



SOUTH-WEST
UNIVERSITY
·NEOFIT RILSKI·
BLAGOEVGRAD, BULGARIA

VOLUME 14
2016

SCIENTIFIC Research

ISSN 1312-7535

ELECTRONIC
ISSUE

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON LABOUR MARKET

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Summary: The paper emphasizes the advantages of the distance education for all the categories involved in this process. Students are, first of all, in question, for them, distance education is meaning more freedom as concerns the access and as consequence a wider range of opportunities for education and qualification.

For the employers, distance education provides the possibility of organizing education and professional development at the work place, which is often more flexible and saves a multitude of adjacent costs.

The main elements and basic properties of the flexible, distance education and its most important points are also shown.

As concerns the quality of the distance learning educational programs in the higher education institutes, the existence of a consistency between what the university offers and the performance of the external environment, of the needs of education on the labor market must be had in view.

Keywords: formal education; economic and social function; labour market; employed population; flexibility.

I. SPECIFICITY ELEMENTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ADVANTAGES GENERATED BY THESE

At present, the importance of distance education is recognized for the educational development and competitiveness of the graduates of this form of education on the labour market. The institutions that offer distance education play a crucial role in continuing professional education and lifelong learning.

The education system, including distance education, represents a *subsystem of the social system*, this being subordinated and integrated within and in the general structure of the society, having not only an internal structure, but submitting also to external, social impulses.

At present, the distance education has a special economic and social function as concerns qualifications and education of those who are disadvantaged in terms of acceding the traditional methods of education.

The type of distance education is fitted to continuing education, education of adults and generally for different categories of beneficiaries in accordance with the specific needs of the labour market.

The distance education is the education alternative based on technology that offers a fast and easy access to resources, eliminates distances and involves personal responsibility of learning in the familiar, home environment.

The technology has changed the education landscape as concerns the way the information is provided, the speed of accessing the information and the terms of choosing the options of courses, programmes, universities. Due to new technologies, this type of education becomes more and more popular.

This type of education is achieved by telecommunication, audio and videoconference or by e-mail.

The major advantages of the distance and mobile education are aiming especially at acceding a more valuable and up to date information, and also increases the interaction with other persons and systems. Another important aspect connected to the distance education refers to the fact that it may generate an experience of learning which provides supplementary and more powerful means of coding, reminding and transferring knowledge. In addition it is

important to underline that learning objectives, such as learning style, cognitive processes and student motivation are achieved.

Distance learning means for the graduates, a higher freedom as concerns the access, and as consequence, a higher range of opportunities for learning and qualification.

Distance education provides the opportunity for the employers to organize learning and professional development, at the workplace itself, which is often more flexible and saves the costs of transport, accommodation and meal allowances, etc. These advantages for the students and employers are important characteristics from the perspective of the government also. Traditionally, the governments have introduced the characteristics of distance education in order to increase the access to education and education opportunities, referring to what they provide as concerns updating, re-qualification and personal enhancement, improving efficiency by the costs of education resources, at the quality and variety of the education structures.

Distance education has a special importance in a world where the labour market is in a continuous and fast changing, due to encouraging lifelong education and the fact that this system ensures the continuous acquiring of new knowledge and skills.

An often-met situation may be of those who may not be distance education (DE) users and who know nothing about the subject. Because the majority of the members of the society are ranging in this last category, the education system, by its user's interface, must be able to explain to a completely not familiar with this notions user, but who may express at a certain time, the opinion of what e-learning itself and DE mean, providing certain correct and relatively complete notions that are possible to be retained and to improve the image of the on-line education systems generally; in this category may be listed, the managers, for example, who employ DE graduates or who might employ such graduates; if their perception about DE is affected negatively, it is possible to not employ anymore DE graduates, even if these represent exactly what the employers are seeking – because of a certain source of authority or not, had created a negative image about DE.

Distance learning is important for finding in an as good as possible job in two directions, and namely, on the one hand, increasing the chances to find a job for those who are not employed and on the other hand, decreasing the time and costs involved in finding better jobs for those who are employed.

This type of education, which may be described as a learning system which carries on outside the formal education system, differs from the formal education at least in two aspects: first, it is addressed to the needs of those who have no possibility to attend a formal education system and that it uses alternative methods of learning. A factor that had an essential role in spreading this education system was the extension and extreme increase of Internet, which contributed creating a new vision upon the administration and development of distance education.

Distance education makes possible the remote access to huge databases, to numerous courses; it also allows a distant cooperation, interactive conferences and videoconferences, extended and fast feedback, multimedia, etc.

In relation with the way of providing education, the traditional universities were based on four hypotheses, which were contradicted by the information technology and namely:

- The library is a physical place – but these are more and more extensively replaced by digital libraries, accessible everywhere in the world, practically by anyone

- The community of students grouped around the university library- will be replace soon by the communities of specialists connected electronically and independently of the geographic location

- The ideal groups, with a small number of students became difficult to support from material viewpoint and they cannot compete with the distance learning, on the same specializations

-The structure of various positions where the graduates will be employed have changed and the education cannot provide a career for the rest of the life, as it did until present.

Distance education may provide education and training for the employees in small and medium size enterprises, where training is not always paid attention, the women who re-enter labour market, those with low qualification and to jobless persons. Moreover, in comparison with the traditional education, distance education is more efficient from the costs viewpoint and both of the students and the organizations viewpoints.

In order to be successful, the organizations that provide distance education must reply to all the requirements of the labour market, all the fields of activity where the graduates will activate. This is the reason these are obliged to adjust constantly, to revise and to renew the courses. The request for education is directed towards methodological approaches, innovative courses and programmes.

The main reasons for which the trainees choose distant education are finding a job or finding a better job, as well as the potential increase of salary. A distance education programme allows to the employed students to stay at their workplaces, while they attend such a programme. They must not turn upside down their life in order to attend such a programme. The reduced costs are also an attracting reason.

Another positive aspect concerns the option for distance education, rarely or not at all emphasized, consists of the fact that the employers see the graduates of the distance education as self-motivated persons and able to answer to complex challenges. These persons took also in their hand their own education. Ultimately, their success is determined by their own determination. These traits are very attractive for the employers.

The experience and the knowledge of the distance education providers and their capacity to conceive new courses proved often beneficial not only for the respective institutions and their students, but also for the education institutions which had not always the resources needed to conceive new courses in new education fields of study, not explored yet. Actually, the institutions, which provided distance education, put the basis for courses, which, in further stage, became part of the classical, formal education.

Hence, the role of distance education consists of transferring the education request of the labour market in new courses, in achieving efficiency by lower costs of the distance education and by implementing new developments in formal education institutions.

The planning problems on long and medium term must also not be neglected, both of the education organization- which must function both during the next academic year, but it is presumed that it will function also in the next 10-15 years, - and also of the education programmes and related courses - here interferes the ability of the management to foresee the future interactions both at economic and at society level. In this direction, planning for the process of lifelong learning- where the connection with powerful companies as well as SMEs, may ensure the continuation of bachelor's programme studies, which must be adjusted to immediate requirements, on short and medium term of these companies, is an important task to provide the bond between the teaching activity and the economic activity. The education-planning process for sustainable development, for the "green" technologies as well as for the frontier fields, may also be mentioned.

Consulting services in choosing the job have also a special importance for the DE graduates and their employment or their acceleration on higher positions. Consulting may be produced in advance towards the education process- respectively, when registering the person who learns- and who may be helped to choose the preferred specialization- and until choosing a new job- when the graduate may be directed to an employer and may be prepared for the employment interview.

These trends are present in our country but within the entire European Union also. We may give an example here the non-profit organization EADL (European Association for

Distance Learning) that represents over 500-distance education institutions in 20 of the European countries. This organization proposes to be a partner in the national discussion and of the European Unit, referring to the relation between education and the labour market and between labour market and between education and Information Technology.

II. IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY IN E-LEARNING AND DE

The quality is often approached rather as a concept than a technique and the implementation depends on each organization. In order to improve the quality, an important and necessary step in predicting the effects of changes is the identification of processes; therefore the process must consider all the aspects of the system, including the providers, the clients, the design and providing the education service.

For providing quality results achievement during DE process, interdependence, performance of the system depending on the entire education process must be taken into account.

A DE system must not satisfy only the requirements of direct clients (persons who learn) but also other interested persons and even the society as whole, including here the employers of DE graduates.

For DE type education services the main quality criteria must be considered the following:

- Performance – the finalised service must operate as the client desires, the desires of the person who learns, and who is the end user of the system, respectively.

- Characteristics – the attractive elements of the system, which must however not separate from the final objective and must be appropriate to it.

- Conformity – the provided education service must be compliant with the standards in the fields of activity and must use standard technologies, in this case using theories of education, respectively.

- Durability – the education system must be relevant and nondegradable in time (if definitely established principles, for example laws of physics, are taught) or which may be updated easily

- Easiness of providing complementary services for the main service

- Perceived quality – the finalised service must lead to the improvement of the image of the education organization.

The satisfaction of these quality criteria by an institution that provides DE type education services should lead to:

- Implementing a doubtless, measurable quality and that can be proved anytime for the education services provided by the institution;

- Implementing a organisational culture concerning quality, at the level of:

- The management – which must realize, develop the quality policies and follow/verify their implementation;

- The education content and education context developers- which must implement continuously these policies as in what they develop and to develop and demonstrate based on these policies the good practice procedures which allow their implementation;

- The teaching staff- which, at its turn, must implement these policies in its activity;

- The society, which must be made aware about the quality aspects specific to education;

- Accreditation of the education organization and its education programmes, so that the evaluators from the Competent Authority understands exactly what are the policies of quality of the organization and the specific way these are implemented in its education services.[2]

- Accepting DE type education service, service provided by the university, at the level of the society. It represent the „final test” [7] of the quality–test which demonstrates to the society that there is a real need of the society for the respective service and that the provided

service has an at least comparable quality with similar services, from the state universities and the universities with similar specializations.

EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIETY

The evaluation of the quality of the distance education from the perspective of the society has a key role, being of great help, because in the external environment of the education service there are potential employers. The evaluation of e-learning quality in particular and of DE (DE-Distant education) generally from the perspective of the society may seem of secondary importance in the context of the general evaluation of e-learning quality. However, not only in Romania, but also in the developed EU countries [3] the problem of understanding and accepting the DE type education projects (processes) are an extremely complicated matter. If in the Anglo-Saxon countries the problems is already solved, and in the Netherlands also, where acceptance may be considered close to 95% [8] in the rest of Europe the false problem between the quality of the classical higher education, considered superior due to the physical presence in the classroom and the quality of the DE type education processes- remains still to be solved by a common approach.

The evaluation of the quality from the perspective of the society may be represented by the general diagram below.

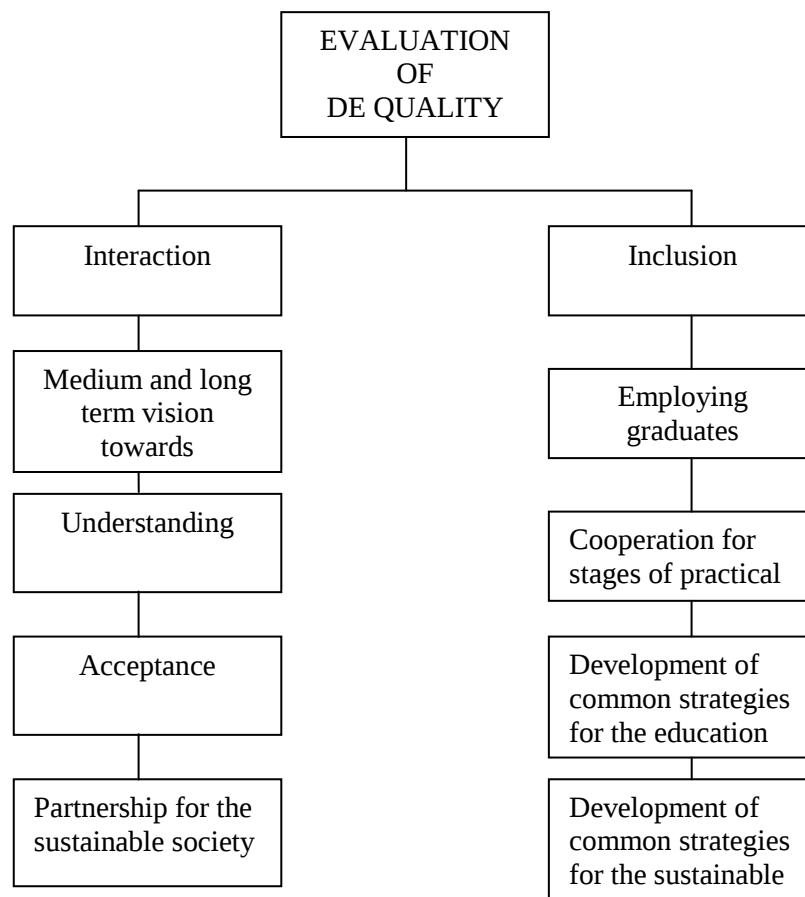


Figure 1. Evaluation of the quality from the perspective of the society

In the end, the following relationship existing between the society and the graduates must be emphasized: the society benefits of the presumable results of those who learn and at the same time it can direct these results depending on the general requirements of the society- the best example being the 1990 years when the subject of engineering of all specialization (mechanical, electrical, aeronautics, etc) lost much in favour of the humanities.

Conclusions

Distance education has a special importance in a world where the labour market is in continuous and fast changing due to encouraging lifelong education and due to the fact that this system provides continuous acquisition of new knowledge and abilities.

Distance education shows a special attraction for the employed people, because it provides a good flexibility, allowing to the student to not depend of the constraints concerning time, space and work rhythm.

Looking to a not very far off future it may be find that the development of the higher education institutions towards a system where the quality is a dominant criterion is obvious, especially under the new social-economic conditions.

We also find out that the higher education graduates and implicitly those of DE type, influence directly the quality of the activities within the private entities and public organizations.

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