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The Information Society: Many a Realistic Chance for a New Lease of Life

For many people modern communications technology has nothing more to offer than a pleasant way to pass the time of day, "something you have to do to be in with the crowd", for others it means a way of enhancing their career prospects. Other groups are also benefiting for the first time from access to a wide range of educational opportunities by means of computer and modem. Furthermore, this new technology offers many disabled people the opportunity to lead a fairly independent life.

University correspondence courses are enjoying an increase in popularity, also in remote areas. In fact, not every student who wants to study is necessarily willing to leave home and some may simply not be able to afford to. The majority of lectures offered on correspondence courses can be accessed via the Internet or video conferences, however, examinations are supervised. In collaboration with the open university in Hagen (North Rhine-Westphalia), the Zentrum für Fernstudien (Centre for Distance Studies) at the University of Linz in Austria offers subjects ranging from economics, education, sociology and psychology to electrical engineering, mathematics, as well as information technology. Some 2,000 Austrians were enrolled as students at the open university in Hagen along with 500 students at the Open University in the UK. During the winter semester of 1997/98 there was a total of 221,383 university students in Austria.

Because of the ever increasing number of students, an additional centre for correspondence study was opened this year in Steyr, adding to colleges already located in Linz, Vienna and Bregenz and another one will open shortly in Saalfelden. A recent innovation has been the introduction of a new experimental degree programme; from autumn the centre in Bregenz will offer the opportunity to study law. Only a few days after the new course was announced the institution was inundated with more than 100 applications for the 30 places available.

For many disabled people university correspondence courses finally offer the opportunity to participate in academic life via the computer. Over the past twelve years scientists in the "Fortec" working party at the Vienna University of Technology in Vienna have been developing work opportunities particularly to the disabled. Part of this initiative involved a project called "VIP" which developed a complete computer workstation for the blind and visually impaired. In addition, a computer was fitted with special enlarging software for the screen display, voice recognition, text scanner as well as braille lines so that the blind are able to read text scanned in braille-form.

The "AUTONOM" project was an attempt by engineers to give even the most severely physically handicapped the opportunity to live and study independently. Special switches and controls which are adapted to the individual needs of the user,

together with customised software, allow the room lighting, heating or radio to be controlled via the computer. "AUTONOM" has also enabled severely handicapped children to move a toy, such as a crane, using voice commands. So far two childcare centres have been equipped with their own "AUTONOM" rooms, the Elisabethinum centre in Axams and the Dr. Adolf-Lorenz School in Floridsdorf (Vienna).

"One of the main problems of developing technology for the disabled are the high costs involved", says Wolfgang Zagler, head of the "Fortec" working party. TU experts are currently engaged in a project named "RESORT" that aims to reduce the ever increasing service costs and the redesign cost of workstations for the disabled. "The aim of the project is to provide for an on-screen service to carry-out adaptations via synchronised contact with the disabled PC-user. The service provider can make adaptations, without needing to be called out", according to Zagler. A care assistant may also be summoned via a conference channel if necessary.

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