Chapter 2
From Traditional Teaching
to Online Learning: 
Revolution or Evolution

José Magano
Instituto Superior de Ciências Empresariais e do Turismo, Portugal

Carlos V. Carvalho
GILT / Instituto Superior de Engenharia do Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

In Portugal, like in most Western countries, most higher education institutions are already using e-learning platforms. However, this does not mean that these institutions are now offering distance education programmes but rather that they are using these tools as content repositories to support normal face-to-face academic disciplines. Therefore, effective e-learning adoption is still limited to episodic, non-systematic, initiatives. This chapter presents the e-learning initiative of the Higher Institute of Business Science and Tourism (ISCET). This initiative is relevant, precisely because it represents a holistic and revolutionary approach. All the students of ISCET were involved and there was a provision of online environments for the entire body of subjects offered in ISCET. The evaluation of the experimental stage setup the path to a systematic approach to distance education in the institute and provided valuable clues for other institutions that want to replicate ISCET’s e-learning initiative.

INTRODUCTION

The adaptation of the Institutions of Higher Education (IES) to the knowledge society is having a profound impact in terms of paradigms, organizational structures, educational and social methodologies and practices (UNESCO, 1998; CRE, 1998, Daniel, 1996). This view of the dynamic and rapidly evolving world has been fully substantiated and demonstrated since UNESCO’s original statement ten years ago. Now, more than ever, Universities are required to be able to prepare World Citizens, capable of living and working in a globalized society, with improved skills and competences. We’ve been watching for these past years how uncertain this society is, how difficult it is to achieve balance in such a world and how deep and large are the variations that arise from the global market. Anyone who cannot cope with this will be limited to small, unimportant roles.
In Europe, the Bologna declaration changed the Higher Education panorama. This declaration, resulting from the common agreement of the Ministers of Education of over 20 European countries, promotes the creation of a two-cycle system with comparable degrees (undergraduate and graduate) and a common credit system with high degree of students and teachers mobility. Above all it promotes recognized quality assurance procedures (ECEM, 2000). The adaptation to the Bologna declaration has also lead to the adoption of new, student-centered, learning/teaching paradigms.

E-learning has already overcome the initial misgivings arising from a traditionalist vision of Distance Education and it is regarded as a valid means to enhance learning (Moore, 1996). E-learning promotes an increased responsibility by students in their learning. The student controls various aspects of the process, as the choice and access to sources of information, time and location of such access, the processes of interaction with other participants, etc.. Simultaneously, the teacher gets the role of tutoring and guiding the students in their cognitive development. Thus, e-learning converges with the fundamental objectives expressed in the declaration of Bologna. In Portugal, although most of the institutions of higher education have e-learning initiatives, there are actually only a few that promote alternative forms of learning. They rather focus on the use of the e-learning platforms to support static contents of face-to-face (f2f) academic disciplines.

The Higher Institute for Business Science and Tourism (ISCET) is a private establishment of higher education and offers degrees in the areas of Tourism, Management of Human Resources, Social Service, Labor and Social Psychology, International Business Relations and Marketing. ISCET values, in all circumstances, the relation with business in the exploitation of its scientific areas of expertise and in the characterization of their students and teachers. ISCET also encourages and promotes the exchange of teachers and students through protocols with other institutions and regular contact with centers of excellence and seeks to encourage research, as a dimension of the activity of teachers and students (ISCET, 2008).

The e-learning initiative of ISCET presents innovative aspects that promote its scientific interest. The size of the institution allowed for an integral approach, including an holistic assessment of the process. This made possible to examine the change in the organizational culture introduced by the initiative.

This article describes the goals, methodology and evaluation of the initial stages of this initiative and presents the conclusions and recommendations that lead to its systematization.

BACKGROUND

What exactly is e-learning? When does an initiative / methodology / model carries a more generic definition of the use of ICT’s for teaching / learning for e-learning itself or one of its variants (like blended-learning)? When a term is as widespread as e-learning is today it ends up failing to reflect what it actually means. People just assume that their interpretation is shared by others and build conversations based on completely different ideas.

The multiplicity of the available definitions does not help to a clear identification. Jay Cross, who in 1998 introduced the term, says that its ambiguity is so great that he prefers not to use it anymore.

A common definition that can be found on the Internet is: “The use of communication technologies to create, promote, distribute and facilitate learning, anywhere anytime.” The credit must be assigned to Elliot Masie. It is an elegant but very broad definition. E-learning becomes a large bag of methodologies. However, putting a set of pdf files on the Internet and answering questions from students via e-mail is not e-learning!