THE ADVANTAGES AND THE DISADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING IN EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

By 2006, nearly 3.5 million students were participating in on-line learning at institutions of higher education in United States. Many higher education and for-profit institutions, now offer on-line classes. By contrast, only about half of private, non-profit schools offer them. The Sloan report, based on a poll of academic leaders, says that students generally appear to be at least as satisfied with their on-line classes as they are with traditional ones. In the article we talk about the impact of the introduction of e-learning methods on the education system in Romania, correlated with other programs already implemented at European level.

Keywords: e-learning, classic learning, statistics for Romania

1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic learning (or e-Learning or eLearning) is a type of education where the medium of instruction is computer technology. No in-person interaction may take place in some instances. E-learning is used interchangeably in a wide variety of contexts. In companies, it refers to strategies that use the company network to deliver training courses to employees [7].

The worldwide e-learning industry is estimated to be worth over 38 billion euros according to conservative estimates although in the European Union only about 20% of e-learning products are produced within the common market [6]. Developments in internet and multimedia technologies are the basic enabler of e-learning, with content, technologies and services being identified as the three key sectors of the e-learning industry.

2. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING

From the main advantages of e-learning are [9]: the possibility of work in a flexible way regarding other home activities, the reducing of time and money spent on travelling from home to school, eLearning gives to students the possibility of taking the responsibility for studding. The final advantage is very important due to the manner in which the students are

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being treated. It is essential for an adult to be responsible for his own actions. Why won't we let students to have the responsibility for their own knowledge?

On the other hand, another big advantage is that students can work at their own place, or anywhere they have access to a computer. This is very important because it creates the proper environment for the student to work, some of them might be shy working in groups or coming to school.

Among these advantages, there are also disadvantages. The main obstacle [9] for eLearning is that the students "with low motivation or bad study habits may fall behind". Some students are comfortable with the classic way of learning: going to school, answer in class, be active, and be motivated by teachers to study harder. This motivation is usually concretized into bonus points, good grades or other benefits (even candies or sweets). This is the main reason that makes the eLearning a little bit dangerous: some active and social students may lose their motivation of studding.

Another disadvantage is also met at psychological point of view and it is about isolation [9]. Some students may feel isolated from the teacher and other students. This isolation may create a long-term barrier of communication.

3. E-LEARNING IN EUROPEAN UNION

Europe's future economy and society are being formed in the classrooms of today. Students need to be both well educated in their chosen field and digitally literate if they are to take part effectively in tomorrow's knowledge society. e-Learning - the integration of advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) into the education system - achieves both aims.

Europe also needs to make learning a lifelong attempt, with people of all ages continuously developing their skills. E-Learning can make a significant contribution, with both workers and organization, transforming the way they learn, interact and work. Moreover, e-Learning can promote social integration and inclusion can open the access to learning for people with special needs and those living in difficult circumstances (marginalized groups, migrants, single parents, etc.).

E-learning was a priority within the original e-Europe 2002 Action Plan. The e-Europe 2002 Benchmarking Report showed that the initial e-Europe target of connecting all schools to Internet had been all achieved by 2002, and the attention must therefore shift to better connections and wider educational use.

The e-Europe 2005 Action Plan therefore set the following targets [8]:

- From e-Learning Initiative to Program: the eLearning Initiative has been supporting the co-ordination of European e-learning efforts at both European and national level since 2001. Under eEurope 2005, the Commission will:
- Launch the e-Learning Program (2004-2006) to continue this work and support priority areas, including the deployment of virtual campuses (below). The program

was proposed on December 2002, to be adopted in the Education Council from November 2003.

- Analyze the European market for e-learning, including the private sector, to identify obstacles and propose solutions;
- Virtual campuses for all students. All universities should offer on-line access for students and researchers to maximize the quality and efficiency of learning processes and activities by the end of 2005.
- The e-Learning Initiative has already launched several pilot projects, which it will soon begin clustering together, and it is publishing a study on virtual campus deployment. The e-Learning program will continue this work in 2004;
- Broadband connections: All schools and universities, as well as other institutions that play a key role in e-learning (museums, libraries, archives), should have broadband Internet access for educational and research purposes by the end of 2005.(see eEurope 2005/Broadband);
- Grids for e-Learning: the Commission should launch, by the end of 2003, research and pilot projects in the use of advanced distributed computing systems ("GRIDs") and broadband networks to provide high quality learning facilities.

E-learning is also among the objectives of the Information Society Technologies (IST) program, which is part of the EU Research Framework Program. The focus of research in this area is on applications of technologies for user-centered learning, building on the concept of ubiquitous computing and on sound pedagogical principles.

Re-skilling for the knowledge society: while over 70% of the EU work force-think the computer skills are important for employment, only about 27% has received job-related computer training. By the end of 2003, the Member States, where is the appropriate use of Structural Funds with Commission support, should launch actions to provide adults all the key-skills they need.

Re-skilling is therefore an important topic within the e-Learning Initiative's preparatory actions and will be picked up by the e-Learning Program under the direction of Promoting Digital Literacy.

4. NATIONAL PROGRAMS OF E-LEARNING IN ROMANIA

A. RoEduNet

The Romanian Educational Network program (RoEduNet) was initiated in June 1993 and began with the installation of the Central Node at the University Politehnica of Bucharest. From the very beginning RoEduNet was conceived as an open structure, offering free access to the academic, scientific and cultural nonprofit institutions. Once the first institution was connected – the University of Bucharest, August 1993 – the nucleus of the academic data communication infrastructure was created.

The structure remains opened to all universities as well as to non-profit scientific and cultural institutions. A large percentage of the educational institutions in Romania are now connected to the Internet through RoEduNet.

B. SEI programme (Sistem Educational Informatizat - Education IT-Based System). Enhancing education with new ICTs was stated in 1998 by the Ministry of Education and Research as a priority, but concrete actions were taken at the beginning of 2001. The premises and incentives of SEI national program are three-folded, based on: the social and political commitment (the harmonization within EU framework principles, objectives and actions), the e-readiness objectives and the education process efficiency development.

The goal of the SEI program is introducing IT as a teaching/learning tool in lower and upper secondary education. Schools are provided with computerized laboratories in order to support the IT-Based teaching/learning process. Beside the availability of technology in school, it aims to establish a high level of interactivity and directly, personal experiment of the phenomena and scientific theories by learners. The program was approved in early 2001 by Information Technology Promotion Group – a task force integrated by several ministries and presided by the Romanian Prime Minister – with an initial estimated budget of 200 mil of USD. It is implemented in partnership with the state administration and private sector. The main companies involved being SIVECO Romania, HP Romania, and IBM Romania.

C. eLearning Romania program is an initiative of several civil society institutions (TEHNE – Centre for Innovation and Development in Education; ASTED – Association for Education Sciences, and the National Foundation for Community Development), developed in collaboration with two centers of research from universities (University of Bucharest an University Politehnica of Bucharest) and with a national research institute in education (Institute for Education Sciences). Managers, academics, researchers, practitioners, opinion leaders and educational software developers were involved within a community meant to share resources since the beginning of 2006, when the program started. Other institutions from private sector had supported this initiative too.

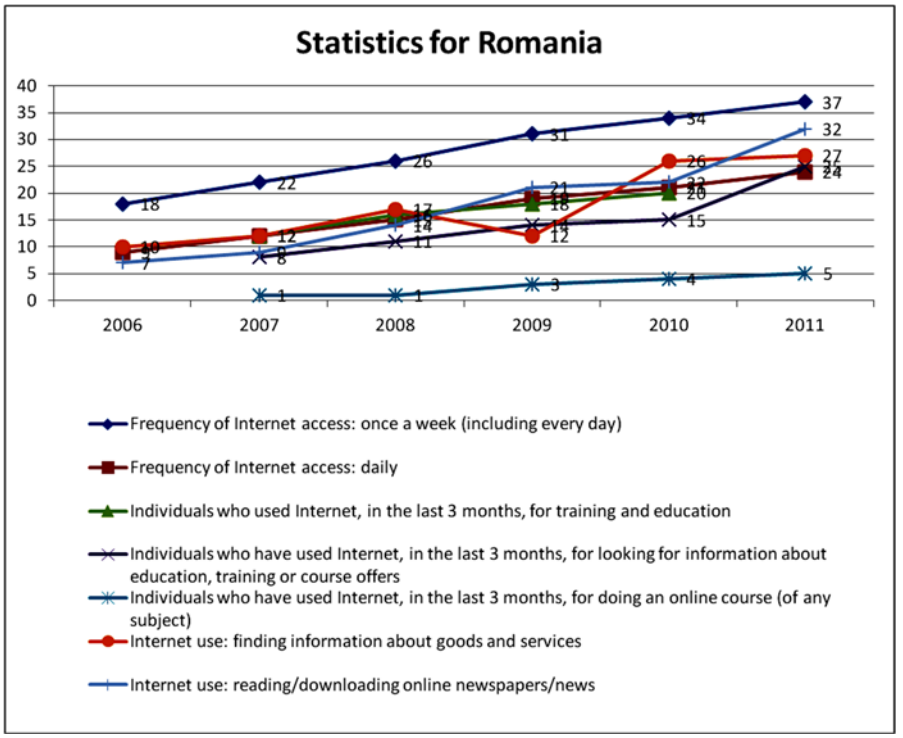
D. Knowledge Economy project

The Knowledge Economy project is implemented by the Government of Romania through the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), and is financed by the World Bank with a total budget of USD 70 million. The KE project (with a lifespan from 2006 to 2010) aims to support activities based on knowledge at the national level, as well as directly within local communities, and in particular to accelerate the participation of knowledge disadvantaged communities in the knowledge economy. The target groups are around 250 rural and small urban communities in Romania, where local community e-Networks will be established to ensure access to knowledge through a number of services and technologies, including computers, Internet services and specific content disposal for different target groups (citizens, businesses and pupils). The project has a strong education component, which aims to lead “an educational model based on teaching and learning through ICT” integrating computers and Internet access within the primary and lower secondary schools.

Even though the project started more than a year ago, few information about the progress and achievements are available yet.

5. STATISTICS IN ROMANIA

In order to establish if these programs had succeeded their goals, it is necessary to let the numbers "speak" for the next years since these programs were implemented [10].

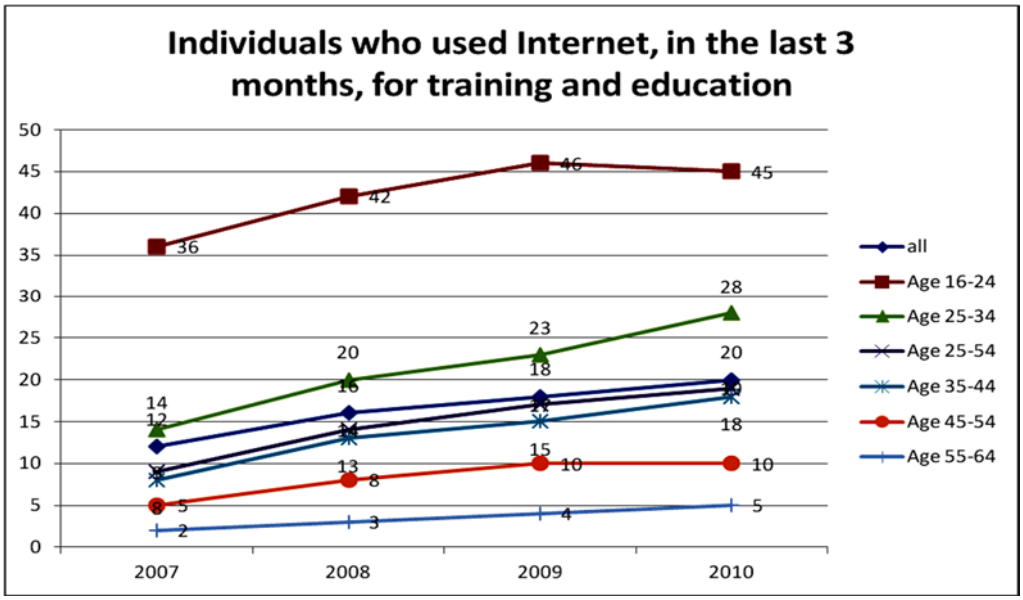


Graph 1. Romanian statistics

Graph 1 from above shows some of the most important evolutions from Romania, regarding the Internet (usage, frequency, reasons for using the Internet). In 2006, 18% of the users of the Internet accessed a web site at least once a week, 10% of them for finding information about goods and services, 7% for reading/downloading online newspapers/news (this is, also, a form of self-education through Internet).

In 2007, 8% of the Internet users were looking for information about education, training or course offers, while only 1% of them used the Internet for doing an online course (of any subject). These numbers increased during the next 4 years, reaching in 2011 at: 27% of users looking for information about goods and services, 32% of users were reading/downloading online newspapers/news, 25% of users were looking for information about education, training or course offers, but only 5% were doing an online course (of any subject).

Comparing these evolutions from Romania with other european countries, we reach to the conclusion that, even thou the procents are increasing slowly, there is still hope that in the future (next 5-10 years), more than 70% of the internet users to use the Internet for education (of any form).



Graph 2. The use of Internet for education in Romania

On the other hand, the second graph from above shows the age evolutions for using the Internet strictly for training and education. In 2007, 12% of all individuals that use the Internet were using it for training and education, while in 2010, the procent grew at 20%. From these users, in 2007, 36% were between 16 and 24 years old, 14% between 25 and 34 years, 8% between 35 and 44, 5% between 45 and 54 and, finally, 2% between 55 and 64.

In 2010, these procents grew at: 45% between 16 and 24 years old, 28% between 25 and 34 years, 18% between 35 and 44, 10% between 45 and 54 and, finally, 5% between 55 and 64.

All these statistics prove that the educational programs adopted and implemented at national level were effective. We hope that, in the near future, these numbers grow near to 100%.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, eLearning is a disputed concept in our days and very dangerous if we take into account the advantages and disadvantages of implementing this manner of teaching or learning. Private Institutions may become more involved with on-line presentations as the cost of instituting such a system decreases. Properly trained staff must also be hired to work with students on-line. These staff members must be able to not only understand the content area, but also be highly trained in the use of computer and Internet. Online education is

rapidly increasing, and online doctoral programs have even developed at leading research universities.

In our opinion, as long as eLearning does not influence the classic way of teaching and studding in a decisive way, than it is a good idea. Else, the social relations between people are influenced that much, that it can reduce the daily interactions between us.

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