

ONLINE EDUCATION - AN IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR THE LABOR MARKET

Assoc. Prof. PhD. **Diana-Mihaela POCIOVĂLIȘTEANU**

"Constantin Brâncuși" University of Targu Jiu, West University of Timișoara, Romania
diana@utgjiu.ro

PhD. Lecturer **Liana BADEA**

Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
badea.liana@gmail.com

Abstract:

Crises come and a crisis go and during any period of insecurity there is invariably an outcry for "change", change to the law, the rules, the system, our behaviour etc. It is then, during the crisis when people start asking questions about the causes, the effects and the remedies for the crisis. They usually blame others for what happens to them and start observing what it is obvious – the factors that change the world. Nowadays, population face a number of significant new trends in the global environment. These shifts are affecting not only the shape and mode of operation but also the purpose of higher education systems. Some of these trends represent sources of opportunities; others constitute potential threats. Among the most critical dimensions of change are the growing role of knowledge, the information and communication revolution, the emergence of a worldwide labour market, and global socio-political changes. Increasing the level of education is become a priority for individuals and society. Starting from such aspects, this paper aims to emphasize the fact that a high level of education obtained in the classical way or online, increases the chance of adapting to labour market demands and it contributes to increasing the quality of life.

Keywords: online education, higher education, labour market, employment

JEL Classification: I20, I25

INTRODUCTION

In the context of a globalised society, one may observe that knowledge accumulation has become one of the major factors in economic development and is increasingly at the core of a country's competitive advantage, which is itself determined by the ability to innovate in a continuous manner. Starting from this, it is easy to understand that countries are struggling to adapt their higher education systems to meet the challenges brought about by rapid societal change over recent years. Thus, new types of higher institutions and new forms of competition are appearing, inducing traditional institutions to change their modes of operation and delivery and take advantage of opportunities offered by the new information and communication technologies.

As the majority of individuals know, in the present, as in the past, one of the factors that made a huge difference between the stages of developments of countries was the educational system. It was also one of those factors that assured the functionality of the labour market. This is why, in our era confronted with many changes, the rapid adaption of the educational system to the markets evolution become very important.

Employment is, in any society, including in developed countries, a balance which is essential for macroeconomic and socio-political stability. It is a complex dynamic process of major interest to all economic and social partners for the present and future of society, with varying implications: economic, psychosocial, educational, cultural, political. Increasing the employment of the workforce and reducing the phenomenon of unemployment are now key economic policy objectives of all countries, made possible by establishing equilibrium between supply and demand for skilled labor market.

In accordance with the objectives of Europe 2020, the European Strategy on Employment aims to create more and better jobs throughout the European Union. The European Strategy encourages measures to ensure the achievement by 2020 of three major objectives:

- 75% of people aged between 20 and 64 to be **active** on the labor market
- reducing school dropout to less than 10% and increasing to at least 40% the proportion of higher education graduates among the population aged 30-34;

- reduction by at least 20 million the number of people who suffer or may suffer from poverty and social exclusion.

The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth rightly recognises the key role education and higher education must play if the ambitions for Europe in a fast-changing global reality are to be realised. It is obvious that the labour markets increasingly require more graduates with the knowledge and competences provided by higher education; countries will have to invest substantially in their higher education systems to ensure that this demand is met. However, as we all know, while demands are increasing, public funding is diminishing and the new technologies require important funds.

As James D. Wolfensohn said in 2000: „It is impossible to have a complete education system without an appropriate and strong higher education system... I am not for a moment suggesting that primary education and secondary education are not at the very essence of development... [but that is] not enough. You have to have centers of excellence and learning and training if you are going to advance the issue of poverty and development in developing countries... the key... is higher education, not just on the technological side, but to create people with enough wisdom to be able to use it.”

In order to realise that objective, one must first understand what the trends in this area are and how they affect the general mentality. The paper is going to emphasize the importance of the online education in our days and the fact that it became one of the trusted forms of education.

ONLINE EDUCATION

Nowadays we can see that quality higher education and training is crucial for economies that want to move up the value chain beyond simple production processes and products. In particular, today's globalizing economy requires countries to nurture pools of well-educated workers who are able to adapt rapidly to their changing environment and the evolving needs of the production system. Today's world asks to well train people which are able to give practical solutions for economic problems. And we ask ourselves: is the educational system ready to provide such a thing? Is it enough to teach students how to memorize a bunch of theories? Is it enough to tell them which are the economic variables and how they evolve? Is it enough to stay to the classical forms of education? Do we have to adapt the educational system to the global trends?

Thus is why it is particularly important to examine how research can energize and re-engage the brain and the voice of online classes in achieving a more effective strategic positioning in the context of the modern university.

The Internet has changed the way people get informed, interact, communicate and learn in the 21st century. Distribution of information and knowledge is nowadays carried out more and more via the Internet. The growing demands for highly skilled and educated labour force claim for changing traditional teaching and learning processes. One way of changes is related with an integration of various kinds of computer-based learning systems as supplements to conventional teaching methods, as it is said that nowadays there are three major new challenges which bear heavily on the role and functions of higher education: economic globalization; the increasing importance of knowledge as a driver of growth, and the information and communication revolution (Salmi, 2001).

Historically, the rush of online education may be located in the decade 1990-2000, a period characterised by a boom in the ICT and the invention and evolution of the Web. This not only led to the foundation of many Open Universities around the world (Doukas and Andreatos, 2007), but also pushed many traditional universities to offer distance learning courses. It is estimated that, as far as continuing education in higher education institutions is concerned, distance learning will grow at least ten times faster than on-campus learning over the years to come (Burns, 2006). Thus is why many universities around the world started to use means of online education in order to adopt their management strategies to the evolution of the humankind.

It is well recognized that online education brings a lot of advantages (Figure no. 1)



Figure no. 1. Advantages of online education

Most of these advantages have an important impact on various aspects of human behaviour which affects the quality of life. The flexibility of online education offers opportunities for a series of racially, ethnical or age discriminated people such as persons with disabilities, housewives, people with minority ethnical origins. Also, this kind of flexibility might be an advantage in lifelong learning allowing both work and study at the same time. As previously shown, online learning tends to create intimate community of learners which might have a significant impact on the quality of interaction between different people. Moreover, online learning facilitates the rapid creation and operation of think tanks enlarging considerably the pool of expert specialized ideas in different fields.

Online education brings also disadvantages. In scientific fields like engineering, for example, the need for practical training remains an important issue. Computer simulations alone cannot replace all forms of applied training. In many science and technology-oriented programs, hands-on activities in laboratories and workshops remain an indispensable constituent of effective learning.

There are some controversies related to the quality of online education. Studies focused on academic achievement have shown mixed reviews, but some researchers point out that online

education can be at least as effective as traditional classroom instruction. Several research studies on student satisfaction in online courses or programs reported both satisfied and dissatisfied students (Jung and Rha, 2000).

Online education is one of the most exciting enhancements to contemporary education. Online education is neither right for all students nor right for all faculties, but it frequently meets the needs of both for an exciting, high-quality educational experience.

ONLINE EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

When analysing the online education, one must take into account that learning can be formal, non-formal or informal. Thus, the formal one is offered, mainly by colleges and universities. The non-formal learning in the online form can be found outside the formal learning system; it is offered by official organizations such as governmental services, youth organizations, training services, scientific unions, enterprises, voluntary and non-profit organizations, etc. The informal learning on the other hand is not organized or organized but casual; even travelling or watching TV may lead to informal learning. It is what we learn from everyday life (Rogers, 1996).

As shown in the bellow figure, one can notice important gaps between Romania and the rest of the European countries regarding long life learning process.



Figure no. 2. ELLI Index Results 2010 – Lifelong Learning in the European Union

Source: The ELLI Index – Europe 2010

Nevertheless, during the last five years, Romania has made a markedly effort to shorten this gap. These efforts were mainly focused on using modern learning technologies.

Since, in the last years, in Romania the demand for the online formal learning grew, our analysis is based on it.

Romanian people do not represent an exception from the global trend of using the Internet. Thus, statistically speaking, the number of Romanian Internet users exceeded 7,786,700 in 2010, according to Internet World Stats.

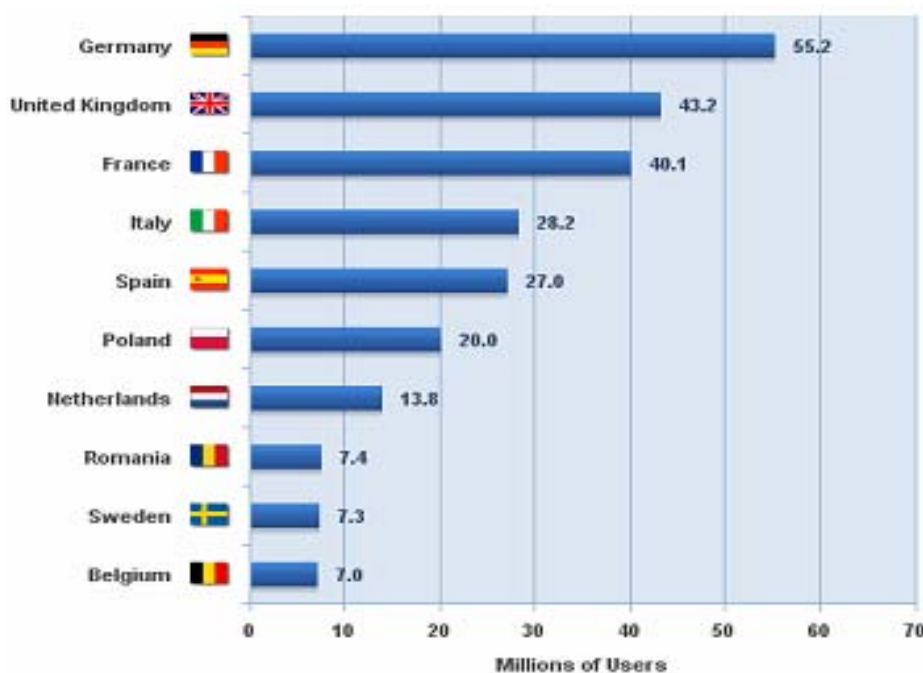
The international statistics revealed that the number of Internet users in Romania had a continuous upward trend, as suggested in the table below:

Table no. 1. Internet Usage in Romania and Population Statistics

YEAR	Users	Population	% Pop.	Usage Source
2000	800,000	22,217,700	3.6 %	ITU
2004	4,000,000	21,377,426	18.7 %	ITU
2006	4,940,000	21,154,226	23.4 %	C.I. Almanac
2007	5,062,500	21,154,226	23.9 %	ITU
2010	7,786,700	21,959,278	35.5 %	ITU

Source: Internet World Stats (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/eu/ro.htm>)

International statistics show that Romania is situated between the first ten countries in Europe, by the number of Internet users (Figure no. 3).

**Figure no. 3. EU top ten Internet Countries**

Source: Internet World Stats (297,001,040 estimated EU Internet Users for December 2008)

In what concerns the online education we can see that during the last years, the demand for Distance Learning forms, especially, grew more and more. These learning forms facilitated the access to education of the persons who could not attend daily classes (courses) organized by higher education institutions. In response to the changes in enrolment demands, many institutions and organizations have been working on strategic plans to implement online education. But, at the same time, misconceptions and myths related to the difficulty of teaching and learning online, technologies available to support online instruction, the support and compensation needed for high-quality instructors, and the needs of online students create a series of challenges. There are a number of indicators that can give an insight about the population interest towards online education and training, such as: percentage of individuals using the Internet for consultation with the purpose of learning (I_IUCLRN); percentage of individuals who have used Internet for training and education (I_IEDUT); percentage of individuals using the Internet for seeking information about education, training or course offers (I_IUEDUIF); percentage of individuals who have used Internet for doing an online course (of any subject) (I_IUOLC).

Although the interest in using the Internet for learning is high (Figure no. 4), the number of universities that organise online programs is low.

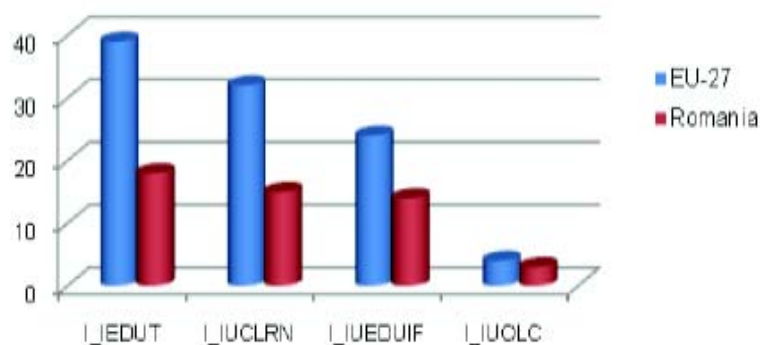


Figure no. 4. E-learning indicators in Romania for 2009

Source: Eurostat

In Romania, mainly, the public universities organize online master programs, unlike some other European or American universities that offer online bachelor, master and PhD programs. For example, in the Academy of Economic Studies, the most important university of economic studies from Romania, there are ten online programs of master degree.

One of the reasons is that online education programs and web based courses raises challenging issues, such as the intellectual property rights and academic freedom with respect to ownership and control of education materials developed exclusively for online or other multimedia dissemination channels (Salmi, 2001).

Using the appropriate software for online education has implications on the level of pedagogical methods and instruments.

The information and communication revolution also has far-reaching implications for how universities are organized and deliver services, thus implying supplementary costs for creating the basic infrastructure. In the United States new universities are designed and constructed without a library building because all students are expected to use computers to access online digital libraries and data bases (Salmi, 2001).

Also, it is known that education institutions need the capacity to react swiftly by establishing new programs, reconfiguring the existing ones, and eliminating outdated programs without being hampered by bureaucratic regulations and obstacles. But our country, administrative procedures are very rigid when it comes to making changes in academic structure, programs or mode of operation.

CONCLUSIONS

Some specialists are already predicting the end of the traditional university, seeing open and online universities as a cost-effective answer to the massification challenge faced by many countries: "Universities won't survive... Higher education is in deep crisis. Already we are beginning to deliver more lectures off-campus via satellite or two-way video at a fraction of the cost. The college campus won't survive as a residential institution. Today's buildings are hopelessly unsuited and totally unneeded" (Drucker, 1997).

If the predictions are right, remains to be seen.

What is for sure, is the fact that the hegemony of traditional universities has been definitively challenged: "... Many universities may die or may change beyond recognition as a result of the ITC revolution. When asked what his light bulb would mean for the candle industry, Thomas Edison reportedly replied: <<We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles>>. We are entering an era in which most colleges and universities must decide whether to change a little (and thus remain in the academic candle industry) or a lot (and launch themselves into the academic electrical business)" (Langenberg, 1996).

Starting from the actual situation in Romanian education system, it is obvious that we are facing with a "perfect e-storm," linking pedagogy, technology, and learner needs. The growing demand for online learning leads to opportunities for innovation in the educational system.

In Romania the first steps were taken through implementing e-Learning projects and defining the barriers that stand in the way of an information society for everyone. In the Romanian educational system – rather conservative – changes occur gradually and it takes a long time until the innovations (especially quite radical, such as those generated by the introduction of ICT) are assimilated.

We recommend to the public and private universities to explore, implement, and extend online education programs and partnership activities and continue to build-out the use of technology implementations that increase the quality of online courses, improve their ability to scale to larger populations, and improve the breadth of coverage of courses.

Acknowledgements

This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/89/1.5/S/59184 „Performance and excellence in postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain”

REFERENCES

1. Burns, E. (2006), *Continuing Education drives Distance-Learning enrolment*, Available online at: www.clickz.com/stats/sectors/education/article.php/3605321
2. Doukas, N. and Andreatos, A. (2007), *Advancing Electronic Assessment*, International Journal of Computers, Communications & Control, Vol. II, No. 1, pp. 56-65
3. Drucker, P. (1997), *Still the youngest mind*, Forbes, 10 March 1997
4. Jung, I. and Rha, I. (2000), *Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness of Online Education: A Review of the Literature*, Educational Technology, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2000, pp. 57–60
5. Langenberg, D. (1996), *Power plants or candle factories, in science*, quoted in J. Dator (1998), "The Futures of universities: ivied halls, virtual malls, or theme parks?", Futures, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 619, June.
6. Pociovălișteanu D.-M., Șerban-Oprescu G.L., Badea L. (2011), *The impact of online education on the quality of life in Romania*, Proceedings. International Scientific Conference PROgress, INnovation, DEMocracy HORIZON 2025. 2nd edition, Academica Brancusi House Publishing, pp. 581-586, www.utgjiu.ro/orizont2025/index.html
7. Rogers, A. (1996), *Teaching Adults*, Open University Press
8. Salmi, J. (2001), *Tertiary Education in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities*, Higher Education Management, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 104-125
9. ***, The ELLI Index – Europe 2010