Chapter 24

Master in Innovative Tourism Development:
A Blended Learning Experience in the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses a Portuguese HEI's first experience with blended learning. Focusing on the Master in Innovative Tourism Development currently being held at the Superior School of Technology and Management of the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, it presents the institutional background and rationale behind the course's implementation, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas of potential development. Based on an evaluation research carried out throughout the course's first three editions and that involved students, faculty and institutional leaders, it summarizes the main results of a long term-study, putting forth a set of recommendations for improvements and defining potential areas of intervention in future editions of the course.

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly competitive world of Higher Education, institutions are constantly being challenged to adjust their educational offer to both the students and the market's demands for more interactive and flexible learning experiences. Considering how technological developments have deeply affected people's relationship with information, knowledge and learning, more and more Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have been turning to ICT looking for ways to upgrade their practices and enhance their on-campus

and distance education offer. Considered to be a viable, versatile and adaptable solution, blended learning has become a prominent method of course content delivery and teaching in this context, which has led to a growing interest surrounding this topic and ensuing research.

Focusing on a specific case (the Master's course in Innovative Tourism Development), in this chapter we analyse an institution's first experience with blended learning and the steps taken in order to improve it. After discussing the concept of blended learning and where it stands within the current state of the art of Portuguese HEI, we describe the way the Master is being implemented and draw a general profile of those involved in the course (faculty and students). This will contextualize our research and frame the ensuing data analysis, as well as the subsequent course of action taken.

After describing the methodology behind our research (that comprised a mixed method approach and the collection of data through observation, questionnaires, interviews and a focus group), we thoroughly analyse the first 3 editions of the course and describe the preliminary findings. Considering the pragmatic nature of the study, we then give an account of the intervention plan carried out in order to improve the course and its outcomes, briefly discussing areas of future research. As part of the chapter's conclusion, we also outline a series of final recommendations regarding the course to be made to institutional leaders and coordinators.

BACKGROUND

Over the last decade, in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly globalized world and technological evolution, HEI have had to adapt and review their instructional models and offer. This is particularly evident in Europe, where most institutions are also facing the need of complying with the principles of the Bologna Declaration and the improvement of the overall quality and quality assurance processes in Higher Education. Therefore, moving away from the idea that education in European institutions is mainly based on conservative models, traditionally relying on face-to-face and expository models, more and more HEI are gradually shifting towards the adoption of more student-centred and flexible approaches.

Overall, these changes have had an impact on the way stakeholders perceive the curricula and content distribution. Considering that learning no longer relies solely on the number of contact hours and classroom activities, most HEI have turned to ICT in order to enhance learning experiences, facilitate off-campus interaction and develop students' autonomy and collaboration skills.

Considered to "offer great opportunities for using student centred approaches" (Bielschowsky et al., 2009, p.10), distance and blended learning have come to play a very important role in HEI, as they support the creation of constructivist learning environments "where learners (…) work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities" (Wilson, 1996, p. 5).

Initially thought of as a trend that was associated and subordinated to the much broader terms of Distance Education or distance learning, blended learning has gradually emerged as a specific domain in its own right, having gained recognition as a feasible and promising alternative to exclusively online courses. Considered to be more flexible and adaptable to different settings and users, as it encompasses "the best of both worlds" (Chew, 2009; Davis & Lindsay, 2010; Graham, 2006; Roscoe, 2012), blended learning can be defined as "learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst

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