

MOTIVATION FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Beginning with the 1980's the new information, communication and computer based technologies stimulated the development of the distance education. In Romania the universities adapted rapidly to this type of learning that became an important financing source for most of them. In this article we approach the causes of attraction for the distance education. For this purpose we use an investigation we did on a group of students at Distance Education including interviews regarding their reasons for choosing this type of learning.

Key words: *Distance Education, Romanian Universities, Students' Perceptions, Labor Market, Knowledge.*

Introduction

The Lisbon Strategy ambitious aim to make the European Union "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world" implies a rethinking of the European education system, giving it more flexibility and efficiency. Among the ways to reach this objective it is the distance education development.

It is accepted the beginning of distance education or distance learning was in 1728, when a teacher named Caleb Philips made an announcement in Boston Gazette that he offered lessons to be sent weekly for his potential students. This kind of education was stimulated by the development of the postal service in the 19th century. In the twentieth century, new communication techniques were used in distance learning. Beginning with 1980s, the development of Internet services and CD-ROM technologies facilitated the distance learning programs proliferation.

In Romania, the distance learning experienced a significant development in the last decade. It proved to be much more efficient, with lower costs and comparable fees, than the classical type of education. Romanian universities, many of them with financial difficulties, fructified this opportunity offering study programs for distance learning. These programs would become, probably, more important beginning with 2008, when it is expected, because of the demographic processes from the early 1990s, a significant decrease in the number of students from the classical type of education. In these circumstances, the Romanian universities offer for distance learning has to become more attractive for the potential students.

The distance learning in Romania was approached in specialized literature especially from the reform education perspective. In this paper we study the main reasons for choosing the distance education. For this purpose we made an own investigation on a sample of distance learning students from the University "Dunărea de Jos" Galați. Although the results can't be generalized, the perceptions expressed by these students could be considered indices of the motivation for distance education.

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Literature Review

In the specialized literature, distance learning is approached from different perspectives: the changes induced by new technologies, the particularities of teaching, the sociological aspects a.s.o.

Moore (1987) analyzed the effects of the new information, communication and computer based technologies to distance learning in the United States. These inventions determined significant changes in how distance education is designed, delivered and administrated. They also contributed to a new perception of distance learning¹. Holmberg (1991) revealed the students' perceptions to these new technologies².

Ross (1998) studied the main techniques used in distance learning: E lectures, Ask-an-Expert, Mentorship, Tutor Support, Access to Network Resources, Informal Peer Interaction, Structured Group Activity, and Mutual help, stressing that each of them require from teachers ability in communication³. The special efforts that have to be made in teaching in the distance education systems were also revealed by Pereira and Prohmann (1999)⁴.

Some papers approached distance learning from a sociological perspective. They were concerned about the aspects such as repartition on age, gender, location, life roles, and ethnic background a.s.o. Holmberg (1995) found out that, in general, in the USA universities, distance learning students are significant older than the classical type of education students⁵. Several studies indicated the gender distribution of distance learning students is different from country to country, more likely because of the cultural differences⁶. *Kelsey and D'souza (2008)* studied how the perceptions of students about distance learning determined the impact of interaction on the efficacy of distance learning⁷.

Georgescu (1999) stressed the necessity of the Romanian education system reform that implies changes in the distance learning⁸. Also Marga (2000) advocated for new approaches over the distance education⁹.

Theoretical Background

The data used in this paper were provided by an own investigation realized in the period October 2007 – March 2008. We used a sample of 94 distance learning students from the Faculty of Economics – University “Dunarea de Jos”, Galati. In this sample we included students at different specializations and in different years of study.

The investigation implied two stages. First, the data were collected by group interviews, a technique that allowed us to detect the collective mood. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and each group had between 8 and 12 students. Second, the students were questioned. We assured to each of them the protection of anonymity.

In our investigation we approached two aspects:

- the students' expectations after graduation;
- the utility of the knowledge supplied by the education process.

Student Expectations after Graduation

In our investigation we tried to find out what distance learning students expect after graduation. It resulted the age and the present jobs had significant influences over the students' attitude (table 1).

Table 1 - Distribution of students by age and the present job

Age Present job	Under 25 years	Between 25 and 35 years	Between 35 and 45 years	Over 45 years	Total
Company	-	-	11	3	14
SMEs	2	23	32	-	57
Public Institution	-	-	7	8	15
Entrepreneur	-	-	3	-	3
Unemployed	5	-	-	-	5
Total	7	23	53	11	94

All eleven students older than 45 years chose the university studies not necessary because they wanted to be promoted but because they wanted their present jobs from companies or from public institutions to be safe. They explained they were worried because of the universities graduates increase that could threaten their jobs. The eleven companies' employees with the age between 35 and 45 years hope, after becoming economists, to be promoted. From the seven public institutions' employees with the age between 35 and 45 years, four wish, after the graduation, to obtain a well paid job to a company, while the other three hope to be promoted. From the 57 students employed by small and medium enterprises (SMEs), 51 wish, after graduation, to be employed by companies. The rest of six students, older than 35 years, chose the university studies mainly because they wanted their present jobs to be safe. From the distance learning the three students who are entrepreneurs hope to achieve the knowledge necessary to run better their business. After graduation the five students who are unemployed hope to achieve jobs as economist to any kind of employer.

The Utility of the Knowledge Supplied By the Education Process

In our investigation we asked students to characterize the importance they perceived for the knowledge supplied by the education process. Many of them complained that in university they receive too much theoretical knowledge and too little practical one. There also resulted major differences in perceptions between the students with jobs similar to the profession of economist (accountants, salesmen, cashiers a.s.o.), and the other students (table 2).

Table 2 - Students' perceptions on the utility of the knowledge supplied by the education process

Degree of importance Categories of students	Students with jobs similar to the profession of economist	Other students	Total
Very big importance	1	3	4
Big importance	4	16	20
Medium importance	26	11	37
Little importance	19	2	21
Very little importance	12	-	12
Total	62	32	94

A half of the students with jobs similar to the profession of economist assigned a little or very little importance to the knowledge offered by the distance learning. From the group

interviews the results show these students consider the experience in their jobs offered enough practical knowledge. Instead, more than a half from the other students assigned a big or very big importance to the knowledge offered by the distance learning.

Table 3 – Descriptive statistics for the importance of the practical knowledge supplied by the faculties perceived by the students

Indicator \ Category	Students with jobs similar to the profession of economist	Other students
Mean	2.40	3.63
Standard Error	0.12	0.13
Median	2.50	4.00
Mode	3.00	4.00
Standard Deviation	0.93	0.75
Sample Variance	0.87	0.56
Kurtosis	0.23	0.04
Skewness	0.10	0.21
Range	4.00	3.00
Minimum	1.00	2.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00
Sum	149.00	116.00
Count	62.00	32.00
Largest (1)	5.00	5.00
Smallest (1)	1.00	2.00
Confidence Level (95.0%)	0.24	0.27

We transpose their answers on a rating scale from 1 to 5 (1 for very little importance, 5 for very big importance) in order to facilitate comparison between the two categories of students. The descriptive statistics that resulted confirmed the significant differences (table 3).

Conclusions

In this paper we approached the motivation for distance learning. For this purpose we realized an own investigation among distance learning students from the University “Dunarea de Jos” Galati. We found out that the reasons they chose the university studies depend on the age and on the present jobs.

We also found out that the utility they perceived for the knowledge supplied by the education process is significant lower for the students with jobs similar to the profession of economist than for the other students. The main reason would be the first consider themselves generally ready for the profession of economist and they want only the diplomas to offer this right.

Although the sample we used was too small for generalization, the results of the investigation may be useful in order to understand the students’ attitude towards the distance learning education. These results may be also useful for the elaboration of the universities policies of calling candidates for this type of education. However, other researches would be desirable, in which to be approached the distance learning situation from other universities.

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