AN ASSESSMENT OF DISTANCE LEARNING EDUCATION PLATFORM OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITY

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Abstract*: Distance learning in Romania is organized by combining different forms of distance interaction and communication (designed and developed using an e-learning predefined platform) but also face-to-face meetings and tutorial sessions. Danubius University implemented in 2009 such a system based on Sakai e-Learning platform. To evaluate the quality and opportunity level regarding the usage of the e-learning platform and the specific methods and tools, the distance learning department developed a quiz for the students. The content of this questionnaire, based on which the performance assessment is made, approach the flexibility in offering the e-learning support, the communication possibilities and the time saving. All the University's students enrolled in distance learning programs were subjects no matter their degree level or domain. The results of this assessment are managerial tools and decision instruments for future development of the distance learning methods adopted by the university but also for new modules added to the e-learning platform.*
Keywords*: distance learning, Sakai, e-learning platform*
JEL Classification*: D83*

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has experienced lately an impressive evolution, becoming more and more a flexible type of educational category "available to anyone at anytime and at any place" (Subic, A& Maconachie, 2004); more, this system turns into one of the most important global business, following the development of another element, that of internationalization of the educational process. Also, techniques and methodologies providing distance learning services have developed lately, now existing various LMS platforms in open or paid versions (Subic, A&Maconachie, D., 2004). In addition, an increasingly number of students choose to work during their studies, thereby determining them to choose more flexible version of distance learning than on the conventional form, specific to standard education. Among the advantages of distance learning can also find the flexibility, timesaving orienting and learning resources in multiple environments.

In this sense, the greatest challenge that universities encounter during their effort to provide distance education is to use approaches and technologies particularly suited to educational context, which is attractive to students and to become effective. Thus, the quality of distance learning programs offered by universities is an important factor in attracting students

from other regions/countries and, of course, in the consistent involvement of these students in learning through the computer.

DISTANCE LEARNING: STATE OF THE ART

Starting with 2008-2011, distance education knows a new stage concretized in MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), which is a form of providing university education to anyone with access to a computer connected to the Internet (Kurzman, P, 2013). Education providers offering online courses to students (EdX, Coursera, Udacity, etc.) in partnership with educational institutions worldwide are in continuous transformation, adaptation and expansion, and the number of courses they provides follow the same trend. Thus, if in 2013 EdX offered 94 courses from 29 institutions, Coursera offered 325 courses and Udacity offered 26 courses, in January 2016 EdX provide 820 courses, Coursera 1580 courses, while Udacity exceeded 120 courses, according to some sources.

The alternatives to this system began to materialize, so, in 2012 was launched DOCC (Distributed Open Collaborative Courses) which allows to change the theme and courses organization based on the students intervention and, then SPOC (Self-Paced Online Course), which enhance students flexibility in terms of the learning start, the rhythmicity of the study, etc. In Romania, distance learning system is restricted by certain regulations governing at the national level the organization of this kind university education. So, even if distance learning is based on electronic means of communication, enabling communication with anyone, anyhow, anywhere, some activities remain closely linked to the presence of students in the university campus. Flexible learning technologies used in distance learning programs can be different, but it matters a lot the manner in which they are used to facilitate communication and interacting with the student for it to be able to acquire specific skills and concepts appropriate to the graduated program. A list of the references in alphabetical order should be given at the end of the paper using Times New Roman, 10 pts., normal, alignment justify, upper and lower case.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Danubius University of Galati chose Sakai platform (https://sakaiproject.org/about) as the learning management system and it seems to be the only university in Romania using this system, although the Sakai community includes over 360 educational institutions worldwide, including Stanford University, Université de Poitiers, Columbia University, Bradley University, Duke University, University of Notre Dame, The University of North Carolina, etc.

Sakai platform ("Danubius Online") offers to university students several types of instruments/facilities:
- Tools to support learning through individual study and a flexible tutorial;
- Access to educational resources
- Tools for testing the acquired knowledge;
- The possibility of transmission the projects during the semester to the teachers
- The possibility to discover grades obtained from ongoing evaluation or final evaluation;
- Tools for bidirectional communication (with teachers or peers year) such as: chat, messaging, and forums

- Notification system directly via email account
- The possibility of participating in videoconferences
- Providing information on tutorial activities schedule, exam scheduling, etc.

Also Danubius Online supports teachers, researchers and administrative staff, offering them, among other things:
- The opportunity to open and develop sites;
- Tools for project management, resources distribution, tactical or strategic planning activities, and collaborative activities development;
- Tools for organizing teaching and research

To assess the way in which students appreciate the Sakai platform used by Danubius University we have created a questionnaire structured on three evaluation areas of the e-learning platform performance, namely: flexibility, communication and efficient organization. The collected data were analyzed and the results have led to expressing our conclusions.

According to the data, 41.6% of students who participated in the survey are enrolled in the Faculty of Law, 40.8% in the Faculty of Economics and 17.6% are enrolled the Faculty of Communications and International Relations. Regarding academic year, we find that 45% of respondents are in the first year, 29% are in the second year, 19.7% belong to the third year, and for the fourth year (only for the Faculty of Law) are 6.3% of students. Regarding the evaluation of flexibility generated by the use of the platform, the questionnaire contained three questions.

For the first question students had to answer if it considers that using the e-learning platform leads to improving the way in which they work with teachers. Student responses are leading to the conclusion that they estimate as positive the learning environment based on Sakai tools, since 93.2% of respondents appreciate this in very great extent or largely according to the figure below.

Figure 1 Appreciation of the learning environment based on Sakai
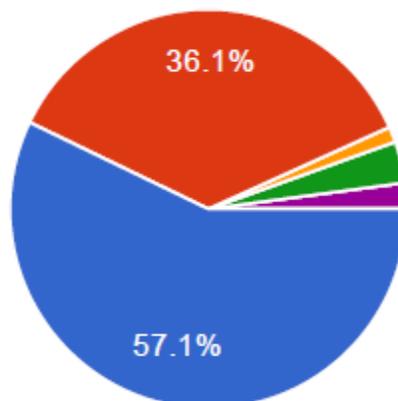
Very good 57.1%; Good 36.1%; No answer 1.3%; Satisfactory 3.4%; Unsatisfactory 5 2.1%

Also, regarding the flexibility of the tutorial support that e-learning platform allows you, 89.5% of respondents believe that students can even submit self-evaluation tests during the semester.

Figure 2 Flexible tutorial Support
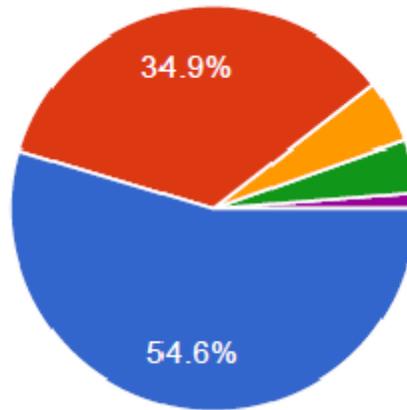
Very good 54.6%; Good 34.9%; No answer 5%; Satisfactory 4.2%; Unsatisfactory 1.3%

Another aspect analyzed refers to how the Sakai platform can provide two-way communication in distance learning programs between students or between students and teachers, so, according to the questionnaire, 86.55% of participants responded that students can communicate more easily with tools provided by e-learning platform.
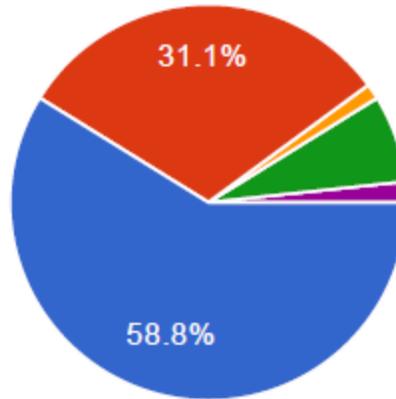
Figure 3 Facilitating two-way communication
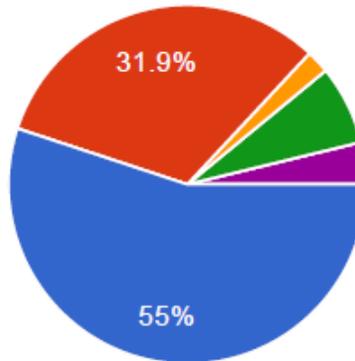
Very good 55%; Good 31.9%; No answer 2.1%; Satisfactory 7.1%; Unsatisfactory 3.8%

And 98.9% of the students receive information about their meetings with professors through the e-learning platform.
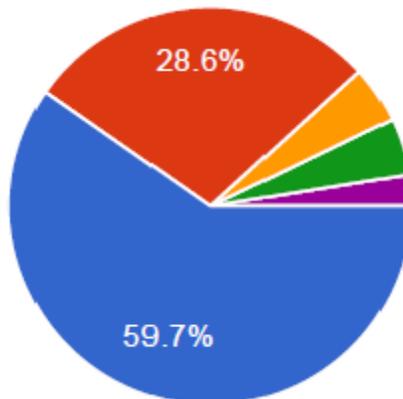
Figure 4 Getting useful informations

Very good 58.8%; Good 31.1%; No answer 1.3%; Satisfactory 7.1%; Unsatisfactory 1.7%

Also, using the e-learning platform, 88.3% of respondents feel they can submit questions at any time to the teacher.

Figure 5 Continuous interactions between student and professor

Very good 59.7%; Good 28.6%; No answer 4.6%; Satisfactory 4.6%; Unsatisfactory 2.5%

From the perspective of more efficient activities management and saving time, we see that saving time is one of the most important factors in choosing a distance learning program. Thus, 93.7% of students responded that the e-learning platform is a single point of access to the information required in the learning process.

Figure 6 Time management and time saving
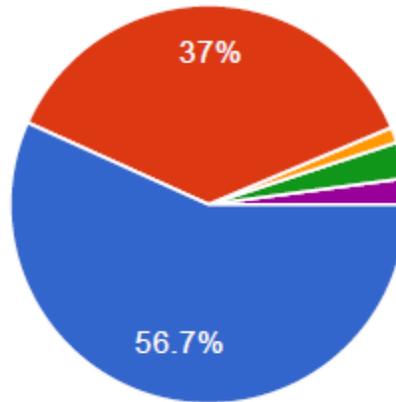
Very good 56.7%; Good 37%; No answer 1.3%; Satisfactory 2.9%; Unsatisfactory 2.1%

While 97.1 of students believe that the use of the platform enables better management of time, regardless of the location. Thus, distance learning, mediated by the e-learning platform allows the student to save time (by decreasing/eliminating distances to/from the university, obtaining the necessary information faster, etc.).

Figure 7 Time management
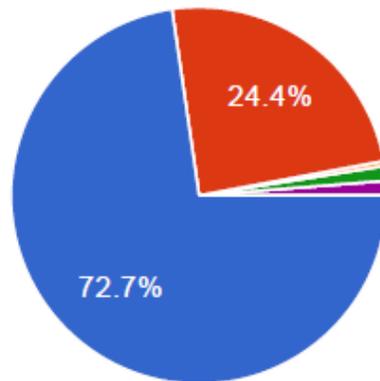
Very good 72.7%; Good 24.4%; No answer 0.4%; Satisfactory 1.3%; Unsatisfactory 1.3%

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