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Mediaeval History course at ICoN

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1. Introduction

ICoN is a consortium of 24 Italian universities set up in January 1999 in partnership with the Office of the President of the Chamber of Deputies and with the support of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Universities & Scientific & Technological Research. It operates in agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The ICoN Consortium has a complex structure with a president, an Assembly of Consortium Members, a Board of Administration, an Executive Committee, a Scientific Teaching Council, a College of Auditors, and an operating team complete with secretariat.

The Consortium is a group of universities and enterprises with a common organization and a common aim, which is, in this case, the promotion and spread of Italian culture and the image of Italy worldwide using the Internet. It offers a degree course on Italian Language & Culture for foreign students as well as two separate Italian language courses and a course on Written Italian for Special Purposes.

The ICoN consortium is extensive, well-financed and supported by the Ministry of Education, University and Research.

Every member of the Consortium takes part in financing the organisation. They each allocate an agreed amount annually to pay for ICoN for its tutors and its technical tools. Some things do not need to be paid every year, such as creating the course

materials. Tutors work under contracts which depend on the number of students enrolled and on the courses that they select..

ICoN web-site visitors can register as simple users. Registered users can read and download all the material available in the Digital Library and receive information about the Consortium's activities.

An annual subscription is charged to registered users, schools and universities. This allows access to all the texts in the teaching modules, the material in the Virtual Museum and all the Encyclopaedia entries.

Three different forms of yearly subscription are available:

- an individual subscription costs 140 Euros
- a subscription for high schools and ICoN partners costs 650 Euros
- a subscription for foreign universities costs 1000 Euros

The courses in Italian Language for Foreigners, Written Italian for Professional Purposes and Italian for non-EC citizens can be accessed only by those that have paid the appropriate subscription.

Students enrolled on the degree course have access to all the teaching & learning resources, the Community section and the forum pages. Access to the virtual classes and interaction with the tutors is reserved for students who have enrolled on the tutored degree course.



Image 1: ICoN home page

2. Thematic viewpoints

Pedagogy

Students are not required to go on-line at fixed times. Messages from their tutors are sent to the student's mail-box or stored in the forum area, until the student has time to download them and send a reply. The modules and the accompanying material are available at all times. Whenever students are ready to resume work, all they have to do is to log-on to the web-site and start again where they left off.

At the time of enrolment, ICoN students can choose between two different paths: a course with tutorials or a self-guided one.

Tutoring

Tutors enrolled in the tutoring system are sub-divided into classes corresponding to the subjects. For each class, a discussion forum is created where students can take part in discussions led by a tutor.

Services provided by the tutoring system

Students have the opportunity to take part in a debating area reserved for their class, for each of the subjects followed, and also in a debating session open to all students enrolled in the tutoring system. This is the ICoN Café. They can get help and guidance from their tutors and expect answers within three working days, provided it is within the tutors' specific field of competence. They can also contact the site management team for technical support and the tutoring co-ordinator on questions relating to teaching. They have the option to do two pieces of written work assigned by the tutor on topics forming part of the course subject. The work will be marked by the tutor using the same criteria that will be used for the final examination.

Vouchers for tutorials

The ICoN tutorial "voucher" guarantees access to a subject forming part of the degree course. At the beginning of each semester all students who have completed the enrolment procedure receive a number of vouchers equal to the number of subjects they are required to take in that semester. It is generally five. A student who decides not to take all the proposed subjects can, through the options available in the enrolment or re-enrolment procedure, opt to retain one or more vouchers for subsequent semesters, in order to study those subjects at a later date. At the end of the course all unused vouchers will be automatically cancelled.

Self-guided study

On the basis of the credits associated with each syllabus within the degree course on Italian Language and Culture for Foreigners, students who opt for self-guided study work entirely on their own, studying the modules, grouped together by subject, that are specified for the semester in question. They do the self-assessment tests at the end of each unit and at the end of each module.

Teaching activities are divided into two semesters: September-December and March-June. The first examination session is held in January and February, the second in June and July.

All teaching is done on-line. Students use the interactive teaching materials, complete the automated-answer exercises, and consult the library, museum and encyclopaedia. They can take the self-guided, self-access course, or make use of tutoring services for each subject taught during the semester.

Enrolled students who make use of the tutoring service take mid-term tests and interact, in a virtual classroom with other students, who may be anywhere in the world. At the end of each semester, all students take written examinations at institutions that have an agreement with IcoN. These are located throughout the world: at Italian Cultural Institutes, Italian schools abroad and foreign universities. At the end of the course, students must prepare a written project, a computerised fact-sheet or an audio-visual project on a subject related to their studies.

At IcoN, students work asynchronously, which means that they are not required to go on-line at set times. Messages from their tutors are stored in the forum rooms or in the students' e-mail boxes until they have time to download them and send a reply. The modules and the accompanying material are always available. Whenever students are ready to resume study, all they have to do is to identify themselves on the web-site, and then start again where they left off.

History courses

Courses in history and in the humanities that are offered on the platform include

- Medieval History: 10 courses;
- Modern History: 10 courses;
- Contemporary History: 10 courses;
- Demographic and ethno-anthropological disciplines: 5 courses;
- Sociology: 4 courses;
- Economic History : 7 courses;
- History of Science and Technology: 4 courses;
- History of Christianity and the Churches: 5 courses;
- History of Political Thought: 7 courses;
- History of Games and Sport: 1 course;

- Archive-keeping, bibliography and librarianship: 5 courses;

To see how history is taught on an ICoN degree course, it will be helpful to examine one of the courses, for example the one on Medieval History. The other history courses follow a similar pattern.



Image 2: *The History and Social science area*

The Mediaeval History course, which is part of the degree programme in Italian Language & Culture, aims to give students an overview of mediaeval culture and history in Italy. The course is open to enrolled students, although other users can access some of the lessons.

The course is split into 10 lessons written by different people. Each lesson consists of 8-10 units and provides a presentation and a guide. At the end of each lesson the students have to do an exercise. This is open only to enrolled students.

The themes are really traditional. There are two units on the quality and use of sources (without practical examples) and lessons on the different chronological phases of the Middle Ages: High, Central and Late. They also include lessons on particular subjects such as Institutions and Religion.

Units appear set in stone with no sign of the materials being developed or extended.. Students have to read the texts of the lesson, then do the exercises – if necessary consulting the library, the virtual museum and the encyclopaedia. They can follow the entire course in a self-guided, self-access way, or they can make use of tutoring services.

Each unit includes a number of exercises that student have to complete within a fixed time, which is normally half an hour. These are generally tests with a single choice.



Image 3: An example of a test in the Medieval History course. Students have half an hour to answer several questions. The entail choosing between two possible answers.

Materials

The study materials look like traditional lessons written by the tutor, split into convenient chunks and put on-line in html. The learning units are original texts written by tutors from the consortium universities. There are very few images, or links to other texts. Each course has its own bibliography. There appear to be no external texts that students have to read. Bibliography at the end of each single history course sometimes includes links to other on-line texts which students are free to download. Students can also find material in the ICoN digital library which consists mainly of works of Italian literature.

Material is almost entirely in the form of texts, though there are some images in the Archaeology courses and the History of Art courses. Tutors conduct mid-term tests and they can interact with their students in a virtual classroom, if students want

this. It is not clear from the web-site what the course objectives are or what results are achieved. The texts are fixed and unchanging, and the course seems rather inflexible and not very well balanced.

The on-line Library, Museum and Encyclopaedia are accessible from the ICoN home-page.

The Library gives access to 318 works of Italian literature written by 104 leading authors. The Museum contains images of Italian works of art from antiquity to the 20th century. The Encyclopaedia offers a wide range of items from the Piccola Enciclopedia Treccani covering the main areas of Italian culture. Texts and images can be studied on-line or downloaded.

There is no on-line access to literature or journals, apart from a journal produced by ICoN itself, and short extracts from articles chosen by the tutors and included in the teaching units.

Copyright issues are dealt with in commercial agreements between ICoN and the authors or between ICoN and the other institutions that participate in the consortium – such as Treccani Publishing and the offices of Monuments and Fine Arts (Soprintendenza ai Monumenti e alle Belle Arti). Authors give ICoN the copyright in the material that they put on line.

Little use appears to be made of primary sources. Secondary sources appear as short quotations. ICoN exploits few of the on-line tools available for e-learning. Apart from the exercises, there is little that is interactive, and no sign of quizzes, games or other learning devices. The bibliographical database is wholly internal so the course appears as a closed unit. Students are neither required nor encouraged to look for material elsewhere on the Internet.



Images 4 and 5: The digital library

Administration

Since ICoN is a consortium of many Italian universities, it has a complex structure. This includes the Assembly of Consortium Members, the Board of Administration, the Executive Committee, the Scientific Teaching Council, the College of Auditors and the operating team with its secretariat. The Mediaeval History course appears to be totally integrated into this complex structure and seems to have no special audience of its own.

Platforms

Lessons and materials are available only as web pages. The technical requirements are therefore: a computer with a sound card and Windows Media Player, an internet connection with a speed of at least 28.8 Kbps (56 Kbps is recommended) and an internet browser: Internet Explorer 5.0 (or higher) or Netscape Communicator 4.7 (or higher).

Language

As the Mediaeval History course is part of the Italian Language & Culture programme, lessons and materials are all in Italian. Primary and secondary sources, when used, are translated, or they are quoted in the original language with an accompanying translation.



Image 6: The learning units on sources of the High Middle Ages

Intercultural issues

ICoN courses are for foreign students who want to improve their knowledge of Italian culture and language. Though the students that enroll on ICoN courses are from many countries around the world, each with different teaching traditions, the teaching methods used by ICoN take no account of this.

Quality

Feedback on the ICoN degree courses, including the Mediaeval History course, is extremely limited and comes only from students enrolled each year and those that complete their degree. Students can study when they want to, without any time constraints. Interaction between teacher and students is limited and there is no real exploitation of the tools and methods now available for learning on-line.

Student assessment

In order to be assessed, students doing the self-guided courses must complete a set of exercises by 27th December, for the semester beginning in September, and by 17th June for the semester beginning in March. These exercises are available at any time of the year within each course.

Assessment by means of the tests

This is based on the average of the final tests in the obligatory modules. 50% of the total, with the possibility of rounding up to the next whole number in the case of odd numbers, eg. 4 final tests out of 7, three out of 5, etc.). This applies to the modules indicated at the beginning of the semester. A bonus of 3 points is given for each of the remaining modules taken by the student as an option..

Below 50%, the exercises are assessed at 1 (inadequate, “fail”) regardless of the mark actually achieved. The board of examiners will be informed if technical difficulties arise, provided they have been properly documented,. For the subjects in which the student intends to take the examination, the exercises are assessed on the last day before the deadline. The result of the final assessment is indicated by a letter: A, B, C, I). For the final mark, expressed out of thirty, the Board of Examiners may assign:

- o up to 3 points (with distinction) for an overall result = A
- o up to 2 points for an overall result = B
- o up to 1 point for an overall result = C

At the end of each semester, all students do a written exam which they take at one of the institutions laid down by agreement with ICoN located around the world. They are generally held at an Italian school or a foreign university. At the end of the course, students must prepare a written project, a computerised fact-sheet or an audio-visual project on a subject related to their studies.

4. Conclusion

As its aims the Consortium has the promotion and spread of Italian culture and of the image of Italy worldwide and the organization of course degrees in Italian culture and language, ICoN achieves these aims very well. Through the ICoN website Italian students abroad, and foreign students who want to study the Italian language and learn about Italian history and culture, find plenty of fine material. From a historical point of view, it provides a fair picture and gives students a valuable start. It is a good formula, but only for the particular purposes laid down.

It does not seem appropriate for use in other fields and for other aims and it is not suitable for lifelong-learning programs or for institutional history degree courses, delivered by European universities. The learning materials are too fixed: It is possible to change them of course, but this means that teachers would have to re-write their own original texts, and change the whole course structure, and this would entail a great deal of time.

The materials are mainly in text form. The use of multimedia and of web tools is too limited and the learning objects appear to be too circumscribed and too inward-looking.

Members of the Consortium

The ICoN Consortium comprises the following universities: Bari, Cassino, Catania, Florence, Genoa, Milan State University, Padua, Parma, Pavia, Perugia for Foreigners, Pisa, Rome “La Sapienza”, Rome “Tor Vergata”, Roma III, Salerno, Siena for Foreigners, Teramo, Turin, Trento, Venice; the Free University of Language and Communication IULM of Milano, the Oriental University Institute of Naples, the Superior School for Academic Studies “S. Anna” in Pisa and the NET.T.UNO Consortium.