

THE LINK BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND THE COMMISSION THROUGH EUROPEAN DOCUMENTATION CENTRES

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A bit of the past...

Decades ago, the European Commission pushed for the creation of a network of European Documentation Centres in universities. It was 1963. Seven years after the signing in 1957 of the Treaties of Rome. Seven years after the creation of an idea of peace, consolidated in a network of innovative transnational institutions, with ambitious economic, legal and political objectives for the founding Member States. An incipient administrative machinery generating bulky documentation, key to understanding all this unstoppable process.

Too tantalising for colleges. They, almost immediately, put the focus of the analysis and the research effort in that complex and incipient issuer of information that today we often call, so to simplify messages: “Brussels”. It was undoubtedly a topic that burst as a novelty and an object of study in any process of academic work, doctoral thesis or research result.

Among the faculty, students and research staff of those universities of 1963, a strong demand for documents arose. A demand for information in order to theorise about what was happening. And one has to think about that analogical decade. Because in the 1960s of the 20th century, paper printing, the sending of documents by post and cataloguing and archiving in large libraries were the only way to access information and the these means were absolute protagonists of any communication.

It could be concluded from a market point of view that: the product existed (European institutions) and the demand was created (universities). The agile and professionalised communication channel was missing. And it was precisely an expert of the European Commission, who in 1963 shaped the product and created the necessary channel to reach the Academia.

The Directorate-General for Information of the Commission of the European Economic Communities, and in particular its Joint Press and Information Service, was responsible for informing the public about what was happening in Brussels. The University Information, Youth and Adult Education Unit was created with Jean Moreau as director of this Service which since 1960 showed a clear vision of cultural cooperation between States.

In January 1961, Moreau added journalist Fausta Deshormes la Valle to his team. The University Information section sought to promote teaching and research on the European Communities in the universities of the Member States, which at the time were: Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany).

In 1962, Jacqueline Lastenouse-Bury, a graduate in political science and international relations, joined the team as Head of Bibliography on European integration aimed at the demands of information from the academic community.

Thus, Jacqueline Lastenouse-Bury and Fausta Deshormes la Valle, form a support team for the study and research on European issues that were being forged in universities. Deshormes la Valle knew Antonio Tatti, a civil servant of the Commission's information office in Rome. Tatti kept good contact with universities and was keen to disseminate the work of the European Commission on their campuses.

Moreau supports the idea and in 1963 from Rome, they start to create the first European Documentation Centres, the first EDCs, in Italian universities. And it was then Jacqueline Lastenouse-Bury who later took care of these Centres. At the EDC's annual meeting in Brussels in 2015, Lastenouse-Bury received a tribute from the Commission and stated:

“In those years Europe was a breath of optimism. We quickly understood that researchers needed documentation and we therefore had the vision that universities should be the main link to connect that society and that Academia with the European Commission. To this end, it was thought that a type of library should be created to work with information from the European Union, specialising in Community issues. We looked for ways to create depository libraries to support education and research”.

Deshormes thus devised a pilot project with Italian universities to shape a network of European Documentation Centres that would begin to open their doors in universities in all Member States. Moreau's vision of cultural cooperation made it possible to finalise the project thanks to her team's work and Deshormes was responsible for the creation of more than 200 European Documentation Centres in European universities.

“In 1967 there were already around a hundred EDCs in the Member States. We started by sending the documentation, we tried to work on the doctoral theses, even creating a prize for the best thesis on integration. We created scholarships, visits to institutions, grants for seminars, for doctoral theses”. Dumoulin, M., Cailleau, J. AHUE, 2004.

A bit of present time...

Since 1963, the network of European Documentation Centres has been growing along with the various enlargements of the Union. It must also be said that in 2020, due to Brexit, the network lost those Centres located in

universities in the United Kingdom. Although just as some of these EDCs were created, as is the case of the one in Sussex, even before the UK was a Member State, British EDCs are now working to maintain an independent and active network in their universities.

There are more than 300 EDCs across the European Union as a result of decades of work. Certainly with changes, instaurations and eliminations of Centres in all Member States, but an independent, stable and crucial network to bring European information and research closer to universities, even in the digital age.

Because the EDCs that will turn 60 years old in 2023 are today totally immersed in the digital age. That is to say, in these (still today almost) 60 years of history, the Centres have gone from being depository libraries, containers and guardians of the official documentation of the European institutions, to being proactive centres in the academic life of the universities: a point of excellence regarding European integration information.

And much future

There are 33 EDCs in Spain with practically the same objectives as in 1963: to promote research and study on European integration, to provide information and training to the university community and the general public on European issues. To encourage participation and debate on European issues. The EDCs are independent and impartial information centres, an EU reference point at local level, a documentation service for the Academia and the public.

With new communication objectives since 2009 the European Commission set the digitisation challenge on our agendas. With the design of activities and products that address new demands for information and debate either in a single EDC or in collaboration with other information Centres and networks.

Thus, the EDCs have made an ecosystem of their own with the social networks and the digital media. This is essential to communicate with young people of university age, they open new channels of interaction with the Academia through social networks. Digitalisation is another of the challenges assumed by the EDCs, as well as the design of online training and new digital products that improve communication.

They are responsible for information literacy in European subjects, which is one of the objectives of training in the university context. They are also responsible in these universities for promoting participation in the debate on the future of Europe. A challenge in which especially young people feel involved.

The EDCs collaborate with the European Commission Representation in Spain by organising and hosting Citizens' Debates and proposals for the Conference on the Future of Europe. Dialogues and debates forged in classrooms, demanded by young students who come to our campuses every day

They have been supporting research, study, critical vision, participation, information on opportunities in the EU, debate, and specific training on European policies for decades.

The work of the EDCs is mainly aimed at students. Students of law, international relations, journalism, humanities, experimental sciences, languages and so on until completing each and every degree offered by the universities. They complete part of their training as they deal with European integration, documentation sources and resources that they will have to know and manage in their classroom, end of degree and end of master's degree work, in their doctoral theses and even in for their public examination processes. And in many cases, the EDC remains their reference European information centre once they are building their professional careers.

The work of the EDCs is also aimed at teachers and research staff. New developments in European policy strategies, calls and research projects, information searches supporting academic articles, theses, lectures, classes.

They report on opportunities in the EU: funding programmes, volunteering, internships and public examinations in the institutions, employment.

The EDCs are key in the fight against disinformation in the context of the European Union. They often work with the media, with entities, companies or other public institutions and agencies in collaborative projects.

They organise events, exhibitions and an endless number of activities that help to understand European history, current affairs and politics. They produce guides and other publications such as newsletters, journals, wikis, databases, podcasts, etc. that bring the reality of the EU closer to its target audience.

They use social media to give the Centre's activities and the network visibility. To summarise the institutions' complex content and translate EU thematic content into their own language. To share resources, alert of opportunities and calls.

Sometimes, different Centres collaborate to create value-added products and services. Whether at regional level, as for example the Andalusian network with a complete programme that they carry out annually in common. Or like the EDC of the University of Valencia that collaborates with other institutions and regional bodies to create specific programmes such as

Desembre Europeu. The EDC of the University of Extremadura has recently become part of Yuste Foundation, thus expanding its potential in the task of disseminating European issues.

Among the thematic collaborations, we must highlight the Spain-European Union Digital Archive (SEDAS) created in 2011 and with 21 EDCs participating today. It is also supported by the Representation of the European Commission in Spain and the collaboration of the State Secretariat for the EU of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation. SEDAS is an open access repository that digitises relevant funds about Spain's accession and integration process in the EU currently scattered in different archives. It also adds the scientific output of universities, mainly Spanish ones, related to the EU¹.

EDCs are created by signing an agreement between the host entity, which is in most cases a university, and the European Commission. They are currently integrated into the Europe Direct information network.

In Spain practically all the EDCs are located in universities and more specifically within their libraries. The Representation of the Commission in the Member States acts as a reference point and offers institutional support to its national network of Centres. This, in the case of the Representation of the Commission in Spain, takes the form of close cooperation and participation with the Centres. You can contact any of them directly through their website².

In conclusion, it must be noted that the added value of EDCs is the fact that they are strategically located in universities and to develop strong relationships with local communities. The Academia is assisted by the EDCs in the search for specialised data and these Centres are crucial when it comes to providing information to students, involving them in a way that neither the Representations of the Commission nor other communication networks could do. In addition, people working in the EDCs have specialised training in European databases and topics. (European Commission, 2015).

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¹ <http://seda.uji.es/>

² https://spain.representation.ec.europa.eu/contacto/en-espana/encuentra-un-centro-de-la-ue-cerca-de-ti-en-espana_es

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