MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:
The concepts and practices concerning the distance education are experiencing substantial changes (from the following point of view: planning, organizing, leading and controlling) since the number of institutions providing distance learning and the amount of learners concerned by such programs have increased significantly. Studying in depth the status of the art of the distance education, the main question that arise frequently is how to run such systems in order to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency when using the involved resources (a limited number of teachers/tutors reaching a large number of students, using diversified modes of delivery) and still meeting the requirements. A common feature of all the actors involved in online/distance/blended learning is the try to be or remain effective for the next generation, using learning tools and techniques accordingly.

Keywords: distance education, effective, learning tools, management structure

1. DISTANCE LEARNING. WHAT IS IT? HOW IT WORKS? STATUS OF THE ART

The purpose of this paper starts with the question: why distance education and includes monitoring the status of the art of distance learning, monitoring the effect upon educational planning, in terms of human and material resources (educational platforms, teaching resources, management structures, etc,.), highlighting current technologies/trends present in the process of delivering education, analyzing the context where the need for distance education occurred (historical and societal setting) and identifying methodologies of planning, applied in distance education, especially in technical universities.

Going from an individual pursuit, characterized by infrequent communication between student and teacher, due to the postal service and reaching viable systems of distance education – was a long, yet rapidly evolving field. Crossing additional generations of learners (influenced by the mass media, radio and television, video and audio or by computer-based education) distance learning has never displaced previous ones. Moreover, distance education is based on a combination of all of the previous periods.

Providing a flexible and individualized educational experience compared to traditional/formal schooling, open universities provide learning opportunities to students living in remote areas, to the temporary or disabled, to school dropouts and adults who wish to continue learning. Such systems also permit training, re-training or upgrading of working persons. (Francoise Caillods , p.9)

Between 2000 and 2013, upper secondary and tertiary qualifications gained more and more terrain. The proportion of adults aged 25 to 64 who have not attained an upper secondary education decreased by 11 percentage points. During this period of time (2000-2013), the proportion decreased from more than one third of all adults (34%) in 2000 to less than one fourth (23%) by 2013. As the proportion of the population with only a below upper secondary education decreased between 2000-2013, the proportion of the population attaining tertiary education increased. In 2013 one in three adults (33%) held a tertiary qualification. Tertiary educated adults have the best outcomes in the labour market. (OECD 2015, p.32-33)

The length and the quality of the schooling that individuals receive have an impact on students` transition from education to work. In order to improve the transition from school to work (regardless of the economic environment, demographics) education systems should aim to ensure that individuals have the right skills needed in the labour-market.

2. DELIVERING DISTANCE EDUCATION. TEACHING RESOURCES

Teaching is inherently connected nowadays with ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). Distance learning is possible by the means of technology because it involves information that needs to be collected, processed, taught/delivered. ICT is relevant when we speak about interaction, networking, feedback. It opens ways and methods of teaching and learning.

Distance education is defined by systems where students can access contents, interact with the teachers and colleagues. The needs distance /online learning covers are diversified, so are their ways of delivery. A whole range of modes are taken into account, from well established to the newest forms of communication technology. There are platforms that provide a set of features (configurable) that makes possible the creation of online courses, forums, work groups and also allow registering, monitoring and evaluation (for both: teachers and students) via Internet. Universities deliver developed programs which use not only printed text but also tapes and cassettes, telephone, audio and video conferencing, telematics and computer- conferencing. Taking into consideration the technical approach, there are different types of LMS (Learning Management Systems). According to the type of solutions they offer, they are divided into: LMS representing commercial solutions (WebCT, Blackboard) and LMS providing open-source solutions (Moodle).

Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is identified as the easiest and most used open-source platform in higher education. It enables the creation of a course and ensures access only to the students that are enrolled. It favors the exchange of information between users from different geographic coordinates by the means of forums. Its set of configurable features allows the creation of student assessment processes and the management of their tasks within a timetable.

Teaching resources and instructional materials are created in digital formats and they are uploaded to the platform. Some examples of such resources are: PowerPoint files, Web pages, word documents, PDFs, video and audio files. The content is to be manipulated and transformed as the interaction among students and teachers asks for it. In order to successfully use an e-learning platform, teachers must be aware of how to use and organize the communication process. Moreover, with the fast improvement of technologies, a revisit of the knowledge and of the learning methods/tools is constantly and increasingly necessary.

3. MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION. EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Management structures in distance education are becoming a must in the general management of any institution providing e-learning/blended learning/distance learning options. We are witnessing a growing number of institutions and individuals resorting to the use of distance learning (with everything that comes within: tools, trends, methods). Mediating learning, addressing to larger numbers of students, becoming flexible towards learners/public is the direction where the learning curve is heading (according to Raj Dhanarajan, Wasawan Open University, Malaysia). The growth of distance learning from correspondence education in the 1830s or 1840s through the growth of private correspondence schools and colleges, to present status of investing in distance/online/blended learning, has resulted in the emergence of a new educational paradigm characterized by low face-to-face contact with teachers or educational institutions. For this reason only, those managing distance learning systems face challenges that traditional classroom-based systems were unaware of. The symbolic picture of such a management is an arena within those involved must exercise various skills. There are not many things written specifically on the management of distance learning systems, much of the literature deals with the subject tangentially. Authors like Oster (1965),Kaye and Rumble (1981), McAnany (1982), Dodds (1983), Birch and Latcham (1984), Rumble (1986), Paul (1990), Perraton (1991) wrote about the office organization of a large correspondence school, on planning and management of distance education, the administration of distance teaching, open management within open learning, administrative structures for distance education.

Adopting the latest technological capabilities universities are adapting in order to allow the distribution of information and communication anywhere, anytime. There are two faces of the story: first, there are institutions accustomed with traditional students gathering in classrooms are opening to offer distance/online education to those interested. On the other hand, there are institutions that relied on large-scale distance delivery of instructional resources via print or television. They are asked now to provide flexible, interactive, web/net-based alternatives. Terry Anderson (2004, Theory and Practice of Online Learning, page 5) believes that *free sharing of course content is a powerful tool to encourage the growth of public education institutions. Sharing will not result in a net value loss for the delivering institution. Rather, its reputation will be enhanced and its saleable services will increase in value.*

The same idea of opening the access is rooted in the very spirit of a university. The knowledge is meant to be shared. Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1813: *He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me. That idea should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation.* (1854, pp.180-181)

Online learning must create activities that are challenging, that enable students to make connections between new information and old one (according to Bonk and Reynolds, 1997). The same direction is followed by the continuous change of the management of such structures, constantly adapting to new, to the requests coming from a different generation of learners and to all the challenges concerning the legal, organizational, technical and human aspects of distance/online education. Management is the process of doing things efficiently and effectively, by working with and through the right people.

Educational planning is related to overall regional and national development and it intends to be of use for all the parties involved in the process (students, teachers, general management, job market, etc.).Practices and concepts of educational planning encountered substantial change. Rationalizing

the process of educational development and rigid centralized planning proven to be inappropriate and dispensed with. Nevertheless there have been forms of planning that helped broadening the scope of educational planning. Collecting data, evaluating existing programs, undertaking studies, paying attention to the debates around the topic – are strong bases to guide educational planning. Before change is made, assessing the present situation, specifying the aims and means to accomplish it, mapping, targeting, acting and correcting are acute. Planning, organizing, leading and controlling can be done well or can fail. Done badly, resources are wasted, opportunities are lost, institutions grow weaker. (Greville Rumble, p.13).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Complementary to formal/traditional system of education, it is now compulsory to answer to present needs of learners: delivering education but in non-formal settings and still concerning for the quality of the process and for the control of its results.

Planners and administrators are/should be aware of the importance of implementation strategies: financing methods, examination, certification procedures and other regulation structures.

The key to a successful management of distance education describes three major sub-systems involved: the material sub-system (the production of materials), the service sub-system (the support to students) and the administrative sub-system (the management of tutors). (Francoise Caillods, p.10) The course development is the process which translates academic ideas into a prototype course. The main role is played by the discipline coordinator or academic specialist. Developing course material requires great investment of time, as designing one hour of student work takes two to ten hours for an academic. Speaking of approaches to student services it is important to admit there are numerous issues around the strategic options available in planning and organizing it. Procedures, forms and records are handled in such a way that is both friendly and formal/official. In terms of the management of tutors, all learning systems need to provide opportunities for students to interact with tutors. The management of these interactions also depend on the human skills of those involved in the process. Monitoring every interaction between students and tutors is not possible, still there are ways of monitoring their work by checking on the grades, the comments they made to students/tutors. Monitoring can be increased in case a tutor`s work is generally unsatisfactory. In terms of budgeting and financial control, the needs for motivation and realism suggest that this aspect should be reviewed and revised as the year progresses. The three systems that distance education is based on, are (materials, learner and administrative), driven by different philosophies. The distance between students and tutors is geographically wide, the interactions (student-student, student-teacher, student-administrative) are central to the delivery of the educational service. The greatest challenge is to maintain a proper balance between all the elements.

Investments in management education and training is recognized as vitally important, so that the relationship between the inputs and the outputs of the educational process is managed to minimize resources costs.

Which media works better, how effective are the distance programs, what is their educational value, what costs are involved, how to run a distance learning system – are aspect to further considerations.

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