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# Quality of the online delivery in the European Master in Adult Education

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## Abstract

The students from European Master in Adult Education were attending offers on Moodle platform, and also interacting with professors and peers from abroad. The students' satisfaction about the quality of online delivery, and their preferences for a fully online offer/ a blended one, or a F2F one were investigated, trying also to find out if there are differences in students' perceptions if they are from different countries. Results showed that, in spite of being very favorable to the online offer, they were more content with F2F delivery, suggesting that like this they met professors from abroad, an highly appreciated opportunity.

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*Keywords:* learning environments, online learning, blended learning, students' satisfaction, quality of eLearning, Moodle LMS;

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## 1. Introduction

The European Master in Adult Education (EMAE) is an innovative study program, which was launched by several European universities in 2005 by looking at the future of adult and continuing education in Europe. It was granted in the first three years by the European Union, as a curriculum development Erasmus project. The initiating organization, University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, developed together with representatives from six other countries (Italy, Romania, Spain, Czech Republic, Denmark and Finland) a flexible curriculum (Egetenmeyer, R./Lattke, S., 2007, p. 6-9) for the studies of students to work later as professionals in adult education.

The main idea behind was the need of raising the competences of international work in an more and more integrating Europe, to allow the students to work in the European Member States as well as in their own country, to exchange experiences and knowledge amongst the universities and to develop after a while a kind of an European standard of professionalization in this important educational field. Mainly the question of labor market, but also the idea of enlarging the scale of the scientific approach was the driving force behind this common curriculum.

There was designed a flexible study plan with a common core (70 %) of the curriculum, which started to be realized first in Romania, Germany and Italy. Universities from other countries are willing and interested to join.

One of the most interesting experiences so far is the different culture of learning amongst the students in the different countries and their approach to the delivery modes chosen in the program.

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The teaching there follows a diversified structure of on campus teaching, online courses and systems of blended learning. An important role plays also the mobility of the teachers. So it was after some years the time to find out what and how the students deal with their learning in the EMAE-Program, how they value the different types of delivery modes and their combination as students.

In this article are presented the results of a first survey amongst the students regarding this topic, kind of an evaluation of the quality of the teaching-learning issue in the program. The survey was carried out by the Romanian partner, addressing the Romanian and German students.

While addressing the issue of the quality and the effectiveness of online teaching and learning, it is not difficult to find articles in the current literature about it. The brief literature review focus was done with the purpose to find out what are the trends in defining the quality, and its new connotations, what are the areas to be taken into account while defining the quality and effectiveness of eLearning, what are the factors influencing the students' perception on a qualitative delivery and satisfactory learning experience.

To define common values and standards of quality in education is a very difficult attempt at European level (see, for instance, *European Report on Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning*, 2002, or *The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe*, 2004), mainly due to the axiological connotations. Thus, during the study was interesting to find out about the differences in students' satisfaction, differences that might come from different teaching-learning cultures. The general assumption was that the German students are used with a less support from the teachers and more space for individual readings, self-reflection, critical debates, and the Romanian students with a more teacher-centered approach, but this assumption was not validated by the students' behavior online and their feedbacks.

Andria Young and Chari Norgard (2006, p.107-115) have identified the following areas as important for student satisfaction with online instruction: interaction among students, quality and timely interaction between student and professor, consistent course design across courses, technical support availability, and flexibility of online courses compared with face-to-face (F2F). Wuensch et al (2009) have reported that the frequent teacher-students contact and prompt feedback were the most prevalent principles, the other five principles (time on task, active learning, cooperation among students, high expectations, divers ways of learning) being less frequently identified as practiced.

More than that, timely and meaningful feedback from instructors is associated with both students' satisfaction and students' learning, no matter of which type of technologies or interactions are involved (Sommenarain et al 2010, Loh 2010, Sahin 2008, Keengwe 2010). Using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Sahin (2008:217) conceptualizes the "satisfaction from technology as an essential link in student outcomes, with greater enjoyment associated with higher levels of student engagement, which in turn is associated with increased student learning". The TAM model provides basis to explain the impact of variables such as beliefs, attitudes, and intentions on using a technological application. Other findings pointed out (Wuensch, 2009) that more instructors use technologies to connect with their students, the greater the quality of the course as perceived by students.

Finally, the theory of social facilitation (Loh, Smyth, 2010: 335-336) has been a prerequisite while designing the study, being interesting to find more about the students' involvement in the group work online. Phenomenon like social loafing (the tendency for individuals to exert less effort when working in groups than working alone) and free riding (occurs when an individual shoulders less than their fair share of the work and yet share in the benefits of the group), as decreased group participation were also in background, trying to identify if they are, when occurs, due to students' motivation or circumstances, or due to the quality of delivery. It was interesting to find more, from students' perspective, about the empiric somehow surprising observations of the teachers that the German students tended to be more active in the online debates, but less active in the international teams of work, while the Romanian students were more task oriented, but have had the initiative to set up their own Ning social network.

## 2. The technical background

Taking into consideration the European dimension of this program, the EMAE master was designed in a blended way to be delivered. Besides traditional on campus courses taught by local professors in the national language, or by foreign teachers running a teaching mobility in English, each partner university of the EMAE network has offered one or more online courses in English, for all students at once.

The virtual delivery in EMAE was done on a Moodle platform, hosted by the coordinating university Duisburg-Essen, Germany.

Launched in 2001, the Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE) is recognized around the world as one of the most famous and widely well known and used Learning Management System (LMS) and Course Management System (CMS), especially in the higher education area. Among the most important and well known Moodle's features, there are: it is free, friendly to use and very flexible; it enables fully customize design and navigation; it allows a straight forward management of students, groups, teams and departments; there is a very strong open source community with lots of active and helpful users; within the new functionalities of the Moodle there are wikis, blogs, RSS feeds, forums, polls, quizzes, chat rooms, instant messaging, journals, database, e-books, basic content management, WYSIWYG editor, item analysis, calendars etc., which open a new door to the social learning and not only. More than that, the software continues to be improved; on the Moodle platforms, it is allowed to upload a range of different contents, like: e-learning packages, word documents, pdf documents, audio and video, web links podcasts, screencasts, diagrams, slideshows etc.

Even Moodle is not a total online campus management solution or an excellent content development tool, Moodle is constantly considerate<sup>2</sup>, since the 2007 ranking, as one of the top 100 tools for e-learning.

### 3. The Design of the Analysis

The investigation was aimed to identify the degree of satisfaction and experiences of the students enrolled in EMAE from Germany and Romania, in working with the Moodle learning platform, in attending the courses delivered in different ways. Beside the degree of satisfaction, as a secondary focus was the research question of identifying with what extension there are national differences in students perceptions regarding the quality of the learning experiences of the online/ blended delivery, differences coming from different learning and teaching cultures.

The study, conducted through an online questionnaire designed by the teaching staff from the West University from Timisoara, was run in June-July 2010. The target group was consisted out of students enrolled in at least one online course run on Moodle during the academic years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010. In total, 22 students (12 from Romania, and 10 from Germany) filled in the questionnaire, meaning 67% from the total number of students. The questionnaire was not designed to evaluate a single course, but the overall delivery. This aspect can be considered as a limit related to the validity and reliability of data, due to the fact that there are different levels of satisfaction at the different courses, but it was not intended at all an evaluation of single courses.

Using the Google Form as the survey application, the questionnaire was distributed by the researchers through emails and also it was embedded into the website of the learning platform. Participants were asked to indicate their satisfaction level by using Likert-type items with response choices ranging from strongly agree (1) (very often, all the time), to strongly disagree (5). The complete questionnaire can be viewed online at: <https://spreadsheets.google.com/viewform?formkey=dHQ1VEhjSVIEaFdISHZIRy1CYVVpNnc6MQ>.

### 4. Data analysis

Among the entry requirements to be enrolled as student in EMAE there are computer skills and English competencies, to be able to interact in an virtual learning environment, together with teachers and students from abroad. The degree of mastering these skills is affecting the students need for extra (national) support, or their ability of independent work, as well as their satisfaction about the support received during the classes. Thus, in spite of the fact that 14 of the students answering to the survey did not attend previously to the enrollment to this master other online offer, they consider with a large extension computer literate (12 of them at 1st ranking, and 21 of them are positive about their computer skills).

Furthermore, their answers at the 3rd question show that they are more familiar with social networks applications, instead of other more dedicated educational applications, like wikis, podcasts, VLE, CMS. But these

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<sup>2</sup> See Jane Hart Top 100 tools for learning, <http://www.c4lpt.co.uk/Top100Tools/moodle.html>

answers come to enforce their level of computer literacy, and also the answers to the 4th question related to the easy finding of the features on the Moodle platform. The ones having some difficulties in finding the courses on the Moodle platform were the German students registered at the national master, but having the opportunity, if they were interested, to attend also courses at the European master, or some that did not report a high rate of computer skills.

Regarding the topics and tasks of the offers, less related to the technical point of view, the students are rather content (13 answers on the first two positions). The more negative votes (Position 4) are from Germany and they are closely related to more negative answers to the questions on support and interaction (Q 11 to 14, see down).

Obviously there was also the need for more information in the courses than being given by the teachers and tutors, but beside this as well the engagement and activity of the students in this EMAE-Curriculum, which is higher than in other studies. There is no difference in this point between the Romanian and the German students. Interesting that the students not using the internet for further research are also preferring face-to-face communication and blended learning. So, there is a certain approach to interact also in counseling and supporting.

Looking at the answers to the questions regarding support by teachers and tutors it can be seen clearly that there is a very urgent need. Even the feedback concerning the support of the teachers is positive in general, there can be seen a stronger wish to improve this aspect of online teaching. The critics are less oriented to the technical part of the course than on the content part; almost all negative votes are given from students being or considering themselves as experts in computer technology. Some original opinions to illustrate:

“e-learning programs have to be supported stronger by the tutor. Often the answers on questions take a long time and they are not really satisfying. The exercises should be clearer and more detailed. Exercises should be not too wide and students need to be motivated by the tutor”

“most of the tasks are based on reading a document. Creativity could be added to the material and tasks”.

“More interesting activities, not only read and write papers, more business approaches in Adult Education...”

If we look at the general question regarding the delivery mode, there is a plus for the face-to-face learning; half of the students prefer the traditional social teaching process. Those voting for fully online offers argue mainly with the availability everywhere, which is crucial in an international study course.

The most important difference between the EMAE and other study plans at universities is the internationality – the international approach in the content, the study organization, the language and the teachers. So one of the questions dealt with these aspects, since it influences also the valuing of the delivery mode. At the question “It was easier for you with the national teachers?”, it is rather equilibrated answer, but a little more of them disagree. Of course the attribute “easier” doesn’t mean the same for everybody, but there can be realized some aspects:

- There is a slightly stronger vote for the international aspect of teaching and the international teachers;
- Those voting for “easier with national teachers” are more often from Romania;
- The answer to this question is more related to language skills than to technical aspects of online learning;
- Those who highly disagree with this statement are preferring the face-to-face communication.

For illustration an original citation from one of the questionnaires:

“I am very glad that I had the opportunity to meet such wonderful professors like Mr. Federighi, Mr. Jarvis and Mr. Nuissl. I would like to have more lectures like those with Mr. Jarvis, for example. I think the courses should be more flexible in terms of physical presence because for some of us isn’t possible always to be present on campus” (Romania, preferring online courses).

But they have also the clearest votes for improving the online offers (Q17); some proposals: to create a special guide for online learning; to have more online communication between teachers and learners amongst themselves (f.e. videoconferences); to choose another platform (“Moodle is pretty primitive”), to use more multimedia resources; to create Twiducate<sup>3</sup> accounts for every course; to correct and complete the translation matters (f. e. Romanian/German); to have a better layout; to check more clearly the time schedules; the teachers should sometimes take the online courses more seriously.

Most of them wanted to be notified with the results of the study, showing their interests not only as “clients”, having this way a possibility to assess themselves with their peers, but their interest is also at meta-level, as further professionals in adult education which can deliver themselves such courses.

<sup>3</sup> Twiducate (<http://www.twiducate.com/>) is a social networking platform designed especially for schools.

## 5. Conclusions

Surveying the perception of the students taking the courses online is a way to address the quality. The results of the study allow us to draw some trends in students' perception about the quality of the online delivery, and, based on them, to focus the efforts for further improvements.

Despite the small sample size, the study revealed several interesting conclusions. First, there was no significant difference in the student satisfaction of their online learning experience in both online groups. Although the majority of them were first time online users, overall students showed a positive feeling about their experience.

Moodle is a great LMS easy-to-learn, easy-to-teach, easy-to-build and easy-to-use, successfully used by plenty of educators, and this aspect proved to be true in the students reporting on almost no problem in using the platform. Also, exploiting all its benefits, means a proper support for the teachers to design and run courses on it. In an internationally delivered master that aims to extend to other partner universities, the online offer has to be enlarged, and more attention has to be paid to administrative issues, time consuming for teachers, but mainly to their ability and motivation to do it (see also Keengwe, 2010: 533-538). The students' answers showed an urgent need to improve the teacher's support and interaction with the students.

Second, the results are in line with the ones of the literature surveyed, in the way that as strong points for the online delivery is mentioned the flexibility and the opportunity of extended learning environment. But, in spite of this, and high degree of computer skills, the majority of the students have expressed their preferences for the F2F delivery, somehow surprising. This paradox in students' perceptions is however in line with other research findings (Nakos 2002, Sahin 2010, Loh 2010 etc.), showing, on one side the needs for flexible modes of delivery of the students working and not placed on campus, but on the other side their valuing for the benefits of the direct interaction, but mainly with the foreign professors. This can be a treat of an internationally delivered master program, the students highly appreciating the opportunity to meet the professors from abroad. Thirdly, there could not be seen significant differences in students' answers, needs for support or their suggestions that might be interpreting as coming from different teaching-learning cultures.

This is an exploratory study of how students perceive online courses. Further research is needed to expand the scope of this paper and to see if our results can be generalized to other partner universities settings, to other European/ internationally delivered masters. In the future, the goal is to refine the survey, increase participation, and administer the survey as part of an ongoing quality assurance measure. More into depth questioning is needed. Also, a faculty perception survey is needed, to determine if the faculty expectations and perceptions of online courses, in each partner university, overlap with student expectations and perceptions of online courses.

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