Silvia Florea
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu
Romania
Email:silviafl2002@yahoo.com
silvia.florea@ulbsibiu.ro

Constantin Oprean
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu
Romania
Email:rector@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract: The role of Romanian universities has become crucial in (re)negotiating a new relationship with life-long learners and in bridging the gap of social, age and educational disadvantage. This gap places young graduates at the top of IT skills and life-learners at the bottom of the same scale when both categories attempt to find work. In this way, Romania is a model for the potential of long distance learning in emerging countries, esepcially those of Eastern Europe. Particularly in emerging countries such as Romania, universities are called to respond to ever new challenges; they must bring not only new forms of technology-enabled education to learners of all ages, but they must also make sure these devices reach out and contribute to social cohesion and bonding. This is all the more difficult to achieve as it comes along with a new paradigm in education, characterized by flowing (interchangeable) roles, shared resources, virtual facilities, and asyncronous teaching/ learning processes. In the first part, this paper depicts the status of adult education prior and post fall of communism (1989), and then describes the context in which distance education programs were established. Moreover, it describes, some of the integrated efforts that a young Romanian university (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu) is making to reach out to all categories of learners, as well as the extent to which we accomplish these goals. The paper argues that, in a learning context, the Internet becomes a tool for innovation, shaping notions such as borders, space, time or mobility. In particular: distance education generates new social patterns of bonding by creating a shared memory of recent learning experiences; eases the accommodation at a distance to the future job; facilitates the social and professional integration of new life-learners; enhances new community strategies; facilitates the intra-national mobilization of learners; produces new networked life styles; and enhances the capacity to make decisions and act over disadvantages and borders in real time, giving rise to new forms of national socialization and community solidarities.

The Online Life-Learner: Rethinking the Social Role of Universities in Distance Education

Most European countries have made significant progress in defining unified and overarching strategies for lifelong learning and in setting it as a national policy priority. Such a strategy would mean that in achieving lifelong learning, a long term view would envision a coherent set of priorities, as well as the resources needed for different capacities to address flexible learning pathways and effective transition points between systems, levels of education, and training. In the case of Romania, this has been very difficult to achieve in this educational area: as the country emerged from a communist period, there has been a 20 year span of trying to catch up with the more advanced Western and Central European countries.

The Impact of Government on Educational & Career Choices

Whereas in Western countries educational and career choices are only minimally influenced by government policy, the government of the former East European communist countries intruded upon individual career choices to a large extent, in what was to be called "the governmental regimentation of access to the highest school track". (according to Pinquart et al. (2004)).

Idelological objectives.

Before the fall of communism (that is prior to 1989), adult education (AE), as part of life long learning (LLL), was a mass phenomenon; it had strongly ideological connotations. It was not considered necessary as a second chance, since there were to be no unemployed or illiterate people (Sava 1998). Under communism, enforced school attendance meant that illiteracy was practically eradicated and this held true even for the Roma population (a population now having the highest illiteracy and dropout rates). In Romania, during the socialist regime prior to 1989, the plan for industrialization identified the working class as the ruling force; it required a rigid outline that nominated the number of workers needed in each sector of the work environment. The educational focus was on expanding the working class, and the slots open in the educational system reflected this strategy. In other words, the profiles and number of career specializations were regulated by a centralized governmental plan outlining the need and availability of job opportunities.

Mandatory, Free Eduction

In the Romania of the 1970s and 1980s, education was mandatory up to the 10th grade and free of charge for the entire length of study. However, the number of high school graduates accepted into colleges or universities was severely restricted. According to the U.S. Library of Congress Study of Romania (Bachman, 1989), only 8% of the high school graduates were permitted to enroll into the highest educational track. The very same statistics (8%) apply to their East German peers, whereas in West Germany 23% of late adolescents were accepted into colleges (Pinquart et al., 2004). In the Soviet Union in the 1950s, roughly 80% of the children finishing secondary school enrolled in an institute of higher education; in the late 1970s, the figure was not more than 18% (Heller, 1988).

Occupational Choices

During communism, unemployment in Romania was kept to a minimum and every high school or college graduate was to be guaranteed a job. As a result, the central government allocated slots based on predicted demand for given occupations. As a result of this restricted opportunity for admissions, competition became very intense at an early age, so much so that career choice and decisions were pushed to the age of 16, or sometimes even as early as 14 (Bachman, 1989). With this early age in career decision making, it is not surprising that the family came to have a strong influence on career orientation and students' educational trajectory was determined mostly by concerns about job assignments, geographical location, and anticipated working assignments and conditions. Upon completion of one's educational program, an individual could not apply for a job of his or her choice; rather, the individual was assigned a job through a yearly state-coordinated distribution system. The Ministry of Education would organize long summer

sessions of graduate distribution, according to specializations and fields of study; this practically forced the graduates to work in geographical regions far away from their families or birthplace. The range of career choices was restricted and reduced by the undesirability of some of their assignments and had a very limited field of action in the socialist Romania (Ioanid, 2000; Ludusan, 2003). However, there were a few advantages to the system: First, a departure from the "common gender stereotypes of career choice" (Whitmarsh & Ritter, 2007). These were the times when higher numbers of college admission slots and greater opportunities for large city assignments made engineering an especially attractive field of studies in the 1980s. They were also the times when many female students took advantage of the educational slots available in electronics, construction, heavy machinery, or metallurgic engineering. Second, free access to health care and education, welcomed by all citizens. And third, a guaranteed employment and pension system, by means of which the Communist system offered the undisputed advantage of protection security. Ironically, this protection security – which was in fact the only instrumental freedom familiar to Romanian citizens – was fractured by the overturn of the Communist regime.

Curriculum

Prior to 1989, the university curricular content placed a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge and focused more on transmission and reproduction of a large quantity of knowledge while minimizing the value of practical applications within the educational experience. The highly specialized college curriculum carried the informational load of a combined bachelor's- and master's-levels education (Ludusan, 2003), which sufficiently equipped graduates with theoretical knowledge. However, the educational system failed to offer the experiential tools needed for the practical integration of that knowledge. With such a lack of practical experience, graduates faced a great disadvantage when they attempted to "translate" these studies to Western educational standards and practices. With the downfall of the Communist regime and the abrupt opening of opportunities to work and study abroad, the necessity to establish an international curriculum of university studies emerged with unprecedented power (Ludusan, 2003). These events also propelled a new paradigm shift in learning, one passing from reproductive to problem-solving education and formative evaluation.

TheNewEra

This was basically the heritage that all educational policies have been trying, since the1990s, to change in view of preparing graduates for the tough(er) and, by all measures, different emerging labor market. In this context, adult education and continuing professional education have known the greatest expansion and significant development., This development is due in part to the emerging new requirements in the labor market and different connotations of job profiles. It is fostered and brought along by the principles of an aspiring democratic society in which learners of all ages had to take an active part. AE has thus taken the active role of filling the gaps of education for the unemployed, for excluded groups, in the context of persistent illiteracy and increase of low income, and for the at-risk population(s). More recently, Romanian higher education institutions has become more involved within European and international projects in the field of technology-enhanced learning aiming at institutional development. As a result, it

has been possible to do a lot of catching up. Since Romania's adherence to the European Union in January 2007, more active steps have been taken towards shifting the responsibility for education and learning away from government and to the individual, as well as toward a focusing uponon the development of individual capabilities and the capacity to learn.

Opportunity

The shift from former education institutions and processes, toward diverse learning opportunities that are more process and outcome oriented, has been gradual, constant and accelerating. Although occasionally slowed down by financial scarcity, the shift is real. In Romania, AE now represents a real second chance for people who left formal education too soon, for people who need to change jobs, for those who need to overcome problems caused by social change, those who are required to identify their own needs and goals, for those who set out to learn and be ready for continuous self improvement. The government funding for LL goes mostly to professional re-qualification and re-conversion; it is being monitored by the Ministry of Labour and Social Care and the many public institutions or non-governmental organizations which develop training for new jobs. There are non-governmental organizations playing a leading role in continuing professional training because they are more flexible providers, often with international support. The need for introducing new technologies and modern equipment, the appearance of the first generations benefiting fully from modern educational programs, as well as the expansion of science-based fields, has led a now huge gap between the young graduates with top IT skills and life-learners belonging to older learning groups at a visible disadvantage in their competition for jobs. An example will serve to hightlight this.

ResultingGroups

According to an EC Report, between 2000-2006 in Romania the annual growth rate of graduates in mathematics, sciences and technologies was 5.5%, that is 1,1 percentage points above the European average rate. (Preliminary report of the European Commission in 2008 regarding education and training progress.). For example, in 2003/2004, this annual growth rate represented 24.4% of the total number of Romanian graduates, which ranked Romania higher than other recently adhered EU member states such as Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, and even well above the EU average rate, 24.1% (Eurostat 2005). At the other end of the spectrum, the participation rate of adults aged between 25 and 64 in education and vocational training is at a low level, stationary at the level of the year 2007 (1.3%). Participation in qualification-requalification training courses is low, about 4.8% (according to AMIGO, NIS 2008), with significant variations between rural and urban areas. This rate of adult participation in education and lifelong learning is still far from the European goal which stipulates an increase of at least 12.5% by 2010 from the total population aged betwee 25- 64. According to the Report on the Progress Towards Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training, Commission of the European Communities (EC Report 2008), the highest participation rates are registered

with the Scandinavian Countries and the UK (well over 20%), whereas in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania these rates are around 2%, four times below the EU average.

This huge gap between learners belonging to different age groups and having different computer skills has become more visible in the last decade and has produced imbalances in the labor market for those who did not stand a fair chance to get work. Added to all this, is the fact that the expansion of higher education in Romania in the recent years has complicated the picture because it has produced an increase in the number of graduates entering the workplace; this is accompanied by a growing concern about the mismatches between the slightly increasing demands for qualified labor and the rapidly growing number of higher education graduates (World Bank Country Report 2008).

Increasing Use of Learning Technologies in Romania

All this has happened at a time when Romanian higher education, as a result of the new learning technologies and up-to-date ICT infrastructure, has benefited from considerable know-how transfer and higher funding resources. These benefits have increased substantially not only because of funds received from various national Romanian Government programs but also, exponentially, from the simultaneous expansion of many e-learning modern programs (Istrate 2007). Consequently, all the higher education institutions have set-up Distance Education Departments, and indeed some of them Technology Enhanced Education units, which are all operational and which deal with the implementation of the new teaching methodologies within the traditional education activities. Initially, these distance education programs were centered more on correspondence education rather than on using modern information and communication technologies. However, with time they have become ever more modernized and competitive in the European space of learning and teaching; they are effective in diminishing the existing gap between the young students and older life-learners in terms of curricula, methods of teaching, learning flexibility and outcome (Nistor et al 2005). One such example is the Open Distance Learning Department of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu which was established in 1998.

The Open Distance Learning Department at Lucian Blaga

The department offers various distance courses (either initial, continuous or post higher education) and allows for 18 authorized specializations to function via distance education in 10 territorial centers. The distance education programs have, comparing to the regular studies program, the same curriculum, the same specialization, equivalent diplomas and all the rights of the graduates assured by law. Throughout Romania, the improvement of school infrastructure and the connection of educational institutions to Internet have been the goals of two major-impact programs since the 1990s: SEI (Sistemul Educational Informatizat – Education IT-based System) and RoEduNet (extending the Romanian educational information network). Beside these programs, initiatives and projects aiming to support the innovation in education have been jointly undertaken by various institutions and individuals (Istrate 2004). At our university, technically, the distance study program is operated by the MySeLF Application which is a projected electronic platform in the e-Learning 2.0. system and which provides specific resources, individual learning tutoring, bidirectional communication and self-assessment facilities. The

MySeLF e-Learning platform consists of integrated modules which allow for the use of the open meetings application for videoconferences and is assisted by the Multimedia Educational System, which consists of the Internet DIDIFR-TV channel system and TV by request. The new ICT tools used are: CDROM, e-books, websites, virtual laboratory and libraries and users are assisted online by video tutorials round the clock. Formative assessment methods and final examination are used; periodically, student feedback contribute to statistics on the impact of e-learning in distance education on web products consumers provided by two of the most highly specialized platforms for standings and statistics on Romanian sites: www.trafic.ro and www.best-top.ro**.**

Distance Education in A Historical Context

Notably, distance eductional itself is not new to Europe. Distance education has been part of the European educational scene for about 150 years. It started in 1840 in Great Britain, and between 1890 and 1920 private distance education was introduced on a regular basis in Germany, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and Finland (Karow 1980). Long distance education came to a full recognition as a value adding HE system in the second half of the last century through the establishment of Open University, (UK), Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (France), and FemUniversitat, in Germany. With well over 180,000 students, Open University is the largest in the UK, issuing 3 million diplomas and educating full-time employees, disabled people and convicts.In Eastern Europe, the course of history meant that distance education had to be introduced through state initiatives. It had to somehow take account of all missing lifelong learning issues which concern all components and levels of education and training and includes non formal and informal education contexts alike. This accounts for the lateness, occasional slowness and difficulty in its implementation throughout Romania: early education, education in family, education through mass media, education for democratic citizenship, training in enterprises, initiation into ICT and developing language skills. Following the Soviet Union model – a model known for its extensive use of distance education for postsecondary studies in conventional universities, teacher training and polytechnic colleges as well as in a number of specialized distance teaching universities – correspondence tuition in Romanian distance education has been combined with face-to-face sessions in a "consultation model" so as to enhance teaching and learning (Morcov, 2006).

The Present Romania Efforts

It is this distance education model we are discussing here from a social point of view, a model specifically designed to serve certain groups and meet specific educational criteria. From the outset, our Romanian universities have targeted certain largely adult groups as the main beneficiaries of distance education: those who were mainly adult groups of high school graduates who could not have access to HE during communism because of the severe restrictions on the number of places in entrance examinations, people who were technically left out of the system and who were in the 25-55 age group. To this, another target group was also encompassed, represented by persons willing to pursue HE but who were prevented from doing so because of lack of geographical accessibility.

Much has been said about the disadvantages of learning in distance education programs in relation to traditional campus settings, particularly in terms of classroom learning, lack of face-to-face interaction, geographical remoteness and quality of program. Initially, our university conceived distance education in the form of correspondence education. However, the slowness of the teaching and learning processes, as well as the lack of any computer skills, particularly attributed to older generations of learners, made it necessary in the late 1990s to add another component to the system so as to account for the age group discrepancies. This has meant that the face-to-face teaching had to be maintained somehow and students were to be assisted in the education process as much as in regular programs. Despite all controversies, distance learning's advantage of allowing students in remote areas to attain to educational opportunities they could not have otherwise had, has proved to be an impressive advantage. Therefore, besides online courses and assistance, our university teaching faculty travel periodically to distance education centers, making in person efforts to fill the gaps of knowledge, offer tutorials and contribute to strengthening the relations between actors involved in a process of learning (trust, commonly respected rules on competition/co-operation, relational attitudes, common language, etc). Such a learning process which traverses a lengthy socialization process is, in principle, only possible within the framework of physical proximity (Crevoisier 2008).

Changing Student Perspections & Academic Reponses

However, the times have changed and for the new majority of students, young or old, higher education is no longer as central to their lives as it once was for previous generations of students. Students' now expectations are for a different, newly established relationship with the college than students have historically had: today's students seek convenience, service, quality and low cost. In fact, current desires for distance education are for a stripped-down version of higher education minus the plethora of electives and student activities, a more adult-oriented, for-profit educational and territorial variant. This has led to the placing of the online life-learner in a learning context in which, from a social point of view, the Internet has become a tool for innovation, one that also reshapes notions such as borders, space, time and mobility.

On the general level of the development of society and the economy, we are witnessing nowadays an extraordinary growth regarding the mobility of information, knowledge, individuals and capital. At present, there is a phenomenal development of new information technologies, a drop in transport costs, easier movement of persons, and progressive integration of higher education within corporations, as well as considerable growth in intangible activities within the composition of a product and its consumption. All these factors have been leading to a growth and multiplicity of knowledge which can be mobilized fast and over greater distances but becomes efficient if the needs and expectations of the recipients have been properly identified. The decisive factor in online learning is therefore no longer the fact that learning and economic activities match regional training and structures, but rather the local capacity to formulate learning demands and entrepreneurial projects as well as the ability to mobilize knowledge and competencies at medium and long distance. This is effectively accomplished by distance education and, since its establishment, it has generated ever new social patterns of

bonding in a shared memory of recent learning experiences, enhanced by the on-line learner's ease of accommodation at a distance to the future job.

These strategies have proven worthwhile, all the more so as debates and inter institutional consultations are currently being held to overcome the general decrease of Romania's population. As higher education represents a terminal segment in education and training, it also has been our university's mission to therefore absorb, through DE, an important pool of adult population so as to contribute to the diversification of the student body. The prospect of decrease in the population of Romania (by 11% by the year 2030) according to EU forecasts) will have a strong impact on the development and use of course areas. The population of Romania will constantly grow older by 2050, and the employed retired ratio will grow worse to more than twice the current level. In 2005, the dependency rate for people aged over 65 was 21% in Romania, partly as a consequence of fluctuations in retirement policies. The rate, which is defined as the ratio between the category of over 65 and the category of employees aged 16–64 will be 51% in 2050. This means (according to National report 2008) that the number of people aged over 65 will represent almost 30% of the total population in the same year, compared to the current level of 15%. The total population of Romania will gradually decrease to 17.1 million in 2050. Under these conditions, it has become clearer that the university's current educational concerns should be socially and strategically geared towards the development of a national integrated and coherent strategy for lifelong learning/adult education, assumed by all stakeholders and social partners. As distance education facilitates the social and professional integration of new life-learners, enhances new community strategies and facilitates the intra-national mobilization of learners, we seem to have thus moved from the concept of socially static externalities to one that is relational, evolutionary, and more compatible with our territorial approaches. Likewise, as individuals and competencies move around and interact with others at varying distances, when we take a social perspective, the processes of interaction and learning can be perceived as a collective, shared activity within territorial education which is capable of producing new networked life styles and different forms of national socialization and family solidarities. This enhances our graduates' capacity to take decisions and act over borders and disadvantages in real time.

According to the National Institute of Statistics (INS), in the academic year 2006-2007, the country's long distance education students numbered 177, 204, which is about 43, 000 students more than in the previous year and 18 times more than in 1999, when this education system started to be fully implemented in Romania. More data shows that our university's distance education has produced a huge regional impact, as Sibiu is situated in the Central Region of the country (Transylvania), which covers 34 100 square km, represents 14,3 % of the whole Romanian territory and occupies the 5th place among the 8 existing development regions of Romania. The region's population is 2,5 mil people, out of which cca 60% are located in the urban area. The age population structure indicates 15,7% inhabitants aged between 0-15, 66% in the 15 -59 group, and 18,3% over 60. Since 1998, our university has trained well over 30,000 distance education graduates and two-thirds have reportedly found jobs in the first two years following graduation. Most of the faculties in the Long Distance centers are of Economics,

Agricultural Sciences, Food Industry and Environmental Protection, Law, Journalism, Engineering and Sciences and they train future engineers, accountants, tourist services managers, financing experts, food processing engineers, public administration officers and gas technicians and experts. The regional potential is exploited through the Branch College of Gas Exploitation and Management at Medias which operates and trains specialists for the area rich in natural gas resources and gas delivery companies. There are also Long Distance MA studies programs available for the graduates who wish to specialize further in their studies or attain to the Ph.D level.The program has thus reached and activated a significant proportion of adult, underserved, distant, and other nontraditional student populations in the Transylvanian region. In other words, we have tipped the scale in the occasional relative balance that existed between the highly trained graduates from our traditional study programs, on the one hand, and, on the other, the less favored generations with scanter chances to succeed these days on a tough(er) national and European labor market facing migratory flows of foreign workforce.

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