
DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER

14

**Embracing
the
Internet**



DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER FOURTEEN

DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER
NUMBER 14

Embracing the Internet

by

Carol Oliver and Dr. Gordon Wills, International Management Centres

Printed by The Hadley School for the Blind, Winnetka, Illinois

Published by the Distance Education and Training Council, Washington, D.C.

March 1996

DETC OCCASIONAL PAPERS (formerly *NHSC Occasional Papers*) are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between distance study professionals. For a complete set of *Occasional Papers*, write or call the DETC.



Introduction

Most of us in distance education regard the Internet phenomenon today with a mixture of awe and foreboding. And that mixture is appropriate.

There is little doubt that the Internet, using the World Wide Web and similar formats, will change forever the way we conduct distance education. The dilemma is when and how—and who should go first?

We volunteered to contribute this Occasional Paper because our Business School, International Management Centres, has gone for cyberspace totally. Since November 1995, all of our programs and processes are driven through the Internet via <http://www.imc.org.uk/home.htm>—if you can connect there please do so at once. You are most welcome.

Why Did We Jump?

Much of what we do as distance educators is totally familiar to that which all other DETC members do. Students (in our case practicing managers whom we call “Associates”) join our programs from any country in the world.

However, when delivering our programs, we always use what are termed “sets” of 8 to 16 people—who meet together and pace their studies together. They are encouraged to critique one another’s assignments before they are submitted for evaluation to supplement the advice our tutors give. Our tutors meet their sets face to face, normally rotating the “classrooms” to the premises of the Associates themselves.

The courseware for our programs used to be shipped by mail from our central warehouse in England to all corners of the world—to places

like Finland, Curacao, New Zealand and Papua, New Guinea to the Netherlands and Gibraltar. The MBA program included thirteen large box files. They regularly got damaged. The postal services, even air freight, were often unreliable. Non starts and product damage often accounted for 40% of all materials shipped globally.

To be cost effective, the courseware was produced in batches with a shelf life of two years or so. Each Associate was then given guidance in tracking down the best local library to supplement the courseware when it came to writing his/her dissertation.

Control systems were typically excellent just prior to a DETC on-site examination and always as graduation approached. At other times, they were less than excellent. Keeping central administrative services informed of address changes and other administrative details were the main priorities.

Associates world-wide, and faculty, wanted to share and compare outside of their local sets. But they had to communicate through IMC in the UK to make connections. While we did this with enthusiasm, it was cumbersome. The whole world of IMC was unable to meet and talk with one another except at our annual Congregation when the Associates graduated in a splendid and academic ceremony. Attendance at these Congregations averaged about 400-700. This event toured the globe—Kuala Lumpur (1992), Queensland, Australia (1993), Yorkshire, England (1994), Amsterdam (1995) and Helsinki scheduled for 1996. Six months in between Congregations, we run an Annual Professional Congress to talk amongst ourselves. Attendance is about 60-100. Again, it tours the globe—England (1992), Johannesburg (1993), Hong Kong (1994), and Curacao (1995).

It was at our Congress in England in November 1992 that Dutch and Australian faculty argued that many of the hoped for benefits from such a multicultural Business School could, in theory, be much better

achieved if we used the new electronic methods just becoming available. At that time hardly anyone in the room had an e-mail address, but it sounded like a good idea.

We did not proceed as many wise folks would, to prepare a feasibility study and discuss how to fund such a move. We simply got started! (Our educational philosophy at IMC is “action learning.” Which quite simply means acting to learn rather than learning to act.)

By July 1994 we had created, not an Internet site, but a Bulletin Board System (BBS) for all of our activities. The cultural mode for IMC integrated all the administrative and courseware processes and masterminded the news and information exchanges. Each region of the world, and each set of Associates, had their own BBS connected to the central system.

The wildcat BBS we adopted taught us a great deal about how to organize our data and information. But, as we anticipated, most Associates were unable to connect to the BBS regularly and thus didn't benefit much. Most faculty were slow to come to terms with it. More importantly, it failed to galvanize our international community to share and compare as the system matured.

By March 1995, the Congress meeting in Curacao resolved that we should move to the Internet at once—and we went online at our Amsterdam Congregation in November 1995.

The IMC Internet Site

Our site on the Internet is made available to us by MCB University Press—the largest academic and professional management publisher in the world. We employed talented young technicians who are wholly comfortable with computers and challenged them to create a site that would be:

1. An active site for all necessary courseware and administrative procedures we use at IMC;
2. An interactive destination for all Associates, Faculty and Graduates of IMC;
3. A linkage to the body of knowledge needed to support Associates all over the world to complete their studies, e.g., a virtual library of professional journals; and,
4. A news and information service.

Because our courseware and administrative files had been originated for the BBS it was relatively easy to convert them to the Internet. By mid-1996, with the use of Adobe Acrobat software, the pages available for downloading by Associates as they proceed will look virtually as they would in print. Full text articles with copy input clearance appear alongside the course structure. Associates are further directed to abstracts of articles where the full text will be supplied to meet a 24 hours dispatch service level from the British Library.

Interactivity is a demanding and time consuming process—and of course will only happen when Associates and Faculty are fully conversant and comfortable with the new technology. As such, we are including interactivity as a required exercise in each course. Associates must log on at least four times each week and their assignments must have built in them evidence of sharing and discussing with other colleagues on the Internet. News items can be posted directly from around the world via linked e-mail from the Internet pages to the News Bulletins edition. Pictures can be scanned in and so indeed can sound be included (but we have not done this yet).

The Economies of Internet

E-mail has predominantly replaced the use of the telephone. Attached/posted files have replaced the mail and fax. The cost savings to IMC have been considerable.

The biggest savings, and the greatest benefits, however, have occurred in the courseware we provide. Gone are the staggering postal costs and the loss/damage we experienced. We now boast of having six monthly updates of the references given to the Associates as they study their courses. We are no longer saddled with central printing and warehousing. We now have “on demand” printing for Associates. The cost of delivering much more up to date courseware globally has fallen by well over 50%.

Is the Internet a Sales Medium for Distance Education?

Much of the Internet hype you read about suggests it is the greatest new sales medium ever invented. This has not been our experience, nor frankly have we striven to make it such. Internet is an accompaniment to our sales efforts of course. Potential Associates can browse our site. We place no restrictions on access to what we offer—even our courseware. Passers by, the curious Web page reader, training managers, all can demonstrate it and use it for their own purposes if they are so inclined.

Nobody who has not registered with us as an Associate, however, can gain our tutorial support work with fellow Associates, submit assignments or earn our credentials. Our philosophy is that as long as we are moving ahead successfully we do not begrudge someone who wants to eavesdrop.

A more pro-active approach could be followed provided the approach is respectful of the nature of the medium, i.e., the customer must be interactive rather than passive. Irritating or unwanted junk e-mail to targeted audiences is most unwelcomed. That does not mean, however, that list servers should not be used—you can contribute to these approaches by getting successful graduates and current students to talk about their achievements. Neither does it prevent you ensuring that the titles you give to your pages include key words which are wholly relevant to what you offer. “Word search” or hyperlinks are now available to enable you and potential students to crawl across the net finding as much as they can about a specific topic.

Anyone arriving at our site will find that our program brochures and our application forms are there for downloading and submission by post or by e-mail. They are posted in one smooth operation that creates them in a format that enables processing for hard copy printing or Internet play.

What does the Student Experience on the Internet?

Many of the comments which follow are simply a replay of what a good distance education institution does already. The Internet for distance education involves these issues:

- Each student must come to terms with being online and using the Internet. Most people under 25 have no problems at all. Most people over 35 may have some psychological problems. To deal with this dilemma, we have put younger people in charge of our system. We run Cyber Cafes and hands on workshops world-wide for those who need reassurance and help in getting started. We have standard practice routes with templates for focused searching (not surfing) on the Internet.

- Each student downloads that section of the courseware appropriate for the next study period.
- Each student relates with his/her tutor and with fellow students tackling similar assignments—using an Internet meeting place/ Newsgroup for the purpose.
- Assignments are sent as attached files to an e-mail that is sent to the tutor, whose marks and comments are returned the same way.

The vital differences are that the whole process of interaction can be done much faster on the Internet than with postal exchanges. And students can offer help and consolation to one another as they go along. This helps to overcome the obvious loneliness of many distance education students. Our experience to date has been that the method has greatly improved our course completion rates.

How Our Faculty Uses the Internet

Faculty members are naturally most active when they are tutoring a specific set across the world. In addition to this task-driven relationship, however, we have ensured that IMC's central office has Internet benefits as well. The Annual Professional Congress for 1996 is being run as a combination "virtual" conference from March/September at three face to face places—in Kuala Lumpur, Lismore, Australia and Guildford, England. Each meeting lasts three days, and each picks up from the Internet where the other left off—plus the views from the "virtual" conference of those who could not attend in person.

The focus papers of those who lead workshop sessions are available on the Internet well before the face to face sessions. Discussions at the on-site meeting are based upon focus papers which have been read beforehand. Each workshop leader can already have reactions from

individuals before the sessions start. Discussions can therefore build on these exchanges from the outset of the meeting.

Faculty can follow distance education progress at no charge with IMC—to further improve their skills. They can access all details of IMC’s Academic Board’s deliberations, the program Regulations and Ordinances. They can take advice from tutors globally who have tackled similar assignments elsewhere.

What are the Snags?

Here are just a few:

- The biggest snag currently is the technology. Students have to be properly organized and be computer literate. This is potentially an obstacle for anyone over 25.
- Even when organized, the Internet still has its fair share of delays, blockages and frustrations. The server you choose to use will go down from time to time. “Connectivities,” as they are called, will get lost.
- Graphics, which make pages look pretty and often make the course more compelling, take a long time to download. For the near term, avoid using too many graphics.
- The task of keeping your site up to date and interesting is very labor intensive. Most of us underestimate how tough this is. The students and faculty members want to see something “new” each time they visit your home page site. If not, the desire to make repeat visits will dwindle away.

When the system works well, it is awesome. Its capacity for interactivity is its most significant contribution. Provided that you

staff-up adequately to handle the Internet, it will be a major breakthrough for distance education.

What Do You Do Next?

If your institution is not yet using the Internet, unless there are very exceptional reasons, it should start right away. There is no reason to delay your entry into cyberspace!

The best advice that we can give from IMC is:

- Do not simply get a home page which you hope will generate leads. It almost certainly won't.
- Get a home page by all means, but use it to complement and supplement all of your existing promotional media. Publish your home page address in every school publication and ad.
- Go further. Get demonstration course sessions up on the Internet, which prospective students can see—and sample—and show viewers how the constructive feedback and servicing aspects of distance education work.
- Get some of your successful alumni and graduates to e-mail you and agree to be testimonial-givers for prospective students. Publicize their e-mail address on your home page as a source of reassurance to other prospective students.
- Get all your faculty to come to terms with the Internet. Form a Newsgroup with them as soon as you can to keep in constant touch—share your problems and successes. If you can, run Cyber Cafe's for them where they can share and compare, and show one another how to make the best use of technology.

- Once the faculty are trained and ready to go, offer one of your more popular courses on the Internet—not instead of but as well as. Chose one where the enrollments come from students who are already comfortable with the Internet.

It should take you no more than 12 months to get on the net. It is less expensive than you might think. Get a young staff member to take charge of the project. They will relish the opportunity and the challenge.

Conclusion

If you are already on the Internet and want to share your ideas with us, please e-mail the authors of this paper at carolo@mcb.co.uk. If you are not on the Internet yet, do not be daunted. The medium of information captured and disseminated through the Internet is here to stay—albeit that a great deal of refinement is still needed. We are now in the “silent movie” era of development, but the “talkies” are just around the corner. The future of distance education is multimedia interactive communications at prices we can all afford.

Internet will not sweep away the need for face to face contacts, nor student concerns, nor the need for elegant paper certification on completion of courses. But it opens new vistas on the old concern of distance educators. It has the ability to transform the courseware cost/benefit equation and to enrich the learning equation.

Keep the technology in perspective. It is only there to serve the paramount educational goal: changing peoples’ lives for the better.

The Authors

Ms. Carol Oliver has spent 10 years with International Management Centres, Buckingham, England, as Program Manager and Executive Multinational Registrar. She was responsible for the operation of both the BBS and Internet systems between 1993-1995.

Dr. Gordon Wills is Principal and Professor of Customer Policy at International Management Centres, and was a founding member in 1964. He has written widely and is also currently Marketing Director of MCB University Press and responsible for the transition to electronic publishing of 150 journals. He has global marketing responsibilities at MCB University Press, but is especially responsible for the Asia Pacific, the fastest educational growth market in the world today, with active partners in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Brisbane and Sydney.

Other Occasional Papers Available

Number 1—*Student Services: Achilles Heel or Crown Jewel?* by Michael P. Lambert, Executive Director, DETC

Number 2—*What Manager Doesn't Study at Home?* by Dr. Gordon Wills, Principal, The International Management Centres

Number 3—*Toward Better Service and Testing* by Dennis Foltz, Vice President of Education and Operations, Gemological Institute of America

Number 4—*Testing Home Study Advertising* by Jack Thompson, Consultant

Number 5—*Conducting Graduate Surveys* by Mary McKeown, Vice President, American School

Number 6—*Enrollment Contracts for Home Study Schools* by William Wright, American School

Number 7—*Evaluating Your School's Worth* by Michael P. Lambert, Executive Director, DETC

Number 8—*Getting the Most PR for Your School* by Sally R. Welch, Assistant Director, DETC

Number 9—*The Effectiveness of the Home Study Method* edited by Sally R. Welch, Assistant Director, DETC

Number 10—*Home Study Academic Transcripts* by Sally R. Welch, Assistant Director, DETC

Number 11—*Admissions Policies: The Key to Success* by Josephine L. Ferguson, Member, Accrediting Commission of the DETC

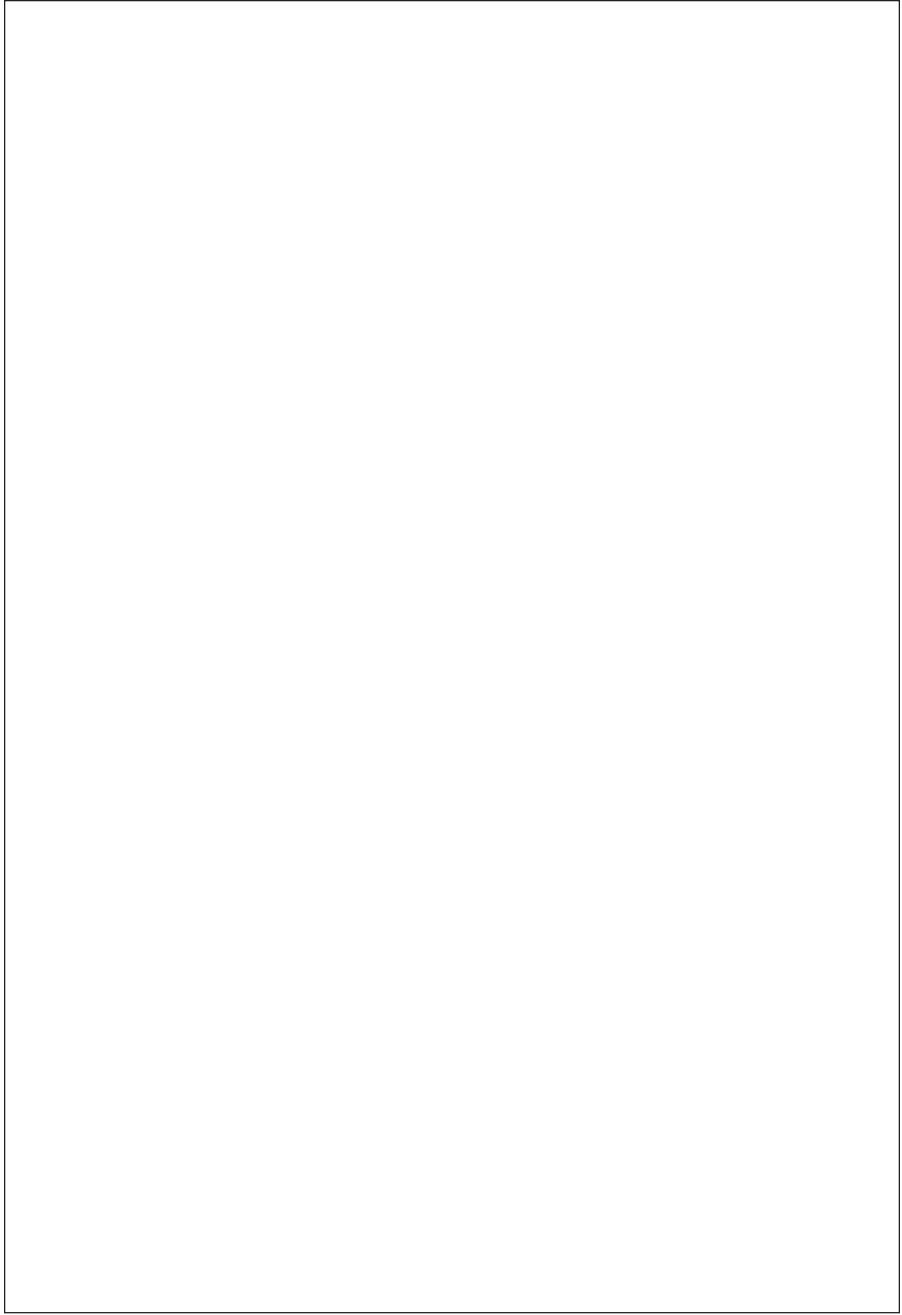
Number 12—*How to Write an Analytical Self-Evaluation Report* by Josephine L. Ferguson, Member, Accrediting Commission of the DETC

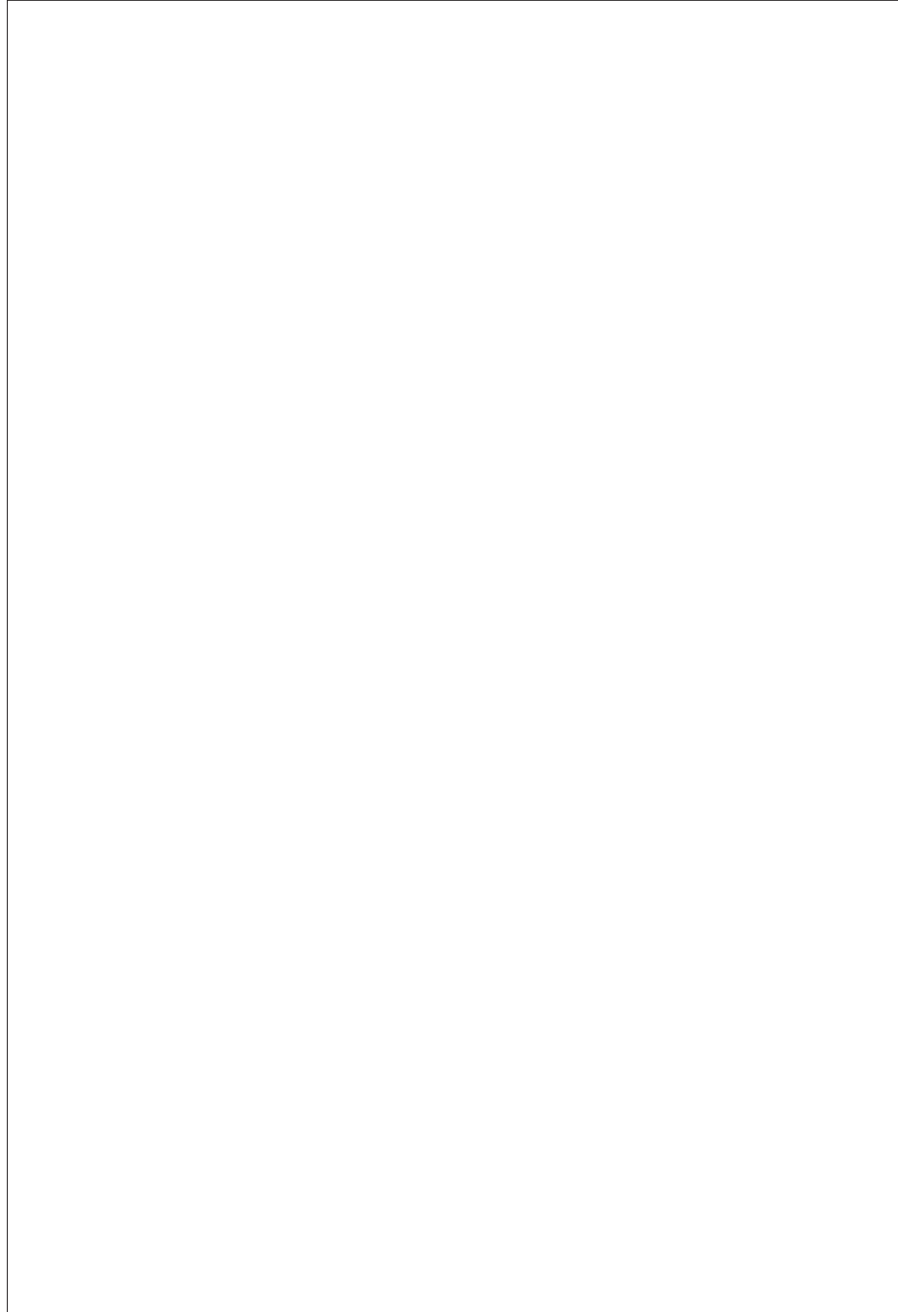
Number 13—*Building a Distance Education Faculty* by Dr. John E. Jessup, Academic Dean, American Military University

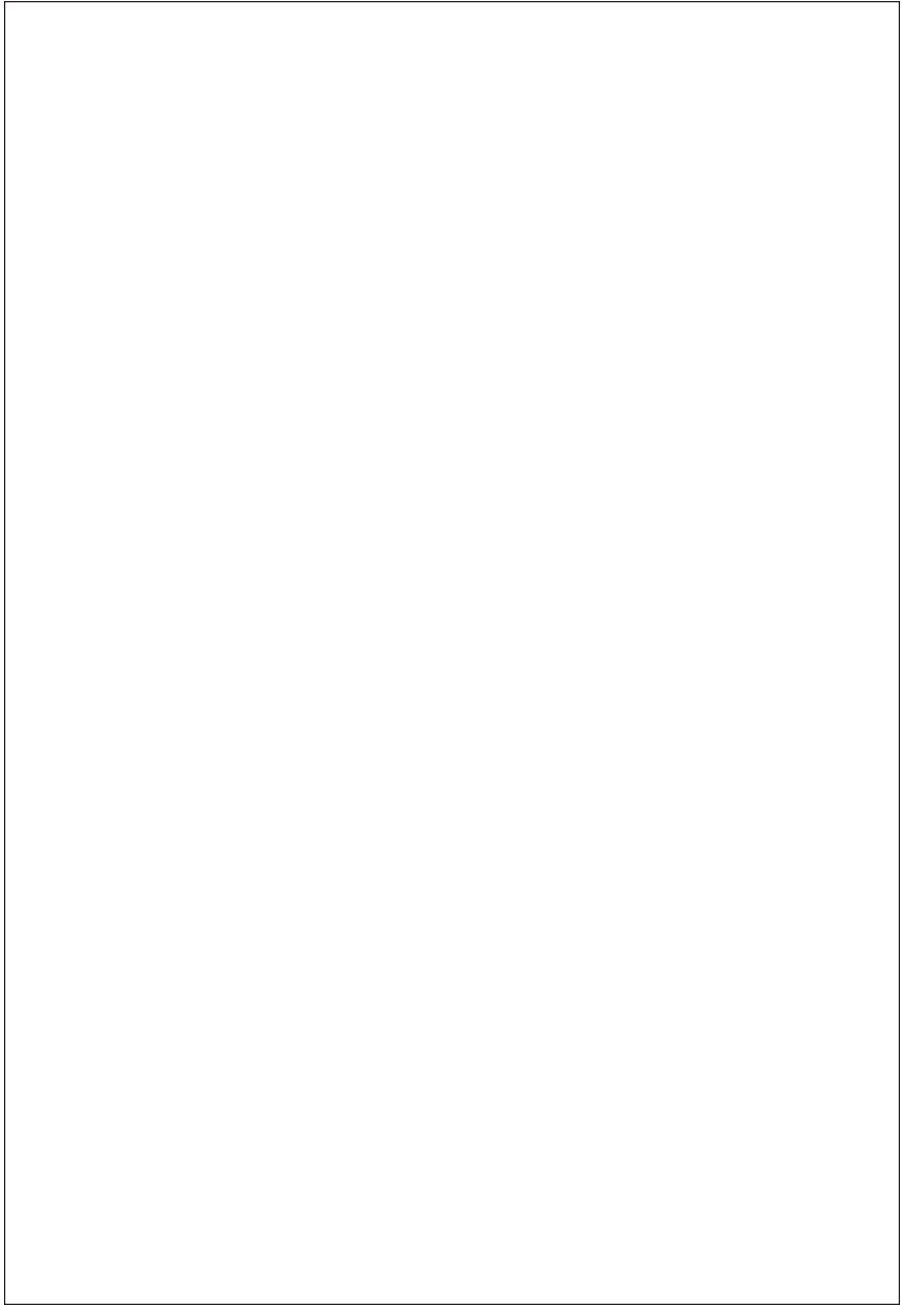
Number 14—*Embracing the Internet* by Carol Oliver and Dr. Gordon Wills, International Management Centres

IMC's Meeting Place

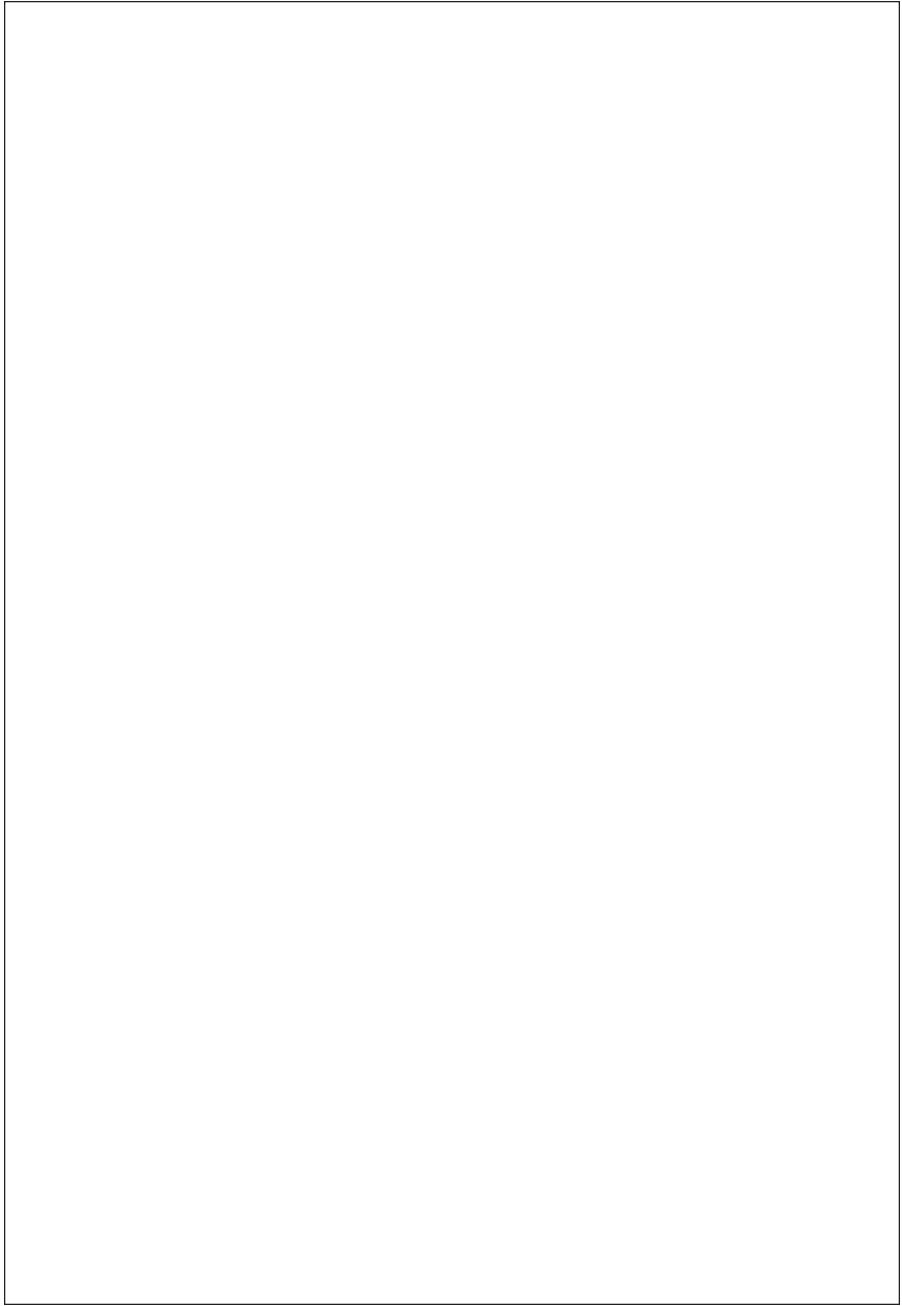




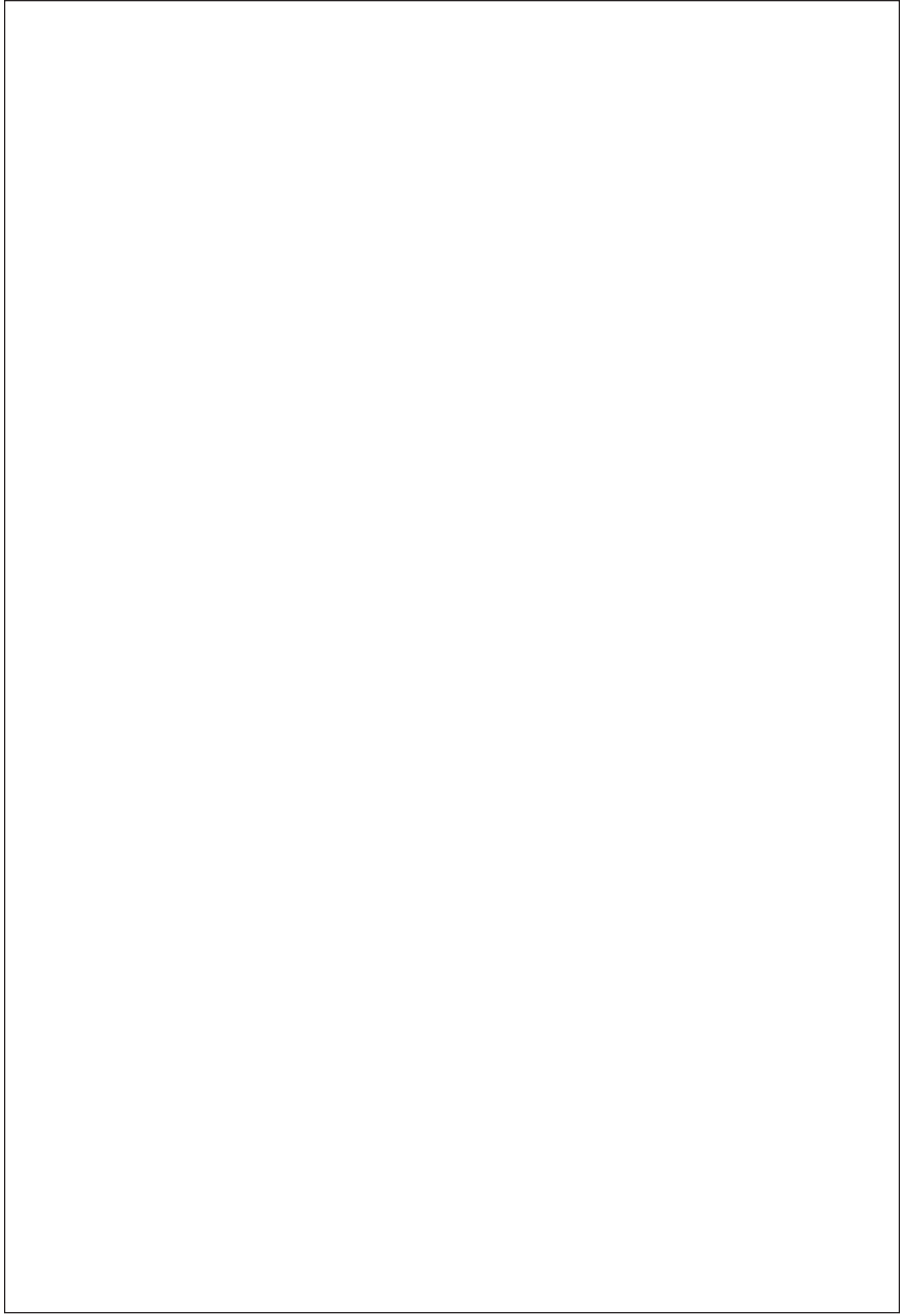












DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER FOURTEEN

DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER FOURTEEN

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND TRAINING COUNCIL



1601 18TH STREET, N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20009-2529
(202) 234-5100
