ADULT LEARNERS IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper attempts at identifying the main features that characterize distance higher education and adult education, respectively, in order to be able to establish to what extent adult learners can fit in distance higher education programs. The historical background of distance learning education, the factors that influence adult learners, and distance learning's key objectives, effects, issues, advantages, and disadvantages are to be briefly investigated in order to reach the purpose of this paper. Recent developments in Information Technology have led to a new approach to teaching and learning, especially as far as adult learning and distance learning are concerned. Thus, this study will also focus on the consequences of using technology for course design, delivery, and the perception of adult learners participating in distance learning.

Keywords: *distance learning, adult learner, higher education, information technology, interaction*

1. Introduction

Information technology has brought about change in many aspects of our lives: economically, socially and even educationally. Higher education has started to change in order to cope with new technologies, but this change has not been entirely driven by the computers era, since its beginnings can be traced quite a long time ago, in the mid-19th century with the University of London. At that time, the development of postal services made possible the foundation of distance learning that promoted the spread of higher education among the less "well-located" students. In modern times, more exactly in the 20th century, the creation of the Open University in the United Kingdom has led to the current expansion of this type of learning.

If, in the 1970s, most open universities were almost exclusively relying on radio and television broadcasts for much of its delivery, nowadays, the development of computers and the internet have made distance learning distribution easier and faster and have given rise to the "virtual university", the entire educational offerings of which are conducted online. Not only can students obtain bachelor degrees by means of this system, but they can also apply for and, in the end, graduate from master and doctoral programs. At global level, and in Romania, as well, the number of students enrolled in these programs increases every year, as the number of universities providing distance learning is on the rise.

Many of the students enrolled in distance learning programs in Romania are adults. Thus the general purpose of this paper is to establish if, at present, distance learning meets the requirements imposed by general adult learning standards. To be able to give a tentative answer to this question, one has to provide the theoretical frameworks for the two concepts to be used (distance learning and adult learning) as they are described in Romanian and international literature, and to briefly describe them from the point of view of the leading "actors" involved in this process, the tutor and the student.

2. Content

The concept of adult learning varies from country to country, as adulthood age is differently interpreted and agreed upon, mainly depending on cultural factors. In the *Pre-study on the role of higher education institutions as providers of continuous professional learning and adult education (2011)[2],* conducted by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture, many examples are given

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/higher_en.pdf

to support the idea that the concept of adult learner is provided various explanations in EU countries, depending on national educational systems. But, since the aim of this pre-study was to offer a review of the current volume of adult learning in higher education institutions and to raise a limited number of key questions in this area, the researchers had to define the term "adult learner" very precisely. Thus, in this pre-study "the term adult learner refers to all people aged 30 years or older." (European Commission, Reports and Studies, *The role of higher education institutions as providers of continuous professional learning and adult education*, 2011:4).

Age is not the only characteristic that has to be taken into account when referring to adult learning. According to Kasworm (2003), when approaching adult education, the following two aspects have to be considered as well: the status of maturity and developmental complexity (acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence) and the status of responsible and often-competing sets of adult roles (reflecting work, family, community, and university student commitments).

Knowles proposed a theory of adult learning, pedagogy for adults, called Androgogy (Knowles et al., 1998). There are six principles of Androgogy for adults. The first principle is the learner's need to know: "how learning will be conducted, what learning will occur, and why learning is important" (Knowles et al., 1998). Second, self-directed learning is the ability of taking control of the techniques and of the purposes of learning. Then, prior experience of the learner impacts learning in creating individual differences, providing rich resources, creating biases and providing adults' self-identity. The fourth principle is readiness to learn. Adults become ready to learn when their life situations create a need to learn. The fifth principle is orientation to learning. In general, adults prefer a problem solving orientation in learning. In particular, they can learn best when knowledge is presented in real-life context. Finally, the sixth principle is motivation to learn. Adults have high motivation to learn when the learner can gain the new knowledge to help them to solve important problems in their life.

Even if the standard vision regarding adult learners has been based on the unfounded stereotype that adults are less effective learners simply because they are adults (their learning problems being linked to loss of memory and lack of the necessary flexibility to adopt new perspectives), this theory has largely been rejected by research[3]. It has been demonstrated by research studies that adult students can make a valuable contribution in teaching and learning, and more specifically in class discussions. Academic staff often remark that adult students perform better than younger students and that they have a positive influence on the courses they read, in particular in tutorial contributions. They can also be more adept at examining and exploring their prior experience in order to make sense of new information and new situations, and at a „meaning" instead of a „surface" approach to studying[4].

One also has to establish what makes adults want to pursue higher education. Kasworm (2003) suggests that there might be three types of motivators: internal life developmental changes, external planning to create a different future life in their adult world, or a mixture of the two life-context motivators. So, adults may choose to enter university because of a divorce, children entering school, a recent job loss, or a denied job promotion due to the lack of a university degree, because they seek new life choices that will provide greater benefits and rewards or because of mixed motivators between the first and the second set enumerated.

Distance learning has gained ground in institutions of higher learning because of its flexibility and availability to learners and teachers, regardless of geographic location. The distance-learning

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[3] Kasworm, C., and Blowers, S. *Adult Undergraduate Students: Patterns of Learning Involvement*. Report to Office of Education Research and Improvement, Department of Education, Washington, D.C. Knoxville, Tenn.: College of Education, University of Tennessee, 1994.

[4] Richardson, J. T. E. and King, E. (1998) "Adult students in higher education: Burden or Boon?" The Journal of Higher Education, vol.69(1), pp. 65-88.

environment has a major contribution to make to the educational requirements of the 21st century by encouraging general acceptance of the concept of knowledge as a vital element in social development and economic growth. The authenticity, quality, and competitive standards of such programs should come from reputable institutions so that those in higher education can confidently say that it will eventually lead to economic growth.

Keeping pace with changes in technology and meeting the increasing demands of the knowledge-based economy will require a highly skilled and educated workforce capable of working collaboratively to find solutions to diverse economic, social, and environmental problems. The key to success is, in large part, continuing education, which means that distance learning, with its open access and opportunities for active collaboration in an egalitarian environment, will have an important role to play in meeting the challenges of the future (Stansfield et al., 2004).

Nowadays, labour markets demand knowledge and skills that necessitate regular updating. People have started to realize the importance of education and how convenient it has become to have access to distance learning and virtual universities that allow educational experiences to be tailored to the needs of individuals or groups. In other words, educational needs are becoming continuous throughout one's working life.[5]

Various definitions are given to distance learning in the literature. Mantyla and Gividen's definition (1997) tries to be as comprehensive as possible[6]: "Distance learning is a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources. While distance learning takes a wide variety of forms, all distance learning is characterized by: (a) separation of place and/or time between instructor and learner, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources; (b) interaction between the learner and the instructor, among learners and learning resources conducted through one and more media; use of electronic media is not necessarily required."[7] In Berg's opinion (2002), the main elements of distance learning are: (1) physical separation (complete or more than 50% reduced contact time) between teacher and learner; (2) administration by an educational organization; (3) frequent use of various media, including print, video, film, computer and audio; (4) communication between student and teacher, synchronous or asynchronous; (5) often an administrative focus on the nontraditional learner.

Since the term distance learning is often interchanged with distance education one should try to differentiate between the two. According to Steiner[8] (1995) "Distance Education is instructional delivery that does not constrain the student to be physically present in the same location as the instructor. (…) Distance Learning is the result of Distance Education."

The common institutional motives for the use of distance learning need also to be investigated. Ehrman[9] (1998) suggests that widening access, sharing a wider range of intellectual sources, as well as implementing new teaching techniques could be envisaged as possible reasons for distance learning. Given these motives, he sees the challenge as extending access and enriching

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[5] For example, the European Union, through its Education Commission, has initiated numerous programs concerning lifelong learning, intended not only for individual students and learners, but also for teachers, trainers and all others involved in education and training. Moreover, EU The Lifelong Learning Programme: education and training opportunities for all has a wide scope, funding projects at different levels of education and training, as it has four main sub-programmes: Comenius for schools, Erasmus for higher education, Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training, Grundtvig for adult education.

[6] This definition discards the growing importance of information technology in distance learning, probably because at that time (in 1997) this technology was relatively new and less widespread than nowadays.

[7] Matyla, K., Gividen, J.R. (1997). *Distance Learning. A Step-by-Step Guide for Trainers*. Alexandria: The American Society for Training and Development

[8] http://www.dlrn.org/library/dl/whatis.htlm

[9] Ehrmann, Stephen C., "Studying Teaching, Learning and Technology: a Tool Kit from the Flashlight Program," Active Learning IX (December 1998), pp. 38-42. After June 1999, the article will be available at http://www.cti.ac.uk/publ/actlea/al9.html. Since then the article has been expanded and rewritten; a recent draft is posted at <http://www.tltgroup.org/flashlight/ActiveLearningFL.html>.

resources, while at the same time controlling costs. O'Lawrence (2007) goes along the same view, considering that universities are implementing distance learning programs for 3 reasons: (a) the convergence of communication and computing technologies, (b) the need for information-age workers to acquire new skills without interrupting their working lives for extended periods of time, and (c) the need to reduce the cost of education.

In Istrate's view (2000) distance education may be a feasible alternative due to the flexibility of the roles both the learner and the teacher have to play and to the existence of the student-oriented curriculum (the particular needs of the students are in the center of the educational activity). Through this system, students have numerous opportunities to learn, as the spatial and temporal obstacles are removed, and their learning pace is attuned to their capabilities. Moreover, Istrate emphasizes that this type of education could encompass a large targeting population, because it does not require prospective students to give up on their professional activity (job). Therefore, distance learning is designed to ensure compatibility with the characteristics and needs of the adult learner. By maintaining their jobs while attending university, adult learners are able to continue to accumulate work experience while pursuing educational goals.

In distance learning students and teachers will find themselves playing different roles than is the norm in traditional education. The teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge but instead becomes a facilitator to support student learning, while the student actively participates in what and how knowledge is imparted. More than any other teaching method, distance learning requires a collaborative effort between student and teacher, unbounded by the traditional limits of time, space, and single-instructor effort. Distance learning is student-centered learning.

To summarize, as compared to traditional education, distance education stands out due to several advantages, such as:

• all the resources are ubiquitously available;

• the curriculum is more comprehensive, as it offers numerous possibilities for students to acquire high level knowledge from various domains;

• the number of students that can attend this type of education is considerably big, comprising those students that cannot attend traditional university courses; access to local, regional, national and international networks bring together students belonging to different social, cultural and economic backgrounds;

• learning is experienced at student's own pace and personal style, as courses can be studied or attended gradually and repeatedly; computer software are flexible, the student being able to maximize the way in which information is transmitted, learned and, finally, assimilated individually;

• the synchronous and asynchronous interaction between the teacher and the student can complement one another;

• interactive technology, easily allowing total feedback, as well as formative or summative, qualitative or quantitative assessment.

Nevertheless, there are also disadvantages, which are generally related to distance education implementation:

• distance education system development means high costs to cover expenses related to hardware and software technology, transmitting network information, maintaining equipment, producing the necessary materials;

• the difficulty to make considerable and constant efforts on the part of the students, academic staff, technical intermediaries and administrative staff;

• it is necessary for both educators and students to have good written communication skills, as well as computer skills (one of their responsibilities might be that of performing maintenance activities on their personal computer);

- the high degree of motivation that students need in order to attend and graduate from distance education (research concluded that distance education students are more prone to become "quitters", as interrelations are impersonal);
- the relatively "dehumanization" of the courses (this can be partially removed only by developing adequate interaction strategies and by focusing on the student, not on the system)[10].

Having emphasized the strengths and weaknesses of distance education, one should now be able to perform the analysis proposed at the beginning of this paper. As far as the motivation of the adult learner is concerned, this is to a great extent intrinsic, and distance education, mainly due to lack of human interaction, may cause certain problems that could be overcome only if the courses offered immediate and tangible value to the learners. Learner orientation is another aspect of adult learning which should be taken into consideration in contrast with distance learning, as adult learners learn only what they feel they need to learn. The solution might be to explicitly state learning goals as a key component in the design of distance courses; tutors and course developers need to illustrate the real-world applicability of the material and to provide adult learners with some ability to control their own learning environment.

When learning something new, most adults need to see how it fits in with (or is different from) what they already know. Distance educators should devise ways to incorporate the learners' previous experiences into new material and build in ways for learners to share their ideas and experiences with one another. As for orientation to learning, adults need immediate feedback concerning their progress. Thus, tutors and course developers in distance education should develop strategies to help adult learners assess their own progress, so they can reassure themselves they are going in the right direction.

One more important aspect that needs to be considered when analyzing the extent to which distance education is adequate for adult learners is the dispositional barrier[11]. As compared to children or teenagers, adults are much less open to the trial-and-error approach. Many adult learners will resist trying something new if it involves the risk of making an error and feeling foolish as a result. This is especially true if the person has had problems with learning in the past, or difficulties with the subject area being covered. Therefore, because adults try to avoid failure as much as possible, distance education materials could assist them in overcome this "fear", by providing simple techniques, such as making the first exercises or tests so easy that practically anyone can be successful at them. In addition, designers and developers must also be aware that providing distance learning over the Internet incorporates a whole new area of risk for many learners. The technology itself is complicated for many people, and course providers must ensure that sufficient support is available for students as they take on the challenge of learning in this new environment.

Personal learning style is also a key issue measuring the degree of adequateness of distance education for adult learning. By the time people reach adulthood, they have settled into a learning style that has worked well for them in the past. One person may prefer reading, while another does best by trying out a practical exercise, for example. They may use a global or analytic style of processing information, and they may prefer to work cooperatively or independently. Some students like to have material presented in a step-by-step, cumulative, sequential pattern that builds toward a general concept. Others learn best when they are given the concept first and then details. One possible solution might be the inclusion of global and analytical approaches in developing learning modules. Distance education course designers should provide opportunities, suggestions, and resources for independent learning and make use of techniques such as (online) role playing, simulations, case-studies. Students should be given guidance to make them aware of their own

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[10] Istrate, Olimpius, *Educaţia la distanţă. Proiectarea materialelor*, Botoşani: Editura Agata, p.15-16
[11] MacKeracher, D., Suart, T., & Potter, J. (2006, May). "State of the field report: Barriers to participation in adult learning". Retrieved January 26, 2012, from the National Adult Literacy Database Library Web site: http://www.nald.ca/library/research/sotfr/barriers/cover.htm

learning styles, and, moreover, tutors should offer them ideas for ways to adapt materials to suit their own learning styles

The adaptation of distance learning to successfully meet the adult learner's needs is a process that requires a large amount of effort, especially in point of methodology. Encompassing latest research findings from various domains such as IT, education sciences and psychology in devising courses could also be beneficial for younger adults attending distance education.

3. Conclusions

The transformation of the world economy over the past several decades has put a premium on an educated workforce. The continuous development in information technology due to its enormous resourcefulness and flexibility, as well as its increasing accessibility due to decreasing costs make higher education institutions envisage distance learning as one possible alternative for the future in order to meet this fast growing demand. Adult learners need distance learning. The flexibility and convenience of distance education makes it particularly attractive to adult learners, who are constantly looking for ways to upgrade and expand their skills in an effort to improve or protect their economic position.

The purpose of this paper has not been that of exhausting the aspects to be considered when discussing distance learning as one possibility for adult learners who want to pursue higher education. To a certain extent, I have attempted to pinpoint to the specificity of adult learning and how distance learning can be tailored to meet adult learners' needs. The theoretical framework provided in this paper will hopefully serve as a starting point for a future empirical research that will analyze if the Romanian distance higher education system meets the needs of the Romanian adult learners.

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