

Distance education in Romanian higher education

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ABSTRACT

As a paper purpose, I chose to conduct a pilot research on students' perception on economic university distance education and I have tried to determine the most important factors in the decision to enroll in a ID program, to determine students' degree of involvement in an ID program, to identify students' degree of satisfaction with distance learning and the main obstacles encountered while learning through distance education.

This research work is the result of interpreting the data gathered by the questionnaire survey method., applied online by using Google Forms, on different social groups of students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies, enrolled at a distance learning program.

I have demonstrated that the assumptions made are valid: if students have the minimum logistical endowment for ID, then the problems encountered in the learning process are minimal; if students choose distance learning for lack of time, then they do not pay special attention to the study; If ID students have as their primary objective obtaining a diploma, then the interest for personal development is minimal.

Keywords – distance education; students; higher education; e-learning.

JEL Classification – A230, A290, I230

1. Introduction

I agree with the statement in which Cace, Richițeanu and Stăiculescu (2012) claim that the challenges of living in a world of constant change and insecure environments, the stress of looking for a job and finding an advantageous and motivating one is a stressful search for all students and graduates, but e-learning provides them many career opportunities. I chose to draw up the thesis entitled *Distance education in Romanian higher education*, as this topic is intensely debated.

I think that this work will bring a lot of knowledge to those interested in distance economic university education, being an important source of information on this subject. I hope that this will provide answers to the non-learned questions to

all those who do not know enough the implications of this type of education and make a contribution in terms of informing and educating future students.

2. Theoretical aspects of distance education

I agree with the statement supported by Cross (2004) which says that learning is a great mystery of life. We know very little about how the mind works when it teaches. The synapses, neurons, cortex, and the theories underlying their function help us to learn and understand the complexity of all things. In fact, learning is a continuous process, creating neural connections and rejuvenating the brain, and it is the one that allows us to have a successful life.

Distance learning has a fairly old history and this period has undergone significant changes. Over time, the society has moved from postal mailing to accessing the Internet, and this has favored the development of distance learning. (Spector et al., 2008)

As Istrate (2000, p.25) argues, distance education is the teaching-learning action planned by an institution that provides the material needed for the study to the enrolled students without constraining participants to be present. Mediation takes place in different ways, the most commonly used online collaboration.

3. Research concerning the students' perception on economic university distance education

Regarding the applicative part of the paper, I chose to conduct a pilot research on students' perception on economic university distance education, and in this chapter I will present thye research methodology and interpret the results obtained.

3.1. Research methodology

The project was based on the research question: What is the perception of students about economic university distance education?

In order to establish the correct answer to this question, I have tried to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determining the most important factors in the decision to enroll in a ID program;
2. Determining students' degree of involvement in an ID program;
3. Identify students' degree of satisfaction with distance learning;
4. Identification of the main obstacles encountered while learning through distance education.

In the beginning of this research I have started from the following assumptions:

Hypothesis no. 1 - If students have the minimum logistical endowment needed for ID, then the problems encountered in the learning process are minimal;

Hypothesis no. 2 - If students choose distance learning for lack of time, then they do not pay special attention to the study;

Hypothesis no. 3 - If ID students have the primary objective of obtaining a diploma, then the interest for personal development is minimal.

This research work is the result of interpreting the data gathered by the questionnaire survey method. The applied questionnaire includes 22 questions. The first question was asked to get relevant answers for research, avoiding the answers of students who are not studying within a distance university program. The following 16 questions are very important as they relate to obtaining information in relation with the objectives of this research, and the last 5 provide information about the identification data of the students surveyed.

I conducted survey using Google Forms and I applied online during the period 22.04.2017 - 22.05.2017. During this time I sent invitations via e-mail and distributed the questionnaire link to different social groups of students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies in order to get as many answers as possible. Finally, I obtained 264 valid answers, so I can state that the research is a pilot type of research, the number of answers being insufficient to exhibit representative results for all students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, enrolled at a Distance learning program.

3.2. Analysis and interpretation of research results

In order to realize this paper, I have tried to answer the research question by fulfilling the proposed objectives, which was done by analyzing the answers received through the questionnaire launched online. So I chose to analyze them with Microsoft Office Excel to graphically represent students' perceptions and finally draw conclusions. I chose to address the first question "Do you study or study in a distance economics program?" to filter out the answers and get those that are representative of research. Thus, out of the 332 answers, it seems that 68 of the respondents (20%) chose the "No" option and for the continuation of the analysis we kept the answers of the 264 students of a distance economics program.

Regarding the logistical endowment needed for "distance learning", 89% of the students stated that they had the minimum necessary for the courses and the preparation of the themes for the periodic evaluation, demonstrating the hypothesis that if the students have the minimum necessary logistics, then the problems encountered in the learning process are minimal. Regarding the educational goals they have in their personal development plan, most choose to study at distance to obtain a diploma, skills or for personal development.

Asking why they chose to study at a distance rather than a full-time program, most of them cited the reason for lack of time and the existence of a job. Also, costs have a significant impact on making this choice.

Concerning the impact of career specialization, for 52% of students the current specialization is of benefit to the current workplace, with the remaining 48% following the studies for a future job, which shows that students want a professional development.

Regarding the frequency of faculty attendance, it appears that 37% only participate in assisted applications and periodic evaluations, 29% attend weekly courses, 13% only show regular reviews, 12% twice a month and 9% once per month.

Asking "which days of the week do you prefer to be called to college?", 63% chose the "weekend" option, and 37% opted to attend classes during the week after 18:00. This is in line with previous responses that show that most are already active on the labor market and their time is limited.

By identifying the time ID students gave to the study, I found that 54% of them study only before the exams, and 23% are those who allocate 2-3 times a week. This was to be expected in view of the busy schedule of those who decide to follow this form of education, confirming the hypothesis that if students choose distance learning for lack of time then they do not pay special attention to the study.

In terms of the amount allocated to the survey, 57% of respondents allocate around 3000-4000 RON annually, 24% allocate between 2000-3000 RON and 19% over 4000 RON. Given the reduced frequency of courses, it is obvious that much of the amount allocated annually comes from the study fee, which hovers around 3500 RON per year.

Addressing the question "What are the factors contributing to the usefulness of" distance learning "?, we have identified that 42% of the surveyed students consider this form of education to be useful, precisely because the amounts spent are lower compared to those envisaged by the education with frequency. In addition, 29% appreciate distance learning for the ability to store information of interest, and 29% think they can quickly get a large and diverse amount of quality information.

Regarding the advantages of distance learning, it seems that for adults it does not affect career development, being an alternative to traditional education, providing the opportunity to obtain certification in the economic field, as long as other variants are impossible.

Most, in a proportion of 35%, considered a barrier the need to study alone, without constantly receiving confirmation that "you are on the right way." Also, 17% confirmed that it is impossible to socialize and create friends, and for 14% the lack of direct contact with other colleagues or teachers is another barrier.

Asking "Do you think distance learning contributes to lowering school drop-out rates?", It seems that 67% chose the negative option and 33% the positive one. I agree with the majority, since those who choose distance learning have good reasons, as I said above.

Concerning the level of satisfaction with teacher-student communication, staff courtesy, student feedback, planned meetings, ongoing spending, available teaching materials, and guidance from the coordinating professor, the majority said they were satisfied, but there are many dissatisfied respondents, which reflects that there is possibility for improvement of all these items.

Regarding the problems encountered during the academic year, it appears that 77% of the students did not have problems, but the other 23% faced problems such as: examinations being organized, crowded themes in a short period of time, poor

communication with administrative staff, outdated online platforms, lack of notifications following upgrading teachers too demanding for the exam, relative to the level taught during assisted activities, as well as lack of communication with many teachers, as well as cumbersome communication with other teachers.

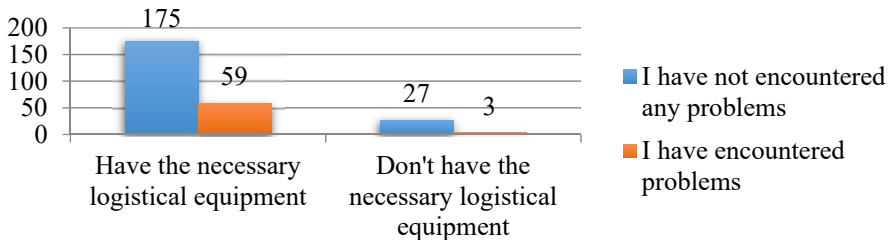
Following the research, the ID student's in the economic field is characterized as female, employed, with higher education, aged 21-30 years. The environment of origin is urban, which can be explained by the migration from the village to the city and the income achieved somewhere over 3000 RON/month.

4. Results

I will continue to demonstrate whether the assumptions made are validated by the research:

Hypothesis no. 1 - If students have the minimum logistical endowment needed for ID, then the problems encountered in the learning process are minimal.

Figure 1 - Testing the hypothesis no. 1

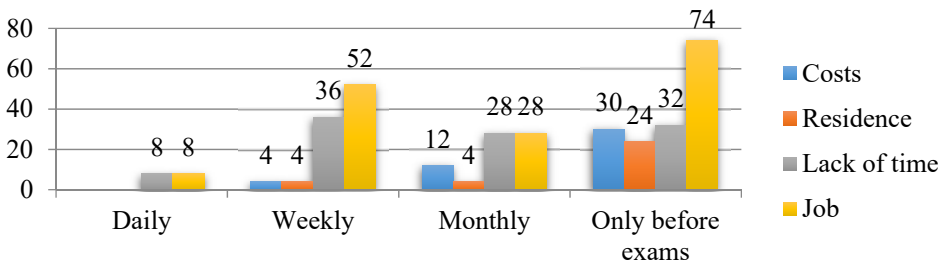


Source: Own processing based on the questionnaire

As can be seen in Figure 1, the first hypothesis is valid, since those who have the minimum logistical endowment required for ID, have not encountered problems in the learning process.

Hypothesis no. 2 - If students choose distance learning for lack of time, then they do not pay special attention to the study;

Figure 2 - Testing the hypothesis no. 2

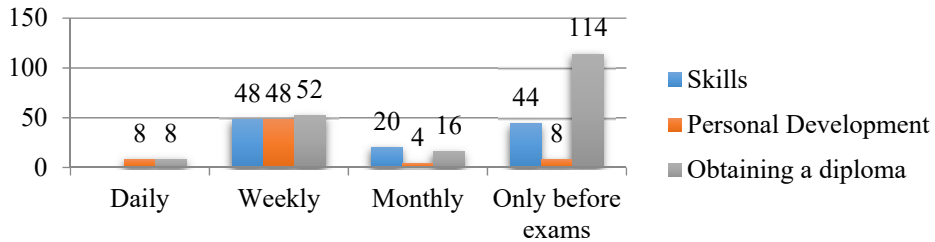


Source: Own processing based on the questionnaire

According to Figure 2, hypothesis no. 2 is valid, as it seems that the time spent on the study is minimal, both for students who have chosen the job and for those for whom lack of time has been a reason for distance study.

Hypothesis no. 3 - If ID students have as their primary objective obtaining a diploma, then the interest for personal development is minimal.

Figure 3- Testing the hypothesis no. 3



Source: Own processing based on the questionnaire

As shown in Figure 3, it seems that hypothesis no. 3 is valid, because if ID students have the primary objective of obtaining a diploma, then the interest for personal development is minimal, as it only takes time to study just before exams.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the ID student's in the economic field is characterized as female, employed, with higher education, aged 21-30 years. The environment of origin is urban, which can be explained by the migration from the village to the city and the income achieved somewhere over 3000 RON/month.

As I have suggested, I have demonstrated that the assumptions made are valid: if students have the minimum logistical endowment for ID, then the problems encountered in the learning process are minimal; if students choose distance learning for lack of time, then they do not pay special attention to the study; if ID students have as their primary objective obtaining a diploma, then the interest for personal development is minimal.

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