation, competition, socio-economic development, flexibility, and the evolving training needs pose significant challenges for higher education institutions. In today's world, globalization, interdependence, and communication technologies now go hand in hand and can provide universities with tools that allow for the development of new models of collaboration in research, teaching, the creation of joint programs, the exchange of faculty and students, even in a virtual manner, and above all, in the creation of scientific content related to various disciplines and digitized on the Internet. The mission of universities has always been the advancement and development of humanity. Now, with Internet technology, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, color, or gender, everyone has the potential to access education and contribute to the development of a global economy.

Traditional universities must embrace reinvention and break free from stagnation. Transformation is no longer an optional path but an unavoidable imperative. "In a world characterized by unparalleled connectivity, particularly among today's youth, universities continue to operate as isolated entities focused on erudition and learning, failing to fully leverage the Internet's potential to break down the barriers separating institutions, faculty, and students." Moreover, "The convergence of the new web, the new generation of students, the demands of the global knowledge economy, and the aftermath of the economic crisis is creating a 'perfect storm' for universities, with signs of imminent change becoming increasingly evident.

If traditional universities are to withstand the rise of the Internet university, they must embrace change". [8]

If traditional universities are to survive the development of Internet-based education, and above all the rise and diffusion of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT¹, which uses the knowledge available on the Web as a basis for its training, and for information processing and elaboration without distinguishing between reliable sources and *fake news* or *fake knowledge*, they must undergo substantial changes. What will characterize the value and success of a traditional university, in my opinion, will be a new pedagogical model to implement the development of collaborative learning where the student becomes an active participant in knowledge construction. The true value of traditional universities today lies in the new forms of knowledge communication through new technologies and in the human interaction that can be established through direct face-to-face contact between teachers and students. The university will have to operate in virtual spaces of interaction and cooperation, but at the same time, it will have to enrich the physical spaces of real encounters between two generations, the youth and the mature. Worldwide, there is a discussion about new models of universities, new teaching-learning methodologies, and new languages related to communication and knowledge transmission through new technologies.

The Internet has evolved into a global platform that is increasingly rich in content, many of which are not scientifically reliable, effectively becoming the predominant infrastructure for knowledge exchange among people. It is increasingly revealing itself as an immense space for storing knowledge and information, which does not always guarantee the user their veracity. There are many fake news circulating in the vast expanse of the internet. Distance learning in the new context is not an alternative to traditional universities, but it also represents a new opportunity and a new way of carrying out teaching and research functions for these universities. Online universities today can help traditional universities develop innovations in products, processes, and systems.

Universities, being the exclusive domains where knowledge production and transfer processes coexist, play an essential and indispensable role in creating content for the Internet, thereby guaranteeing the validity of sources for all users. However, realizing this vision necessitates a transformation in the role and structure of universities. It calls for the establishment of new international alliances, the creation of both physical and virtual spaces to foster shared knowledge networks among different universities worldwide, and to support institutional convergence. Moreover, these changes will lay the groundwork for creating scientific knowledge bases that can be used to train artificial intelligences.

The shared spaces of knowledge should not be homogenous or uniform [9]. The goal is not to come together to replicate ourselves or, worse, to "McDonaldize" educational systems. Rather, the aim is to strike a new balance between unity and diversity, embracing the unity of values and traditions passed down through memory, while celebrating the diversity of cultures and languages [10]. New communication technologies empower traditional universities to create virtual spaces for interaction and cooperation, while still maintaining physical spaces for meetings and face-to-face communication, fostering dialogue between different generations.

¹ <https://chat.openai.com/>

In this context, the creation of new international alliances will increasingly become important in order to establish a global network of public and private universities that bring together their knowledge, share resources and facilities, curricula, laboratories, internal mobility of faculty and students, while maintaining the specificity of individual universities as a value and enrichment of the network. The aim is to build a network of universities on the Internet that is composed not only of technologies but, above all, of individuals and intellects capable of connecting their knowledge while respecting cultural, political, religious, and economic differences. Such a network of universities, empowered by the Internet, expands and amplifies the possibilities of acquiring information, knowledge, and establishing interactions and exchanges between people. [11]

INTERNATIONAL TELEMATIC UNIVERSITY UNINETTUNO INTERNATIONALIZATION MODEL

This model has been realized by the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, which has developed a unique educational platform worldwide, offering courses in five languages (Italian, English, French, Arabic, Greek), with plans to expand its content to additional languages. Instead of relying solely on translations of content from faculty members of traditional Italian universities, UNINETTUNO has engaged the expertise of top faculty members from various universities around the world. Each faculty member has the opportunity to deliver their teachings in their own language, fostering internationalization. Students and faculty members hail from different countries worldwide, not only from Europe and the United States but also from Arab countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey [12, 13], to the 167 countries of origin of the students currently enrolled in UNINETTUNO higher education programs. Prominent professors from these countries, selected based on the international quality of their publications, have taught and continue to teach on the UNINETTUNO platform in their own languages. Courses in certain faculties, like Engineering, are offered in Arabic, French, English, and Italian, while other faculties are also developing content in English. Master's courses are already exclusively delivered in English, with some even offered in Greek.

This choice was made to embrace linguistic diversity as a source of cultural strength and to respect the diverse backgrounds of the students. Moreover, this linguistic richness enables students to access and share information, to construct their knowledge in a global rather than local context, and to realize that working collaboratively with people from different cultures can lead to better solutions for certain problems.

Observing from the UNINETTUNO observatory, it becomes evident that the interest in cooperation among learning communities extends beyond education and encompasses broader social and cultural interests. Through collaboration, forms of learning that involve group work, research activities, sharing of experiences, and cultural exchange are fostered.

The UNINETTUNO University is dedicated to establishing a Euro-Mediterranean space for education and research using this approach. The creation of such a space, which involves collaboration among distance universities, traditional universities, and training institutions from various European and Mediterranean countries, holds significant strategic, cultural, political, and economic importance.

The International Telematic University UNINETTUNO has consistently strived to develop a university model where teachers and students collaborate in both physical and virtual spaces of the Internet. Together, they build networks of shared knowledge that enrich curricula by incorporating the cultural, religious, and political specificities of different countries' histories and cultures. This model fosters the interconnection of intellects and the collective creation of new knowledge [10]. Students can pursue their university education without being limited by space and time constraints.

Our experience demonstrates that it is indeed possible to share curricula and engage in joint reflection and thinking with universities from countries that have different policies and cultures. It serves as a multicultural laboratory fostering the development of a new virtual space where original content for study curricula is created and innovative teaching and learning models are devised, empowering younger generations to become agents of change, and allowing the creation of a new model of internet-based university that, as observed, has the potential to bring academic knowledge to people's homes worldwide, removing the constraints of space, time, and location. This accessibility allows individuals to pursue education, acquire new skills, and develop a common value system. This reality cannot be ignored; rather, it should inspire political and academic choices to promote increased cooperation between universities in the global North and South. [12]

TOWARD GLOBAL ALLIANCES FOR KNOWLEDGE

Academic alliances not only facilitate the joint creation of educational content, but more importantly, they foster dialogue and exchange among diverse cultures. The younger generation of students can collaboratively build the knowledge and skills necessary to confront the challenges of a globalized world of work, while also learning to interact with and appreciate each other's differences. Therefore, I believe that strengthening cooperation in academia and research is crucial in the present historical moment.

Dialogue between intellectuals and academics, the harmonization of higher education and scientific research programs, and the mobility of students and faculty are essential for integrating intercultural dialogue into everyday life. Universities need to support all citizens in considering cultural, religious, and political differences as assets of humanity rather than instruments of conflict and war. Global conflicts can no longer be ignored, as they increasingly impact our freedoms in a globalized world. If universities remain isolated, a significant gap emerges between the needs of our society and academia's response to those needs. On one hand, we have educational institutions with localized paths, while on the other hand, individuals are globally connected in real-time, engaging socially and professionally with the realities of the internet. The interconnected world of the internet brings together people who often lack the cultural tools to engage with subjects from vastly different backgrounds; on the other side, Universities and schools are currently not able to develop in the citizens critical thinking capacities, especially when facing knowledge provided automatically and with no supervision by digital tools such as the generative AIs engines.

The construction of a global society necessitates a new approach to the internationalization of educational systems. This internationalization should be based on the sharing of curricula and the formation of consortia among universities from countries with diverse policies and cultures [14].

When the interconnected intelligences of faculty and students from different regions of the world, with no imposition of a cultural model over another one, harness the power of new social network systems and virtual interactions offered by the online world to create new knowledge, then they can establish a true laboratory for intercultural and interlingual cooperation to make the new generations able to develop a critical sense of knowledge and make them protagonists of change.

CONCLUSION

Democratizing access to knowledge is crucial for nurturing minds, providing equal opportunities for all, and eliminating the shackles of ignorance. It is therefore essential for all countries to support innovative initiatives that can restore confidence in certain populations, leading them towards democratic paths and economic development, while also fostering respect for ideological, cultural, and religious differences.

Today the construction and transfer of knowledge transcend borders, and boundaries become spaces of continuity rather than conflict. With the Internet, every citizen of the world, unrestricted by space or time, can engage in educational pursuits, acquiring literacy, new skills, and reinforcing shared values such as justice and peace, which are theoretically accepted by all but often unheeded.

These aspirations are not mere utopian dreams. I am truly convinced that the university - the gymnasium where the minds of young people from all over the world are trained - can now rely on the Internet to create an open system of teaching and learning capable of updating itself, integrating all the knowledge available online, and materializing the exchange of knowledge globally, thanks to the Alliances for Knowledge.

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