E-LEARNING – A POTENTIAL ANSWER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION'S CHALLENGES

CONSTANȚA AURELIA CHIȚIBA*

cchitiba@gmail.com

Abstract: *At the higher educational level there are drivers and barriers which increase or decrease the motivation to engage in e-learning, and provides some insights into the challenges of embedding e-learning in higher education. The most important key drivers underlying the adoption of e-learning are the need to up skill the population to meet the challenge of the information and knowledge society and the need for accessible and flexible access to education lifelong.*

Keywords: *e-learning, lifelong* learning, strategies; driver and barriers; academic preferences.

Higher educational institutions have been using the Internet and other digital technologies to develop and distribute education for several years, but e-learning concept offers the prospect of a radical new approach of the higher educational process focused on the opening up traditional universities for those unable to attend on-campus and face-to-face forms of teaching and for lifelong learners in the workforce at a time when effective use of knowledge is seen more and more as the key to economic success[1]. In the same time, higher education is facing a number of challenges: globalization, aging society; growing competition between higher educational institutions both national and international, and rapid technological development.

To answer successfully to all these challenges, traditional universities must transform themselves by adopting e-learning system which will enable people to study at any university in the world, from home[4]. To achieve this transformation, universities will have to introduce strategies and policies which implement flexible academic frameworks, innovative pedagogical approaches, new forms of assessments, cross-institutional accreditation and credit transfer agreements, institutional collaboration in

* **Professor Ph.D, - „*Dimitrie Cantemir*" Christian University, Bucharest.**

development and delivery, and, most crucially, commitment to equivalence of access for students on and off-campus.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ACTUAL BACKGROUND IN WHICH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ARE PERFORMING

Higher education institutions exist within economic, political, cultural and social context. Four forces for change stand out, in this context, in terms of their impact on higher education in the coming decades:

- globalization;
- demography;
- new approaches to governance;
- technology.

Globalization - The globalization of the world's economies is leading to increased permeability of national educational boundaries as well as greater emphasis on the internationalization of curricula. The internationalization of higher education is a double-edged phenomenon, inducing growing collaboration and growing competition among countries and among institutional providers.

Cross-border higher education has grown significantly over the past decades and this is expected to continue. This growth has been driven by several interlinked forces[6]:

- greater mobility of skilled workers in an increasingly knowledge-based economy;
- the drive to develop export industries and expand international collaboration in higher education;
- the need to build a more educated workforce in sending countries, where study options may be limited;
- the desire of students and academics to have international experience and promote mutual understanding;
- the decline in the cost of transport and communications.

This growth has, in turn, fuelled greater competition for students and academics between countries and universities. Higher education institutions of all types increasingly see themselves not simply in terms of their domestic role but as actors in a global market. At the same time, domestic higher education systems increasingly face international pressures and competition, under voluntary harmonization agendas (*e.g.* the Bologna Process in Europe).

Demography - More and more countries are becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of demographic factors on higher education. Reductions in the traditional 18-25-years old student age group already affected most universities, especially in developed countries. This decline may be offset by increased participation rates of foreign students from countries where demand for education is not fully satisfied and by the increasing tendency of older adults to enter or return to education system[2]. E-learning is considered the only way to adjust higher education systems to the needs of foreign students, located in other countries and of lifelong learners for more flexible delivery courses and tailor-made programs.

Changing governance - transparency, efficiency and effectiveness, responsiveness and forward vision are now considered the principal components of good public governance, which higher education institutions are being and will increasingly be asked to implement. In this context, wider circulation, sharing and reuse of learning resources and tools developed by public funding, which can ensure a better return on investment of taxpayers' money, should be of interest both to policy makers and representatives of higher education institutions and funding bodies[2]. Institutions are increasingly freer to develop their own strategies and determine their own priorities but governments and other policy makers have to combine the encouragement of efficiency and excellence with the promotion of equity.

Technology – technology continues to gain ground in higher education and has already enhanced the on-campus student experience, through student portals, Internet access, digital libraries, and the availability of laptops, handhelds and other portable devices. E-learning is becoming part of the mainstream of educational programs. Digital technologies have also dramatically changed academic research, thanks to the rapid acceleration of computer and network performance, which has allowed researchers to access and manipulate massive data sets, to simulate, model and visualize more complex systems, and to strengthen international communication and collaboration in research.

INSTITUTIONAL E-LEARNING STRATEGIES

Nowadays the unemployment is very high, especially with young people, because a very large part of them does not have the necessary skills to get a job. The specialist appreciate that, in the nearer future, approximately 30 percent of the total number of jobs would require higher

education graduates. In this regard, pressures have emerged from policymakers and other stakeholders to adopt e-learning technologies in mainstream higher education.

The pressures on higher educational institutions to adopt e-learning are substantial; however, the ability to do so can be constrained by numerous barriers, not least the availability of funding. The pressure to adopt e-learning should also be seen in the context of the pressure on higher education systems to reform and modernize in terms of curricula, teaching methods, expanded learning outcomes, new types of students, qualifications frameworks, quality assurance etc. Universities have been criticized, especially at European level, for offering the same courses to the same group of academically best-qualified young students and failing to open up to other types of learning and learners.

In the same time, in the actual economic context, universities need to grasp more directly the challenges and opportunities presented by the lifelong learning potentials. The two key drivers underlying the adoption of e-learning are:

- the need to up skill the population to meet the challenge of the information and knowledge society;
- the need for accessible and flexible access to tertiary education to meet the changing nature of society and the lifelong learning agenda.

The **e-learning strategy** is aim to support the higher education sector as it moves towards adopting e-learning appropriately, using technology to transform higher education into a more student-focused and flexible system, as part of lifelong learning for all who can benefit[3]. A number of countries (United Kingdom; New Zealand; Ireland etc.) have developed national e-learning strategies for the higher education sector which aim to meet needs for lifelong learning, up skills and quality improvement.

It should be noted, however, that the adoption of e-learning at the level of higher education institutions does not necessarily increase access or widen participation to off-campus students. The enhancing on-campus learning is, in most cases, the leading rationale for adopting e-learning, whereas distance learning does not feature as a strong rationale in this respect.

Following the specialists, the **main reasons** for adopting e-learning at the higher educational level are:

- enhancing reputation;
- developing information skills/literacies;

- widening access;
- supporting the disabled students;
- improving quality of teaching and learning;
- increasing flexibility;
- reducing cost/improving cost-effectiveness.

A number of national and international e-learning strategies hold out the goal of ubiquitous and lifelong access to higher education. However, it should be acknowledged that the realization of such a vision will require more than the availability of technological infrastructure[5].

Lifelong access to higher education via e-learning will require higher educational institutions to implement strategies and policies which focus on:

- flexible modular frameworks;
- innovative pedagogical approaches;
- new forms of assessments linked to learning outcomes, including e-portfolios;
- cross-institutional accreditation and credit transfer agreements;
- institutional collaboration in development and delivery;
- multiple access and exit points from programs;
- most crucially, commitment to equivalence of access for students on and off-campus.

Analysis of the strategies of adopting e-learning strategies in traditional universities indicates that;

- most universities have adopted a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' implementation policy;
- they tend to foreground the potential of e-learning to enhance teaching and learning;
- they tend to foster a wide variety of learning outcomes;
- staff training is seen as essential to successful e-learning;
- flexible support structures and mechanisms are much more important.

Following the specialist, the main stages of e-learning development are:

- **Minimum** (introductory) - the minimum standard readily achievable now for all programs of study. This defines what all students should expect as part of their e-learning experience.

- **Intermediate** (contextual) - development and embedding of activities into local learning, teaching, assessing practices and customization to specific disciplines and contexts.
- **Advanced** (transformational) - significant shift in pedagogical practice and greater requirement for technical infrastructure and development.

However, there are significant barriers to implement the strategies at local level:

- **Academic staff acceptance and engagement** is a key factor in the successful implementation of the institutional e-learning strategy. The political support of senior management is essential for the wider adoption of new practices, but innovations cannot be adopted without buy-in from rank and file academic staff that, in their role of subject matter experts, and in accordance with the tradition of academic freedom, can often choose whether or not to change their teaching practice[3]. At the higher education institutional level, staff attitudes to e-learning is ranging from highly skeptical, to highly supportive, particularly with regard to the pedagogical effectiveness of fully online programs.
- **Funding and competing agendas** emerged also as potential barriers. There are real obstacles in implementing changes in a situation of tight funding and competing priorities. To succeed, an e-learning strategy needs a series of institutional structures to be put in place to support e-learning developments, both at central and at faculty level that means supplementary funds allocation.

In developing an e-learning strategy in order to meet the increasing demands for change and modernization in higher education, for the universities is vital to have:

- a **clear vision** of desired outcome (lifelong, access to higher education etc.);
- an **understanding** of the current capacity and attitudes of the relevant staff;
- a **coherent set of steps** to move from the current situation to the desired outcome.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, among the factors which would increase motivation to adopt e-learning, the potential to reach new students and experiment with new technologies rank highly as motivating factors, whereas factors likely

to decrease motivation are more pragmatic, relating to inadequate technical support, time and recognition of the work involved.

However, with thousands of open courses from internationally reputed higher education institutions available through Internet, teachers will need to consider that students compare their curriculum with others. E-learning is likely to accelerate changes in the traditional teaching role and the evolution of more independent learners. An increase in non-formal and informal learning can be expected to enhance the demand for assessment and recognition of competences gained outside formal learning settings.

The successful implementation of e-learning strategy at higher educational institutions level requires not only adoption by enthusiastic innovators but also institutional structures must be put in place to support the sustainability and mainstreaming of e-learning initiatives.

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