From Traditional Education to the Online Training Process in Romanian Higher Education – an Experiment Generated by the New Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

Higher education is undergoing a permanent modernization process, through which it should demonstrate the ability to provide the best results in ensuring the professional training of human resources, an essential condition for achieving economic and social progress. The spectacular development registered in the field of information and communications technology has had a significant impact on education and teaching, at all levels, contributing to the modernization of teaching-learning-assessment methods. The pandemic generated by the Coronavirus has caused a rapid reorganization of the entire activity, in new directions, including in the field of education and teaching. The content of this paper draws attention to an analysis of the online education trends at the international level and what the experiment of replacing the traditional school with the online school model has meant, for a period of two months, at the level of the Faculty of Economic Sciences/FES within Ovidius University of Constanta.

Key words: traditional higher education, Coronavirus pandemic, online training, future approaches
J.E.L. classification: I20, I21, I23, I25, I26

1. Introduction

The current legal framework for Romanian higher education is represented by the Law of National Education (Law no.1 / 2011), which states that the organization and development of undergraduate study programs are carried out in three distinct forms, namely: 1) full-time education (IF), 2) part-time education (IFR) and 3) distance learning (ID), while master's degree programs are organized as full-time and part-time education (Law of National Education no. 1 / 2011). Also, in Law no.1 / 2011 the way of carrying out the educational activity is described for each of the three distinct forms. Due to the fact that, at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, within the Ovidius University of Constanta, the study programs are organized in two forms (IF and ID), we will select, from Law no.1 / 2011, the elements specific only to these forms (Law of National Education no. 1 / 2011).

Thus, full-time education (IF) entails the direct meeting, within the university, between students and teaching and research staff, in order to carry out teaching and / or research activities.

Distance learning entails the particularity of using specific electronic, computer and communication resources, self-learning and self-assessment activities completed by specific tutoring activities (Law of National Education no. 1 / 2011).

Distance learning (ID) is conceived as an alternative form of higher education, in which the organization of educational processes is able to offer the students the opportunity to personally choose the place and time in which to learn / learn autonomously (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).

The main condition is that the study resources be made in ID technology, in printed or digital format, posted on the e-Learning platform and / or other fully functional virtual communication and learning media (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).

From this presentation, it can be said that the current Romanian higher education takes place through the co-existence of the classic learning system (the face-to-face type, in a well-defined framework in terms of place and time, respectively the full-time education form - IF) with the virtual, online system (Distance learning -ID).

2. Theoretical background

Open or distance learning has emerged in order to meet the educational needs of the persons for whom distance and physical presence in the classrooms were limitations to learning. There is an opinion according to which the open, distance learning system was institutionalized in 1900, when a correspondence teaching department was established at the University of Chicago. However, in England, Sir Isaac Pitman had been organizing correspondence training since 1840. The evolution of this teaching system was marked by the establishment of the Centre national d'enseignement à distance (CNED), in 1939, in France, and later on, in 1969, it was followed by the establishment of Open University in the United Kingdom (Dobre, 2010, Brut, 2006). The appearance, in 1971, of the PEACENET communication satellites network, used for the delivery of the courses, represented another essential moment in the development of open or distance learning. Thus, in the 80's there were over 40 distance learning institutions, and in 2000 - over 1500. In terms of educational methods used in this form of teaching (the methods diversifying in close connection with the progress of information and communications technology) we can mention the following: sending materials by mail or fax, communication between students and instructor by telephone calls, broadcasts organized on some radio and television channels, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, the Internet (Dobre, 2010, Brut, 2006).

After 1990, more and more universities in Europe present, in their educational offer, combinations of study programs organized face to face, but also online. Furthermore, a distinct category of institution - the virtual university - is emerging.

Concepts used for the online training process:

Various concepts are currently used to address issues related to online higher education. Also, the diversification of the forms of teaching activities has been accompanied by the emergence of new concepts. I believe that an inventory of frequently used terms should ensure a full understanding of the general term *online schooling*.

Thus, *training*, defined as a process of teaching knowledge and skills, in an educational institution (DEX, 1998) is, on the one hand, the action of transmitting knowledge in a field, and on the other hand, the preoccupation with learning, assimilating new knowledge.

Teaching is the socially organized activity of training and educating (DEX, 1998).

Distance learning is the form of education institutionalized at the beginning of the twentieth century, which initially used the communication facilities offered by the mail, telephone, and then television. (Brut, 2006, Dobre, 2010)

Distance learning is an access alternative to higher education, capable to provide flexibility to the students on where and when to learn / learn autonomously.

Computer-Assisted Learning (IAC) is "an educational method which capitalizes on the principles of modeling and cyber analysis of the training activity, in the context of the use of information and communications technologies, characteristic of contemporary society" (Adăscăliţei, 2007, Dobre, 2010).

Computer-Based Learning (CBL), a concept which emerged in the 1970s, defines enriched education with the help of a "set of techniques and methods of computer systems used as pedagogical tools integrated into an educational context, whether it is education (primary school, high school, college) or lifelong learning" (Moise, 2008, Morvan et al., 1999, Dobre, 2010).

The concept of technology-based learning has a fairly broad content and refers to any form of training with the help of other media than the traditional classroom (Moise, 2008, Dobre, 2010).

Online learning refers to the situation in which learning is performed using a computer connected to a network, the educational content being represented by traditional lessons or collaborative work sessions, realized with the help of communications technologies. Educational materials can be presented in the form of texts, graphics, audio, video materials (Moise, 2008, Dobre, 2010, Istrate, 2006).

Blended Learning defines that form of learning in which traditional methods of learning are combined with those using technology (Dobre, 2010).

A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a medium with two basic functions: (1) interaction between tutors and students, including communication and information exchange, (2) content distribution, i.e. online publications, management and retrieval of documents and other information. (Dobre, 2010).

E-learning is defined, according to Cambridge dictionary, as learning achieved through home study, by using a computer and courses provided via the Internet. E-learning is a virtual learning medium (VLE) and involves the use of an e-learning platform (web-based) for the delivery of courses in digital format and is usually integrated into educational institutions (Moise, 2008, Dobre, 2010, EDUFOR).

E-learning, in a broad sense, defines all educational situations in which the means of information and communications technology are used significantly. (Cucos, 2020a).

Currently, for the various situations in which education activities are carried out using technological support / electronic means / modern computer means, various expressions are used, such as: computer-assisted / mediated learning, digital / mobile / online learning / education, learning through multimedia, etc. (Cucos, 2020a)

We also emphasize the idea that the most commonly used terms in the field of virtual education are classified into eight basic classes: group C (computer), group I (Internet), group T (technology), group D (distance), group O (online), group W (Web), group E (electronic), group R (resources), and the educational concepts used are: training, learning, teaching, tutoring, education. (Moise, 2008, Morvan et al., 1999, Dobre, 2010)

3. Research methodology

The content of this paper is based on a marketing research carried out by combining the in-office research with the observation method (Jugănaru, 1998, Jupp, 2010). Most of the information used in the research belongs to the secondary information category and has been collected, in a longitudinal profile, from various statistical data sources, some being considered classic (represented mainly by books), most being online sources. Information processing consists of personal interpretations (Silverman, 2004) of theoretical and practical aspects, identified at different times, about the reconfiguration of the education / learning system related to the achievements in the field of information and communications technology, to the training needs of the modern man, but also the current economic and social context.

4. Data, results and discussion

The European Council meeting held in Lisbon, in March 2000, marked a turning point in setting the political and action direction in the European Union in terms of education / learning process. "The conclusions of the Lisbon European Council meeting confirm that the move towards lifelong learning must be accompanied by a successful transition from the knowledge-based economy and society" to the information society (C.E.C, 2000)

Also on this occasion, it was considered that the education and training systems in Europe are changing, but also that lifelong learning has a decisive role, being seen as an intentional learning activity carried out continuously, in order to improve knowledge, skills and competences. According to the views expressed on this occasion, there are three basic categories of learning activity, namely: (1) *formal learning*, which takes place in education and training institutions and leads to officially recognized diplomas and qualifications; (2) *non-formal learning*, which can be achieved simultaneously with the main path of education and training and does not normally lead to formalized certificates. This form of learning can be provided at the workplace, through the activities of civil society organizations (such as youth organizations, trade unions and political parties) or through organizations or services complementary to formal systems (such as art, music and sport classes).

In most cases, *non-formal learning* is not seen as "real" learning, and its results are of little value on the labor market. Viewed in this way, non-formal learning is, therefore, underestimated (3). *Informal learning*, which is considered a natural component of everyday life, is also the oldest form of learning and remains the basic component of early childhood education. Unlike the other two forms, informal learning is not perceived as an intentional education, it may not be recognized even by the individuals themselves as a contribution to their knowledge and skills C.E.C, 2000)

The trend towards a reorganization of education and training systems in Europe, debated at the European Council meeting in Lisbon, in March 2000, envisions, inter alia, a change in the share of each of the three core categories of the learning activity. It was pointed out that, until then, *formal learning* had dominated educational policies, influencing the ways in which education and training are provided and the way people understand what learning means. The need and importance of lifelong learning (specific to the current period) arise concerns in the direction of finding new ways to combine the three forms of *formal, non-formal and informal learning*, in the context of the computerized society.

The newly created term *lifewide learning* brings to attention the concern of lifelong learning, in continuous or periodic form, achieved through the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal learning. At the same time, the *lifewide learning* concept adds new dimensions to learning, in the sense that it becomes useful and enjoyable, it can be achieved in the family, free time, community life and daily work activity. *Lifewide learning* makes us understand that teaching and learning are, in themselves, roles and activities which can be changed according to the different places and times (C.E.C,,2000)

The process of transition from traditional education to online training in Romania's higher education, during the new Coronavirus pandemic:

News on the spread of Covid-19 virus infection has been circulating internationally since the beginning of 2020, but for many people it was perceived as information about something happening somewhere far away and which does not affect us directly. In a short time, we have found out that the virus is also present in Romania, the first cases of Coronavirus being confirmed on February 26, 2020. (Chitu, 2020)

Shortly afterwards, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared that the coronavirus outbreak had become a pandemic. In the face of this threat, gradually, almost all the states of the world have begun to take complex political, economic and social measures.

In Romania, according to art. 1 of Decision no. 6 of the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations (NCSES/CNSSU), the courses "in all pre-university education units" have been suspended, "starting with March 11, 2020, until March 22, 2020, with the possibility of extension depending on the evolution of the situation".(NCSES/CNSSU,2020) From March 16, 2020, once the state of emergency was declared for 30 days, the courses in all educational units and institutions were suspended and severe restrictions on the movement of persons were taken. Starting with April 15, 2020, the state of emergency in Romania was extended by 30 days. (Romanian Presidency, 2020)

Decree no. 240/2020 stipulates that "During the state of emergency, higher education institutions in the national education system, based on university autonomy, respecting the quality of the teaching activity and assuming public responsibility, will use alternative teaching-learning-assessment teaching methods, in online format". (Romanian Presidency, 2020) In this context, with the transition to the state of emergency, pupils, students and teaching staff were forced to stay at home, to carry out the educational activities scheduled / pertaining to this semester in an "online" format. As far as higher education is concerned, information on reorganization was limited to the use of "alternative teaching-learning-assessment educational methods, *in online format*". (Romanian Presidency, 2020), and *exams can also be taken online*. With these "clear guidelines", we, FES students and teaching staff, have begun to experiment with the use of different possibilities of "alternative teaching-learning-assessment educational methods, in *online format*", and "*technology-assisted learning*", but without knowing if we had, at home, the necessary means: endowment with devices (personal computer, laptop, tablet, mobile phone), Internet connection, teaching materials made with the help of communication technologies, access to e-learning platforms.

Furthermore, we also have to mention the aspects related to the existence of digital skills (both of teaching staff and of students), the space availability in everyone's home (given that, in many situations, all family members have stayed at home: parents switched to "telework", and children to "the online school"), and also the use of the devices by the family members during the day. From the constant discussions we have had in the 10 weeks of online school (out of the total of 14 weeks of educational activities of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020), we have noticed that the students have had a change of opinion regarding this education system.

At first, the students were delighted with the idea of staying at home and continuing their school activities. It seemed to be a more relaxed / easy form and with extra leisure time, precisely because they stayed at home. Gradually, they have begun to feel isolated, the lack of interaction with their colleagues and teaching staff (specific to face-to-face activity), they have reported that they have received surplus workloads from teachers, that there was less clarity in online courses, they have faced various shortcomings (faulty Internet connection, congestion in the house and others). For many undergraduate students, the announcement that the bachelor's and master's degree final exams will also be taken online has been a cause for concern. For the most part, the students have stated that they want to return to the form of face-to-face educational activity, with the return to a normal life situation.

5. Conclusions

The development and modernization tendencies in higher education have represented, for a long time, preoccupations of national and international organizations; they are found on their agenda in the form of actions that must or are recommended to be carried out by each state and, also, integrated, correlated and harmonized in an international approach. One of the main topics in the eEurope 2005 action plan is eLearning. The eLearning initiative seeks to mobilize all the actors to accelerate changes in education and training systems so that the EU can move towards a knowledge-based society. The eEurope 2005 action plan aims to connect all the schools to the Internet, adapting the curriculum to and training teachers in the use of digital technology. (EurActiv.ro, 2004.) The changes in recent months caused by the Coronavirus pandemic show that, compared to these goals, the achievements in modernizing education are very different from one country to another.

Traditional higher education will not be eliminated. However, a reconfiguration of the education system is needed. The starting point may be the clear knowledge / dimensioning of the student segments and their training needs, so as to achieve the most appropriate combinations between the three basic categories of learning activity: *formal, non-formal* and *informal learning* and of the three distinct forms in which they materialize, respectively: *full-time education, part-time education* and *distance learning*.

We believe that the progress in information and communications technology will be increasingly assimilated into the classic (face-to-face) system of higher education training. We need to identify and develop the types of teaching activities which can be done better online than in the traditional way, so as to increase the attractiveness of the educational offer in each institution, to ensure a modern education, in line with the evolution and labor market trends.

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