

The 8th International Scientific Conference
eLearning and software for Education
Bucharest, April 26-27, 2012
10.5682/2066-026X-12-016

E-LEARNING – A KEY TOOL IN TODAY’S ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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***Abstract:** Higher education has changed profoundly due to the introduction of e-learning technologies and the formation of e-learning specialists. Romanian higher education is not an exception. With a relatively late start in comparison to that of other more developed countries, Romanian higher education has rapidly absorbed and adapted to the newest technologies that allow the development of e-learning content. The present paper attempts to present the situation of today’s Romanian higher education seen in an on going process of modernization due to the massive introduction of e-learning technologies, generating quality e-learning content, due to the involvement and commitment of an increasing number of e-learning specialized trainers.*

Keywords: e-learning, e-learning standards, e-learning platform, e-learning tools

I. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The spread of the information technology, which has come to occupy both the whole social space and the intimate, individual space, its use in all the domains of human activity deeply influences education.

The educational system is reacting to the new training challenges imposed by the development of the contemporary society, assimilating the results of the technical and scientific progress and integrating them into its own action strategies.

Information technology has become a key component of the educational process, even if sometimes the lack of financing and ignorance were difficulties almost impossible to overcome.

As a result of the introduction of information technology in the educational field a new type of educational methodology was born: computer assisted training and e-learning platforms. All these deep changes are aimed at meeting the needs and matching the learning profile of the new students, the digital generation.

It is obvious that the mental profiles of the young people twenty or thirty years ago is no longer the same as that of the contemporary young generation.

Higher education has changed profoundly due to the introduction of e-learning technologies and the formation of e-learning specialists. Romanian higher education is not an exception. With a relatively late start in comparison to that of other more developed countries, Romanian higher education has rapidly absorbed and adapted to the newest technologies that allow the development of e-learning content.

II. E-LEARNING SYSTEMS

In this context, the introduction and growth of e-learning in the Romanian higher education can be regarded not only as a natural phenomenon generated by the development of technology but

The e-learning platforms are tools that mediate between individuals and knowledge, between individuals and skills, abilities, between cultural and social realities and which operate on the basis of rules and specific didactics. The use of technology in the teaching – learning process requires new teaching methodologies, a special didactics and trainers should clearly and from the very beginning understand that e-learning platforms are not just simple means of shifting the same traditional courses taught in the traditional ways to a virtual environment. It's the very teaching and learning experience that has to be re-defined and re-designed, otherwise e-learning technology would be used much below its potential.

The permanent development and increase of complexity of the e-learning systems involves a higher degree of specialization in the field of the involved actors.

The Romanian e-learning services and communities have benefited from numerous studies in the past years which lead to the implementation of new e-learning standards, new e-learning platforms, additional systems and services, new didactic methodologies, all of them leading to the consolidation of the domain.

At the same time it becomes obvious that all the above mentioned aspects of e-learning, the development of advanced methodologies for distance learning activities focused on the objective of creating a smooth, harmonious integration of methods and technologies should be doubled by the creation of new professional roles, by the formation of specialized staff, capable to act dynamically and competently in these new contexts.

III. COMPETENCE, KNOWLEDGE, MANAGERIAL SKILLS

Europeans have been capable of inventing their own responses to a problem common to the whole world: how to keep one's cultural identity and at the same time adjust to the modern world, i.e., the technological revolution (Banciu 2011). The roles and attributions of these new professionals involve the possession of competences based on a strong integration of knowledge, on technological, methodological competences above the average and sometimes managerial skills. Such professional figures, still in development in Romania and sometimes not yet very well differentiated are the manager of the e-learning system, the e-learning project manager, the e-authoring expert, the expert in developing advanced e-learning content. We strongly believe that the appropriate training and role distribution of the academic staff are decisive steps for the creation and development of a competitive e-learning department in any university and for conferring a European dimension to the Romanian education.

As instructors gain confidence with the e-learning tools and methodologies they can improve their courses Romanian academic staff using e-learning tools are already familiar with the fact that e-learning course creation is a complex and time consuming activity because they have to re-evaluate their traditionally taught materials and choose the most appropriate technical and pedagogical tools for e-learning applications. As far as our university is concerned, the course development process was a gradual one, extending to more academic years. The first to be developed were the tests and examinations, then followed course and seminar activities, while students were encouraged to involve in virtual dialogues with their instructors or peers.

In this framework the Romanian e-learning community will be able to participate in the creation of European virtual campuses. The European Commission is encouraging such initiatives and is supporting the development of new organizational methods for the European universities (as shown in the article *Virtual Companies. Net-learning and net-working will be common*). It seems that the initiative belonged to an American Universities which has introduced virtual courses ever since 1992, taught in virtual classrooms by using Windows, Lotus Notes, NetWare, ISDN and digital video technology.

An example of good practices in the domain of e-learning used in higher education.

As the environment of higher education is evolving, the universities are confronted with higher costs and lower budgets to which an increasing need for distance education is added, all of these causing educational institutions to re-examine the way that education is delivered. In response to this changing environment e-learning is implemented more and more frequently in order to create new opportunities for both educational institutions and students.

The e-learning models of Romanian higher education today have their roots in the older type of distance learning. Initially introduced to allow individuals in distant areas access to higher education, distance learning has evolved significantly in Romania in the last two decades.

As an increasing number of students became interested in attending its courses, *Spiru Haret* University from Bucharest developed distance learning courses; they were at first delivered in the traditional ways (printed materials) doubled by television and radio broadcasts dedicated to academic activities. In time as more and more people gained access to computers and the internet these two tools came to represent an ideal channel for the delivery of educational content.

During the mid 2000's the leading staff of the university became conscious of some important phenomena and their effects in the field of higher education: the transformation of a part of the internet into an immense reservoir of sources of useful, authentic and reliable information, the gradual replacement of the traditional educational process by a blended one including elements based on information and communication technology as well as an important change in the student profile.

While it is impossible to consider the internet as a whole a source of reliable, objective, honest information there is however a certain part of it which offers the guarantee of a quality at least equal to that of a large academic library. This part consists of the web sites and portals of prestigious academic institutions, research institutes, academic libraries, scientific and cultural publishing houses. The value of the information available from such sources is all the more enhanced due to the fact that it is permanently updated. It was therefore a natural objective and desire for *Spiru Haret* University to bring its contribution to this valuable information pool by creating its own didactic and scientific platform.

Twenty years ago when the university was founded, the Romanian higher education system had been unchanged for decades. As in many other parts of Europe, traditional higher education had become self sufficient and did not seem to need anything new from the point of view of methodology or technology. But the great development of the information and communication technology has changed this situation and the traditional teaching based on printed materials and courses taught in the classroom had to make room for a blended approach, within which the weight given to e-learning has become more and more significant.

As far as the third phenomenon mentioned above, it refers to the student profile. The student's access to information and means of communication are now completely different from those that a student could benefit from twenty years ago. Until relatively recently a typical student had access and used only the course materials taught and disseminated by a professor and other printed materials that could be found in the library of the University or other academic libraries (the National Library, the Central Academic Library, the Library of the Romanian Academy). The easier and ever improved access to the internet has opened a gate to an infinite universe of knowledge, of information on the one hand and the use of means of communication whose absence would be unconceivable today (such as the electronic mail, the synchronic communication, the forum).

Another aspect in the student profile that has suffered a deep transformation in the past decades is the student's time resource. While in the past a student's only preoccupation was learning and they were financially supported by their parents the picture is completely different today. More and more students are employed, not only from financial reasons but also because they are pushed by the tough competition on the labour market. Gaining experience and having at least a minimum experience at graduation have become a must for Romanian students. Therefore it has become a difficult task for students to attend all their courses and seminars and to obtain the printed materials in the bibliography. Those choosing the distance learning form of education were not privileged either as their contact with the university and the professors was insufficient.

IV. THE INTRODUCTION OF E-LEARNING PLATFORM IN PRIVATE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

The necessity to introduce an e-learning platform for all the students of *Spiru Haret* University became thus a main objective of the leading staff. The first variant of such a platform, called exam view was introduced in 2007 and it was used for tests and examinations. It was soon replaced by a much more complex one, Blackboard Academic Suite due to which students benefit from on line course materials, practical activities, feed back from professors, on line tests, forums and access to various sources of information. It is very important mentioning that the platform is updated every year, a thing which would have been very difficult – if not impossible – to achieve in the case of printed materials and traditional didactics.

The platform is administered by a special IT department in collaboration with each faculty, which creates accounts for the students and the academic staff. A student account allows access to the disciplines in the curriculum of each year and semester as well as to tests; students can also view their grades and engage in discussions with their peers and teachers.

All the academic staff at *Spiru Haret* University uses the Blackboard Academic Suite for teaching their disciplines. As the implementation of the platform represented a significant change for most teachers, the management of the university elaborated a coherent training strategy. All the teachers have been trained how to use the platform by e-learning specialists and the fact that its introduction was a gradual process contributed to it being successful. A special guide about how to use the platform and benefit from the educational opportunities it offers was created and can be accessed on line by the members of the academic staff.

Now the platform is used in all the faculties and for all the courses in a unitary form (the same interface, logo, main menu, etc) and it allows teachers to upload all kinds of materials such curriculum, course calendar, course materials, practical /seminar activities, tests. They can also monitor the students' activity on the platform, the resources accessed by them and the grades obtained.

The type of education offered now by *Spiru Haret* University is a blended one, a mixture of valuable traditional techniques on the one hand and e-learning content, methodologies on the other hand.

The amplitude of the project, the unity of the platform, the focus on the efficiency of the didactic activity, the training of the academic staff with a view to using the platform properly and completely, the focus on the beneficiary and on the communication with this beneficiary have lead us to the conclusion that *Spiru Haret* University can be regarded as an example of good practices in the field of Romanian on line education.

V. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of computerization of education, a new way of organizing the process learning appeared (Albulescu 2003:63). New treatment technologies, storage and communication of information are developing increasingly. Using e-learning system and multimedia techniques lead to new educational situation and a new mode of action and adaptation to many of Romania's institutions of higher education. However, a common framework for the European virtual education and a common European degree system are needed. The content of a European virtual university, service to which more national universities bight bring their contribution would be a portal to net-based or net-supported courses and programmes, information seeking, collaboration and exchange, allowing academic staff from different countries to share models and best practices.

We have presented the way e-learning was implemented in our university as a starting point for a larger debate on how e-learning is used at European level. So far virtual education in Europe has mainly taken place on a national level, and there is not yet a great deal of transnational collaboration. National consortia with centres of expertise have been formed in some countries (France, the Netherlands, etc.), while some single e-universities and project-based national initiatives also exist.

Public-private partnerships are also developing, and there are new providers of content from corporate and media-linked sources. The issues of quality assurance and accreditation, as well as international strategic alliances, are being widely discussed.

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