

## **Blended Learning – A Path towards Modernizing Higher Economic Education?**

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**Abstract.** *The recent history of education emphasizes that the new generations seem to be increasingly more connected to modern means of communication and increasingly less willing to adopt classical styles of learning. Many of those concerned about the future of education in general and the higher education in particular are beginning to wonder whether the whole system should be reconfigured. In this context, with the amid criticism published regarding online learning, in the early 2000s started to be used in universities and in specialized journals the concept of blended learning. Thus, until 2004, for the US, it appears that 45.9% of universities already had developed offers including blended-learning courses (Allen, Seaman and Garrett, 2007). Starting from the reality of the 2000s and the increased interest of young people to use new techniques and technologies, some optimists predicted that blended-learning will become the "new traditional model" (Ross and Gage, 2006) or the so-called "new normality" (Norberg et al., 2011). However, among the scientists there are still many controversies concerning the long-term effects of introducing blended-learning in educational institutions. Based on these considerations, this paper aims to present the pros and cons of introducing specific elements of blended-learning in higher economic education in Romania.*

**Keywords:** blended learning, higher education, economy.

**JEL Classification:** A20, I23.

### 1. Blended Learning: a middle path?

In the current circumstances, it becomes increasingly obvious that education and training of high quality are essential for economies seeking value chain moving beyond the simple production processes and products. The challenges that confront today's economy require countries to have the capacity to benefit from well-educated workforce able to adapt quickly to the changing economic environment and to the changes in the production systems. Today's world requires excellent trained people, able to provide practical solutions for any type of Economic Affairs (Pociovălișteanu and Badea, 2011). In this permanent game of economic variables intertwined with the social and political ones, increasingly frequent occur on everyone's lips questions such as: Is it better to still use only classical forms of education? Will we need to adapt the education system to global trends? Is it necessary to introduce new techniques and technologies in teaching / learning and if so, how much?

The Internet has changed the way people use to inform, interact, communicate and learn in the XXI century. Sharing of information and knowledge is currently being performed increasingly more through the Internet and nowadays education systems begin to take a different form. In this new context, educational systems of countries with developed economies seem to regroup and quickly adapt to the general trend. Since 2000, in the developed economies begin to be widely used the concept of blended-learning (Guzer and Caner, 2014).

A fairly long time it has been discussed in the literature about distance learning, with all its advantages and disadvantages. Out with the advancing technology, education was passed to a new stage. The spread of the Internet has brought with it a new terminology - "online learning", "e-learning" or "web-based learning" and new disputes concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the methods and traditional means of teaching and learning versus the new ones based on the advance of technology, which virtually changed the face of nowadays education. In this context, in the 2000s the concept of blended-learning arose as a middle path through which can be considered the benefits of both classic and modern education (Guzer and Caner 2014).

Over time, some individuals confused the concept of blended-learning with the one of e-learning. Thus it is necessary to correctly define each one. Specialists define e-learning as "that kind of electronic assisted instruction, which can be done using a computer and the Internet" (Fei et al., 2014). At the same time it is needed to specify that e-learning involves the use of a wide range of technologies, from computer, desktop, laptop to mobile devices, communication electronics, video conferencing, virtual learning environments and a wide range of software (JISC, 2004). Basically, we may discuss a series of attributes of e-learning, which include (Rana et al., 2014):

- Many-to-many communication or group communication;
- Independence concerning the space (access to information through the Internet and various devices almost anywhere);
- Independence concerning the time;
- Multi-media access;
- High flexibility;
- Potential mediation of sent / received messages.

E-learning has been adopted in many universities in the past 20 years. However, towards the essential features of e-learning there have been developed different attitudes among both the beneficiaries and representatives of universities. Thus, in terms of gender, it was found that female students are more interested in e-learning than male students, because they have not unrealistic expectations regarding the use of technology (Keller and Cernerud, 2002). J. Reisslein, P. Seeling and M. Reisslein (2005) found that students have a positive attitude towards teaching and learning online, but they feel the need of a direct interaction with their professors, which is lacking in the e-learning environment (Reisslein et al., 2005). However, authors like K. O'Neill, G. Singh and J. O'Donoghue (2004) have shown in the performed studies that the technology is useful and can enhance the learning process, but can never successfully replace a professor (O'Neill et al., 2004). Therefore, in the scientific literature and in the pedagogical practice, the idea of a form of mixed-learning began to take shape, i.e. a combination of traditional face to face lectures and learning via the web, a combination that during the time began to be finalized as blended-learning (Concannon et al., 2005). Specialists consider that this form offers a number of advantages for both students and professors, as it provides a lot of flexibility, responsiveness, may exceed the limits of time and space and may always be subject to innovation through the performance of ICT (Hua et al., 2013). However, so far there is no unanimously accepted definition for the blended-learning concept. One of the simplest definitions assumes that the blended-learning represents a mix of classical methods of teaching in the classroom with activities conducted via computer, thus combining technology with standard pedagogical principles (El-Mowafy et al., 2013). One of the difficulties in defining this concept starts exactly from this mix, raising the question of how much we should be focused on traditional teaching methods and how much on the online area. J. Poon shows that when talking about blended-learning, one must keep in mind both the numerous advantages and the challenges that this new concept brings. Thus, among the advantages J. Poon enumerates:

- High flexibility both for teaching staff and for students;
- High autonomy;
- Developing the necessary skills for research and reflection;
- Low school dropout rate;
- Low organizational costs;
- Reduced costs concerning the learning materials (Poon, 2013).

Beyond the advantages J. Poon identifies a number of challenges occurring with the implementation of blended-learning at various universities, such as:

- Unrealistic expectations from students;
- Technical problems for the institutions or students;
- Adjustment difficulties in the case of the teaching staff concerning the new techniques and technologies;
- The time needed to be devoted to this type of courses;
- Potential penetration of such courses in other areas (Poon, 2013).

As noted, like any other novelty, blended-learning requires a careful consideration concerning a number of issues related to the opportunity of its mass expansion. Unfortunately, until now, studies of blended-learning are relatively few in number and impact. The fact is that studies on the factors that prevent the adoption of blended-learning at the university level are not numerous. Among those who have studied the factors that stand in the way of extending blended-learning at the scale, one may find:

- M. Humbert, who analyzing the responses from representatives of 37 faculties in France, concluded that in the way for the adoption of blended-learning at a large scale in universities one may find factors such as: the concern about the decline in the quality of interaction with the students, the lack of time to prepare the content and the online activities, and the difficulty to deal with the online interaction (Humbert, 2007).
- E. Oh and S. Park, which analyzing the responses from representatives of 133 faculties in Korea, found some barriers such as: the difficulty of understanding and learning about the characteristics of new technologies, the lack of motivation and the lack of financial support (Oh and Park, 2009).
- T.A. Beggs, who concluded after interviewing 348 academics that the greatest impediments are lack of time and lack of equipment of those involved in teaching (Beggs, 2000).

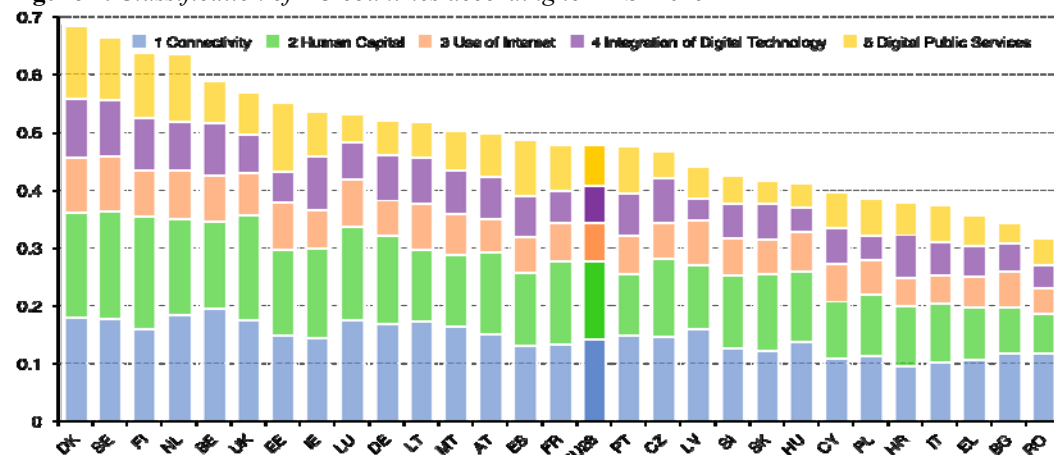
However, it appears that students perceive differently the concept of blended learning. In a study conducted by H.J. So and T.A. Brush for a total of 48 graduates, it was found that graduates said they were generally satisfied with the courses thought in the blended-learning style, and were also satisfied with the interaction and the structure of courses. However, the 48 graduates indicated as unsatisfactory elements the lack of immediate feedback and synchronicity (So and Brush, 2008). A more comprehensive study conducted by López-Pérez et al. (2011) on the perceptions of 1431 students who participated in blended-learning activities has shown a general contentment, highlighting the fact that the activities of blended-learning have provided a higher rate of promotion of examinations and a reduced dropout rate (López-Pérez et al., 2011).

It is therefore apparent that the education in the classical form begins to change its appearance. Some experts have gone much further and dared to predict the end of the traditional university, considering the online and blended-learning academic programs a response to the challenges faced by many countries: "Universities will not survive ... Higher education is in deep crisis. Already, we began to offer several lectures outside the physical space of the campus, making use of the existence of satellites and video means at a fraction of the cost associated with the traditional education. Thus the concept of campus in the physical space will have to be rethought. Buildings today associated with the idea of campus will prove useless for learning in the future" (Drucker, 1997). It remains however to be seen whether the predictions are correct. The fact is that in our country, the number of universities that have identified the trend is quite low. However, timid steps have been taken to align with Western trends.

## 2. Blended-learning in the Romanian context

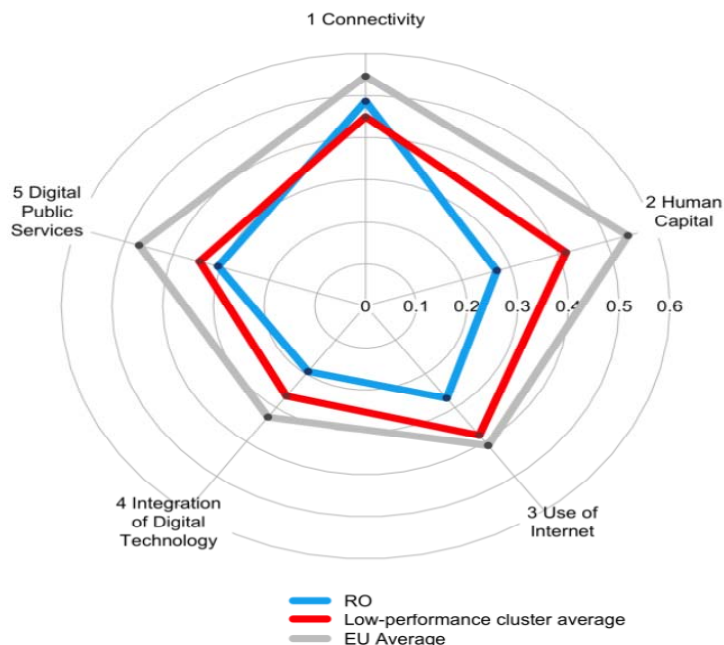
Our country "inherited" from the communist regime an educational system with high standards, with massive participation and a greater focus on science and technology; this system, unfortunately, was also characterized by a serious lack of flexibility (SAR 2007). Unfortunately, over time, the Romanian higher education system remained fairly far behind, especially in terms of adaptation to trends from the Western world. Romania has made significant efforts to reduce disparities, focusing on the use of modern learning technologies. However, it seems that our country does not occupy any leading places in the international rankings. Thus, at digital economy and society Index (DESI), our country ranks 28th out of 28 countries analyzed, as shown in Figure 1. This index is a composite one, developed by European Commission (DG CNECT) "to assess the EU country's progress towards an economy and a digital society", highlighting five dimensions: connectivity, human capital, use of internet, integration of digital technology and digital public services (European Commission, 2015).

**Figure 1.** Classification of EU countries according to DESI 2015



**Source:** European Commission (2015), Digital Agenda Scoreboard, <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/digital-agenda-scoreboard>

Our country is placed at the end of the mentioned classification, as a result of the fact that Romania needs to improve significantly the five considered dimensions, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** DESI 2015 for Romania

**Source:** European Commission (2015), Digital Agenda Scoreboard, <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/digital-agenda-scoreboard>

For the category „connectivity”, Romania ranks better, placing in the 20<sup>th</sup> position among the EU countries. However, 10% in households in Romania are not connected to the fixed broadband network and nearly half of households do not have subscriptions to landline broadband, as following the fact that subscription price is quite high, Romania ranking 7<sup>th</sup> in the EU at this point. A person who wishes to subscribe to the broadband Internet should spend on average 1.8% of its gross income, which is more than the EU average of 1.35% (European Commission, 2015).

In addition, it is noteworthy that 39% of Romanian have never used the internet (compared to the EU average of 18%), which means that more than a third of the population cannot benefit from the possibilities offered by the Internet, nor can contribute to the digital economy. So we live in a country whose citizens need to improve their digital skills, at the present only 20% of Romanian having them. According to the "Digital Agenda Scoreboard", although Romanian universities provide some of the best educated ICT graduates, Romania has the lowest percentage of ICT specialists in the labor force in all EU countries (1.3%) (European Commission, 2015).

Based on these considerations, the question of blended-learning in higher education should be viewed with great care as it may be one of the best ways to use in order to raise the aforementioned rankings. Some efforts in this direction have already been made, but they are only timid attempts. Some universities have started serious projects in this regard, such as the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. In the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, it operates several projects that make use of the specific

elements of blended-learning. One of these is *POSDRU/161/2.1/G/138552 "Internship for tomorrow's technology"*, with a component of simulated enterprises, within which were involved 51 students of the MA program in Business Communication.

In this project there were used both traditional teaching and learning methods and an online platform, which allowed students to simulate for a period of 6 months various processes that are specific to an enterprise. Simulated enterprise is extremely important for the development of master students' entrepreneurial skills by simulating processes and activities specific to a real enterprise, from internal ones to reaching to relations developed with other firms or organizations. Master students were divided into two teams, who worked in two enterprises with different business objects – the first one in the area of production and sale of clothing and the second one in the domain of organization of events. At the end of the six months the 51 master students were interviewed in order to observe how the whole project has been perceived.

Among the addressed questions, there have been used some which are specific targeted to the blended learning tools. The first question on the importance of direct contact with an academic able to supervise the processes carried out on the online platform, 98.03% said that it is essential, while only 1.97% said they may miss the presence of a professor, this showing a preference for a direct contact with a teaching staff and the need for feedback in teaching and learning process. Furthermore, master students indicated that it is highly important to communicate with a professor, starting from the active listening component (Hristache et al., 2015) and reaching the transmission mode of information. Regarding the pleasure of using the computer for homework in the context of simulated enterprises, 82.35% of the students answered affirmative, while 17.65% said they prefer the traditional methods. However, to the next question - "Do you consider ICT an important aspect of everyday life?" - 98.03% of the students said "yes" and only 1.97% responded negatively. When asked whether they would like future projects that involve only specific forms of e-learning, the unanimity response was negative, thus indicating that they would like a combination of traditional methods of teaching and using virtual platforms, demonstrating the preference for the mixed forms of learning. Overall, master students were satisfied with the specific elements of blended-learning, proving to be willing to use them in the various courses and seminars.

It starts therefore to be increasingly visible the need to adapt to the trend in the case of the universities, starting with the acquisition of appropriate software items, with serious implications for pedagogical tools and methods, to the effective organization of the premises. The information and communication revolution has profound implication on how universities are providing services, implying additional charges for creating the basic infrastructure (Badea, 2013). In the US, for example, the new universities are designed and built without the existence of a building for the library because all students know how to use computers in order to access digital libraries and databases (Salmi, 2001).

It is also known that educational institutions need the ability to quickly react by setting up new programs, reconfiguring of existing ones and eliminating outdated programs without being hampered by laws and bureaucratic obstacles. Unfortunately, in our country, the

administrative procedures are rigid when it comes to changes in the structure of academic programs or in the manner of organizing them (Badea, 2013).

### 3. Instead of conclusions

Currently, many voices begin to argue that traditional universities hegemony staggers: "... Many universities may disappear or may change, which may be a result of the ICT revolution. When asked what the bulb represents for the candle industry, Thomas Edison replied: << We will make the electricity so cheap, so that only the rich persons will burn candles >>". Thus, we are entering an era, in which most colleges and universities must decide whether to change a bit (and thus remain the "academic industry of candles") or more (and thus launches in "academia business of electricity") (Langenberg, 1998).

Based on the current situation of the Romanian education system, it is obvious that we are facing a phenomenon, which is similar to a hurricane generated by the online environment, requiring in this case the establishment of a connection as strong as possible between pedagogy, technology and the needs of the learner. Thus, the rising demand for blended-learning and online education services can bring real opportunities for innovation in the national education system.

Therefore, we consider appropriate the recommendation to the universities, whether public or private, to explore, implement and expand programs for blended-learning and also to increase the number of those to whom they are available, in order to respond to the needs generated by the economy.

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