

An outline of Scuola IaD, University of Rome Tor Vergata

Historical context

Before dealing in depth with the issues in matter, we urge to preliminary highlight that *Scuola IaD* is a *distance* education Academic Institution operating within a *in-presence* educational environment (University of Rome Tor Vergata is the *mother* Institution).

Since its start-up, Scuola IaD's inspiring principle and purpose were to re-run those same steps that have characterized the **history** and the evolution of distance education on a wider space-time scale, with reference to the development of the information and communication technologies used within the educational activities.

This implied for us passing from the former use of the mail medium, through CMC (computer mediated communication), up to the full achievement of the e-learning technologies, exploited both as self-learning and as cooperative learning.

The evolution of the technological supports, which we never conceived as self-aimed, allowed the educational models' improvement and enrichment in a synergic relation, which structured our competence over the years.

In our experience, **competence** was built on the *praxis-theory-praxis* dialectics: a former praxis-approach (field-experience and experimentation) let arise *questions*, the answers to which gave birth to the building of *scientific theories*, also through the support of former field literature. The scientific acquisitions achieved subsequently set the conditions for further experimentation, and so on.

Such a way of operating and building *know-how* obviously matches with a **gradual and step-by step** development of competence, which is exactly what historically connoted our institution.

In our experience, also **evaluation and research** have been fundamental and chronologically grounding elements: Scuola IaD arises in 1996 formerly as CoFoDi, multi-discipline Committee set up with an exclusive quality-control purpose, where the quality control issues in matter were the training processes delivered by another institution (BAICR).

Only in 1998 IaD launched its first own specialization course. If evaluation and research historically characterize our institution's origin, the awareness of the intimate and synergic relation between these, on one hand, and the educational elaboration and offer, on the other, keeps being one of our operative cornerstones.

Technical issues

As for **competence** within our institution's **information and communication technology** system, we have always aimed to keep within the forecasted international

standards. Nevertheless, as we already mentioned, we never conceived our institution's ICT performances as self-aimed.

In particular, the information technologies are, in our experience, basically exploited to gain customers' confidence in the enrolling phase, and assure this is maintained throughout the educational delivery and certification phases.

What we firmly refuse is an "imagine-aimed" use of the information technologies. As for the communication aspect, we analogously aim to use the technological mean by constantly paying attention to the educational aspects and specifically to the improvement of the integration between the different communication codes.

Our students don't need (in the current third generation distance learning phase)- and never needed throughout the former phases - the aid of any **additional hardware or software**, which means they don't need and never needed to personally face any additional cost.

What we unfortunately must highlight is that the **integration between the different IT systems** cannot be considered currently satisfying, in our institution such as - we believe - within the landscape of international distance education institutions: what appears to be fairly inadequate is the "technical mean" itself, where for "inadequate" we mean 'unable to recreate, while bettering it, the same level of cognitive, emotional and relational students-trainers and students-students integration which characterizes presence education environments'.

A **weakness** that, instead, specifically characterizes our institution, to be although framed within the historical delay of the Italian administrative systems, is the way the certification processes are managed, due to the damaging complexity and continuous changes of the administrative procedures.

Such administrative operating style causes unpleasant delays of the certificates' mail delivery.

While admitting our weakness, we also wish to highlight our **strength**, which we believe to be in the deep ability we developed over the years and regularly perform, to welcome our "customer", in the way that appears more suitable for the individual user and/or individual circumstance, our availability to *answer* to any request our customer feels he/she needs to express and satisfy.

Courses

As for the **subjects** covered by IaD's educational offer, our courses deal with a wide, potentially not bordered, range of subjects. The huger request is directed to the humanistic and strictly scientific area (mathematics, physics, statistics...).

Our availability to the experimentation within any subject may be requested or perceived as needed by any particular audience and this matches with our believe that no subject can be considered not "**onlineable**" by default, given some obvious limitation due to the applicative connotation of some particular sectors.

But, if on a theory basis, we believe no border should be raised, as a matter of fact we are compelled to circumscribe our educational offer to those subjects with reference to which we concretely find trainers' availability to the distance teaching challenge. Analogously, we set up courses regarding only those issues which, in our purpose, represent an answer to what, time by time, appears to us as concrete learning needs and requirements.

In accordance with IaD's sharp attention towards the audience's confidence towards the training process, we are able to define our courses' **start-up and progression** as definitively flexible.

As for the courses' modality, although we are aware that the synchronous way allows a more efficient 'teacher-students' and 'students-students' integration, and despite the huge request of synchronous distance learning courses, about the 70% of our educational offer is asynchronous.

This is basically due to three factors: trainers' scarce availability to be involved within asynchronous education narrower manageability; a huge presence of working students among the applying audience; several limits within the institution organization's current structure.

Management, strategy and attitudes

One of IaD strengths is the involvement and regular support from its **Institutional leadership** (the Tor Vergata University) and specifically from the Rector, which, since the beginning, has strongly contributed to its success.

As for the attitudes displayed by the **different groups of staff**, we previously wish to highlight that our HR organization has never been rigidly structured and managed. This implies that, not only roles and positions are set, modified and eventually eliminated within the organization according to the needs urging time by time, but also that the same individual is regularly moved from one position to the other, still in accordance with what in a given moment appears to be more suitable and effective for the achievement of the institution's objectives.

Given this preliminary remark, we can describe the staff groups' attitudes passing from a former suspiciousness towards what appeared to be new and unpredictable, to a gradually increasing participation and involvement, certainly encouraged and supported by the growing number of goals achieved by IaD, and by the increasing confidence from both the Institutional leadership and the applying audience.

There is certainly a precise **strategy** grounding our institution's success, which we rather feel as a "dream" to constantly guide our activity: we aim to replace the traditional *lectio*, structured and conceived as an 'ex cathedra' lecture (equal to the "one-way" education process) with the medieval *quaestio* (equal to the two-ways education process), implying direct involvement and active participation by learners and dialectical trainer-learner relation.

What we also consider fundamental and constantly pursue is our courses' **quality issues**, for the achievement of which we are "double-checked": by the audience

applying to our courses, through anonymous questionnaires, which they always fill in before their examination (so as to avoid being influenced by their performance); by the ISO9001 control quality protocol, which represents an 'objective' guarantee.

Unfortunately, some weakness in our organization is due to the existing gap between the **administrative procedures**, basically still conceived and fit for presence education environments, on one hand, and the reality of distance education offer and delivery, on the other.

The main trend aims to the conservation of traditional processes and to the maintenance of restrictive rules, even though we are thankful to the Athenaeum for having generally approved what wasn't forbidden.

As for trainers' activity, our organization always forecasts predictable and manageable **trainers workloads**, by accurately planning them in details and due advance. This, together with the use of many different platforms and with the articulated composition of our staff (trainers plus 36 operators between tutors, educational managers, network administrators, developers and others) currently allows us to manage a **huge number of courses and students**.

Something we are also proud of and that, in our opinion, proves our strategies and operating style to be successful are the **synergies achieved with other educational institutions**, and moreover with public and private organizations. We are aware that the complexity and variety of these synergic relations gives credibility to our institution at a national (**government and public administration**) and international level.

Economy

In general, the **cost-effectiveness** of the online education activities run in our institution can be defined satisfying: we are able to offer cheap courses, which generally allow the achievement of a huge number of applications.

In our experience, online education **income is predictable** on a triennial basis, while the comparison between contiguous *three years blocks* regularly marks light increase.

We believe that, in order to reach success and regular incomes, it is fundamental to be **flexible** and adaptive towards the ever-changing **market** features and requirements. Flexibility is also necessary within **employment** strategies, which urges us not only to the use of temporary contracts on a nearly exclusive basis, but also to a mobile management of staff and functions, as already highlighted above.

Other factors

A further factor we believe to have strongly contributed to our success in terms of **sustainability, robustness and achievement of critical mass**, is Tor Vergata University's prestige and good reputation. It is not only a matter of image, but also of concrete involvement of our Athenaeum within our structure: IaD's Committee is in fact chaired by the Rector and composed by six professors from all the Faculties.