E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: FOCUS GROUPS AND SURVEY AMONG STUDENTS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

By

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ABSTRACT

Despite a great deal of time and energy went into digitalisation of the world around us, education has been lagging behind. A question therefore arises to what extent higher education institutions should introduce e-learning as part of their programmes. The purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge on e-learning by examining perceptions and intentions of students regarding e-learning. There are two broader research objectives pursued in order to achieve the purpose. The first objective is to identify students' knowledge and perception of e-learning, along with their attitudes and experience with it. The second research objective is to assess readiness of students to engage in e-learning and determine their willingness to pay for it. This study uses mixed method research design. First, results of two focus groups are reported, followed by results of survey on 104 respondents in a country of Central Europe. Results show that, students are in general positively inclined towards e-learning and would be willing to take online courses. However, there are still some reservations connected to it and the preference is towards the blended format. In spite of e-learning's European roots, the majority of students do not want the full integration of Information Technology into the study process, meaning that the traditional learning methods combined with IT are preferred.

Keywords: E-Learning, Distance Studying, Student Attitudes, Central Europe.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a worldwide used mode of studying both at higher and secondary education institutions. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard and other top world universities provide e-classes as a part of non-curriculum activities both on native and specially elaborated platforms like edX (edX, 2016). Each program or a course has different degree of e-learning integration into academic process. New York University, Northern Arizona University, University of Michigan, University of California (Berkeley) and lots of other worldwide known educational institutions offer distance learning as a way to obtain the university degree on both under- and postgraduate levels (Top Universities Offering Online Degrees in Business, 2015).

In the 18th century students could get necessary information in form of books and lessons, and pass exams presented as a written work via paper letters. Now-a-days the system did not change much, except that mails got an "e" prefix (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009). According to Aggarwal (2007), distance learning started more than 130 years ago, while Jung, Wong, & and Belawati (2013) date it even earlier - around 200 years ago. For example, in Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) already in 1926 more than 37,000 of students were accepted to distance programs to MSU (Distancionnoyeo brazovaniyebiloest' ibudet. Istoriya, 2016). In 1990s, distance learning underwent metamorphoses and due to technological boom mutated in e-learning (Terho & Onnela, 2006). Today three main forms of learning are distinguished: full-time, part-time, distance education, and, additionally, e-learning which is more a learning tool rather than a study mode. In turn, different sources distinguish such forms of e-learning as network, online and blended form of studying

(Gaevskya, 2012). In 2013, 13.1% of US students were enrolled into exclusively distance learning courses (Fast Facts, 2016).

However, a lot of criticism follows distance education ideas. Among the problems associated with distance education generally and e-learning particularly, the most concerns are about evaluation of such study mode, talking both about its quality and quality of knowledge the students get; the technological and legal aspects and followed by these two concerns, the question about value of online (or on distance) obtained diploma arises (Willems, 2013). Overall, in Europe, the development of national strategies and initiatives for e-learning in higher education varies and so does the implementation (Gaebel, Kupriyanova, Morais, & Colucci, 2014). Faced with new generations of students and competition from worldwide, higher education institutions now-a-days face the need to integrate e-learning into their programmes. The researchers also want to contribute to the discussion in the present Journal and add a view from a different side than for example Dimitriadou, Nari and Palaiologou (2012) examined teachers' perspectives towards e-learning and found positive attitude and intentions of use in the future. Radda and Mandernach (2012) tackled the doctoral online education from the side of its major concern being that the online learning is not as effective or valid as traditional offline learning. To build on their findings the researchers planned to examine this issue among undergraduate and graduate students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge on e-learning by examining perceptions and intentions of students regarding e-learning. The context of this study is Slovenia, a country in Central Europe that has an established national strategy for enhancing e-learning (Gaebel, et al., 2014). However, especially the largest universities have not yet incorporated e-learning fully into their programmes.

Research Questions

The main research questions of this study addresses are:

(1) How do students perceive advantages and disadvantages of e-learning compared to traditional way of learning?

(2) What are students' attitudes towards e-learning?

(3) What is the readiness of students to participate in e-learning?

Research Objectives

There are two broader research objectives pursued in order to answer these research questions. First, based on empirical study involving students in higher education identify students' knowledge and perception of e-learning, along with their attitudes and experience with it. Second research objective is to assess readiness of students to engage in e-learning and determine their willingness to pay for it. This study uses mixed methods to obtain answers to the research questions. First, results of two focus groups are reported, followed by results of survey on 104 respondents.

This article is structured as follows: following a brief discussion on e-learning a literature review results of some previous studies on e-learning from different parts of the world are presented. This is followed by exploratory research into perceptions and intentions of students regarding e-learning. Besides, the results of focus groups results of survey among students are discussed. In the end implications, limitations and opportunities for future research are explained.

Distance Education and E-Learning

Schlosser and Simonson (2009, p.1) define distance education as "institution based, formal education, where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors". Thus, by distance learning two things are perceived: (1) it could be considered to be a general term to define all types of non-campus (or not pure campus) learning, and (2) the majority of researches link their works to this term while talking about full-time, on-distance courses which can be finished without constant physical presence of a learner in a campus or with his/her presence only during the exams and after finishing which a learner obtains his/her academic degree. The main difference between distance education and simple distribution of study materials is in a

way both parties get the feedback in its structure and the variety of channels are used (Aggarwal, 2007). Distance education and open learning are two different approaches, according to Edwards (Schlosser & Simmonson, 2009, p. 6) who states that "open learning shifts from mass production and mass consumption to a focus on local and individual requirements". Usually by open learning are meant free courses available for anyone. However, completing them does not mean obtaining an academic degree.

Then, e-learning can be defined as "a set of practices that uses technology-aided interaction to create, provide and enhance learning" (Rice & Gregor, 2016, p. 2-3). Distance education can be divided by clusters based on frequency of attendance of the educational institution by a learner, and the amount of feedback he/she gets and provides. E-learning can be distinguished by the degree of technology integration into the study processes none, blended and fully integrated. The last relates to such-called virtual universities (which are "institutions involved as a direct providers of learning opportunities to students and is using information and communication technologies to deliver its programmes and courses and provide tuition support" (Ryan, Scott, Freeman, & Patel, 2013, p. 2) and online programmes which can be offered by traditional universities within distance education initiatives.

The present research is focused on attitude of students towards e-learning with full integration of technologies and low degree of physical presence at the educational institution.

Overview of The State of Distance Education and E-Learning

This section gives an overview of the presence and development of distance education and e-learning around the world. Included are Europe, USA, Russia, and Asia as the countries with most students and potential.

In Europe

In the 18th century, the post services are developed and got more affordable, and, as a consequence, "correspondence learning" appeared. 20th century gave new technologies, and in 1969, the UK Open University with distance learning programs was established. Then, in 1972, National University of Distance Education in Spain was founded, and in 1974, University of Hagen in Germany opened its virtual doors. Apparently, students' habits slightly changed. When talking about e-learning development in Europe, it must be pointed out that, comparing to USA and Australia, Europeans are less inclined to e-learning process, due to the preference of face-to-face ways of communication in all social activities (Gogos, 2014).

Still, survey done by European University Association in 2013 among higher education institutions (Gaebel, et al., 2014), showed that, in Europe, there is an interest in this type of education process. Almost all institutions that were involved in sample are engaged in e-learning, which is actually quite surprising. Most common form (91%) of using it in a way of blended process, which means that they are integrating e-learning into traditional studying process. Even more surprising is that 82% of institutions are already offering online learning courses, which is even a step further. The presence and level of development of e-learning, depend of course upon the nature of the field, furthermore is mostly implemented in business and management and rarely in law and arts. What is really interesting here is that 249 involved institutions with different mission and vision share quite the same motives for implementing it. Furthermore, costs reduction and gaining a profit are hardly ever stated as motives. Rather than that, they value more effective way of teaching time and greater flexibility in learning provision. E-learning on the other hand demands a high investment, but does not guarantee returns on short term which is a reason why there should be provided a national strategy of e-learning in order to support the idea of online process among universities and encourage them to consider about implementing a certain form of e-learning (Gaebel, et al., 2014).

In USA

United States joined the distance learning group in 1874 with Illinois Wesleyan University which offered both Under- and Postgraduate distance education programs, and in 1999, Jones International University got government accreditation. Today such programs are widely offered in top ranked universities. However, there is a noticeable drop

off in interest towards it (Adkins, 2016). The development rate for self-managed e-learning in the United States (US) is presently negative at - 2.7%; this is the first run through in the historical backdrop of the US e-Learning industry that development has entered negative area. Incomes in the US will drop from the $21.3 achieved to in 2015 to $18.6 billion by 2020 (The e-Learning Guild Releases 2015 Global e-Learning Salary & Compensation Report, 2016).

The Research Institute of America found that, e-learning increases standards for retention from 25% to 60% while degrees of consistency of up close and personal learning are low in contrast: 8% to 10%. This is because with e-learning understudies have more control over the learning procedure and in addition the chance to return to the preparation as required (Gutierrez, 2016). The US e-learning market has entered into another stage portrayed by commoditisation and item substitution. The incongruity of a commoditised business sector is that huge volumes of items are sold, however the costs are falling. Commoditisation is likewise portrayed by the absence of separation in items (Adkins, 2016).

Regardless of size, companies are increasing their use of e-learning. However, 41.7% of global Fortune 500 Companies already use some form of technology to train their employees (The growth of Global E-learning: E-learning! Magazine, 2013). International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) saved approximately $200 million after switching to e-learning, according to Dave Evans. With online learning, companies can reduce costs related to travel, hotel rentals, equipment, and instructors, just to name a few (Adkins, 2016).

In Russia

Distance learning in Russia appeared in USSR times. First programs were launched already in 1920s. The main reason was to increase the overall national education level, especially for ex-peasants and their families. Already in 1930, distance learning programs were introduced in almost every state university. The form of learning did not change much from those times: now-a-days distance programs students also come to their universities and institutes twice per year – to pass the exams. And in 2000, MTI got government accreditations for a variety of distance learning programs with possibility of obtaining state degree. This was a big step, and till now MTI is considered to be one of the major distance learning institutions established in Russia. Together with it, Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics & Informatics (MESI) is an important university giving possibilities for e-learning, as well. It invests $10–20 million yearly to develop its study programs (Tihomirov: Graduate of Online Universities in Great Demand all over the world, 2015).

Researches show a stable and high demand for e-learning and distance education in Russia (Distance Education has been, is and will be History, 2016). However, there are still a lot of concerns connected to quality estimation and validity of online obtained degrees – mostly from the students' side. In difference, employers show higher interest towards e-graduates: they consider that, such students have necessary for the modern world skills. Some studies show, that, till 2022, there will be a big segregation between online and offline studies. Learning won't be based on memorising material anymore, people will put more effort in self-education, and e-learning has good perspectives from this point of view. As for the future, in October, 2015, Russian Ministry of Education claimed a possibility of equalising the distance learning with the full-time study mode (Tihomirov: vypusknikionlajnvuzovnarashvatvovsemmire, 2015).

In Asia

Asian e-learning and distance education tradition is quite new: a lot of the first open universities were established in 1970s. From the beginning, there was not a lot of attention paid to the quality of education provided by the new study trend, until in between 1990 and 2005 when the national accreditation agencies were formed. In Asia, distance education has remarkable growth. Asian learning market is probably the most abundant for different distance education forms: open universities (public and private), virtual universities, online programs – everything is present here (Jung, et al., 2013). Asian countries governments pay much attention to e-learning: Singapore scales-up good practices of e-learning among teacher community. Hong Kong government creates digital classrooms equipped with wi-fi, while in Taiwan government is more focused on

teaching technology, and for Beijing government, the infrastructure for curriculum delivery is much more important, they provide digital resources and e-textbooks geared to school curricula (Kong, Looi, Chan, & Huang, 2016). In India, e-learning has become increasingly more popular due to higher digital literacy and in part due to governmental pushes made by Department of Electronics and Information Technology (Why E-Learning Has a Promising Future in India, 2016). As far as outsourcing goes India is a one of the most popular destinations as they offer high flexibility and competitive pricing as well as highly motivated workers mostly fluent in English and ready to offshore the time zone differences (Too Many e-Learning Companies In India – How To Find The Best? – e-Learning Industry, 2015).

Research Design

This study uses mixed methods research to get insights into attitudes of students at a business school in a country of Central Europe. In mixed methods research, researchers combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research to get a broad and deep understanding and corroboration (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007). This study combines focus groups and survey to get deeper understating of the research topic and also to quantitatively measure attitudes and intentions of the population under study.

The population for this research is defined as all students studying at the Faculty of Economics University of Ljubljana (hereinafter: FELU) in 2015/16. The FELU is the first and only Triple Crown (holding EQUIS, AACSB and AMBA accreditations) international school in Slovenia and the broader region. It is both a national leader and an internationally recognised academic and research institution in the fields of Business and Economics that attempts to become perceived as the world-renowned institution for the quality of its academic programmes, education and research achievements (About the FELU, 2016). It is important to stress that, in Slovenia, students are not yet very familiar with e-learning, because there are not many providers of it (Sulcic V. & Sulcic A., 2007).

First, two focus groups were conducted in order to get deeper insights about respondents' opinion towards e-learning and distance education. Each focus group consisted of 10 participants. For both groups half of the participants were male and half female, aged between 20 and 26 years. In the domestic (Slovenian) group, 6 participants were undergraduate students and 4 were from graduate programmes, while in the foreigners group 9 students were undergraduate and 1 was studying at the graduate level. 3 participants of this group were from South Korea, 2 from Germany, 1 from Spain, 1 from France, 1 from Croatia, 1 from Czech Republic and 1 from China.

The focus groups were followed by the e-survey. All participants, both for survey and focus groups, were selected by non probability sampling methods and recruited through Facebook groups of the school. Before conducting the survey, the questionnaire was tested on 12 respondents. Online survey was active for seven days and during that time,104 complete entries were recorded. The majority of respondents were female (66.3%), with age distribution between 18 and 32 years ($M = 21.74$, $SD = 2.06$). 71.1% of the respondents were domestic, while 28.9% were foreign students.

Results

Results of Focus Groups

The focus groups revealed a divide among students by experience with e-learning as the domestic, Slovenian students did not have any e-learning experience. Moderator of Slovenian group focused more on the opinion and attitude about e-studying and not on actual experience since the respondents did not even have an option to try it at FELU. However, the foreign group was asked about their own experience, expectations and opinions.

As expected, the foreign students group experienced various platforms as Coursera, EBS, Kahoot!, Duolingo and Megastudy. Most of them quickly responded to association with convenience, while some went deeper with specific brands or tools in e- learning. Few thought that, e-learning is not effective at all. Speaking of convenience, the majority was not fond of home studying and preferred faculty environment as it provides less distractions. Minority shared opinion on home as less stressful and more relaxing environment in which they thrive. The next question was

about reasons why would they take an online class. Majority, including also the bigger group of those who preferred faculty to home, said that time convenience would be that factor. Those with more academic interest added new information and the ability to re-listen could improve their knowledge and therefore final grade.

The group agreed that, a variety of courses is a must and that the infrastructure should allow for play, pause and rewind controls of an interactive course that tracks progress and has all the theory in one place. Next, the participants were asked if e-learning should be conducted through an app or a website, and they agreed that, probably the best solution would be to offer both. Further on they all agreed that, e-learning has a big advantage in organisation of a course (time, place, lecture length, etc.,) but that there is the disadvantage in form of a lack of human touch and professors opinion or help. Based on the previous experience, everyone really liked gamification factor of e-learning, but some noticed issues with sound quality in videos that were recordings of a class in session. Trying to put a price tag on an e-course proved to be more difficult as some were of an opinion that it should be included in the tuition, while others agree that, it should cost from 30 to 100 EUR per subject depending on the length of the course.

The group of international students remained divided when discussing the possibility of taking exams at home versus faculty. It should be noted that, few seemed to be a bit confused as most was concerned with (lack) of possibilities of cheating instead of the exam taking itself. Finishing up the discussion, it was asked if this type of education could eradicate traditional concepts of education, and just little over half of the group agreed, while the minority strongly disagreed. Nevertheless, the respondents mostly agreed they would partake in e-learning class/program if FELU decided to offer it.

The domestic students almost did not have any experience in distance education or e-learning, so the majority of the respondents connected the word e-learning to the word "online courses". More than a half of the students answered, they prefer to study at faculty because they can work harder in the environment. The reason why they would take a class online was mostly that it would spare them a lot of time. Some of them feel too lazy to come to class, and the others also feel they could use time to research and focus.

Generally, the students expect to receive an additional value from an online course. They want the quality and efficiency. Mostly, students would use e-learning in informatics/computer work field, and the foreign languages. As the biggest disadvantage, all the respondents mentioned difficulties in self-discipline and lack of socialisation. A minority of the group had an experience of e-learning, and they mentioned gamification as a good way of students' engagement. The brands connected with e-learning that come to their minds are Google, Cambridge, Coursera, Khan, MOOC, EdX, Babbel, TedEx, Podcast, Coffee Break, RFI, French Podcast, and Speaking Russian. The students would be willing to pay from 0 to up to 100 EUR for participation in an online course. Half of the students would like to take an exam online (they perceive they can have additional help), and half of them would prefer a traditional, on-campus way. Almost, all the students would like the courses shared in a form of apps or videos.

Almost, half of the participants believe online learning could extinguish classic lectures. Moreover, the opinion is very split about the popularity of online courses at FELU. However, more than half of participants would be interested in taking such a course at FELU.

Results of Survey

Based on the responses, 81.7% of students would be prepared to enrol into an online course if it were possible, while 18.3% are still not open to it. Percentages are approximately the same for domestic and international students, while in survey domestic students were more open to e-learning as in focus groups. When asked about the extent of using e-learning software, most respondents (29.8%) are in favour of blended learning and would use e-learning software more than lectures (60:40 in favour of e-learning); 25% would prefer their studies to be based solely on e-learning, 19.2% would use e-learning software as a supplement activity together with traditional lectures, 18.3% when a problem arose that they could not answer using lecture notes, and the rest (7.7%) would not use it at all.

Statement	M	SD
Time organization is easier with e-Studying	3.84	1.01
E-learning provides better grounds for repeating of lectures	3.80	1.04
E-learning requires bigger self-control and discipline	3.59	1.15
E-learning is going to positively Influence the final grade	3.58	1.08
E-learning is an effective replacement for classic studying	3.45	1.19
Online obtained diploma is equal to traditional degree	3.25	1.17

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Attitudes of Students towards E-learning

Next, attitudes of students towards e-learning were evaluated (Table 1). On average, students agreed most with the statement that time organization is easier with e-studying (M = 3.84, SD = 1.01), and that e-learning provides better grounds for repeating of lectures (M = 3.80, SD = 1.04). On average, they also agree that, e-learning requires bigger self-control and discipline (M = 3.59, SD = 1.15), and that e-learning is going to positively influence the final grade (M = 3.58, SD = 1.08). However, when asked about the more general comparison with traditional way of studying their average agreement was a bit lower. Average agreement that e-learning is an effective replacement for classic studying was 3.45 (SD = 1.19), while even lower was agreement with statement that online obtained diploma is equal to traditional degree (M = 3.25, SD = 1.17). On average, domestic students expressed higher level of agreement with all the statements than international students. However, these differences were not significant.

Further, the researchers wanted to examine at which level (Undergraduate, Graduate, Doctoral) students perceive that e-learning is an appropriate mode of studying. Most respondents (76.9%) indicated that, e-learning should be used at the Undergraduate level, 58.7% see it appropriate at the Graduate level, while only 35.6% perceive e-learning as appropriate for the Doctoral studies. When asked about how much they would be willing to pay for e-learning per course, answers were very diverse, ranging from 0 to 2000 EUR, with mode being 0 EUR (14.4% of responses) and median 120 EUR.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study addressed attitudes and intentions of students towards e-learning. Results of this research indicate that, international students have more experience with e-learning than domestic (Slovenian) students. Although Slovenia is a country with an established national strategy for enhancing e-learning, and while smaller competitors have established e-learning programmes, the leading business school in the country still delivers its programmes in a traditional way with lectures taking place at the school premises. Results show that, students are in general positively inclined towards e-learning and would be willing to take online courses. However, there are still some reservations connected to it and the preference is towards the blended format. While in focus groups foreign students seem to be more interested in distance learning opportunities than domestic, the difference did not show on a larger sample. What is also interesting is that in spite of e-learning's European roots, the majority of students do not want the full integration of IT into the study process, meaning that, the traditional learning methods combined with IT are preferred. Notwithstanding the gained data is qualitative, exploratory research shows this conclusion as an overall tendency in Europe (Gogos, 2014).

Research results provided an insight into attitudes and intentions of students in the context of Central Europe and are based on a non-representative sample, which is one of the major limitations of this research. The findings obtained should be verified on a larger representative sample. However, the purpose at this stage was to get initial insights and understanding of students' perceptions and attitudes in the environment where e-learning is not very developed. The results are also context specific. The attitudes of the students towards e-learning might vary depending on the type of university and the region; the students which might have to travel a lot between home and university could be more inclined towards it.

The school where research took place is in process of incorporating e-learning. For successful implementation another research should be conducted on students taking test courses in order to find out how students liked the online materials (additional explanations in the forms of videos, puzzles and quizzes to practice for exam and so on). After that, the faculty could decide whether to introduce some courses in fully online form, or just keep the partially online courses. This blended way of conducting a class is a softer

version which would probably attract more students than the fully integrated online course, at least in the first few years. The students taking these kinds of courses should be asked about them many times, and their satisfaction and opinions should be tracked, so that, the faculty could have a fully formed feedback and a pool of suggestions before actually making a class completely as an online course. It might also be smart to track potential improvements of grades and compare those with students who are not partaking in online platform.

Today people are all part of a one big mixed puzzle. Borders between countries and cultures are blurring and as such people are slowly, but surely becoming more and more alike. In a way, education systems have stagnated behind the cultural shift and perception of today's global environment. As an answer to this, e-learning was created. For the past few years, e-learning was gaining traction across the globe, with US leading the trend. On the other hand, Asia entered the market fairly late, but is taking a higher interest in the matter. All in all, the global landscape of education and corporations is highly interested in implementing e-learning further down the line. People are just in the need of a next big breakthrough. Slovenian research focused on the attitude of students towards online education and found that, there was positive stance although implementation is lacking or perception of it for that matter. It seems that, students are willing to try e-learning but fear that is going to be inadequate in comparison to standard teaching techniques. One of possible solutions is a complete overhaul of the course type to ensure the gamificiation is implemented and so pulls the student into the knowledge. Before e-learning is implemented, a wider testing net should be thrown to measure responses and willingness to partake in e-learning course by students as well as teachers. There are still obstacles in the way of a truly online learning, but most of them reside in our own perception of quality e-learning and not in the process itself. Nevertheless, with a positive attitude that was shown in research so far the future of e-learning is bright.

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