

Faculty not Factory

(Education is transforming from a mission and a model into a product and a tool - about the Arcadia of the Academy)

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Abstract

The main goal of the School for Distance, Electronic and Continuing learning in New Bulgarian University is to manage the programs for part-time students. The heritage from the Communist period in higher education had many difficulties (including the forms of education for part-time students and programs). The **part-time learning** was “second hand” education in all of its dimensions: learning materials, schedule, and gravity of diploma. Nowadays, when the trend is in **blended-learning** and **e-learning**, the aim for the School for Distance, Electronic and Continuing learning is to transform the methodology of learning in part-time programs without making the University into a factory for diplomas or a diploma mill. The administration of the School decided to create a **standard for e-learning** to describe the frame of the education process. This standard is playing the role of a contract that guarantees students the minimum of the services on which they can rely. In the same time the standard provides the Administration of the School guidelines to handle cases of suspected **cheating** on the examinations and/or evaluations. From one side, students can send their papers and do test on line. From other side, the University can use software for **plagiarism** and many settings in testing to guarantee the quality of the work. In teaching process programs can begin utilization of records of the lectures simultaneously making the lectures non-obligatory. Most of the learning materials can be made available in digital copy in the platform for e-learning.

Shortly after this stage, virtual classrooms can be introduced into the education. After the first two years of on-line testing, analysis demonstrates that the GPA is decreasing, contrary to expectations. Effective instruction should introduce a blended evaluation of tasks. Each student must choose a topic from several proposed from the faculty and submit a paper electronically. The material is checked for plagiarism but the student must present the work before an academic jury on campus with all other students who have worked on the same topic.. If some students show differences between the grades of the on-line paper and the campus presentation, they become objects of special attention when doing on line testing. They may be required to do a second test. Also the Faculty uses the possibility from the program to gather students twice a year for outdoor activities. In those activities, trainers divide students in teams and give them tasks for teamwork. The outcomes are that students become more responsible participants in the learning process. It is clear that in the future higher education will become more and more practically oriented. Elements from continuing education and team building programs will become more and more important and efficient.

Keywords: part-time learning, blended-learning, e-learning, standards for e-learning, cheating, plagiarism

Introduction

The world in which we are living is changing. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the world has moved from ideological to economic competition. There is no sphere of human life that has not been more or less transformed, over the last 20 years: food, travelling, communications, entertainment, and healthcare. Confrontations on religious grounds are a manifestation of the same struggle for economic supremacy. It would be naïve to claim that economic rivalry has never existed before. On the contrary, it has always been the driving force behind people's actions, because it motivates them to act, to change, to discover, to live a better life (taking into account the absolute relativity of these notions "living a better life", "being happy").

The Western world has tried to establish a socio-political system, which has a hard outer shell and an internal system of conditions and norms that contribute to a strong economy, wealth and the common good. In the East, on the other hand, they experimented with controlled, regulated environment, planned by the state, designed to provide for such an outer shell. The centrally controlled environment had reduced to a minimum the conditions conducive to competition and entrepreneurship, introduced artificial norms, and being anti-class by nature, has developed a caste system. In both worlds education occupied an equally important place. In the Western world, it reached the highest point of applicability—education enabled technologies to take their natural course and develop aggressively, searching for new ways to augment and accumulate wealth (medicine, high technologies, communications), while in the East, due to the totalitarian nature of the political regimes, education degraded into a well-developed defense sector (both technologies and knowledge were developed in this sphere), and demonstrated total disregard for the most basic amenities of the average middle-class individual. In the sphere of defense technologies, the two rivaling camps were almost on an equal par, but in terms of the standard of living of the man in the street, the gap was huge. The answer to the question for whose benefit the state operates was more or less identical, although the wording was slightly different in the two camps: in the West it was "*for the benefit of the individual*", while in the East it was "*for the benefit of the people*" (Zozowski, R., 1989).

We need a generalized review of the philosophical ideas about economics, social structure, rights, responsibilities and the individual's place in society, in order identify how they affect the education model in both systems. The models are instrumental to this paper, since the domain where they have interacted over the last 25 years constitutes the environment in which education in Bulgaria has evolved.

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc also undermined the model of education, which does not relate to practice, but rather serves ideology. The Western world gained the upper hand and thus unleashed the maximization of profits (which had been constrained by the mere existence of the Eastern Bloc with markets and spheres of influence, which were off-limits). Deprived of their ideological shell, the countries in the former Socialist Bloc found themselves in a peculiar environment of transformations—changes in education and government models—which fall within the scope of this research paper. In the Far East, a hybrid system emerged, gaining momentum in the changing world—China with its form of socialist market economy (Wai-Cheng Y., 2004).

Currently, we do not know of any stable and viable model of an education system that does not experience any difficulties. Since the time of the industrial revolution, knowledge has always been burdened with the expectations of creating conditions conducive to extending the human life span and augmenting possibilities for production and acquisition of public goods. From being establishments that were monastic in spirit and nature, universities had to connect with research institutes and laboratories, acting as incubators of technologies and innovation. The two worlds of knowledge and profits became even more tightly interwoven and this was an irreversible process which radically changed the Arcadia of the Academy. From being a mission and a model, education transformed into a product and a tool (Scott, J. C., 2006).

After the end of the Second World War, the two worlds on the East and West side of the Berlin wall fell into an interesting relationship with each other, similar to the DNA and RNA chains—interwoven with each other, struggling to continue their co-existence, in a replicating interdependence. If the West came up with a novelty, the East "borrowed" it (legally or illegally). If the East showed any signs of military and technological progress, then the West would pool their resources to surpass the expected outcome. Tom and Jerry versus Nu, pogodi!, Lada versus Volkswagen, Soyuz versus Apollo.

Despite the differences in the social structure of the two systems, no matter how hard the establishment wanted to prove that the people in the two worlds were different, that still was far from

true. People are strikingly similar in terms of their desires and needs. Both in the west and in the east, there are people who have reached maturity in their psycho-physical development, have family and professional responsibilities, take care of their family and offspring, and live in areas physically remote from any university campus. These people muster the confidence that they are capable of completing a lot more than a one-off practical course with self-study materials posted by mail. The experience accumulated in the mid-19th century with non-classroom instruction in Great Britain and the USA, in the 1950s proved instrumental in fostering the introduction of the first university distance education programs. At the same time, the East adopted the part-time and evening modes of instruction in higher education and vocational colleges. The characteristics and the challenges were the same—behavioral, institutional and situational. The boom in the development of distance education in the USA and Canada occurred in the 1990s. Upon reaching peak levels in enrollment between 1992 and 1997, the levels plateaued for a while, until the second decade of the 21st century. The expansion of the platform of technical tools for distance education has triggered new transformations in its nature. The Internet revolution is about to suffocate university distance education, after having brought it to the level of almost absolute technical perfection.

The initial model of sending only text learning materials by mail, which was later replaced by audio and video recordings, or monthly intensive classroom-based instruction sessions, has finally given way to the capabilities offered by electronic distance education (synchronous or asynchronous). They, in turn, put to the test the function and authority of the university as an institution. Beginning with individual courses for additional qualification, distance education reached its prime as an alternative form for obtaining a bachelor's or master's degree, only to see it change again towards a vocational or combined/mixed with the full-time mode of study nowadays. Technological advances both assist and challenge the model of distance education. The opportunities for wider access to university education benefit the whole environment by enhancing its capacity (professional and personality), but only as long as it exists in a pure state and perfect form. However, the differences between the East and the West, engendered by years of antagonism, in terms of purpose and meaning of existence, are instrumental here as well. In the West, students seek practical application of the knowledge and skills, regardless of how they were obtained—in full-time or distance education programs, while in the East the knowledge (or rather the document certifying that some knowledge or skill has been acquired) is viewed as a guarantee for the transition from one caste to another, from equality to a higher level of equality. This dissonance between the goals of the students engenders the differences and the problems posed to the development of the model of distance education (Nasseh, B., 1997).

Education is a sphere of human activity which is most susceptible to the influence of two seemingly opposing development strategies—on the one hand, the strategy based on innovations, and on the other, based on traditions. Accumulating experience and maintaining an established model of instruction provides for the opportunity to maintain and apply standards in education. The standards, in their own turn, allow for defining quality. This, however, is partial quality since it reflects the institution's satisfaction with the implementation of a system of norms and the functioning of the education model in a predictable and manageable format. On the other hand, keeping to an already established model by implementing standards poses the risk of dissatisfaction on the part of the students and the probability of another aspect of quality suffering. Education can easily end up being outdated, impracticable, theoretical and dull. The challenge nowadays facing both modes of instruction—full-time and distance—is how to maintain the quality, and yet change to match the environment and the demand, but at the same time managing to keep knowledge and skills in a scientific context.

Examining the model of distance education management at New Bulgarian University (NBU) is a process and text that will proceed from the concrete to the general, and vice versa. The lack of one or several universal and viable models of distance education, without any issues or alterations in the structure or mechanism, is a challenge which is outside the scope of this text. However, this paper aims at suggesting a possible direction and framework for the desired solution. The high degree of perception of individualization in each individual nowadays is the result of the global processes, which through practically mass and matrix models, deliver information, access to services and tools for action. At the same time, this focus on the individual and the evocation of a feeling that each and every individual is unique and valuable in his/her own right, are far from sincere, and are employed to disguise the striving for easier and heftier profits. Thus, at the same time, each of us is feeling increasingly more unique, while in reality we are becoming more and more uniform, part of rows and columns in a database.

The Europe 2020 strategy for the development of the EU envisages that by the end of this period, each of the member states will have managed to get 40% of their high school graduates to continue and successfully complete their education in universities. According to a speech of the Minister of Education Sergey Ignatov, as far as Bulgaria is concerned, this indicator is currently standing at 36%. What is disturbing, however, is not whether the country will be able to reach, exceed or fail to reach this indicator, but rather the fact that we are again resorting to planning and controlling of needs. Being faced with the lack of qualified workers in a world of advanced high technologies, the EU is attempting to tackle an issue by setting indicators to be met. As a result, many individuals who do not need university education will enroll and obtain a diploma. The point when institutional higher education from being a free choice turns into a necessity is right now in the presence. This alarming transformation combines the two convictions of “western” civilization that no knowledge is wasted, and that once a task has been assigned, the transformation will be completed by both parties involved in it—the student and the trainers—in the best possible manner. Countries in the East are perfectly familiar with such meeting of targets, as well as the mechanisms to feign an activity and its final product in order to absorb the allocated funds. In line with this centralized policy of the EU for regulating the processes in the field of higher education, the system of regulation of the modes of study in higher education in Bulgaria has also undergone some transformations. The establishment of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency and the adoption of the criterion model for evaluation of universities is institutionally justifiable and beneficial for an environment that is still incapable of implementing a healthy dose of self-regulation (УКАЗАНИЕ И КРИТЕРИИ, 2004).

The mass delivery of higher education via digital resources is a controversial trend. It does allow for the opportunity to discover hidden talents and for unexpected breakthroughs in the development of sciences and their application in practice. Along with this, the process of democratization of the elitist institutions that universities used to be before 1989 in the West and the East, opened up opportunities for profanation and quality debasement of education. The intangible added value of the diploma was reduced. The establishment of an increasing number of new educational institutions, the transformation of vocational colleges into universities and the training in virtual universities became quite common. The transformation of education into a market commodity forced even some of the largest and most expensive universities (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, Berkeley, Columbia University, University of British Columbia and the University of Texas) to initiate transformations and to introduce electronic education platforms (EDX (2016)). These universities did not open directly to the distance education mode of study, but by pooling their resources in the development of the platform for open (and free?!) electronic education, they practically demonstrated the level of change in the perception of higher education. The MOOC platforms (Massive Open Online Course) do not offer complete programs, but rather individual courses taught by distinguished professors or on interesting topics (Wikipedia (2016)). This phenomenon of elite universities offering generally accessible education in certain disciplines electronically might be attributed to several reasons, not necessarily in synchronicity. Relying on their already established reputation and their quality of education, elite universities have begun to offer such open courses as a response to the emergence of huge virtual universities, which have begun to offer distance bachelor, master and doctoral programs at a very low cost and with lowered requirements. Thus, they reveal the real level of university education, as they perceive it, and make it open and generally accessible. This paper will attempt to analyze the facts and trace the processes, without daring to venture into bolder and more speculative forecasts. But in this particular case, we would like to predict that the development of individual training courses for the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge will lead to the shift of students away from the actual bachelor and master programs to hands-on training programs aimed at the acquisition of professional skill or continuing education. Thus it is likely that a process of normalization of the situation could be initiated and a realignment of the constituting elements. The EU though is still faced with the issue of striving to impose centralized control and fulfillment of targets. Universities, however, no matter private or state-owned, are beginning to seek solutions other than the officially suggested. The development of programs for vocational and continuing education and of individual courses puts them in direct competition with a multitude of unaccredited institutions, centers and agencies.

At this moment, we are poised on the cusp of the dynamic processes of change in institutions meeting the demands and intuition of those who want to be educated. The democratization of higher education in Bulgaria puts the established universities’ ability to survive to the test. The need for transformation of the overall education model and process ensures change, which will ultimately cater to the needs of the people and the economy, though how it will unfold in time is not quite clear.

Distance education at NBU has long traditions, and has made a name for itself. On the one hand is its long history, while on the other—its accomplishments over the last few years. In an environment where new higher education institutions spring up regularly, the admission quotas are increasing while the number of the graduating classes is shrinking, the threat of the university turning into a factory for diplomas is quite imminent. In the course of expanding the target population from which students are recruited, the ability of the newly admitted students to cope with the academic content and the attendant standards and requirements to be met is shrinking. In order to retain students and to prevent their “leakage” into rival educational institutions offering lower expectations and evaluation criteria, the university has to decide on a strategy for development: whether to go with the flow and turn into a rank and file player on the market, or to devise a high-risk strategy for boosting the quality of education, while simultaneously expanding the technological capabilities of the education platform. Currently, the implementation at NBU of the concept for educational model in distance learning outlined below has proved its expediency. Although initially, the number of newly admitted students plummeted, NBU has succeeded in maintaining the levels of the new intakes of students within a range wider than the average for the country.

The occurrence of several events at the same time has resulted in a situation plagued by many difficulties and risky moves. On the one hand was the boom of web 2.0 technologies, while on the other, due to the demographic collapse, the number of high school graduates also plummeted (Web 2.0 (2016)). Bulgaria's accession to the European Union ensured free access of Bulgarian students to European universities and the labor market raised the bar for the educational attainment of newly appointed staff. These circumstances were mirrored in the development of the education market—an increasing number of new educational institutions were established, all of which were in fierce competition with each other (offering similar academic programs and seemingly equal opportunities for the students to engage in flexible learning modes). The price formation of the educational service adheres to the dumping principle. The interconnection between the academic programs and the actual economic sector is at a very low level. Due to some peculiarities of the legislative framework and its development over the last two decades, we are currently experiencing a shortage of habilitated professors possessing practical experience and up-to-date education, tested under the new economic conditions.

NBU is the first Bulgarian university which, in the post-1989 period, immediately after it was established, introduced a new type of education in the country—distance education. The very name of this mode of learning was opposed to the then existing forms of part-time study, the Eastern European counterpart of the western distance education. At first, NBU relied mainly on the media popular in the 1990s—movies, radio lectures, and mailed materials. The students were still required to attend some classes on campus, although these were designed in a way that differed from the traditional month-long lecture cycle in part-time education. The classes were called consultations and were not intended to deliver academic content (unlike the part-time model of education). During these consultation sessions, the students, who had already familiarized themselves with the learning materials, were able to discuss with the teachers any unclear points from the textbooks. The emphasis was on the students' self-study, counting on their strong motivation, discipline and perseverance. During these consultations, the examination modes were also discussed and analyzed. These followed the model adopted in the full-time mode of study at NBU—instead of one final examination. The final grade was assigned on the basis of several components. The aim of these was twofold—the students were able to learn the content in smaller portions and test their knowledge by means of several communication models (independent study, written examination, and interview), as well as to reduce to a minimum the probability of bias in evaluation on the part of the teacher. Over the years, this model has evolved and is currently structured as described below.

The students are provided with textbooks and paper materials for some of the courses, while all courses are covered by electronic education. Each course features two consultations, four academic hours each within the semester. The students from other cities are served by three local campuses (in the cities of Plovdiv, Varna and Vidin). There are three types of assessment—ongoing, final and mixed type. Students may choose when to complete the final examinations, can actually resit for any of them and select their highest score to be included in the final grade. Attendance of consultations is optional, recordings of the consultation sessions conducted on campus are also uploaded, and the integration of a virtual classroom as a method of training and communication is also underway.

The backbone of distance education at NBU is the Moodle platform. All students and teachers at the university have access to it, including those enrolled in full-time modes of study.

There are two types of calendars providing information to the students. The general calendar provides information as to terms and deadlines applicable to all NBU students—enrollment, payment of the tuition fees for the semester, public holidays, the beginning and the end of the semester and the examination session. In the individual calendar, which is synchronized with the platform for electronic education, the students can find all upcoming tasks, tests and deadlines for the specific courses in which they are enrolled.

Each student or teacher has access during the current semester to all courses in which he/she is enrolled. In the course sections, the students can find all academic content in electronic format that has been uploaded in advance. Also there, they can take electronic tests, which are generated individually for each student from an existing test bank with questions on the course.

The system for video training allows for the broadcast in real time (as well as recording for later use) of lectures from the NBU lecture halls equipped with video cameras. Over 95% of the lectures for distance-learning students are conducted through this system. It is also integrated in the platform for electronic education. Students' written assignments are run through the internet-based plagiarism-prevention service Turnitin. The software is integrated in Moodle NBU and enables teachers, if they wish, to check papers uploaded by students for improper citations and potential unoriginal content.

Moodle NBU consists of the following:

- more than 15,000 courses
- more than 37,000 users
- more than 17,000 pages of academic content
- more than 100,000 files with academic content
- more than 20,000 hyperlinks to resources outside of Moodle
- more than 20,000 assignments
- more than 4,000 electronic tests
- more than 10,000 forums

On a daily basis, between 3,000 and 5,000 students access Moodle NBU, which is approximately half of the students currently being taught at the university.

The model of distance education described above, however, is facing a number of difficulties and challenges both internal and external for the university.

A number of internal factors pose a threat to distance education. First of all, there is the unsatisfactory quality of the academic content and programs taught. They are structured as each department sees fit and do not take into account students' expectations. The business point of view is also not taken into consideration, mostly due to the widespread apathy among businesses with regard to education, although attempts are being made to establish contacts.

Distance education still remains in the shadow of full-time education. Teachers are not motivated either, which invariably entails lower quality of education and lack of interest. However, distance education is in desperate need of exactly the opposite—more attention to students, whose contact with the teacher is quite limited.

Distance learning programs face competition from full-time programs offering electronic education. Full-time students are not required to attend classes and are able to keep track of the course via Moodle and keep in touch with what's happening at the university. In a sense, the full-time mode of study at NBU has asserted itself as an improved version of distance education, offered by the university. It enables students to work and study at the same time.

The launching of new distance learning programs requires greater effort—the initial development of academic content. There is no instrument through which to motivate teachers and departments to do just that.

External factors mainly include the state regulation of this segment of the education market. In 2013, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency instituted requirements and criteria for the accreditation of distance learning programs. The administrative burden of inaugurating a new distance learning program has been increased considerably.

Many colleges and universities emulate the NBU methodology for distance learning education and are beginning to implement some platforms for electronic education—most often Moodle, Blackboard, etc.

The academic programs offered are almost identical in terms of their scope and structure. The instructors usually teach classes at more than one institution.

To enroll in a distance education program at NBU is no longer an easy way to obtain a diploma. Distance education has significantly raised the bar on students. This was accomplished over a period of several years. The notion that distance learning differs from full-time study not only in terms of its methodology, but also in terms of its nature was operational during the 1990s and the first decade of the current century. The Internet boom exposed the differences and allowed for the practice of plagiarism and other forms of cheating through them. The need to introduce individualized electronic tests further complicated the examinations transparency issues. It became imperative to develop models for coping with those difficulties and transforming the modes of study so that they remain equally convenient and attractive to working students or students residing abroad, but without undermining the quality of education and assessment. Two strategies to deal with the problem were decided upon. On the one hand, the structure and academic content of distance education programs were harmonized with those of the full-time programs. Requirements for students enrolled in distance learning programs were raised. New courses and modes of learning, which at first glance seemed totally unfit for the specific schedule of distance learning, were later added to the curriculum. On the other hand, the technological tools ensuring the transparency of assessment were also upgraded—special software for the prevention of plagiarism, electronic tests were equipped with a number of components enabling teachers to examine and compare the performance of students and to re-check any suspicious submissions when they come across any irregularities or unexpected results.

At the same time, the content taught to students fails to keep up. The academic content is delivered in an innovative multimedia environment, but it has not undergone any major revisions and lacks enough contemporary pedagogical approaches. This is the next step in the development of distance education at NBU and it will be initiated exactly through this medium since it is distance education that is the driving force behind innovations in NBU. The technologies that are implemented to address its needs (like video cameras, plagiarism prevention software, and electronic tests) are also successfully implemented in the full-time education, while the revision of the academic content and the development of vocational education aimed at the acquisition of practical skills through the distance education mode of study is one possible model in the future.

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