
QUALITY APPROACH TO BLENDED LEARNING AT WARSAW SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS – A CASE STUDY

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Introduction - importance of the quality in higher education

E-learning in its various forms has become an essential part of university education in many countries. There is no doubt nowadays, that it can play an important role both in tertiary education and in life long learning. Also in Poland, even if there are still no legal regulations concerning this type of studies (and in Polish educational system all types of university studies has to be officially approved) , extent to what e-learning is applied indicates that the process at many universities has reached its maturity phase which leads to a significant change in approach, that can be illustrated by two questions. Previous approach described by the question: “Should we implement e-learning at our curriculum?” is now quite often replaced by the question “How it should be introduced in order to ensure the best quality of teaching process?” And further (at those institutions, which have already implemented it successfully) – “How to use all the advantages of e-learning in order to ensure systematically growing and long lasted high quality of that process?” It is worth mentioning that, although the quality issue has always been of great importance at majority of tertiary education institutions, with regard to e-learning, the mistrust of its value and quality have for a long time been so strong that there is still a need to prove its value and usefulness.

Quality vs effectiveness

When the e-learning elements are already implemented one of the most important issues is to ensure high quality of it. We can talk about the quality of learning environment, its accessibility and friendliness. The support offered to the university teachers involved in teaching process, as well as technical assistance and help-desk services.

Another important aspects of quality concern the learning process itself and learning materials. Closely linked to that are teachers qualifications and competences, with emphasis on their knowledge on specific requirements of online teaching. And last but not least is the efficiency of that process measured by the achievements of online students and results of the exams. Although it is quite clear that all these aspects are closely linked together, it is also true that each of them separately contributes to the global view of the role and position of e-learning at the university. As it is impossible to describe all of them in a short paper, we will concentrate on one particular aspect of research, which has been carried out in recent months. The questions we will try to answer are:

- How the introduction of e-learning influences the university’s didactic process?
- How it is perceived by the people involved in it – the teachers and their students?

Blended learning at the university – pros and cons

At first when the e-learning forms were introduced it was a commonly held belief that online teaching will very quickly replace traditional forms of teaching and revolutionise the whole teaching process. Especially in the USA such tendency was visible and the greatest enthusiasts claimed that in a few years the domination of e-learning would be undoubted. Nowadays, probably nobody would make

such presumptions as it was proved that there are subjects and circumstances e-learning is most suitable for and such for which it is totally unsuitable.

In Poland the introduction of e-learning started a couple of years later than in Western Europe countries or in the USA, which means that we can learn from the mistakes the others have made and therefore we can try to avoid them. One of the main lessons to be learned is the role of e-learning in the whole university system. For many centuries the teaching process at the university was based on lecturers, lecture rooms and blackboards. People are used to personal contacts and face-to-face meetings, not to mention the (unfortunately declining) relations master and student. Not surprisingly one of the commonly raised arguments against e-learning is limited interaction between the teachers and their students as well as between the students. That is why the forms of blended learning appeared and gradually become more and more popular.

It is also to be stressed that introducing e-learning at the university requires significant organisational changes and preparing totally new curricula and syllabuses, not to mention the necessity to convince the academic community to such “revolution” in their stable life and work. It seems plausible, and practical examples have proved it, that blended learning is a form which can smooth this process and make elements of e-learning easily acceptable. While it is true that new technologies can help to improve teaching and learning, it is also true that they often require new skills both technical and pedagogical. Role of the teachers in teaching process transferred to online environment changes significantly and makes them feel uncomfortable and uneasy. Moreover, in traditional learning the main role of a lecturer is knowledge delivery. In online learning the necessary knowledge is presented on the platform and the teacher becomes more a tutor or a facilitator, who is expected to support the students in their individual work and to indicate them how this new information or skills can be applied.

Indicated obstacles and difficulties, as well as the experience of other universities have been taken into account while the decision about introduction of e-learning at Warsaw School of Economics was planned. After some considerations it was decided that the process will be extended for a few years and will be introduced gradually and that e-learning will not be the alternative to traditional learning but will supplement and support it.

A brief description of VLE at Warsaw School of Economics

Before we start to describe the scope of our research and its results we believe a brief description of learning environment at our university is necessary.

The process began in 2001 with implementation of the e-learning platform e-sgh. Possibility to use it for supporting traditional classes and lectures was offered. Necessary guidelines and university standards have been prepared. A wide range action was undertaken in order to promote the whole initiative among the teachers and to convince them that e-learning can significantly improve the quality of university's didactic offer. Some of them have responded to that challenge and their success encouraged the others. During the first 4 years the interest of academic teachers was growing systematically, which was proved by the number of lectures supplemented by online materials.

When the academic staff became familiar with these new techniques and possibilities a competition was announced and a number of full online lectures have been chosen. Since the winter semester of an academic year 2005/2006 students are obliged to choose in every semester one of the online lectures and to complete it as a part of their regular curriculum. It is planned that in the coming years the scope of the online lectures will increase. In February 2006 another competition was announced and the next group of 14 lectures was indicated for online implementation, which gives a total number of 30 lectures (in the first competition 16 lectures were selected). 2230 students “attended” online lectures in the past semester.

The scope of the research and primary results

The process has been being monitored since October 2005 and in January a questionnaire was placed on the e-learning platform, which the students were expected to fill in. In order to ensure high percentage of the answers (a questionnaire was not compulsory) it has been decided, that the questionnaire should not take much time to complete it. It consists of 7 questions (some of them were single choice, whereas the others were multiple choice questions). Final question, the open one, gave the students the opportunity to include their own remarks and indications for expected changes or improvements. During the first 10 days almost 50% (1092 out of 2230) of online students filled in a questionnaire.

Although the number of questions was limited we tried to cover all the aspects of attitude towards e-learning we considered to be important. The areas covered by those questions are:

- Communication tools available on the platform (their friendliness and usefulness) (Q1)
- The extent to what teachers' assistance was
 - Needed (Q2)
 - Helpful (Q3)
- The form in which learning materials are presented (Q4)
- Usefulness of presented materials (Q5), its structure (Q6) and practical applicability (Q7)
- The final question (Q8), of an open type was: What changes would you suggest if any?

As some question (Q5-Q7) have been multiple choice question the number of answers sometimes exceeds the total amount of people involved in a survey.

What are the results we have got?

There is no place in a short paper to describe precisely all the aspects, the questions have covered, so only some of them will be briefly presented and the most important conclusions will be derived.

With respect to the communication tools available for learners on the platform vast majority of the respondents found them useful and user-friendly, although half of that amount indicated that it takes some time to get familiar with those tools. These indications are quite important for two reasons:

1. We use our own e-learning platform, built at the university and some elements still need to be improved;
2. An introductory instruction course should be organised, at least for those who are interested in.

Quite different were the opinions about using interaction tools (chat, discussion forums) for communication with other students and the teachers. Almost the same amount of people (396) indicated that these tools are very important and helpful, whereas a similar number (358) complained that they did not fulfil their expectations of interaction.

Closely linked to the previous one was the question about the role of the teacher in online learning – how helpful and how necessary he/she was? Apart from the answers: “very useful and necessary” (391) or “useful but I would expect more help” (192), significant was a number of respondents (282), who choose the answer “I can't tell because I did not use it”. Explanation of such situation is quite simple because independent online lectures were carried out for the first time (in opposite to the previous supplementary use of e-learning) and some students have not been aware that they should be more actively involved in the process of acquiring knowledge this way.

As far as the course content is concerned, more than a half students (575) appreciated it as useful and applicable, but quite a large group (282) indicated that it would be advisable to include more practical examples and case studies.

One third of those, who filled in the questionnaire used the chance to express their own opinions. The answers could be divided into several groups concerning:

- technology and platform (51);
- forms of interaction (42);
- curriculum and syllabuses (41);
- organisational aspects of e-learning (47);
- scope of the material being taught and the amount of work and time it required (91).

Definitely the most controversial issue was students' involvement in online lectures. Most of them expected the lectures to be similar to the traditional form and have been strongly surprised by the amount of time and work they had to put in order to get good results (it has to be mentioned that all the students had to take traditional exam to complete the course). Although it may sound strange some of them are still not familiar with the use of ICT in everyday life, not to mention their studies. Some of them have also not been prepared for independent work and lack of the face-to-face contacts with the teacher made it even more difficult. Quite a lot people expressed the opinion that the necessity of keeping discipline and work systematically throughout the whole semester was a big hurdle for them.

Some conclusions

The analysis of the questionnaire answers has brought a couple of hints that could be used in order to improve e-learning process at our university. As it was mentioned above the process was monitored throughout the whole semester. One of the factors being traced were the forms of interaction between lecturers and their students, like discussion forums and chat rooms – how often they were used and to what extent. Comparison of these frequency and usability factors with students opinions expressed in a questionnaire will help us to modify the use of these forms. It has been suggested, that greater activity on discussion forum for instance, should give students some extra credits which could be taken into account in the final grade. Such method was already applied in some lectures in this semester and it will be suggested to extend it for other courses. But on the other hand, high level of activity combined with a great number of lecture participants could be some sort of obstacle both for the students, who want to add something valuable and for the teacher who has to monitor, moderate the discussion and finally to “evaluate” it.

To sum up it should be stressed that in general the form of presenting learning materials and delivering them were taken very positively. Some students pointed out that their attitude towards this form of acquiring new knowledge has changed during the semester – they admitted being sceptical at the beginning and satisfied at the end of the semester. Also the change in approach to e-learning among the teachers it worth to be mentioned. While at first they needed to be encouraged, at present they show their own initiative and willingness to be involved in the process. Such reactions have convinced us that the way of gradually integrating e-learning form with traditional curriculum is the best possible form. Provided systematic improvements, based on practical opinions, will be introduced we hope to achieve real enrichment of our didactic offer and significant benefits for the university and its graduates.

Presented results of the first step of research concern long term project, which is expected to supplement the whole university curriculum in a period of a couple of years. Warsaw School of Economics is a leading university among the schools of economics and one of the greatest Polish universities. Also the scope of the whole project places it among the leaders of e-learning in Poland. The solutions implemented at WSE are quite often followed by the other Polish high schools. That is why we feel obliged not only to preserve high quality of our initiatives but also to improve it systematically.

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