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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Officials From 30 Nations Seek Global Coordination in Distance Education

BY JEFFREY R. YOUNG

DISTANCE education is bringing new meaning to the term "exchange student," as the Internet allows students to take courses from foreign institutions without a passport or a costly plane ticket. In an effort to help more students cross borders online, distance-education leaders from more than 30 countries met here this month to foster coordination among institutions around the world.

However, speakers at the day-long forum had more questions than answers.

"There are political concerns about sovereignty and control, important differences in education policy and regulatory environments and in the ways education institutions are chartered and governed, as well as the realities of language, culture, and geographic perspective," said Jacques Hallak, assistant director general for education of Unesco, in a keynote address.

MEASURING QUALITY

The main challenge, according to several officials, is measuring the quality of the myriad of players

in the worldwide market. Several speakers called on accrediting bodies and other agencies to move quickly to set standards and guidelines for judging distance-education offerings.

"We have a responsibility to protect the students," said Pedro Paulo Poppovic, Brazil's secretary for distance learning. "There are

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And not all countries have the technical capability to participate in a global exchange of educational materials.

"In Africa right now, access to the Internet is very, very limited," said Peter Materu, director of the African Virtual University, a non-profit organization supported by

the World Bank. Mr. Materu said the African Virtual University now uses satellite television to deliver courses to its 25 member institutions in 15 African nations, but hopes to begin offering at least a few courses online by next year. "A.V.U.'s success depends on getting [Internet] capacity in Africa," he said.

The African Virtual University has faced criticism, he said, because it imports most of its course content from countries outside the continent and does not yet deliver any homegrown courses. Mr. Materu added that beaming courses out of Africa is the No. 1 priority for the next phase of the university's development.

Some countries also face resistance from national institutions that are not eager for foreign competition, panelists said during the conference.

In Brazil, said Mr. Poppovic, "the universities resist distance education in every way they can." He added that many people in Brazil have a bias against distance education, in part because university education has traditionally been reserved for the elite.

Such resistance, has limited the

development of distance education in Brazil, according to Mr. Poppovic. "We're losing the race," he said. "Things are just happening [around the world], and we need to wake up."

PROMOTING FOREIGN STUDY

The forum was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, as part of a Clinton administration drive to promote international education. In April, President Clinton signed an executive memorandum calling for the federal government to help colleges increase the number and diversity of students studying abroad.

The goal is not to replace the experience of living and studying in other countries, said A. Lee Fritschler, assistant secretary for postsecondary education, in an interview. But online learning "can allow students who can't afford to travel abroad—or who don't have the time—to benefit from international curriculum and international contact."

"The world is, in fact, getting smaller, and it's easier and easier to travel," said Mr. Fritschler. "By making these connections over the Net, especially at a very early age, they'll be eager to go abroad, I hope." ■