Chapter 10
AGH Student City as an Example of Open and Distance Learning System

10.1 Introduction

The idea of Open and Distance Learning System is considered as a highly interesting subject of scientific research and practical developments. However, if one chooses to confront the outcomes of theoretical considerations with reality, or attempts to quantify the effectiveness of the effectuated deployments, it is likely he or she will meet significant arising complications. The performance of Open and Distance Learning is above all a difficult subject for any experimental verification procedure, due to the foundational principle of such system almost entirely precludes any research proceedings. That is mainly a consequence of making educational resources publicly available which in turn renders impossible tracing their state, or gathering information on how and to what effect they are used.

On the other hand, it is rather difficult to transfer the outcomes of scientific observations and experiments to the Open and Distance Learning Systems environment as they are often published by individuals specialized in e-learning methods but using them in typical form and limited to a single student group, or - less likely - to a single term. The reasons for that limited outcomes transferability are usually the following:

- in e-learning courses, students are usually subject to a form of sanctioned regime since the learning process needs to be finalized with graduation or examination. In typical e-learning scenarios, that induces an obligation to use predefined digitalized educational resources. That very fact is contradictory to the idea of unrestrained accessibility of educational resources which itself is a foundation for the Open and Distance Learning process.
- apart from the obligation to learning, typical e-learning courses require framing the learning process within defined time frame that is subject to protocols of conducting, grading and finalization of the courses. That does not correspond with the Open and Distance Learning process that promotes learning in any given time and place.
- during teaching with use of e-learning as an aid to the primary process, a group of students (at school or university) is usually entirely homogenous, i.e., in the same age and with the roughly the same amount of previously acquired knowledge. However, the makeup of learning individuals participating in the Open and Distance Learning process is characterized by varying age and unequal initial knowledge.
The aforementioned reasons justify the assertion that accessibility of information required for evaluation and optimization of Open and Distance Learning Systems models is substantially limited. That holds true even when we consider the situation of increasing volume of research concerning methods and outcomes of applications of tele- and IT-assisted learning with respect to various e-learning forms. Meanwhile, the mounting determination of institutions and organizations involved in advocacy and implementation of Open and Distance Learning class systems necessitates an immediate and urgent requirement for both the evaluation procedures and the premises for optimization.

Having strong considerations for the problems so far presented herein we should relate with even greater attention to unique AGH student city experience of using e-learning techniques in Open and Distance Learning model retaining the abilities of control over the learning process outcomes.

The factor conducive to attainment of that experience was a spatial composition of the AGH campus (see figure 10.1.). The scientific and didactic parts of the university neighbor to compact residential campus (called the Student City) that is a home to approximately 10,000 AGH students. An additional contributing circumstance is the fact that at a half of the distance between research and didactic facilities and residential space of the Student City a supercomputer and networking center can be found called the Cyfronet. That allowed for inclusion of the Student City residents in a broadband Internet gateway.

Fig. 10.1 Topography of AGH “Student City”, university buildings and “Cyfronet”