



EDUCATION AND CULTURE

LEONARDO DA VINCI

Second phase:2000-2006

Project: «Title»

(www.nettskolen.com/in_english/megatrends)

Survey for case studies in the Megatrends project

Scuola IaD

Facts about the institution

Name of institution	Scuola IaD, University of Rome Tor Vergata
URL of institution	http://web.scuolaiad.it
Country	Italy
Levels in the education system	Higher education level
Interviewer	Pedro Fernández Michels
Interviewees	Andrea De Dominicis (dedomi@scuolaiad.it)

Scuola IaD is a *distance* education Academic Institution operating within a *in-presence* educational environment (University of Rome Tor Vergata is the *mother* Institution).

Contextual factors

Please provide relevant information about:

1. Market size (depending on country population, language used)

Italy is a densely populated country with almost 60.000.000 inhabitants. The common language is Italian.

According to *Osservatorio ANEE-Assinform 2005*¹ the overall value of the Italian e-learning market in the year 2004 ascended to 365, 6 million Euros, which was about 18,6 % of the total expenditure on training and education. The estimated growth of this value for 2005 was 17,9% with an increased value of about 430 million Euros. The figures include content, technology and services/consultancy, the three main business areas of the Italian e-learning scenario.

¹ The executive summary of the report can be downloaded from:
<http://www.anee.it/anee/osservatorio.htm#1>



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2. Market readiness (penetration, technology infrastructure, broadband availability) to use online technology (differences between countries)

Internet penetration in Italian households is somewhat lower than in the rest of EU countries, and what is more, broadband penetration is still limited, partly due to high prices. Nevertheless, a recent study presented on the Public Administration Forum revealed that during the past five years there has been a steady increase in the number of Internet users; in effect, the percentage of Italians online has doubled since 2000. More importantly, Italians do not limit their use of the Internet to the workplace; on the contrary, the vast majority connects to the WWW either from their home, or from both their home and workplace.²

3. Target group acceptance of online education (preference, reputation, legislation?)

Italy's performance in adult learning is very unsatisfactory compared to the other EU members. The country needs to multiply its efforts in order to reach the desired 12.5% level of participation to Lifelong Learning set by the Employment Guidelines of the European Commission. At present participation rate is at 6.8%, which is not so surprising given the low percentage of Lifelong Learning offer by enterprises, at 23%, while the respective enlarged Europe average is 53%. Thus, the supply of adult learning needs to be boosted as well.³

4. Digital literacy in population

Innovation and investment in ICT in Italy is less than in the European average. This fact is reflected by a relatively poor performance in digital literacy. According to figures offered by the Minister of Innovation and Technology, in 2002 only 1 out of 5 Italian workers had basic ICT skills and some population segments were at risk to become excluded from the benefits of ICT.⁴ Another study by Christophe Demunter⁵ confirms these figures:

² www.euser-eu.org

³ www.euser-eu.org

⁴ Minister of Innovation and Technology: <http://www.innovazione.gov.it/>

⁵ DEMUNTER, Christophe (2006): "How skilled are Europeans in using computers and the Internet?" [Online article]. In: *Statistics on focus. Industry, trade and services* 17/2006. (Data retrieved on 30/10/2006). URL: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-NP-06-017/EN/KS-NP-06-017-EN.PDF



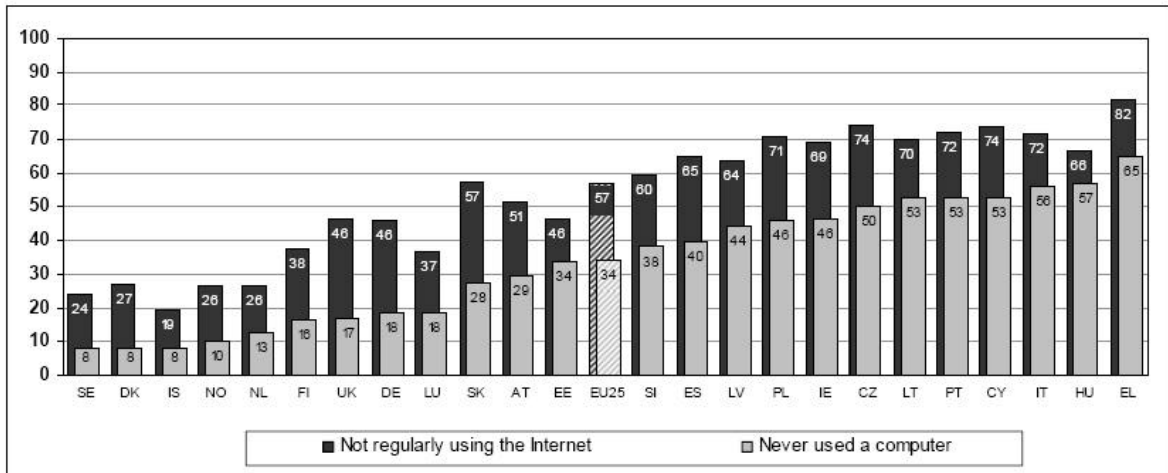
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Graph 2 – Individuals not using computers or the Internet (2005)
(as a percentage of the total number of individuals aged 16 to 74)



Source: Eurostat, Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals.

Notes: Data on computer use not available for Belgium (percentage not regularly using the Internet: 47%); no data available for France and Malta.

5. National policy (national funding schemes)

There is no specific policy for fostering the supply and take-up of e-learning in Italy. Initiatives in that direction come mainly from the European Union and from the social Funds. As a result, e-learning is still at a starting stage in Italy.

In spite of a number of guidelines for the diffusion of e-learning methods in lifelong learning initiatives designed for public administration workers that were produced by the Italian government, the demand on e-learning solutions in the training field is still very weak.⁶

Institutional factors

Historical context

1. How would you describe the history of online education in your institution?

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.

⁶ www.euser-eu.org



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2. How has competence in online education developed in your institution and how has it contributed to your success?

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.

3. Has this development been abrupt or would you describe it more as a gradual step-by-step process)?

It was a step by step process that implied 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.

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.

4. How has online education been followed up by evaluation and research and how has this contributed to your success?

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

5. How would you describe competence in information and communication technology in your institution?

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.



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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.

6. To which extent are e-learning courses in your institution based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software? (in addition to what they have from before)

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.

7. How would you describe the integration between different IT-systems that are involved in e-learning in your institution? How has this contributed to your success?

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’.

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your e-learning administrative systems (from enrolment through delivery to certification)?

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



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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

9. Which types of subjects are covered by online education in your institution and what is the relative importance of different subjects?

As for the **subjects** covered by laD'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...).

10. How would you describe the "onlineability" of the subjects your institution has chosen for e-learning?

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.

11. Do the online courses provided by your institution have flexible start-up and progression?

In accordance with laD'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.

12. What is the role or importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers and among students themselves?

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



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presence of working students among the applying audience; several limits within the institution organization's current structure.

Management, strategy and attitudes

13. How would you describe involvement from the institution leadership in terms of being supportive, and how has this been important for success?

One of laD 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.

14. How would you describe the attitudes of the different groups of staff towards online teaching? How has this affected your 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 laD, and by the increasing confidence from both the Institutional leadership and the applying audience.

15. Does your institution have a strategy for online education? If yes, what is (briefly) the content of the strategy and how is it followed up by employees in your organisation?

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.



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16. How does your institution deal with quality issues related to online education and has quality contributed to success?

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.

17. How would you describe the effectiveness of your administrative routines in online education?

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.

18. To which extent do teachers involved in online education have predictable and manageable workloads?

As for trainers' activity, our organization always forecasts predictable and manageable **trainers workloads**, by accurately planning them in details and due advance.

19. To which extent does your institution collaborate with other educational institutions and how has this affected success?

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.

20. How would you describe the credibility of your institution (both formal and informal) with the government and public administration and how has this been an important criterion for success?

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.



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21. How are you able to handle the large number of online courses and students?

Together with the detailed planning of the trainers workloads the use of many different platforms and 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**.

Economy

22. How would you describe the cost-effectiveness of online education in your institution? How has cost-effectiveness affected success?

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.

23. To which extent is income from operation of online education stable and predictable?

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

24. To which extent does your institution experience pressure to be flexible to be able to adapt to a changing market?

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.

25. To which extent does your institution apply a strategy of flexible employment and use staff to adapt to changes in markets?

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 stuff and functions, as already highlighted above.

Additional factors

26. What other factors have contributed to sustainability, robustness and the achievement of critical mass in your institution?



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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: laD's Committee is in fact chaired by the Rector and composed by six professors from all the Faculties.