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**BLENDED-LEARNING - AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR THE PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS**

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***Abstract:** The present training offer at national or international level does not encompass many programs dedicated to the professional development of the higher education teachers although the essential condition for a successful design, implementation and assessment of the Bologna study programs depend on the development of specialized programs and differentiated curricular routes for the training and development of higher education teachers. Blended learning is on the rise in higher education area. Well-grounded researches clearly demonstrate how the blended learning approach embraces the traditional values of face-to-face teaching and integrates the best practices of online learning, while offering a flexible approach to learning. These are just a few of the considerations taken into account by a group of experts who designed and implemented within a project a blended learning program dedicated to higher education teachers.*

***Keywords:** blended learning, higher education teachers, learning platform, training needs analysis*

## **I. A GENERAL OVERVIEW**

Nowadays, the opportunity to develop the knowledge based society and economy is fundamentally depending on the extent to which higher education (HE) system (as the highest formal level of competency building) is capable to ensure for students a high standard of education, making them competitive worldwide.

The present training offer does not encompass many programs dedicated to the professional development of the higher education teachers (HETs) although the essential condition for a successful design, implementation and assessment of the Bologna study programs depend on the development of specialized programs and differentiated curricular routes for the training and development of HETs.

The POS-DRU project “Continuous training by means of ‘blended learning’ for higher education teachers” implemented by University of Bucharest in partnership with University Babeș-Bolyai from Cluj-Napoca, West University of Timisoara and Softwin company offers to higher education academic staff (HETs) the opportunity to develop a set of complex competencies in order to answer to the challenges addressed both by contemporary society and the main beneficiaries of higher education – the students.

The general goal of the project aims at offering the opportunity and increasing the participation of HETs to continuous training programs in the following areas: quality assurance; higher education pedagogy (student-centred learning); students’ professional practice, by means of an integrated training program articulated around a blended learning methodology.

From the logic of this project, there can be mentioned three major stages of development:

- (1) analysis of the specific training needs of the persons belonging to the target groups;
- (2) designing the training modules and courses;
- (3) delivering / implementing the training activities with the beneficiaries.

## II. A TRAINING NEED ANALYSIS FOR HETs

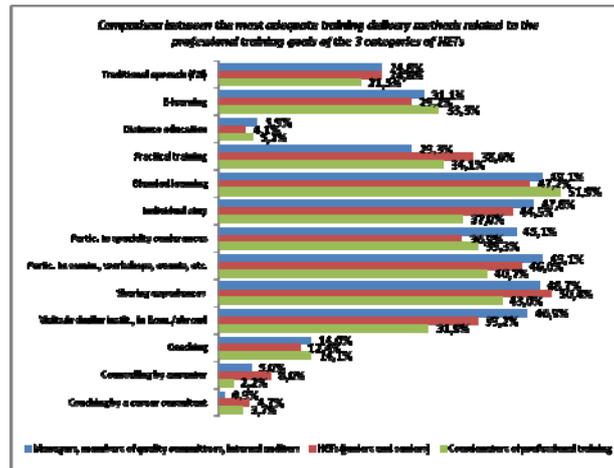
Between January and April 2010 the training needs' analysis (TNA) was implemented by each of the three partner universities. It was based on a complex methodological set of tools consisting of questionnaires and focus-groups interviews. To this investigation participated more than 700 HETs belonging to the target groups established in the project (managers, internal auditors and members of quality assurance committees, novice HETs and senior HETs, respectively coordinators of professional practice) and covered three regions of economic development (Bucharest, North-Western region and Western region).

In the present paper we will focus on the second specific goal: *analysis of HETs' perception regarding the participation to training programs and regarding the desirable strategies for training and/or development* and the subsequent items in order to demonstrate the role and value of blended learning for higher education training programs. The questionnaires contained two specific questions relevant to our present interest:

**Q4.** Which of the training methods presented below do you consider to be best suited to your objectives related to the continuous professional training?

**Q5.** How do you appreciate your expertise as a higher education teacher in the field of: a) e-learning; b) blended learning.

The responses to the former question revealed the following picture:



**Figure 1. Q4.** Which of the training methods presented below do you consider to be best suited to your objectives related to the continuous professional training?

Developing a hierarchy based on the percentages associated to the listed delivery methods, considered as being most adequately for the training goals, we notice that on the first three positions, with relatively close values, are placed:

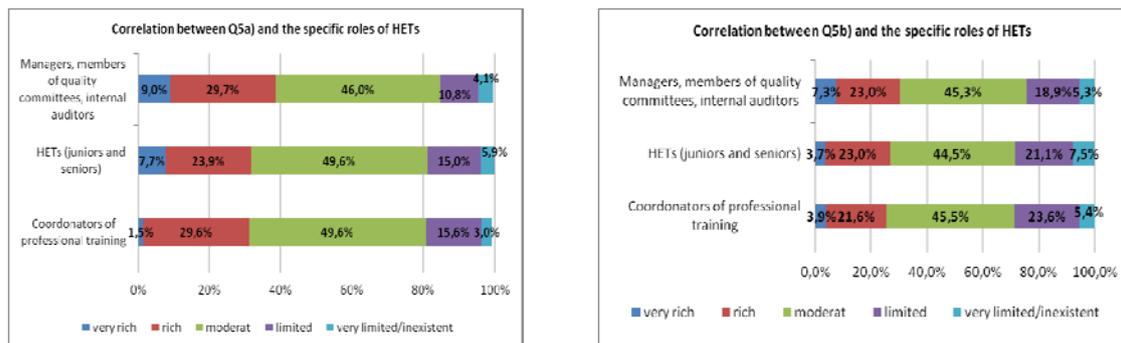
1. *Blended learning* – 49.4%
2. *Experience exchanges with professionals from organizations/institutions from similar or connected fields* – 47.36%;
3. *Participation to seminars, work-shops, events, etc.* – 45.26%;
4. *Individual study* – 43.1%.

On the last places we find counselling by a career consultant (3.1%), counselling by a mentor (5.06%) and distance education (5.06%).

Similar results can be identified in the international studies developed by Erklenz-Watts, Lynd-Balta, Westbay, in 2006 which also focus on alternative programs of professional development. Also they are in line with other national studies (Opre and colab., 2008) which underline the importance of sharing experiences for the HETs in Romania. The options for the last places however contradict the results of similar studies having the same goals (Hellyer and Boschmann, 1993, Austin,

2002). This fact can be due to the lack of the organizational culture which should support these particular methods of delivery of the training programs in higher education.

In the case of **question 5**, we tried to evaluate the level of teachers' expertise in relation to these delivery methods. Among the teachers with responsibility in the field of quality assurance, 38.74% from the respondents consider that they have a rich and very rich experience in the field of e-learning while 14.86% of them appreciate that their experience is limited and very limited. As far as blended learning is concerned, HETs' answers show a balance slightly leant towards the rich and very rich experience (30.18%), while 23.87% of teachers mention a limited or very limited/non-existent experience. We believe that the answers to this question represent a relevant guideline for those in charge with the development of delivery methods and where necessary support materials for the activities delivered by means of the learning platform.



**Figure 2. Q5.** How do you appreciate your expertise as a higher education teacher in the field of: a) e-learning; b) blended learning.

These two questions and the subsequent answers were considered relevant as they proved that blended learning is perceived as an effective way to design specific programs for the development of higher education teachers, although their expertise in the field is still scarce. These ideas were truly relevant for the proponents in order to build both the content of training as well as the manner of its delivery, while acknowledging the fact that besides the specific competencies aimed by the program at its core, there will be developed the IT competences as well as the lifelong learning competences in enhanced technological environments.

### III. A BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH TO HETs TRAINING

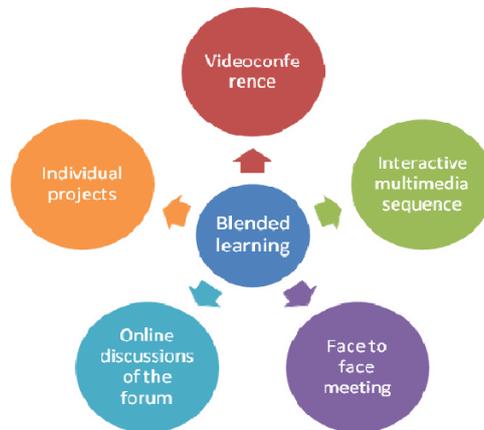
*Blended learning* is on the rise in higher education area. Well-grounded researches clearly demonstrate how the blended learning approach embraces the traditional values of face-to-face teaching and integrates the best practices of online learning. Face to face time can be used to engage learners in advanced interactive experiences. Meanwhile, the online sequence of the course can provide learners with multimedia-rich content at any time of day, anywhere they have internet access. This allows for an increase in scheduling flexibility for learners.

In addition to flexibility and convenience for learners, studies show early evidence that a blended instructional approach can result in learning outcome gains and increased enrolment retention. Also, this approach has proven to both enhance and expand the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning in higher education across disciplines.

These are just a few of the considerations taken into account by the promoters of the project when designing the program dedicated to HETs. As such, the project aimed to answer to a set of clearly expressed needs by HETs that haven't been given a solution yet, while it develops flexible structures of learning which support lifelong learning and a modern, quality higher education.

The blended learning approach was considered to be an effective delivery method for this specific target group due to its particular features and the close relationship to the teaching-learning experience. The blended learning experience should be regarded in this context as a shift to learner-

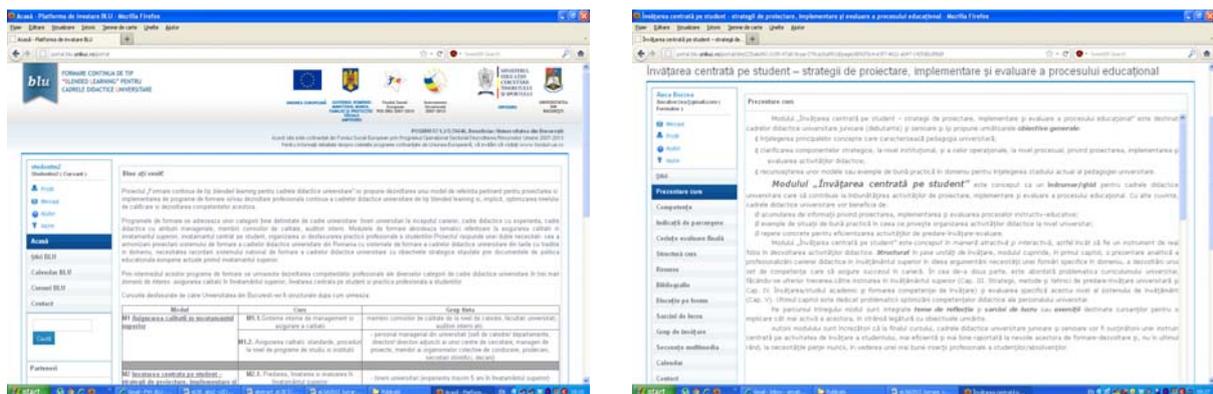
centred instruction in which learners become active and interactive and assume responsibility for their learning; increases in interaction between learner-teacher, learner-learner, learner-content and learner-outside resources. Consequently in the view of this project blended learning is a mixture between:



**Figure 3.** Blended learning activities

The second stage in the project implementation (May 2010 – October 2011) consisted in the development of the training content and the learning platform. We relied on the rich expertise of the technical partner in developing educational tools for supporting learning in technology enhanced learning environments as well as on the analysis of some other learning platform developed in Romania and dedicated to the continuous training of different professional categories. In the paper we will present some of the main features of the learning platform which promote it as a professional instrument of competence development.

The platform offers specific functions for trainers and learners depending on their particular needs. The common functions refer to communication possibilities by means of e-mail, forum and news. Also the learning platform offers a generous space for sharing learning resources, including multimedia sequences. The trainers can use a particular area dedicated to them in order to support their collaboration. The platform also presents a calendar where are presented all the events that are due to happen.



**Figure 4.** Print screens of the platform

The key principles of the learning platform are: a. high usability (having regard that part of the users have just basic knowledge in managing such a tool); b. interactive multimedia sequences (learning units uploaded on the platform are accompanied by multimedia elements to support individual learning); c. balanced combination (with regard to the aspects mentioned in fig. 3); d) distributed approach (all categories of learners and trained can personalize, adapt and independently use their space, but also access "neighboring" spaces, as needed).

#### **IV. IMPLEMENTATION PHASE**

Since November 2011 the training courses have started using a face to face approach, also a videoconference system which allows direct communications with trainers from the other university centres and an effective use of resources, while the platform is being used by more than 350 professional both trainers and learners.

The videoconference system allows learners and teachers from more than 15 higher education institutions to share knowledge, professional experiences, best practices, ideas, dedicated to improving their proficiency. The trainers who are higher education teachers with significant expertise in the fields of interest are sharing their knowledge and skills with all learners as the classes occur simultaneously in all three university centres.

Learners and trainers faced the challenge addressed by this particular method of training delivery. Some of them where for the first time confronted with such an experience and required more technical assistance; some of them who participated to other blended learning projects as well considered this platform quite friendly to use. The learners used mainly the functions that support their individual study (resources, tasks, multimedia sequences etc.) and less those supporting the communication among themselves (forum, mail etc.). The latter were primarily used when facing a difficulty in order to ask for technical assistance.

However we believe that it is highly important to stimulate the development of a true learning community. Higher education teachers are not very used to sharing their experiences by means of the technological tools although during classes they are very open towards each other, willing to share ideas, best practices, to ask questions and to learn from their colleagues. It is a paradox that still needs some research as far as its premises are concerned.

#### **V. CONCLUSIONS**

The experience of this project and its impact acknowledged by the HETs and trainers involved led us to the following reflections that might guideline further developments in the field:

- Blended learning creates an environment that reflects the educational expectations of the learners while it supports learner-centered approach, experiential learning, self-paced e-learning through multimedia content, synchronous and asynchronous collaborative activities, elimination of learning time, and staying connected; it offers a mechanism for meeting the needs of the learners within the value system they embrace. Still it might take some time before HETs are comfortable enough to use at its fullest potential this training delivery method as it requires a shift in their behavior (of course with roots in their cognitive and emotional patterns): the will to cooperate, to communicate about their own practices, to reflect on the professional experiences.
- Blended learning offers potential for genuine transformation within the higher education institutions in general and for HETs professional training and development in particular by means of the information technology; it might alter the higher education institutions usual constraints of space and time, transforming how institutions of higher education are organized, and function, it might support a change in its specific activities including staff development. The first step this program took was to make a statement about the need for HETs in-service development. And the answer coming from the universities proved to be a positive one. The higher education system acknowledges this need and consequently we believe that it will accept the transformations this will bring.
- Being exposed to such experience might further help HETs evolve as designers of active learning environments, thus becoming much more facilitative in their teaching. Just as students have to relearn how to learn, HETs have to relearn how to teach. Sharing this experience led HETs according to their own statements to modifying their personal professional theories of teaching and, more importantly, it helps them articulate and test those theories. This development might bring them closer to the learning needs of the

digital learners, to their better understanding but also this involves a lot of effort on behalf of HETs who are still “immigrants” within this paradigm.

- The program proved that blended learning brings together teachers from different academic areas, creating a forum for mentoring and the exchange of effective pedagogical practices. Furthermore the blended model can support junior teachers to develop their teaching skills and also revitalize senior professors by refocusing them on the practice of effective instruction and present tendencies. For the first time, many of them experienced the formal instructional system design process as they discover flexibility, access, and degrees of freedom not possible in the face-to-face environment. We were impressed during the implementation of the project by the genuine implication of those present (junior and senior) in the activities.

We strongly believe that blended learning in higher education is an evolving phenomenon that offers promise for addressing challenges such as staff development but also access, cost, efficiency, and timely degree completion and not in the least on the satisfaction and competencies of the last end users: students. In addition, this approach will impact aspects of the higher education institutions such as organizational development and rewards, student retention, as well as the notion of lifelong learning.

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