Online School from the Student's Perspective

Iulia Gonta[1]

(1) Polytechnic University of Bucharest, RomaniaE-mail: iulia.gonta@upb.ro

Abstract

The success of an online school depends on how students manage to acquire new skills and knowledge. This process depends on many factors, and the problems that students face are diverse. In order to obtain quality in distance learning, we asked for feedback from students during the period when we switched to online learning. The students' answers were analyzed in this article, and the obtained results helped us maintain a high level of online schooling and the reputation of the institution on the one hand, and on the other hand, offer solutions on how to motivate students to study actively and end up with satisfied graduates.

Keywords: distance learning, online education, higher education

1 Introduction

Lately, the problems of online education have been receiving special attention from specialists in the field of education. The use of virtual learning environments has become the favourite topics of both scientists and users of online education. For everyone, the quality of this type of learning has become an important subject of debate. The issue of the success of the online learning/training system was raised, its the future depending not only on the quality of the contents and manners of online presentation, but also on the satisfaction of the consumers of this educational environment.

2 Debate Regarding the Advantages and Difficulties of Distance Learning

The term distance education „was referring to home study, independent study, correspondence study, external learning, self-directed learning, and telelearning – and today, of course, we read about cyber-learning, e-learning, mobile learning, virtual learning, and many more terms that are also canopied by the term distance education." (Diehl, 2019)

New technologies offer the opportunity to learn from any geographical location through the Internet and, at the same time, are a means of opening up to resources around the world.

Today, distance learning technologies, based on the creation of interactive environments, are actively being developed worldwide. In fact, this learning technology is student-centred and an opportunity to respond flexibly to the needs of society and of the individual.

Lately, more and more people choose to complete their education following distance/online studies and programs. These ways of education allow them to maintain their careers and family life, offer flexibility, give the opportunity to enrol in courses at multiple universities and in several different formats.

2.1 The Advantages of Distance Learning

Distance learning has a number of advantages:
- allows a large number of people to have access to training;
- favour access to trainers of international notoriety;
- stimulates the formation of skills in line with the requirements of today's society;
- saves time by individualizing learning and removing the necessity to travel;
- allows the reduction of training/education costs;
- ensures autonomy: choosing and deciding on an individual training route;
- favours the development of skills such as creativity, imagination, etc.

A study was recently published, in which 210 students responded "with their observations and perceptions of their personal online learning experience and how this experience impacted their work/life/school balance". This paper concludes that online learning „can enhance work-life balance for most students, especially when compared to the alternative of traditional fixed time

and place classroom learning (Berry and Hughes, 2020)."

We adhere to the authors' conclusion and support the fact that distance learning has its specificity, and students who practice it benefit from:

-    autonomy in planning courses and choosing topics (in accordance with their level of training);
-    adapting the pace of learning (according to the ability to understand);
-    interactive multimedia solutions;
-    the possibility to self-evaluate;
-    having a feeling of freedom, etc.

2.2 Difficulties Encountered by Students in the Context of Distance Learning

Research on distance education programs suggests the following reasons because of which students who practice distance learning drop out (Powell 1990; Garland, 1993; Williams and Nichols, 2004; Lao and Gonzales, 2005; Nash, 2005; Piercy and Lee, 2006):

-    using online learning technologies is difficult;
-    lack of high-speed access la Internet;
-    lack of required technical equipment (some students feel that they should be provided financial assistance from the institution to pay for equipment and Internet charges);
-    lack of physical communication and collaboration;
-    difficulties engaging and maintaining online discussions;
-    students do not always correctly anticipate the time needed for coursework;
-    misunderstanding of academic rigour;
-    difficulties when contacting staff members;
-    a need for more mentoring;
-    difficulty in gaining access to materials;
-    lack of prerequisite knowledge;
-    lack of interest;
-    lack of time;
-    lack of support (from peers or family).

„Students who learn from a distance enroll and drop courses for many of the same reasons: family commitments, jobs, time, and technology; all of these elements make distance education attractive, but also cause students to become overwhelmed and drop out." (S. Fey et al., 2018).

In a recent study, Karen E. Brinkley-Etzkorn concludes that teachers and students who participate in online learning are disappointed at the end of the course: "Findings reveal that, prior to and immediately following the training, instructors were highly optimistic about their course redesign and skill/knowledge development. After teaching the course online, participants were less optimistic and less satisfied with their training experience than they had been immediately prior to or following the training. Multiple instructors cited a need for additional or continued training and support" (K.E. Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2020).

2.3 Proposed Solutions for Optimizing Distance Learning

The implementation of distance learning in the daily practice of educational institutions is a complex activity. It requires investment in human and material resources. To ensure success in this area, a meticulously designed government and institutional strategy which takes the following into account is needed:

-    ensuring infrastructure;
-    permanent updating of curricula;
-    training specialists in online teaching;
-    providing technical assistance in educational institutions;
-    continuous adaptation of technologies to new changes.

Of course, e-learning platforms and Online school face several challenges. To optimize the

distance learning process, researchers have come forward with a number of proposals, including: coming up with the idea of personalizing the e-learning experience and to keep students motivated and engaged (Shearer, 2019; Moubayed et al., 2020), proposing effective designs of learning activities in online environments (Cundell and Sheepy, 2018), researching the relationship between students' characteristics and online learning (Baker, 2018), proposing the use of course formats adjusted to the different learning styles, etc.

3 Methodology of Research

The purpose of the study was determined by the desire to contribute to the development of online university education. In fact, we set out to find organizational and pedagogical conditions that would contribute to increasing the quality of distance learning.

In the study, we took into account the fact that most people who study at university have relatively stable characters and are less willing to change, which can make online learning more difficult for them. We also took into account the fact that giving up or partially studying the course leads to undesirable consequences, such as dissatisfaction, negative feedback, undermining the reputation of the educational institution.

In fact, we believe that developing distance learning and an online course system is part of the strategy for modernising education by:
- giving all people access to education and training;
- offering the possibility to choose an online program/course of quality (choosing and accessing courses from the best specialists in the world and from the best educational institutions).

Therefore, we believe that for the development of online education is very important that:
- the content of online education is of high quality;
- the training course is designed to cover/master the entire program;
- students are satisfied with the obtained results by the end.

In order to find the best solutions to make distance learning more efficient, we asked 219 students to give some feedback on the evaluation of online activity in the period of transition from traditional education to online education. For the purpose of assessment, we have developed a tool that includes a list of questions (Box.1) which encourages students to express their opinion, argue about it and provide constructive solutions for more attractive, easier and more efficient online learning.

The answers to the questionnaire questions were collected online, then grouped based on the similarity of the answer and each group of answers was assigned a common theme. Topic reports were then generated and the reports analyzed.

Box 1: List of Questions for Student Feedback on Online Learning
1. Express your opinion on your online learning experience.
2. What do you think about the way the content is taught, the communication methods, the specifics of the tasks, the time allocation, the evaluation method, etc. of the online curriculum?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of online learning?
4. How did you adapt to the "online strategy"?
5. What problems do you face?
6. What do you expect from teachers?
7. What mistakes did you notice regarding organising and teaching online?
8. How could your online learning experience be improved?

4 Analysis of the Results

The answers given by the students showed that they have very different opinions and attitudes regarding online education. Their views, although well-argued, may be completely opposite:

Opposite answers on attention

Student 1: Probably the biggest problem I face is attention, being distracted at home by a lot of things.

Student 2: I think that online education is ideal: it is very easy to learn from home, thus I can be much more attentive to what is taught.

Opposite answers on motivation

Student 3: When you go to University you are motivated by those around you, you have the support of colleagues and teachers. I can say that my motivation diminished as the teaching process progressed. I don't like this "online education" at all.

Student 4: Online learning has helped me develop my self-motivation and self-discipline.

Opposite answers regarding access to course materials

Student 5: From my perspective, online education is more difficult than traditional one, especially since in the online environment there may be difficulties in accessing courses at important times, and you do not have the opportunity to participate in all online activities.

Student 6: I think it is much more convenient to do the classes online, and we find the information much faster.

Opposite answers regarding communication

Student 7: There are people who learn and understand due to the atmosphere created by the teacher and his colleagues. Personally, I prefer studying at university, rather than "homeschooling".

Student 8: Being a shy person, the online environment helped me to communicate more with teachers during classes, to be active in classes, not to be so afraid to answer.

Opposite answers regarding the difficulty of the online program

Student 9: I work much harder since I'm at home, maybe it's my fault because I want to meet all the requirements perfectly.

Student 10: Some teachers explain to us, send us clear materials, and consequently we can solve homework easily.

Also, from the analysis of the answers we found that:

- students express their concern about the efficiency of online learning: "I have adapted quite quickly to the platform and online learning, it is much more convenient for me to do classes in front of a computer, but I do not think it is effective in the long run."

- students are not sure that they understand the topics correctly: "Classmates can also help at university, sometimes they explain more clearly and the teacher has more time for everyone, and in the online format we can misunderstand!" or "It is not enough for me to receive some materials and be told that I have to learn, I need an explanation. It helps me to listen to the teacher talking about a certain topic because then I feel that I understood the information better."

Students find that distance learning has its advantages and disadvantages, which can be transformed in favour of education. Those in the first years of study are more open (and adapt more easily) to online education, compared to students in their final years (Chart 1).
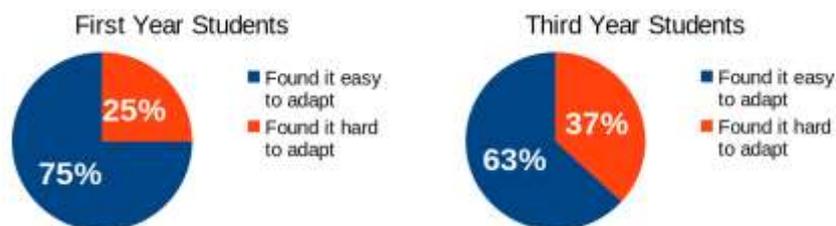
Chart 1: Student's adaptation to online learning

From the analysis of the students' answers, we concluded that the students who participated in our study highlighted the same advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, which we find mentioned in the literature on this topic. However, we would like to emphasize once again that the answers obtained in our research differ greatly from student to student, which suggests the idea that the effectiveness of online learning is related to the subjective reality of the student and the specifics of his personality. Therefore, it is very important to have a permanent connection with students who learn online, to listen to their feedback and to adapt to the specifics of each one of them.

5 Conclusions and Proposals

Given that the purpose of developing the online course system is to provide everyone with access to quality courses, we consider it necessary for teachers to adjust university education to the specifics of online teaching, which involves:
- providing materials to support online interactivity;
- structuring the material for easy and quick assimilation;
- motivating and stimulating the learning activity;
- creating the conditions for the individualization/differentiation of the educational path;
- adjusting the program to the psychological characteristics of the students;
- objective assessment of knowledge.

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