Chapter 2
E–Learning for Widening Participation in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptualize e-learning as a socio-cultural ecological system and to explore the empirical evidences of the objective and subjective conditions for using this concept in practice for increasing the participation in higher education. The components of this new concept are a systemic-constructivist competence, pedagogical leadership, life- and workforce learning, and self-evaluation. The objective conditions for its implementation are the integration of informal knowledge of information and communication technologies, implementing pedagogical leadership in tandems for developing students' intrapreneurship, self-evaluation, and self-enhancement. The subjective conditions are personal involvement, supportive social climate, and eagerness for transforming challenges into new learning opportunities. E-learning as a socio-cultural ecological system fosters students' and faculty staff's participation, producing new knowledge and pedagogical solutions that create synergy between science, education, and politics. This enhances economical growth and sustainable development that benefits the whole ecological system in local, regional, national, European, and global socio-cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Opening higher education (HE) to a larger public is an important and worldwide issue today. The main topical challenge in adult education is to increase the participation rate in adult learning.

The *Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020)* programme (Council of the European Union, 2009) sets the benchmark for adult participation in lifelong learning to at least 15% (population aged 25-64). According to Eurostat data (2009), Latvia has achieved a 5.3% participation rate in

2009, whilst the EU average was 9.3%. A revised HE strategy foresees several activities for reducing the number of drop-outs in HE. The worldwide practice in HE doesn't adequately respond to the learning needs of the new generation (European Commission, 2010a). One of the obstacles preventing new generation learners from returning to education is the discrepancy between the offer provided by HE stakeholders and learners' educational demand, i.e. what they can really accept. This issue is significant in an international perspective. Non-participation in HE is socially constructed and it is a product of the institutions, systems and culture(s) that we create and sustain (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998; Smyth et al., 2000). The work of 'resistance theorists' (Munns & McFadden, 2000; Willis, 1977) is built on the premise that new generation learners react to the form rather than to the substance of education. Considering that the new generation learners (aged 18-24) will constitute the main labour force in 2020, and that knowledge society demands high qualifications for new kinds of jobs (European Commission, 2010a), young people who dropped out of education and training, as well as elder learners, need new opportunities that address their specific needs and help them to regain confidence in learning.

The rapid and continuous development of information and communication technologies (ICT) affects modern learning processes. Knowledge also develops, and turns to be more meaningful. Consequently, each person should be able not only to generate new knowledge, but also to apply previous knowledge in new contexts in an innovative and effective way. The *Europe 2020 strategy* (European Commission, 2010b) aims to secure a knowledge-based education and ICT innovations, increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40%. Universities play an important role in the transition towards a knowledge-based society and economy.

In most Latvian universities (e.g., University of Latvia, Latvian University of Agriculture, Riga Technical University) e-learning and distance learning opportunities are offered to adult learners in a large variety of non-formal and formal education programs. However, as a number of recent publications indicate, e-learning opportunities are not always actively used in HE institutions. There are objective and subjective factors for this relatively slow process.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze these factors, presenting a case study of one e-learning opportunity for students from different branches and different ages – the inter-university master program on educational treatment of diversity (ETD), offered at the University of Latvia since 2007. The purpose of the participating Universities was to follow the recommendation of the European ministers responsible for HE (2005), who issued the Communiqué "The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – Achieving the Goals," after their meeting in Bergen, in May 19–20, 2005. The Communiqué states: "We (…) call upon all national authorities and other stakeholders to recognize joint degrees awarded in two or more countries in the EHEA" (European ministers responsible for HE, 2005, p. 3). These Universities offer the same study course but provide different study pathways.

As defined by the Statute of the study programs of the University of Latvia, the content of the inter-university master's program is structured in two parts: a compulsory part, including the research memory/master's thesis, and optional part. According to the evaluation made in 2012 by a commission of international experts, this program is an innovative and interesting e-learning opportunity provided to students who are employed and need innovative methods to allow them to study further … it would be good to see it offered to other universities within the country" (Council of Higher Education, 2012, p. 9). The e-learning concept does not need expensive ICT resources, as it uses Moodle, chat rooms, Skype conferences, Google environment, easy on-line technology etc. Moreover, the learning provision

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