

THE EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTS' MARKET: THE CASE OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Head Assistant Professor Bojidar Violinov Bojinov, PhD
(bobi@uni-svishtov.bg)
Tsenov Academy of Economics

Distance learning is one of the most perspective and attractive educational products during the last decade. Its low price, high quality and lack of necessary for absence from workplace (or living place) makes it very attractive for managers, who want to raise their education and qualification as well as illiterate people, who cannot access to traditional education. Although the distance learning is the hit on the market, its roots may be found last in the past.

Distance learning, as show its name, supposes some geographical distance between the teacher and the student, as educational process is intermediated by using of some kind of medium (like print, audio, video, digital and etc.). Its evolution is strongly connected with the evolution of the media¹.

The evolution of distance learning

The distance learning originates in XIX century, with post system emergence. Its initial form are **correspondence courses**, conducted by the mail. In the first, the teacher prepares printed course materials (books, studybooks, homeworks, etc.) and then he sent them to students for self-training. The evaluation is made on the basis mailed back students' homeworks. Although correspondence courses had been oldest form of distance learning, they have still wide usage at the present time.

The radio invention has given new opportunities for dissemination of knowledge. The usage of the new media has overcome one of the basic shortcomings on the printed correspondence courses – impossibility for usage by illiterate people. The **educational radio programs** dramatically expanded the educational products' market. The new programs in this period have been mostly educational rather than commercial. Regardless of the lacks of immediate commercial results, the raising of general educational level has led to the increase of demand of specialized educational products and services.

The revolution in the communications after World War II, has contributed for the expansion of educational products through access to new media. The invention of television and its wide spread contributed for new educational product emergence – **the educational TV programs**. By analogy with educational radio programs, the requirements for the educational level of the consumers are minimal, but by contrast with others, new media allows visual presentation.

¹ Hezel Associates, A Framework for Higher Education Distance Learning in West Virginia, p 7-9, The Evolution of Distance Learning (<http://www.tutornet.com/distlearn/evolution.html>)

The improvement of the equipment and technologies allows the educational products to become more personalized and more commercial. While educational radio and TV programs are purposed to low literate or fully illiterate people, the new **audio** and **video courses** is targeted to more limited consumers' group, who has higher educational level. The new educational products allow their multiple usages, in the most suitable time and place for the student.

Table 1. Advantages vs. Disadvantages of Distance Learning Technologies
(Barron, A., A Teacher's Guide for Distance Learning, fcit.usf.edu/distance/)

Distance Learning technologies	Advantages	Disadvantages
Print	Materials Inexpensive Portable High comfort level Readily available	No interactions Limited sensory involvement Requires reading skills Time delay
Radio	Easy to use Easily accessible May be taped	High production costs Requires hardware No interaction Must be scheduled
Broadcast Television	Easy to use Easily accessible May be videotaped Includes audio and visual	High production costs Requires hardware No interaction Must be scheduled
Audiotape	Inexpensive Easily accessible Easily duplicated	No visual cues No interaction
Videotape	Inexpensive Easily accessible Easily duplicated Audio and visual elements	Complex to record No interaction Requires hardware
E-mail	Flexible Interactive Convenient	Requires hardware Software variations
Online Chat	Real-time interactions Instant feedback	Requires similar software Must be scheduled Requires hardware
Web-based Education	May incorporate multimedia Worldwide access Interactive	Requires computer Requires Web access May be slow
Videoconference (via Internet)	High realism Instant feedback May be interactive	Requires computer Requires Web access Requires similar software Must be scheduled

The **computers and Internet** mark the next step in evolution of distance learning. The usage of **e-mail** and **message (bulletin) boards**, rapidly speeding up the exchange of information. The new information technologies breathe new life into correspondence courses, but this time - in **hybrid** or in **fully digital form**.

The **World Wide Web** combined with new techniques for transfer of voice and video via Internet, have led to **digitalization of some of the existing printed, audio and video courses**. The usage of specialized software for **audio- and video- conferencing** has changed the distance learning and eliminated its greatest disadvantage – the distance between the teacher and the student and real-time interaction between them. The new means of communication lead to establishment of **virtual universities**, which are fully based on distance learning techniques.

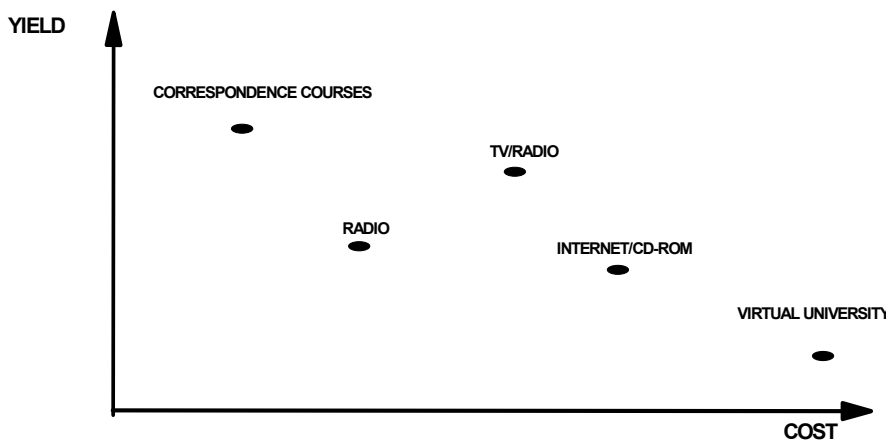


Figure 1. Estimates cost vs. yield points for implementation of various Distance learning approaches

(Stephen Ruth and Min Shi, Distance learning in Developing Countries: Is Anyone Measuring Cost-Benefits? TechKnowLogia, May/June, 2001, p. 36)

Regardless of the multiple channels for distribution of the educational product, **the choice of the technology** for its realization depends on several factors, like:

- **Specificity of the target educational market (language, culture and national peculiarities, level of literacy, etc.);**
- **The level of penetration of communication and new IT, as well as their accessibility;**
- **The living standard**, in particular, the possibility for purchase of specialized educational products (when it is commercial), as well as required hardware (video, computer, etc.) for them;
- **Advantages vs. Disadvantages of Distance Learning Technologies** (see Table 1);

- **Available funds for implementation on preferred technology** (see Figure 1),
- **Demands of specialists with specific educational level** (see Figure 2), etc.

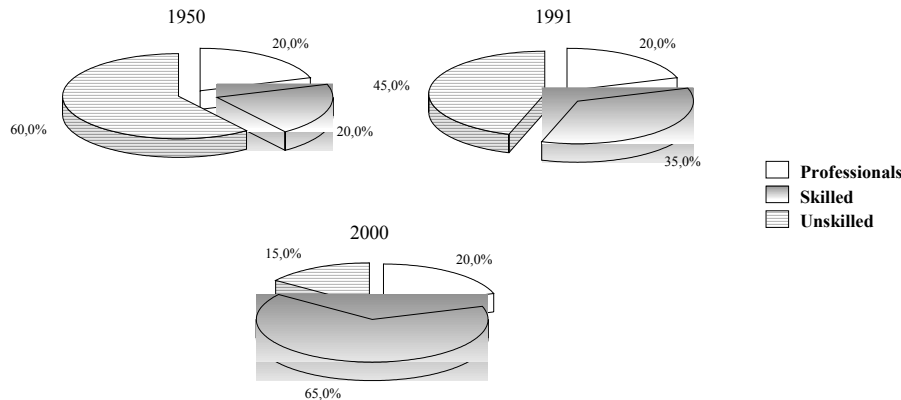


Figure 2. The Increasing Demand for Skilled Workers
 (Mustapha Tannir, Distance Learning and Its Evolution, Arab Symposium for Communications, October 2002, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 5)

Bulgarian experience: the case of the Tsenov Academy of Economics

Tsenov Academy of Economics is one of the pioneers in distance learning introduction in Bulgaria. At the beginning of 1999, supported by “PHARE Multi-country Programme in Distance Education” project, the Tsenov Academy has established Distance Learning Center. In the September 1999 has started the first Master Program in distance learning - “Financial management” in which has been enrolled and trained 60 students. A year later has started two new Master Programs – “International business and management” and “Bank management”, as in 2003 the Tsenov Academy is training over 1200 students in 10 master programs at Distance Learning Center. At Distance Learning Center functions 3 sections: “Interactive and multimedia systems for distance learning”, “Web-based techniques for distance learning”, and “Procedures for control and quality guarantee in distance learning”, as the functions of the first two are directed to the development of new educational products, while the third one has primary control functions.

Regardless of the achieved to the moment, the increasement of competition in educational market, one way to keep leadership in this area is creation on new, highly quality and attractive master programs, as well as creation of new joint programs with leading universities abroad. The usage of Internet and new IT, the digitized study materials, discussion boards, e-mails, video-conferences, web-

based training and evaluation, also have increased the opportunities for leadership in the national and regional markets and these are the keys for successful.

The first steps of the Tsenov Academy of Economics in this direction have been made in 2000, when started the digitalization of 2 of the existing Master Programs – “Financial management” and “Bank management” for which have been made CD with digitalized study materials (books, study books, self-training materials, etc.). At the present, all master programs are fully digitalized, and students, receive study materials on CD, as well as in printed kind. The finished homeworks may be sent for evaluation in printed or electronic form (by e-mail).

In the Summer 2002 at the Tsenov Academy of Economics, has started new pilot project named “Web-based Distance Learning” – jointly developed by “Web-based techniques for distance learning” Section and by Academic Computer Center at the Academy. The aim of the project is to upgrade the existing teaching techniques through usage of digital books, web presentations, videoconference, automated systems for self-training and students’ evaluation. In the pilot are included three of the existing Master Programs, namely “Financial management”, “Bank management” and “International business and management”. More than half of students have shown interest for including in the pilot web-based project (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demand of Web-based Distance Learning
(October 2002, Tsenov Academy of Economics, Svishtov, Bulgaria)

Master program	Students (October 2002)	Of which in web-based distance learning extension	
		(number)	(percent)
Financial Management	157	109	69%
Bank Management	72	52	72%
International Business and Management	73	48	65%

Except the traditional educational materials (printed studybooks, digitalized materials on CD, email accounts), the students from Web-based Master Programs receive an account for access to specialized web server for Distance Learning (<http://wdo.uni-svishtov.bg>). It contains additional educational materials (audio, video, links, etc.), bulletin boards, systems for on-line consulting (via chat or audio/video conference), upload of homeworks, self-training and automated students’ evaluation. The introducing of the last system, which is test-based, is eliminated the subjectivism in students’ evaluation.

The main directions for distance learning development in the Tsenov Academy are connected with the development of new (own or jointed) Master Program, the start of English-based (existing or new) Master Programs, as well as successful finish of the Web-based education trial and offering all programs through this mean.

Conclusions

The penetration of Internet and new IT opens new opportunities before Universities, gives them new means for distribution of their educational products, but at the same time, they faced highly competition in the new common market. This requires as increase of educational products' quality and/or decrease of its price, as investments in hardware, software, know-how, qualified personal and etc. The development of jointed programs with leading national and foreign Universities is the way for improvement of the quality of educational products as well as for market share expansion in the global level.