Traditions and Perspectives for Development of Distance Education at the University of National and World Economy

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Summary: People associate education with prosperity. In a dynamic environment, they need such prosperity even more. In the quest for prosperity, some different forms of education appear intended for satisfaction of various educational needs. In any case, at the one end of the system there is always the consumer (student) and at the other the seller (higher education institution). What is important is who could stand in between, and how, in order to increase the efficiency of educational process. The new forms of education enter the market under the pressure of consumers. One of their main purposes is to restructure the space and time of education. Guided by these ideas the University of National and World Economy was the first state-run university to introduce the modern form of distance learning. This article emphasizes the advantages of blended learning as the point of balance between traditional education and e-learning.

Key Words: higher education, e-learning, blended learning.

1. Origin

The Center for Distance Education was established at the Institute for Postgraduate Qualification in December 1996. The beginning was hard for several reasons:

• Lack of experience and traditions in our country;
• Lack of financial funds;
• Difficult start-up of programs;
• Insufficient confidence in the quality of this form of education.

2. The main queries

The start is always difficult. The managers of educational process must answer a number of questions. To a great extent future success depends on efficient problem solving. **In the beginning the main questions were as follows**:

• Which will be the first major in which education will start in the distant learning form?

• Which will be the education and qualification degree for distant learning?

• Does the University of National and World Economy have enough prepared staff (lecturers, administrators) available?

• Will we be able to attract students to believe us and enroll?

3. It wasn't late before the first results came

In the process of satisfaction of the specific needs the educational process management is especially sensitive to quality. In the beginning for us it was very important to conform to the market situation and make use of our position as the first one. For that reason **the first results turned into an impetus for intensive future development.** It was manifested mainly in:

• Winning a project to fund the creation of textbooks for distant learning funding under the PHARE Programme in February 1997: 7 textbooks published by the National Center for Distant Learning;

• **The master's degree in the major International Economic Relations was the first to start distant learning at the University of National and World Economy;**

• The **first students (24 economists)** were admitted**;**

• **The international audit of the project confirmed the very good results achieved at the Institute for Postgraduate Qualification with the University of National and World Economy;**

• Project extension: the Institute for Postgraduate Qualification won funding for the creation of 5 new textbooks for distant learning;

• In 1998, education started at the **Master's degree programme in the major International Economic Relations also for non-economists;**

• There were generated sufficient proceeds for publication of textbooks and for the overall support of educational process;

• In 1999. after winning a project under the Tempus Programme, resources started to be provided for the new Master's degree programme in Public Finance;

• **The number of students is continuously increasing;**

• **Two admission sessions are held annually;**

• In 2000, the Center for Distance Education won additional funding for creation of training materials under a PHARE project for the major Public Administration;

• A period of extension of the range of majors followed: **the following were set up: Accounting & Control, Health Management; Marketing, Business Administration, Human Resource Management, Defense & Security Economy, Insurance;**

• Information resources are enriched. **The Web-based distant learning platform Oracle is used.**

• The distant form of education is applied **more and more extensively also in postgraduate qualifications and specializations**;

• The **four levels of resource availability** as required under the Ordinance on the state requirements for distant education at higher educational institutions are met;

• In May 2005, the Center for Distance Education moved to the building of the University of National and World Economy;

• In October 2008, the academic year opened at the Regional Center for Distance Education in the town of Haskovo in the presence of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Mr. Georgi Parvanov; this was the first year when **the University of National and World Economy introduced, for the first time among all state-run higher educational institutions, the distant form of education for students in the Bachelor's education and qualification degree;**

• The textbooks and training materials for distant education for all majors are enriched and updated on a current basis.

4. Blended learning as the point of balance between traditional education and e-learning

4.1. Main advantages and restrictions of e-learning

Since the beginning of the present century, all educational organizations, including many universities, literally ran to e-learning. In fact, it grew up in the world of information technology where people are accustomed to spending hours in front of computers. It was said to fully oust traditional education of personal attendance. In Internet-based education, the entire educational process is automated by means of materials generated and distributed by electronic means. The educational gates can be used at home or at workplace and allow for the inclusion of numerous resources. Over the entire period, the trainee does not meet physically with any particular person. He or she is guided by electronic links or a tutor supporting the on-line lectures. E-textbooks enable numerous modes of visualization. Naturally, they exceed the biological abilities of the common lecturer and have much more "memory" than him/her.

What is always pointed out among the main advantages of e-learning is its great capacity of a more efficient inclusion of individualized student who realizes its advantages. The educational package is both accessible and flexible at the same time. The dialogue is carried out on the

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

Advantages	Disadvantages
Flexibility, accessibility, convenience	Limitations due to connection speed
Multi-platform technology: no additional software required	Computers can not replace full-scale communication between people
Saves time and funds during education as in some cases reduces the financial costs up to 50 percent compared to traditional education.	Requires more time and funds at the development stage.
Spreads inexpensively to local centers in the same or other countries	Programmes with Internet switch-on doe usually not allow for specification in relation to individual interests.
Content is easily processed by changes on the server which are automatically accessible for all trainees everywhere	Not each discipline can be studied on computer only: there is no communication between people, emotions, etc.
Access to information of very large volume and content.	There is no expression of trainees' personal activity and no interaction between participants in the educational process.
Обучаемите могат да търсят думи, текстове, фрази.	Usually information is provided in separate portions that can be seen in a specific moment. Thus trainees can grasp the purpose of each separate fragment in relation to the overall idea of the course.
Knowledge assessment/examinations are done very quickly	Does not always reflect the actual knowledge and it is uncertain who is actually being examined.

e-"blackboard" in a virtual lecture hall. The integration with the digital media provides unique opportunities and high quality. The "hidden" student at the lecture hall only performs the instructions and participates in e-seminars.

E-learning requires broadband Internet connection and a possibility that the students get included into it at any time. The lecturer must be well familiar with the operating system. The current on-line courses turned into an iceberg of a kind, mostly in the case of continuing and in-company education. They emerged after long discussions between the experts in electronic technology and lecturers as regards knowledge management. The leading task is how the common course can develop into a computer-based one.

Generally, the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning are systemized in table 1.

4.2. What is blended learning?

It is difficult to tell the future of e-learning. The market for educational services is still in progress with a lot of unknowns. But in recent couple of years some quite intense discussions of the question of the so-called blended (combined, hybrid) learning started.

Experts give it various definitions. According to some in its essence it represents a combination of contemporary applications of pedagogy and manners of teaching that is carried out via blended visual and physical resources. The combination includes both technology-based materials and traditional print textbooks.

According to other authors the contemporary use of the term "blended learning" is closely connected to the spread of high tech. In many countries it is often perceived as use of resources combining e-learning with other educational tools as components of self-learning.

Other authors (mainly from North America) use the term "hybrid education" as they also mean the integration of e-learning and traditional methods. The two main factors to be taken into account are time used for on-line activities and the necessary technologies.

In my opinion one of the most adequate definitions is the one given by Heinze and Procter: "Blended learning in higher education

Table 2. Systematization of components of blended learning

Off-line components	On-line components
Training at workplace, in work environment	On-line reading of texts: e-textbooks and simulations.
Personal consultation with a tutor, instructor or mentor	E-tutor, e-instructor, e-mentor: full feedback
Study hall: lectures, seminars, games, conferences	On-line training: non-synchronous: via e-mail, synchronous: via chat, audio and video conference, virtual lecture hall
Printed training materials, including textbooks	On-line management of training: creation and maintenance of database.
Electronic training materials: cassette tapes, CD, DVD.	The Web: fast Internet, specialized websites
Dissemination of training materials via radio, TV, interactive TV	Mobile training: laptops, PDA, mobile phones

is learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and is based on transparent [open] communication amongst all parties involved with a course."

Blended learning provides an excellent opportunity to combine various components (table 2).

A research of Petet Dean conducted in 2006 demonstrated that quality of education increases significantly by providing several options for connection among trainees and the seminars at study halls. In 2006, at the Harvard Business School it was established that students not only learn more when online seminars were added to their training but interaction among them and their satisfaction with the achievements also increased. In 2008 a White Paper was disseminated stating that the educational results

are obtained faster by people educated by the blended strategy which turned out to be more efficient than e-self-study.

4.3. Strategies for establishment of blended learning

The combination is an integrated strategy for provision of education. The free choice of components upon blended learning exceeds the capacity of the audience. These components could be formal and informal, technology- and human resource-based, independent and in the form of communication. The opportunities afforded by blended learning are given in table 3.

Unfortunately, there is not yet a definite recipe for the components and their relative weight in the educational mix. One thing is certain:

Table 3. Main components of and opportunities for blended learning

Formal physical attendance education	Informal physical attendance education
- Instructor-led audience	- relations as among fellows
- Seminars	- Working groups
- Instruction/tutoring	- Role modeling
- Training during work	
Virtual Communication/ synchronous	Virtual Communication/non- synchronous
- Class for live e-learning	- e-mail
- e-tutor/instructor	- e-bulletin
	- e-register of services
	- e-group by interests
Self-training	Support work
- Working textbooks	- Support systems
- E-learning modules	- Additional printed materials
- Online connections to resources	- Training databases
- Simulations	- Documentation
- Scenarios	- Maintenance/devices for assistance of decision making
- Video and audio CDs/DVDs	
- Online self-assessment	

that purpose determines empirical decisions so as challenges are united with the purposes of education. Naturally, all educational institutions seek their own unique combination of physical attendance and e-learning. What does in fact make the blend strong and how should one choose the right mix of methods for dissemination to ensure the pursued quality of education? Maybe the phrasing of the response should start from the fact that blended learning is a comprehensive process and not an isolated event. It combines education with the particularities of environment, provides an opportunity for expression of a wide range of styles.

Blended learning optimizes resources. It gives an original response to the question of what combination of funds and media ensures good results at least investment. The key to blended learning is the choice of the right combination of media. In order to achieve a good mix, another very important thing is to set up the so-called ambient e-learning, which also involves people who cause the trainee to generate greater interest for himself/herself and actual assessment of the results of e-learning. Each type of media has its strong and weak points. In order that blended learning can be stronger, each media should be considered as a possible option.

4.4. Will blended learning oust e-learning?

For the past couple of years people engaged in education management have become more pragmatic. They use technology-based medium mainly as an auxiliary tool. For instance, after a two-year study of blended learning in more than 300 companies, in 2008 Bersin demonstrated that it is ousting e-learning. The study showed that blended programmes are the greatest "hit" in education as at the lowest price one receives educational

service that simultaneously satisfies the issue of speed, scale, influence and is a point of support for e-learning, where appropriate, without stimulating it in fields where it is inappropriate.

Thus, **blended learning is on the "cutting edge" of trends in the sector of education**. It is a real evolution of e-learning in the integrated programme of different types of media and in the quest for ultimate way to provide an educational service.

It turned out that e-learning is not only unable, but it is also unnecessary, to oust traditional education despite the constantly dropping technology prices. Virtual universities only exist in cyberspace without a physical teaching building and faculties.

That vacuum is filled precisely by means of blended learning. Although it contains something familiar, it rather confirms the dictum that everything old is new again, and better. And it is better because it helps reduce the feeling of isolation of participants, increases the opportunity for adaptation to new conditions, participants can exchange opinions with a variety of people; there is a live interaction between teachers and students as well as among trainees themselves.

In conclusion, it should be noted that **for thirteen years the University of National and World Economy has come a long way in the field of distant education. The efforts of the management of the Center for Distance Education with the University of National and World Economy, of the lecturers and administrators participating in it should aim at improving and making fuller use of distant and especially of combined education at both Master's and Bachelor's education and qualification degrees.**

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