DISTANCE EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract: The article deals with distance education and e-learning. The support for the development of distance education and e-learning is still a major priority for the European Commission. The development of distance education is also supported financially by the EU. Not only education programmes are supported financially, but also research projects dealing with this issue.

The article maps out the current situation in distance education developments and opportunities of distance learning in adult education in various European countries.

Distance education in various European countries is at different levels of development. We can also notice various implementation models of distance learning in European countries and different levels of government involvement in the development of distance education.

Key words: e-learning, distance education, lifelong learning, foreign experience, open distance learning

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the emphasis on lifelong learning, learning, self-study, and education is becoming a regular part of everybody's life. Since society realises the fact that combining work and family responsibilities and study requirements is demanding, it is already possible to acquire higher qualifications in many fields of study through distance learning using an electronic system of learning, i.e. e-learning.

The concept of e-learning originated as for the English term meaning electronic learning (Z o u n e k 2009). This concept began to appear in the literature at the end of the 1980s. It represents an effective use of the Internet and computer technology in education. The core of e-learning is the use of electronic and didactic resources leading to effective achievements of educational goals (Z o u n e k 2006).

There are new opportunities at the level of university studies. Universities are faced with the fact that demand exceeds supply. In other words, universities are not able to admit all prospective candidates. The interest of lifelong learning at universities is also growing.

1   DISTANCE EDUCATION

The distance education system, especially at universities, is not implemented in our country as it is in other countries. Introducing distance education in the Czech Republic subject to many challenges and uncertainties such as lack of information and interpretation accuracy as far as terminology is concerned. In practice, it usually leads to confusion between the concepts of distance learning and combined studies. Therefore, we must define the concept of distance education and distance learning first.

Combined studies are modified full-time studies that conform to external students' time schedule at weekends or evening hours. Students of combined study programmes have lectures and seminars although with a lower number of lessons than full-time students.

Distance learning is a form of education based on self-directed learning (Brocket, Heimstra 1991, Knowles 1975). Students may freely study away from their education institution in the distance form of study (Keegan 1996, Race 1998).

The advantage of distance learning is the fact that it allows people who cannot attend full-time or combined studies for some reason to get the education they need. Accordingly, this form of study is suitable for people with disabilities, mothers on maternity leave, persons doing a sentence, persons serving in the military service, but is also suitable for people living in regions with insufficient transport infrastructure, etc.

In the Czech Republic, distance learning can be supported in two ways at universities. It is possible to apply for distance learning pre-graduate and graduate study programmes (bachelor's, master's, or doctoral programmes) or lifelong learning courses.

1.1 Distance education and e-learning

It has been speculated about the use of computers in education since the very beginning of the computer era. But it was the advent of personal computers that made the idea reality. Electronic teaching has become available to the general public. The Internet has occupied an important role in the development of distance education. Significant development of the Internet has increased effectiveness of distance education. It enables self-study which includes elements of management and communication between teachers and other learners (Zounek 2009).

In connection with the use of the Internet, the term e-learning has come into existence. It refers to online education, i.e. distance learning as a guided self-study in a virtual learning environment on the Internet. Learners use multimedia educational materials for their self-study and a substantial part of these learning materials is distributed via the Internet. Discussion "rooms" are part of virtual classes where students can discuss their problems with teachers (tutors) or with each other (Muňoz 2010, Suebnukarn 2009, Bednaříková 2008).

E-learning covers all advantages of distance learning. There is an individual choice of time and place of study and study pace. E-learning eliminates barriers that students must face within full-time or combined studies, such as lack of time, work and family responsibilities, health problems, etc. In addition, it expands possibilities of communication (Barešová 2012, Nocar 2004).

Tutors play an influential role in distance learning. They help students during their studies and explain some discrepancies related to learning materials or individual work (Muňoz 2010, Suebnukarn 2009, Kheng 2008, Bednaříková 2008, Bednaříková 2013, Bennet, Lockyer 2004).

2   DISTANCE EDUCATION IN EUROPE

In order to implement effective e-learning education, the state has to meet requirements such as introducing accessible Internet infrastructure of high quality, a large percentage of fully literate people including computer literacy, emphasis on lifelong learning in a particular country, and culture which values education and supports lifelong learning, etc.

E-learning with the full backing of national institutions is regarded as the significant factor (Mackeogh 2004).

Scandinavian countries are remarkable for their excellent information infrastructure and people's readiness for ICT integration into all areas of life (Paulsen 2003, Zlámalová 2007). In Sweden, a tradition of distance education dates back to 1898, when the oldest Swedish institution, providing distance learning, Liber Hermonds, was founded and still exists. Finland with its high level of ICT is sparsely populated which is considered to be ideal conditions for the development of distance learning. Denmark has a great tradition of evening and weekend study forms. The idea of lifelong learning has been applied there since the 19th century. The concept was popularized by N.F.S. Grundtvig, a founder of the so-called folk colleges focusing on students' personal development. Norway has a highly developed system of distance learning which represents a part of its education system. Norway was the first country where the distance form of study was regulated by a specific act. The Act of Education concerning distance education was adopted there in 1947.

In most European countries, open and distance learning up to the level of secondary education is mainly guaranteed by local authorities (e.g. they organize ad hoc projects at the level of schools) or there are active private education providers in this field. It seldom happens that national institutions take measures or perform some activities in this field (Kostolányová 2013, Zlámalová 2007, Mackeogh 2004).

The issue of adult education and distance learning is dealt with systematically in most developed countries. However, the form of distance learning is a matter of course in most developed countries. Usually, this form of studies is fully or largely supported by the government (Baumeister 1999, Hampl, Česal, Vaškovic 2008).

Distance learning is particularly widespread in Belgium, where the form of distance learning is provided by twenty commercial institutions (Kostolányová 2013, Zlámalová 2007). Distance learning represents a principal part of the education system in Spain. In France, the form of distance learning has a long tradition where National Centre for Distance Education is the largest institution in the world in terms of distance learning. Universities operate about 30 distance learning centres which fall within the authority of the International Association for Distance Learning (Federation Interuniversitaire de l'Enseignement a Distance). It ensures co-ordination in distance learning activities at universities. The largest European Open University is located in the UK (Kostolányová 2013)) and provides open and distance education. Distance learning is widespread in Norway, which is a pioneering country in advancing the concept of distance education (Zlámalová 2007, Hampl, Česal, Vaškovic 2008).

In Europe, we can find different implementation forms of distance learning within the education system of each country (Baumeister 1999, Hampl, Česal, Vaškovic 2008).

There are enormous differences in distance education within European countries. Western European and Scandinavian countries have a long-established tradition of distance education realized in the correspondence form of studies. Central and Eastern European countries have rather a tradition of evening and combined learning supported by their governments. In these countries, the development of distance learning started in the 1990s (Baumeister 1999, Mackeogh 2004, Hampl, Česal, Vaškovic 2008).

2.1 Models of distance education

According to V. Jochman (cited by Palán 1997 and supplemented), it is possible to define several different models of distance learning that we encounter in European countries. Naturally, there is a certain simplification. The variety of distance learning models and distance education is caused by different cultural aspects of the given countries and different education systems. Furthermore, there are different legislative norms, laws regulating the education and education

systems including distance learning. The tradition of distance education and distance learning also plays a major role. The development of information and communication technology together with its use in the education, school environment, and adult education performs a significant role. A principal aspect, which supports the development of distance education and distance forms of studies, covers the population density in a particular country and accessibility of education institutions for all the population in terms of spatial dimensions (Hampl, Česal, Vaškovic 2008).

British model

In the UK, a large institution, which is financially supported by the government, is widespread throughout the country and has branches in other European countries. The branches are also set up in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Spain. This large institution is specializing in distance education of all types and levels.

The UK is known for its Open University, which is the largest open university in Europe. The university offers education of high quality and graduates of the British Open University achieve full recognition and are highly ranked in the labour market (Zlámalová 2007). The British Open University is also the largest European education institution that confers an MBA degree (HEA 2009, Zlámalová 2007).

Distance learning in the UK is not regulated by the government and there is no state law regulating the distance form of studies. This is because the education institutions, which provide distance learning, are completely independent of the government (Owusu-Boampong, Holmberg 2015).

German model

In Germany, a specialized distance university of the central European type is implemented and focuses only on the university education. The German model is also implemented in Portugal and the Netherlands (Zlámalová 2007). In the Netherlands the use of media in Higher Education is encouraged by the ministry of higher education (Kommers, Smyrnova-Trybulska, Morze, Noskova, Yakovleva, Pavlova, Drlík, Malach, Delgado, Pinto, Issa, Issa 2014).

In Germany, the distance form of studies is regulated by the Student Protection Act to protect students who study at distance learning programmes (Owusu-Boampong, Holmberg 2015). In Portugal the distance form of studies is also regulated the government (Kommers, Smyrnova-Trybulska, Morze, Noskova, Yakovleva, Pavlova, Drlík, Malach, Delgado, Pinto, Issa, Issa, 2014)

French model

France has cherished a tradition of the distance form of studies since the 1920s when the radio used to broadcast education courses implemented by

Sorbonne University. France is characteristic of state-supported institutions for distance learning These institutions are interdisciplinary structured and enable education at all levels (Kostolányová 2013). The institutions, which offer distance learning, are interconnected with traditional universities, colleges, and other education institutions providing full-time studies (Zlámalová 2007).

The distance form of studies is also regulated by state. Further Education and Training Act and the Apprentices Act define the distance form of studies as an integral part of the education system in the context of continuing education (Zlámalová 2007).

Irish model

Universities and other education institutions cooperating closely with National Distance Education Council, which is set up and supported financially by the government, are promoting distance learning. The National Distance Education Council covers distance education in Ireland, makes evaluation and measures its quality, and encourages the development of distance education (Zlámalová 2007, HEA 2009).

Irish education institutions, which provide distance learning, are often linked to the British Open University they co-operate with (Owusu-Boampong, Holmberg 2015, HEA 2009).

Nordic model

The Nordic model of education is typical of its association of universities and other education institutions offering distance learning. These universities and other education institutions mostly have a mutual managing authority within the association, i.e. a common regional centre (Amft 2014). These institutions are typical of a dual education system – that is, a combination of both full-time and distance learning at the same time (Kostolányová 2013). These education institutions provide graduate studies and various types of adult education courses (Owusu-Boampong, Holmberg 2015).

The Nordic model is implemented in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Italy.

In addition to these five models of distance education, mixed models also exist and they only adopt some organizational elements.

3   DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The tradition of distance education in the Czech Republic does not exist. This is why its implementation is quite complicated and lengthy (Hampl, Česal, Vaškovic 2008, Poulová 2009). Besides several attempts to introduce distance learning in education institutions focusing on adult education, such as the Jan Amos Komenský Academy or the European School for Correspondence Courses, this form has gained gradual acceptance mainly at universities. They are especially

Brno University of Technology, Palacký University Olomouc, and Technical University of Liberec which started to organize this form of studies in the 1990s. Later they were followed by University of West Bohemia, University of Ostrava, University of Economics Prague, and Metropolitan University Prague.

Nowadays, the issue of distance education and distance learning support is discussed in the Czech Republic. This form of studies meets the needs in education process of adults who have work, family and study responsibilities and it is sometimes extremely difficult to handle them all (Barešová 2012, Nocar 2004, Poulová 2009). The government of the Czech Republic also deals with the issue at the level of strategic documents, for example the government document on the Strategy of Lifelong Learning in the CR.

In terms of distance education and distance learning, a law recognizing the so-called dual model and its support was introduced in the 1990s. This means that universities and colleges may prepare, implement and obtain accreditation to their study courses in full-time and distance learning. This decision is enacted in the Accreditation Committee Decree and the University Act. (Kostolányová 2013, Poulová 2009).

CONCLUSION

A new information society has emerged recently where ICT play a principal role. ICT services are expanding to our daily activities as well as education. Distance learning, supported by ICT, has been also developing in the Czech Republic for the last decade.

E-learning courses are very beneficial and students evaluate them positively (Liška, Česal 2008, Kheng 2008, Barešová 2012, Nocar 2004). Their most significant advantage is their accessibility as you can study anytime and anywhere (Kheng 2008, Barešová 2012, Nocar 2004). The only condition is to have the Internet access. Distance learning remains independent in terms of the distance between students and a teacher. As a result, this form of studies is highly effective in education of women on maternity leave or people with disabilities, etc. (Barešová 2012, Nocar 2004). However, there are some disadvantages of distance learning for students. One of the downsides is a teacher's physical presence, or rather absence (Klement, Dostál 2012). Students gain nearly all study materials from e-learning materials, textbooks, or essays and get feedback via the test questions, tests, self-tests, individual tasks and exercises (Klement, Dostál 2012).

Students' online testing brings real benefits for teachers. After the test, both students and the examiner obtain a result immediately which saves a lot of time (Zatloukal, Ulrich 2008). Distance learning has also some disadvantages for teachers. One of the downsides is an arduous process of creating study texts, which are suitable for this form of studies. Creating an efficient and high quality

study material, suitable for e-learning and effective in self-study, is more demanding than creating a textbook for full-time studies. Teachers' inexperience in e-learning may also put them at disadvantage. They are used to teaching in a traditional way, i.e. direct methods of teaching, lectures and seminars, and e-learning environment is unusual for them and consequently very demanding (Maier et.al., 1999, Chute et al., 1998).

Although it is possible to state that students can study any subject in distance learning courses, not every subject matter is suitable for distance learning. However, it is necessary to think about a percentage of full-time learning that should be included to reach a high level of effectiveness of a particular subject of study. Full-time studies are irreplaceable although knowledge can be also spread effectively to distance learning students. Conversely, it is difficult to teach skills in this way and it happens frequently that it is not feasible to impart teaching them in distance learning.

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