

E-LEARNING – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Brîndușa Maria POPA

Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies, Brasov, Romania
(pbrindusa2005@yahoo.com)

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Abstract: *Distance learning (e-learning) has experienced a huge development at a very rapid pace in recent years and educational institutions are more and more interested in developing and offering a higher number of online learning programs in an effort to satisfy the demand for permanent development. Thus, e-learning has ceased to be just a buzz word people or institutions use when they want to put up a modern and innovative face, it has become a common educational situation within the educational environment which offers many promises and opportunities. In practice, however, the combination between educational process and technology does not always function properly. Some of the shortcomings are caused by technology, administrative issues, instructional methods and even students.*

Despite the promises and the evident benefits of distance learning, the issues mentioned above need to be addressed, otherwise they will affect the quality of education, will incur hidden costs, will bring about misuse of technology and even improper attitude on the part of instructors, students and administration. Most of the times, these issues are interrelated and for this reason they should all be given the same importance when tackled. Unfortunately, it is impossible to solve all the problems and to keep up with the rapid rhythm the issues and changes that occur. Nevertheless, we should not lose faith and give up because distance learning is an educational product which continues to be attractive and viable. The increasing number of students of all ages and backgrounds enrolling in distance learning courses prove its attractivity and usefulness.

Keywords: *E-learning, traditional learning, challenges, opportunities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Online education has evolved from distance education and Isaac Pitman, a British, is attributed the pioneering the concept of “distance education” when he started teaching shorthand via correspondence in 1840. The technological advancements have helped in improving the teaching process and the IT&C development contributed to the appearance of a new method of learning, online learning or e-learning. E-learning has experienced a huge development and expansion in the recent years, if at the beginning of 2000s online courses were just a sporadic presence in the offers presented by the educational institutions, nowadays almost every university has developed e-learning programs. Although this growth is impressive it does not come without problems and there some challenges that need to be taken into consideration if we want the results of these learning programs to be above average.

Educational institutions have increased their learning programs with online course in response to social changes and student demand. More and more people want to continue their education, but work and family obligations or some financial restrictions prevent them from doing it. E-learning has made education more convenient and accessible for a large number of people, the development of technology made learning activities able to take place anytime and anyplace.

2. OPPORTUNITIES

According to different reports and surveys the number of students attending online educational programs continues to grow annually and there is no apparent reason for this growth to stop. The Babson report from 2011 presents the results of an analysis of the online education status in the U.S. The report states that “the number of students taking at least one online course has increased at a rate far in excess of the growth for the overall higher-education student body” [1] as you can see in fig. 1.

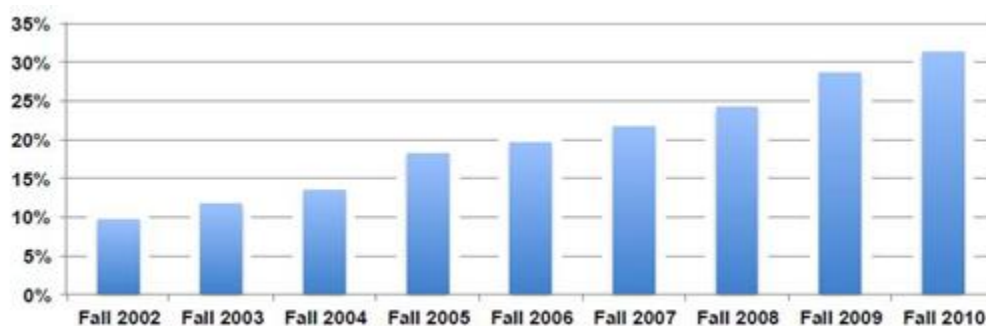


FIG. 1 Online enrollment as a percent of total enrollment - Autumn 2002 through autumn 2010 [2]

The facts presented above are the result of the U.S. strategy to encourage distance learning. They have invested heavily in this domain in order to face the challenges of modern society: unlimited accessibility, flexibility.

The Distance Education Enrollment Report released in 2017 by Babson Survey Research Group [3] presents the evolution of online education in the USA on between the years on 2012-2015. The findings come to support the results from earlier years (see figure 1) and show that distance education growth maintained its momentum.

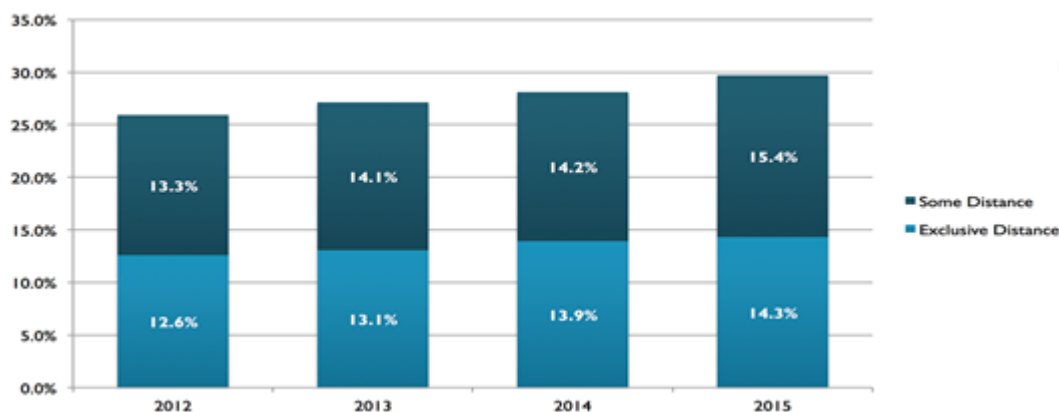


FIG. 2 Percentage of students taking distance courses 2012-2015

Even if there is a gap between Europe and U.S., Europe now goes in the same direction and the new program of the European Commission “Erasmus for all” which focuses on improving people’s skills and their personal development through lifelong learning, will help the funding for e-learning in Europe.

Also, the opinion of the academic world has changed and the advantages of distance learning have become visible and have been recognized. Piet Henderikx, Secretary General of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), stated that it “has become an important answer to the current educational challenges and will significantly impact our educational landscape” [4]. Originally, EADTU had eleven founding members in ten European nations and now the number rose to 15 institutions and 14 national associations across 25 nations. The membership covers over 200 universities and around 3 million students [5].

A report by the IDEAL project (Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning) covering the period between October 2013 and September 2015 offers information about the situation in the European Union and the results of the EU strategy concerning equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all, focusing on people enrolled in distance education programs. From fig. 3 presented below, we can see that there are two predominant age groups 25-34 and 35-44-year-olds in distance education and according to the gender more women than men are enrolled in distance education.

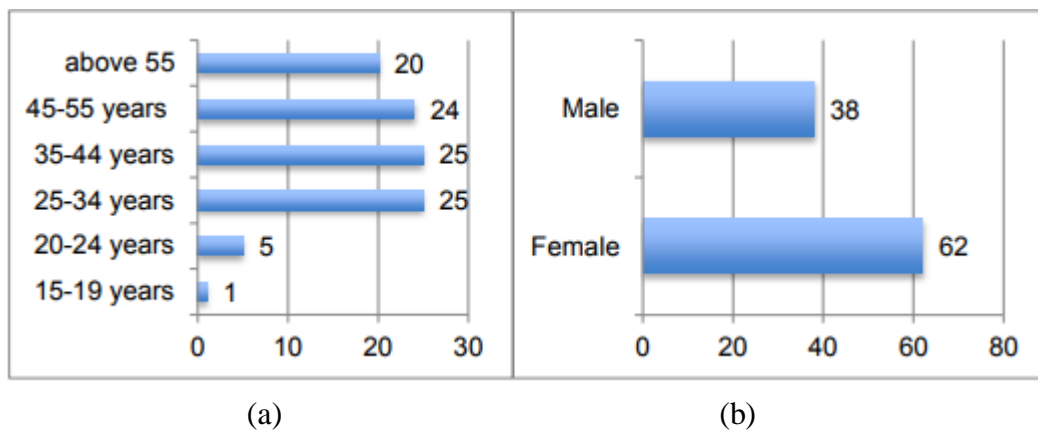


FIG. 3 Percentage of students enrolled in distance education according to age and gender [6]

This impressive growth that is visible in the European Union and the United States is due to its principal characteristic and advantage: convenience. Why is it convenient? Well, one very important aspect is the budget. For both sides, the educational institutions and the students, online learning offers the possibility of providing and taking courses without the burden of a high cost. Here we can mention the teaching staff cost, utilities, consumables for the educational institutions and for the students the cost of tuition, lodging, travelling, educational materials and why not, the impossibility of earning an income while attending a full time education program.

Another aspect is that of time and schedule flexibility. A person engaged in a full time work activity will not be able to attend traditional education programs; there are people who prefer to learn and research at their own pace, spending more time on a specific topic and less on others. Also, students enrolled in this educational process can attend courses from different universities located in other countries, with different time zones.

Diversity and opportunity are two other criteria taken into consideration. For example, one can choose a course on a specific topic, which is delivered by a university from another country without the necessity of relocating there or, one person can attend two educational programs at the same time without overlaps in schedule also, such programs offer access to education even to people having disabilities.

Adaptability to new. Whenever there is a new trend and learners are asking for it the online platforms can adapt quicker than the traditional programs. This is not an impediment. You just need to develop a new module on the training platform and instantly get all the benefits to all your learners. Gamification which represents the process of adding games or gamelike elements to something (such as a task) so as to encourage participation can be a good example.

To conclude, we can say that the fact that this kind of education does not require for the student to be in a certain location for the classes, the only mandatory aspects is access to a PC with an internet connection makes it very attractive. These basic two requests trigger other effects like reduced tuition costs and the possibility to accommodate the learning process to the work schedule or to family constraints. In a service-oriented economy, education is perceived as a service so, the student as a consumer, looks for the most advantageous and diverse offers.

Online education has become more and more competitive, not only from a material point of view, but also from an academic perspective. Online programs offer new learning opportunities in a variety of formats and manners and people from the most remote regions can have access to education. An online course can comprise more information than a traditional class of 50 or 100 minutes. The delivery and structure of the course will not be altered by interruptions and all the misunderstandings can be clarified without taking up from the delivery time, using written communication. And last, but not the least the programs offered can cover almost every domain (with some exceptions, thus universities can enlarge their curricula without any modification to their physical spaces.

Taking into considerations all the above mentioned aspects, we can say that e-learning offers great educational opportunities in an ever-changing world, broadening the scope and reach of education farther than ever before and at the same time being a valuable and cost-effective method of continuous education.

3. CHALLENGES

As it often happens, there is also a downside of this situation, along with making education available to greater number of people arises the challenge of making this diversity of people work in concert and avoid the discrepancies that arise from lack of direct (face to face) communication.

Many of the promises of distance learning and maybe the most appealing are of a financial nature. Universities, as well as students, aim at saving money by offering and enrolling in online courses. Universities can increase the class size without any change in the overhead or without having to worry about the lack of physical space (classrooms, laboratories etc.). All these seem very good, but there are some hidden dangers if we only look for financial benefits. Universities welcome those who want to enroll, but the more they are, the bigger the administrative, technical and instructional challenges.

From the administrative point of view enrolling many people means keeping a lot of records, staying in contact and trying to keep organized large groups of people. Sometimes this can be a very tedious activity and the administrative department might not have the necessary personnel for such an amount of work. This is a problem that occurs for the faculty staff, also. The need for instructors surpasses the personnel of the faculties due to the increased number of new courses that appear every academic year. The challenge is the how to fill in the gaps, as the classes cannot be postponed or cancelled and hiring new instructors is not always possible and the shortage of instructors will influence the quality of the educational process.

The quality of instruction depends on the attitude of the administration and of the instructors. People who are dissatisfied with their activity will not do their best.

Due to the shortage of staff and the multitude of tasks to be accomplished some of the assignments will be superficially effectuated. In order to avoid misunderstandings it is very important that the schedules the deadlines should be very clear, as well as the academic requirements. All the materials should be posted in time and the answers to the students' questions must be prompt. Some students tend to neglect their responsibilities and it is advisable to post some of the most important issues or deadlines on the main page of the site to remind them. Online learning requires students to be more disciplined and determined, they have to manage their time wisely, the fact that their learning schedule is flexible could make them postpone or even omit completely to accomplish their tasks. For this reason online education is not appropriate for young or dependent students who need a lot of supervision and guidance.

Communication is another issue and lack of face to face communication makes the educational process more difficult. The instructor needs to be interactive and to provide quick and clear response to the students' inquiries. The teachers should be deeply involved in their activity, they should find a way to supply the lack of face to face contact by creating a participative environment fostering the sense of a learning community in order to achieve maximum participation. Online courses are generally characterized by lack of interaction. In this case, where direct contact is almost absent and communication is sequential, some problems and especially misperceptions may occur. Also, taking away all forms of interactions with other people might be a demotivating factor for some users, boredom occurs as well as lack of focus.

Some students lack to ability to measure their own progress and need to see the flow of the class in order to feel like progress is being made. Such students are used to the traditional face-to-face instruction and have a difficult time in adapting to the environment, most likely they will show disinterest, will respond with absenteeism and will not finish the learning program.

Learning as a collaborative process is essential when students and instructors are separated by distance. A research by Palloff and Pratt shows that "collaborative activities can alleviate feelings of isolation by purposefully connecting learners with one another through various learning activities and promoting interdependence" [7] and "assists students to achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning making" [8]. The instructor can shape the distance learning environment and encourage collaborative learning thus creating the sense of community among the students and attaining effectiveness. The instructor has the difficult task to overcome the limits of the technology and impediments caused by distance and lack of interaction and to involve the students and facilitate discussions.

Technology is another challenge. Technology in itself cannot improve the quality of the courses. High technology does not guarantee nor produce effective distance education. Technology can facilitate the educational process as long as both instructors and students are familiar with it. There is the possibility of not using it at its full capacity and potential because of lack of knowledge in the area or because of some technical incompatibilities between the programs and the platforms on which the courses are hosted and the personal computers of the students. Technology must be user friendly, any equipment malfunctions can affect the effectiveness of a class and if they happen too often they affect the entire course. Technology will challenge the instructors not only to learn how to use it but also to learn to reorganize their materials to adapt their lessons to the e- learning requirements.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Online students come from all walks of life, they are younger, older, men, women, from cities or villages, but they all want to develop their skills and education. This variety of participants proves the potential of distance education to meet the needs of adult learners. From the point of view of institution it is also a good element to capitalize on, since it offers solutions for financial, material and personnel problems. The goal of online education is to provide learning programmes to large amounts of people, especially those who otherwise could not enroll in a traditional form of education. E-learning should offer to students an experience as close as possible to the traditional, face-to-face instruction, from the point of view of quality, but as Bates (1995) said, instead of using technology to replicate traditional methods, we should use it to improve instruction [9]. Such programs offer solutions to actual challenges like continuous change in the social environment, larger classes, more diverse students, demands from government and employers who want more implication and responsibility in the instruction process of students who should be ready and able to enter the workforce when they graduate and to keep up with all the quick social and technological developments.

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