

UNIVERSITY OF MINHO'S DISTANCE EDUCATION: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND SOCIETY

Ana Silva Dias, Maria João Gomes

University of Minho (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

University of Minho's Distance Education Project is an ambitious initiative aiming to open university knowledge to society, attracting students worldwide to study at a distance in this young University located in the north of Portugal. The project offers online courses with 2 to 5 ECTS in mainstream research domains, bridging the gap between university and society. By 2016 the University delivered 10 online courses to more than 1000 students worldwide. Offering courses in Portuguese, Spanish and English, the project aims to target online students regardless of their origin, facilitating digital access to the University of Minho, its teachers and knowledge.

University of Minho's teachers are trained in online education, learning about e-learning pedagogy and technology. During the course teachers are online students, with tasks and deadlines, they learn about distance education, design, development and implementation. During the course, teachers design a course of their own and at the same time they are online students, and learn about online timing, pedagogy and technology. At the end of the course, the participants learned how to design an online course, to produce content and to evaluate students at a distance.

Following this training, teachers formalize the course (ECTS) in the university senate, in line with the distance education regulation, and begin their own online courses development, oriented by a team of online education experts that advise on course design, support content production, the use of technologies and the contact with students.

By 2020 University of Minho intends to increase its student's numbers by 30% and, hopefully, the distance education initiative will be a major contributor to accomplish this aim.

Keywords: online education, ECTS, innovation, training teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of technologies and the growing number of innovations today affect all walks of life. Smart phones applications (apps), online platforms, social networks, georeferenced systems like Maps, applications like WhatsApp, Uber or AirBnB, they are, in a certain extent, embedded in our day-to-day life.

Higher Education (HE) it's not an exception and cannot avoid the use of technologies to improve students learning experiences. Devices, platforms and apps are inevitable in classrooms and online. Today's life is lived in a blended world, where people commute from face to face to online settings, students and teachers, at different levels and speed, they commute too.

Like any other innovation, distance education develops in silos, based in projects and initiatives, promoted by HE policies by initiative of HE institutions or by individuals. In Portugal, its implementation represents a continuous challenge to people and organizations and, at the same time, resistances are spread all over the place. There's no consistent and active government policies, references in legislation are poor, HE Accreditation Agency (A3ES) is reactive and there is a general mistrust in online education. Thus, there are few e-learning and b-learning practices consolidated in HE. Universidade Aberta is however the exception, being the single Distance Education University in Portugal.

The study "Panorama e-learning Portugal", Dias et al. (2014) revealed the lack of systematic online education offer, the inexistence of clear policies and the inconsistencies on public investments. The study concluded that e-learning maintained its position as peripheral in policies and practices being considered has an appendix to face to face offer.

University of Minho being a young face to face University (under 50 years old) has strong connections to society and that link is printed in its mission. Since last century developed several initiatives aiming

to increase the use of IT in-campus and off-campus, including the adoption of Blackboard (2004) as e-learning platform, to support curriculum activities in articulation with face to face classes.

Distance Education Project (DE) was created by the Rectorate (2014) aiming to open university knowledge to society, opening-up access and attracting students worldwide to study at a distance in this young University located in the north of Portugal. Students don't need to come to the University campus, they are digitally accessing libraries, content, knowledge and expert teachers, which will tutor their learning. Students can access university regardless of their origin, from home or office.

DE Project focus on continuous education and short online courses, intends to reach new target groups, teaching mainstream subjects and bridging the gap between university and society. At the same time aims to support in-campus teacher's development, to reach worldwide students, and to promote lifelong learning. Ambitious and innovative, the project initiated a non-stop institutional change that goes from administration, to pedagogy and technology support and delivery.

Gomes (2008) referred to the typical online education "resistances" as being, individual, institutional, active, passive, declared and undeclared. UMinho DE Project, started breaking two of those resistances, the "institutional" and the "passive".

The changes commanded by the Rectorate Policy contaminated the team and the first teachers involved (all pioneers). Using existing infrastructures and human resources, like the ones existing in the Teaching Support Office and in TecMinho e-learning Centre, the project focused on teacher's development (training the teacher in online education). By 2015 it was possible to launch the first online course with a team of teachers led by José Manuel Meijome from the School of Sciences.

CASO – Advanced Contact Lenses and Ocular Surface, was the first and most successful course till today. Involved 11 teachers, reached 60 online students in its 1st edition and helped to shape the way staff could act and react to distance students, the way services should be changed to include those students. The online course content and exams were created by teachers, who oriented students via activity based learning and tutoring via Blackboard (the university LMS). DE technical support team developed and produced the audio-visual and multimedia content and produced the course in Blackboard supporting the teachers before, during and after course delivery. All together DE teachers and team involved could deliver a very successful course, today in its 5th edition.

DE project is an enormous challenge to this face to face University, its teachers and staff, used to educate in-campus students and to use Blackboard to articulate with face to face studies. That implies a mind shift on delivery and communication, implies changes in the uses of platforms and in the contact with students that are away, not face to face in the classroom and university campus.

Gomes (2005,2008), reports the existence of several institutional challenges that face-to-face institutions must overcome to be successful adopting DE practices at several levels: reinforced infrastructures and technical support; new administrative processes; pedagogical resources and educational materials for online learning; developing and recognizing teacher competencies for online teaching and tutoring.

In spite of the importance of each one of the referred challenges, the technological and, mainly, the pedagogical capacity building, of teaching staff were determining factors enabling UMinho to offer online courses from 2015.

As an innovation project, DE demands for continuous change, namely at administrative and staff behaviour levels. Online students must access a Digital University, contact digital services and staff online, implying new e-logistics that are being developed at UMinho.

2 TEACHERS TRAINING IN ONLINE EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITY OF MINHO

Online course delivery needs new resources and capabilities from teachers and staff, when compared with face-to-face learning. Demands for trained teachers and staff, online learning management systems and student's management systems, digital approaches, programmed activities and multimedia content production, online exams and assessment, digital communication student-to-teacher, student-to-material, student-to-student and a rhythm that enables student learning with tutor orientation (moderation).

Dias (2001) explains that trainers will be obliged to learn new approaches to training in online contexts (tech and pedagogic), namely by sharing their knowledge, exchanging procedures, promoting the construction of knowledge with the students. They will act more like advisors or facilitators challenging

the students to act and to produce knowledge, taking their attention to a topic, focusing in individual and group objectives. In summary, teachers will monitor and guide the students towards the construction of the course knowledge base (course materials plus all elements resulting from the interactions and communications between all parties involved).

University of Minho had already experience in online learning delivery via TecMinho e-learning Centre and the Teaching Support Office which facilitates the use of Blackboard since 2004, as well some other e-learning practices. Building on these experience a customised training programme for University of Minho teachers was designed, aiming to train teachers on e-learning pedagogy, technology and communication. The programme created aimed to tackle pedagogical and technical issues that could build on the previous student's experiences.

Bidarra and Dias (2007) clarify the differences between face-to-face and online education and the needs of training the teachers in that realm. They argue that in distance education in opposition to traditional face-to-face situations, there is less room for improvisation to "save the day". All the learning material to be used, for instance exercises, activities, reflection questions and case studies, should be pedagogically engineered, well organized and fully structured before the course begins, even though during its implementation the production may be subject to small readjustments per the needs of the learner groups. Material or course content for e-learning (e. g. manuals, exercises, learning activities, etc.), take a pivotal importance in the success/efficiency of learning. Naturally, the teacher/trainer's role as e-moderator will bring an added value to the activities necessary to create the context of each course.

The course programme is structured around the following modules:

- 1 Learning Design
- 2 Role Models
- 3 Content Creation
- 4 Course template

The programme includes modules about learning design, role models (online courses examples), content creation and course templating. The course runs during 4 weeks, with one face-to-face workshops per week, blending with online activities during the same period. Face-to-face events are filmed and made available in Blackboard to those not able to attend. Workshops are very active and informal, involve teachers from different Faculties and disciplines, enabling peer-to-peer collaboration and pedagogical practices sharing, promoting creativity in the design and production of new online courses.

The course opens with a face-to-face session to present the UMinho DE Project, the internal Regulation on DE, the course methodology, its objectives, activities schedule, and the e-learning platform Blackboard. Follows a Project Based Learning model, where participants develop their own online education course. Backboard is the *online classroom*, where all materials, modules, teachers and students are accessible. Participants upload their tasks and carryout various learning activities throughout the course, including communicating with the Tutors and receiving orientations and challenges to accomplish several milestones during the course progress. At the end of the course participants will present in a face-to-face session (or online) the resulting courses.

The course methodology is based on constructivist approaches, learner centred and tutor supported. The Project Based Learning strategy applied throughout the training course, allow participants to develop their own e-course and respective e-content from the beginning, so that the results can be transferred immediately to their current professional context, that is, to their face-to-face teaching and to the online course teaching. One of the course main drivers is the KISS strategy — Keep It Simple and Sexy.

Building on Ossiannilsson et al (2015), the course programme uses agile approaches to quality as the educational landscape is changing.

Today, University of Minho's delivers, twice a year, this online education crash course to teachers (7th edition). The course programme is based on e-learning pedagogy and technology teaching and builds on previous project experience in online education.

By 2017 the project trained 122 teachers. During the course, teachers are online students, with tasks and deadlines, they learn about distance education, design, development and implementation. Dealing

with course needs analysis, market and target group issues, at the same time they learn about online education specificities.

The course allows teachers to design a course of their own, and learn about online timeline organization, student's needs, teacher's role and course learning style. At the end of the course, the participants learned not only about online learning design and production but also about content creation and distance student's assessment.

Following this training, teachers formalize the course they created with the university senate, in line with the UM distance education regulation. Courses accomplish for European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

After the course approval by the Senate, the full course content is created by the teachers and a process of content production starts involving the teachers and the DE experts team. The online education experts can advise on course design, production of digital content, and they provide support to the use of technologies. Administrative contacts with students are also based on the DE support team, namely related to enrolment, course help-desk and the process of sending course certificates.

3 INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

University of Minho's DE Project is an ambitious initiative aiming to open university knowledge to society, attracting students worldwide to study at a distance in this young University, with campus located in Braga and Guimarães in the North of Portugal. The project offers short courses online with 2 to 5 ECTS in mainstream research domains. Offering courses in Portuguese, Spanish and English, the project aims to target online students regardless of their origin, facilitating digital access to the University of Minho, its teachers and knowledge.

Back in 2014, when the adventure started, the project needed to create some stable common language and common grounds about distance education and online education, which could be accepted by academia, and especially by the scientific and pedagogical bodies of the University.

The Pro-Rector, Filipe Vaz, charged of mission, created then a DE Body to create and develop the guidelines for DE Regulation. He invited the Faculties of Education, Psychology, Social Sciences and Sciences to appoint a member to be part of the group, together with two DE experts that acted as project coordinators. The board of representatives meet several times in 2015 and created the University of Minho DE Regulation (first version 2015, reviewed 2016 and published in 22nd August 2017, UMinho, Despacho n.º 7406/2017).

The UMinho DE Regulation created defines what is distance education and online education, explains the ECTS type of creditation, defines the methodologies, explains how the short courses work, who is coordinating and the platforms to be used.

DE Regulation represents an institutional change and is the engine for several forthcoming changes at institutional level, thus it implies the use of University resources such as platforms and staff that must be trained to DE delivery, appealing for a Digital University accessible online all time, for all students.

Gomes (2005, 2008) underlines the changes at administration level, including all aspects usually managed by the Academic Services in HE, namely course enrolment, payments, exams enrolment, assessment grids, certificates. Adapted infrastructures such as the LMS and personnel development are also mentioned.

Institutional changes and administration changes are of major importance when shifting to a blended highway. Services and staff should be prepared to manage those changes and the Digital University must emerge in a gradual way.

Changes in Academic Services for enrolment and certification, in the Division of Technologies and Information Systems for platforms like LMS and other applications, in the Communication Office for DE courses marketing, in the Library Service for course content access and on the Teaching Support Office for attending not only face-to-face, but also online teachers and students. Finally, the quality services, to allow continuous improvement and alignment with the HE quality standards.

Ossiannilsson et al (2015), in a study about quality models in online and open education around the globe, developed to ICDE (International Council for Distance Education) points out 11 recommendations to the DE sector:

- Mainstream e-learning quality into traditional institutional quality assurance
- Support the contextualization of quality systems
- Support professional development, through documentation of best practice and exchange of information
- Communicate and promote general principles
- Assist institutions in designing a personalized quality management system
- Address unbundling and the emergence of non-traditional educational providers
- Support knowledge transfer from open and distance learning to traditional quality systems
- Support quality assurance audits and benchmarking exercises in the field of online, open, flexible, e-learning and distance education
- Encourage, facilitate and support research and scholarship in the field of quality
- Encourage, facilitate and support implementing quality assurance related to new modes of teaching

4 CONCLUSIONS

In 2016 the University delivered 10 online courses to more than 1000 students worldwide. Offering courses in Portuguese, Spanish and English, the project aims to target online students regardless of their origin, facilitating digital access to the University of Minho, its teachers and knowledge.

University of Minho DE Project is an agile and innovative initiative, aiming to gather the attention of Portuguese academia in quality and online education delivery issues. Building up in Quality assurance procedures and in teachers and staff training the project intends to grow in figures and in quality and at the same time to contaminate face-to-face classrooms with innovative views on learning.

The production of educational movies, multimedia content and online exams, will make a huge difference in the near future, bringing to the classroom the online content and the typical novelties of online education.

By 2020 University of Minho intends to increase its student's numbers by 30% and, hopefully, the distance education initiative will be a major contributor to accomplish this aim.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Dias, "The role of the trainer in online courses". In Atas da II Conferência Internacional de Tecnologias de Informação e Comunicação na Educação: desafios 2001. Braga: Centro de Competência Nônio Século XXI, Universidade do Minho, 2001
- [2] A. Dias et al, "Relatório Panorama e-learning". Guimarães. TecMinho, Universidade do Minho, 2014
- [3] A. Dias & J. Bidarra, "Designing e-content: A challenge for Open Educational Resources", EADTU 2007 – Annual Conference of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, 2007
- [4] M.J. Gomes, "Reflexões sobre a adopção do e-learning: novos desafios, novas oportunidades". Revista e-curriculum, PUCCSP-SP, vol. 3, no. 2, 2008
- [5] M. J. Gomes, C.P. Coutinho, F. Guimarães, M.J. Casa-Nova & S. Caires, "Educação a distância e e- Learning na Universidade do Minho: análise das percepções, concepções e práticas docentes no Instituto de Educação." A Coruña. Actas do XI Congresso Internacional Galego-Portugués de Psicopedagogía. 2011
- [6] J.A. Moreira, S. Henriques, M.F. Goulão, D. Barros, "Digital Learning in Higher Education: A Training Course for Teaching Online", Open Praxis, Vol 9, nº2, 2017
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.2.539>
- [7] E. Ossiannilsson, K. Williams, A. Camillieri & M. Brown, "Quality models in online and open education around the globe. State of the art recommendations. Oslo: International Council for Open and Distance Education, ICDE, 2015

[8] Keegan, "The Foundations of Distance Education". Michigan. Michigan University.1986