

E-learning models in higher education: The case of European University Cyprus

D. Vlachopoulos

Distance Education Unit, European University Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus.

Accepted 10 September, 2013

ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the use of the e-learning concept in the 1990s, in the context of the information and knowledge society, there has been an explosion of different interpretations and approaches in Higher Education. This range of different interpretations and approaches can lead to a confusing and even contradictory situation given the many different perspectives that give rise to these attempts to explain the concept. Open and face-to-face Universities apply different e-learning models according to their goals, mission and national legislation. The aim of this paper is to present the model chosen by the European University Cyprus, a face-to-face university, which has recently started the implementation of autonomous distance learning master degree programs. The presentation and analysis of different case studies about the e-learning models can create the concept's roadmap in Higher Education and help policy makers to decide which model corresponds better to the characteristics, mission and needs of their institutions.

Keywords: E-learning models, European University Cyprus, higher education, distance education, face-to-face university.

E-mail: d.vlachopoulos@euc.ac.cy. Website: <http://deu.euc.ac.cy>

INTRODUCTION

The setting

European University of Cyprus (EUC) is the first Higher Private Educational Institution to be established in Cyprus. EUC has a reputation for excellence and innovation in research. With an emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, EUC is one of the leading academic and research institutions in Cyprus. Research activity is centred in the schools and research centres/institutes. The University is located in Nicosia, Cyprus a strategic geographical position of the Mediterranean Sea, being the south part of Europe, very close to Middle East and Africa. This geographical position gives a multicultural profile to the EUC, since it has academic and research staff and students from many different countries of Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In a context of equality and respect, this multicultural profile has contributed in a positive way to the University's scientific production. EUC is a member of Laureate International Universities a worldwide network

of Higher Education institutions founded in 1998 in the United States. It is currently made up of more than 70 institutions, in 29 countries, with more than 150 campuses and over 780,000 students worldwide (LIU, 2013). Laureate's mission is to expand access to Higher Education worldwide, and provide students with the tools needed to reach their professional and personal goals. European University Cyprus has been awarded the ECTS Label, a special and supreme recognition of quality in the European Higher Education Area comprising 47 countries. Being awarded the ECTS Label by the European Commission, European University Cyprus is recognized as an outstanding example of an institution committed to European academic mobility in a rapidly-changing Higher Education sector, and an institution that makes teaching and learning more transparent and facilitates the recognition of studies and qualifications (EUC, 2011, 2012, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

In the European Higher Education Area context, there is a growing interest among universities for the use of the internet in teaching and learning. In addition, information and communication technologies (ICT) have changed the nature of Open and Distance Education by providing learning communities for teachers and students where they can interact with each other even if they are situated in different geographical locations (Vlachopoulos et al., 2010). The importance of interaction in forms of flexible, online and distance education has been described at length - whether learners interacting with individualized computer programs or learner-to-teacher or learner-to-learner interaction that at a distance requires the mediation of technology (Moore, 1989; Garrison and Anderson, 2003). Online learning in face-to-face university departments is used mostly in order to support the face-to-face teaching and learning (Vlachopoulos, 2008) and its application has offered some very important benefits to both instructors and students. During the last 3 years though, face-to-face universities are developing autonomous distance education teaching and learning models. This shows that distance education is widely accepted by the society and all evaluation and accreditation agencies. The new model is considered very attractive in the context of the economic crisis, since it allows the combination of studies with work and minimizes the travel expenses for students.

The European University Cyprus, trying continuously to understand and serve the needs of the society, established, in September 2012, the Distance Education Unit (DEU) (<http://deu.euc.ac.cy>). The mission of this unit is to offer access to education and knowledge to all people who cannot attend the face-to-face programs due to personal, professional and/or geographical reasons. In this way, the DEU responds to the new and growing needs of the today's society for learning through alternative education programs. During the first years of its functioning, the unit's ambition is to create postgraduate programs equivalent to those offered by our university through conventional (face-to-face) teaching, but also vocational training and update of the theoretical background of professionals, through independent courses. Finally, the students have the opportunity to take only some subjects from the offered programs, by paying the amount corresponding to them. These students receive a «Specialization Certificate» from the European University Cyprus and the credits passed through these independent courses can be recognized in case they enroll, afterwards, in a relevant postgraduate program. The DEU welcomes students from all over the world, since it offers programs in Greek and English.

Pedagogical model of the DEU

Even though Distance Education is very popular in the Hellenic territory (Greece and Cyprus) and the two public Open Universities (Hellenic Open University and Open University of Cyprus) are fully recognized in national (Greek and Cypriot government) and international (all EU countries) level, the national approach to this new pedagogical model is considered conservative, since the legislation does not recognize yet fully distance/virtual programs (Government of Cyprus, 2005). So the pedagogical model applied at the EUC is adapted to the needs, special characteristics and legislation of the Hellenic territory, where distance education is still always accompanied with face-to-face meetings between the instructors and the students, as well as with the existence of an obligatory (written) final examination. The model of

the EUC, though is much more flexible, and interactive following the example of the Open University of Catalonia (www.uoc.edu), the first 100% online University in the world, with which it has signed a memorandum of collaboration in research and teaching level.

More analytically, the Virtual Campus and the Blackboard platform is the environment which provides access to learning resources and content and makes a certain kind of interaction possible through them. The student occupies a predominant position in this model. The entire process revolves around designing areas and resources to enhance his/her learning. In other words, the learning activity and the preparation of the students for the final examination are the core of the model. In this context, this model includes three fundamental elements that all come together in the design of learning activities: learning resources, collaboration and guidance from the teaching and administrative staff.

Collaboration

Learning collaboratively means using teamwork, through communication and discussion with the instructor and other classmates, to solve problems, develop projects, create products jointly, etc. The collaborative construction of knowledge must combine personal experience, group research processes and knowledge management with the support of Virtual Campus tools (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2009). However, the EUC distance education model cannot only be based on collaboration, since one of our main objectives is to facilitate and promote autonomous and independent learning.

Guidance

This term refers to the different types of relations that are created and developed between the students and the teaching staff of the European University Cyprus. The guidance does not only include the help that is provided to the students on the contents of the courses, but also includes tutoring and coaching concerning the planning of their study, problem resolution, the evaluation process and decision making issue (courses election, itineraries, etc.). Through this guidance policy each student receives personalized attention according to his/her needs, from the first day of his/her enrollment. More concretely, the tutor (instructor) is the person in charge for the teaching and learning process of each course. She/he provides students with all the necessary information and resources for the delivery of the course and a successful performance in the Final Examination. She/he is the person in charge for the students' evaluation, as well as for the management of the learning platform (Blackboard). The academic coordinator is the person in charge for the structure and the content of each course, as well as for the design and elaboration of the learning

activities (often in collaboration with the tutor). The academic coordinator is responsible for conflict resolution issues between the tutors and the students or between the students and the administrative services of the university. Finally, the specialized administrative staff is always at students' disposal concerning the course enrollment, the registration and payment of tuition fees, their professional development, etc.

Resources

This term includes both educational materials expressly designed to support and convey learning content, and other types of documents and tools, whether text or multimedia; taken from the web, created by the students themselves, etc.

As it can be easily understood from the above description, the EUC model for distance education programs is very flexible and it can be easily adapted to the special characteristics and objectives of each course. This means that the 3 basic elements of the model (guidance, collaboration and resources) do not appear with the same intensity in all courses. The teaching and learning process at the EUC offers both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities.

Finally, the written *in situ* final examination is obligatory for all the master degree courses and takes place at the end of every semester. The students cannot take the final examination if they do not succeed in the ongoing evaluation learning activities.

Technology utilization

A very important element for the development of the above pedagogical model is the Information and Communication Technology. More concretely, one of the most important things for a distance education initiative is the hosting learning platform. In the case of the EUC, the Blackboard platform was selected as virtual learning environment and course management system. The choice of a for-profit company for the support of our courses instead of an open-source platform was based on the pedagogical and technical support that is offered with the purchase of the Blackboard platform. In this way the EUC ensures a smooth functioning, monitoring and feedback for the DEU's activity especially during the first years of its creation where both Faculty and administrative staff do not have the necessary experience in managing this kind of courses.

The communication and interaction between students and instructors takes place within the Blackboard platform and through email exchange. The ongoing evaluation activities take place within the learning platform. More personalized issues and questions are commented via email among the involved people. The

interaction between the students and the learning material takes place also within the learning platform. The DEU of the EUC strongly believes that since the program is delivered through distance learning, all learning resources and materials should be available electronically as well. For the communication, interaction and evaluation in the offered courses, the DEU of the EUC uses various electronic tools and applications.

First of all, in the context of the ongoing evaluation process that takes place in every course during the semester, the students participate in online forums, online surveys, self-evaluation activities; they also receive and submit their essays through the Blackboard platform. In addition, they get informed by the instructors (about their grades and score, deadlines, news, notices, etc.) by using the platform's functions. More personalized issues and questions are studied via email between the instructor and the students. The tutoring of research projects and essays is done through line video applications, such as *Skype*.

Videoconference is used very often in all distance education courses of the EUC for the support of the students' learning. The instructors present some of the most important contents of the courses through video conference in order to give the students a clearer image of the course concepts. The students have the possibility to follow live (through live streaming) the video conference and interact with the instructor or simply view the lecture in another moment as a complementary learning resource. The «Elluminate Live!» program is chosen for these reason for its variety of functions that offers to both instructors and students and for its compatibility with the Blackboard platform.

Web 2.0, and especially Wikis and Blogs, is also used in many courses as the basic tool for the collaborative activities. The easy integration of both Blogs and Wikis in the Blackboard platform and their ease of use by the students make them a really interesting tool for collaboration and team work among people who live in different geographical locations.

Technology is not only important for the courses' delivery and design, but also for the whole functioning of the Distance Education Unit of the European University Cyprus. More analytically, a program that is offered through distance learning must facilitate all administrative processes and procedures without obliging the students to visit the institution physically. In this context, all students can get information for the EUC's distance learning programs by email or through the DEU's web page. Furthermore, the students can send all the necessary documentation for their enrollment via email or by post. They also choose the courses they will do during each semester by filling an online form. There are three ways of paying the fees without the need to visit the institution. This can be done online or through bank check. The communication with the EUC administrative staff also takes place via email or live chat. Finally, all the

necessary certificates and diplomas are sent to the students' home address.

Course management practices and philosophy

The term 'course management' refers to four main elements that are important to analyze, in order to have a clear image of the distance education courses of the EUC, a part from the pedagogical model, which was analyzed in the previous chapter: The courses' structure (instructional design), the technical support provided, the number of students policy and the preparation and realization of the *in situ* final examination.

As far as the structure of the course is concerned, all the courses of the master degree programs of the DEU have the same structure. Each course has its own virtual classroom within Blackboard Platform. The virtual platform has some main parts that are the same for all the courses. The 'study guide', is where students can find all the information about the course (competences and learning objectives, main and complementary bibliography, contents, evaluation activities, dates for the submission of the learning activities and for the final examination). The 'online forum' is the virtual space where students and instructors exchange opinions about the course, discuss problems and questions they have during the learning process and share information relevant to the course contents. The 'online discussion' is the virtual place for formal and obligatory online discussions about the contents of the course. These discussions are coordinated by the instructor and they are part of the students' ongoing evaluation. The 'learning activities' is the space where students test their knowledge on the contents of the course. These activities usually are surveys or tests that help the student identify if they have understand the theoretical contents of the course and they can apply them in practice. The 'calendar' shows all the activities of the course during the semester (submission deadlines, online discussions, starting/last day of an activity, etc.). 'Resources' is the space where students can find all the learning materials provided by the instructor. All learning materials are created for distance education courses or they are adapted by the instructors to serve the needs of the DEU students. Finally, the 'Grades' is the space where students can find their evaluation results in every learning activity and also their final score after the written examination. Apart from these main parts of the virtual classroom, the students can find more parts depending on the needs of every course. For example, they can find the Wiki or the Blog space if the course requires such kind of collaborative work, the 'Groups' option if they have to create small groups and work separately, etc. The Elluminate Live videoconference program is available in all virtual classrooms even though the instructors are free to use it how they prefer, either as a

complementary tool for explaining the contents of the course or as a means for more direct communication and interaction between the instructor and the students. The DEU philosophy is to offer flexibility to all instructors to teach with their own style and approaches but always respecting the DEU's philosophy and principles, expressed in the pedagogical model chapter.

As far as the students grouping is concerned, the DEU's philosophy is that effective distance learning can be achieved only with relatively small groups of students. In this context, the maximum number of students in every virtual classroom is approximately 25 students. This number permits a closer monitoring of the students' performance by the instructors and makes possible a personalized feedback after every learning activity. For obvious financial reasons, a course cannot start with less than 10 enrolled students.

The courses count on the technical support of the EUC Information Technology (IT) staff that is responsible for solving all the technical issues in collaboration with the Blackboard team and for helping all students and instructors that faces usability problems. These IT experts have deep knowledge of the Blackboard platform and guarantee the smooth functioning of the programs.

Finally, the organization of the final examination is taking place in places that are accessible for the majority of our students. For example, if there is a big group of students for a specific city of Cyprus or Greece, the final examination will be held in this city in order to help students to avoid unnecessary travel expenses.

Players involved and their roles within the DEU

The distance education programs involve all three categories of the EUC employees: the academic staff, the technical staff, and the administrative staff.

The academic staff is divided in two categories. On the one hand, we have the instructors (tutors) of the courses, who have the responsibility for the whole teaching and learning process of the course and the evaluation of the students. On the other hand, we have the academic coordinators of each course, who are responsible for the coordination of the various tutors and the instructional design of each course. Even though the tutors must follow the general guidelines of the academic coordinators, there is close collaboration and communication between the two parts for the design and development of the courses. The academic coordinator usually does not get involved in the teaching and learning process and has the duty to solve possible problems or conflicts between the tutor and the students.

The technical staff helps the tutors and the academic coordinators to set up the courses in the Blackboard platform. They are helping all academic staff that faces usability problems with the platform or the tools used for teaching and, generally, support the technological

functioning of each course. Their role is very important for the students as well, since they are responsible for solving their doubts about usability issues.

The administrative staff accompanies students from their first day of contact with the university until the day they receive their diploma or certificate-after graduating-at home. Their role is very important since they are responsible for the students' enrollment and courses selection, the payment of the fees, the organization of the students' groups, the organization and realization of the final examination, issuing certificates, etc.

It is very important to mention that the activity of these three groups is not taking place in parallel. On the contrary, -in many cases- they have to collaborate and understand the other groups' duties and activity in order to guarantee an effective functioning.

Case description

Context

Higher Education in Cyprus is provided through a wide range of means and methods in public or in private institutions, through full-time, part-time, distance and other forms of attendance. The intention of the European Union to promote "Lifelong Learning" has extended the role of Higher Education and created new needs such as the creation of the Open University of Cyprus. At the same time, the state policy for the substantial increase of expenditure on research and the establishment of Cyprus as a regional educational and research centre, creates new prospects for the development of tertiary education and indicates that there are great possibilities for tertiary education to contribute to the economic development of the country (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012).

The actual economic crisis and the extended use of Information and Communication Technologies in people's everyday life have been the main reason for the development of distance education in Cyprus. Apart from the public Open University of Cyprus (OUC), which offers recognized bachelor and master degree programs, the Ministry of Education has given the possibility to private face-to-face universities to offer some distance education programs as well, basically because it was seen that the places offered at the OUC are much less than the existing demand.

In this context, the European University Cyprus was approved to offer three master degree programs during the first year of the distance education experience (2013) with the possibility to offer more programs in the next years. A necessary precondition to offer distance education programs was to offer the same program through conventional, face-to-face methods. The European University Cyprus has examined the received demand in all its programs and decided to offer two

programs in Education and one program in Business Administration.

As far as the education programs are concerned, it is important to say that all primary, secondary, special, and informal education teachers need a master degree for their professional development and improvement of their economic conditions. So, there is an important demand from both Greece and Cyprus for such programs. The fact that in Greece distance education in bachelor and master degree level is offered only by the Hellenic Open University by law, makes this demand even bigger from the Greek market. Unfortunately, the economic crisis in Greece does not allow students to travel and live in Cyprus for their studies and the distance education programs seem the best option. Having this in mind and trying to satisfy the actual social needs, the EUC offers two master degree programs in Education Studies, one with specialization in 'Special and Inclusive Education' and the other in 'Education Leadership'.

On the other hand, taking into consideration that one of the most popular degrees is the Master in Business Administration (MBA), the EUC chose it as the third program to offer during the first year of the distance education experience. The fact that the EUC has many international students that can be attracted by this program, led to the decision to offer it in English.

Programs offered

More analytically, the master in Education Leadership is labor market oriented and aims to offer an integrated program in educational leadership as well as to offer knowledge and skills and to create conditions that will enable students to become managers/leaders in education. Its general objectives are to:

1. Present a complete program in Educational Leadership.
2. Promote concepts and cultivate aptitudes for preparing future educational leaders and transforming them into competent educators, able to undertake employment in all sectors and contexts of education and qualified for academic and professional development, advancement and leadership.
3. Impart knowledge and develop dexterities/abilities in research, in the discipline of Education Leadership.

The above general objectives can be achieved through the following specific ones:

- (i) To prepare students for the effective organization and administration of schools and education.
- (ii) To educate and train educators with administrative posts, providing competences leading to a productive and creative advancement.
- (iii) To identify and develop research techniques that will

empower students and allow them as future educators to advance and employ such dexterities in becoming competent educational leaders and respectable researchers.

(iv) To provide students with a high quality education, equipping them with knowledge, notions and abilities so as to contribute constructively to the wider educational, cultural and social context.

Finally, it is expected that students who finish this program with success will be able to:

(a) Design, prepare and present small or large scale of educational research.

(b) Analyze and evaluate quantitative and qualitative researches from the field of Educational Leadership.

(c) Carry out a master thesis about a specific subject of Educational Leadership.

(d) Analyze and explain the relationship between philosophy and education or appreciate the institutions, procedures and results of modern educational systems from a sociological point of view or examine theories and research findings of educational psychology and apply psychological theories into practice or develop attitudes as educators, which are necessary for someone to meet cultural variety.

(e) Develop an extensive sense of educational organization as a social system, realize the dynamic context in which a school and the educational system are working and get familiar with basic leadership operations and how these can be implemented at the level of a school unit.

(f) Identify the characteristics of leadership in relation to the micro society of school and relate leadership with the effectiveness of a school unit.

(g) Acquire knowledge in the areas of motivation, conflict resolution, effective communication, climate/ culture organization and the administration of human and material resources.

(h) Realize the need to introduce innovations in an educational organization for its continuous improvement, to describe the stages of the successful introduction of innovations and be fully aware of the role of an educator and especially of the principal of a school in introducing innovations in schools.

(i) Identify and analyze the basic principles of school policy, identify the difference between the theoretical dimension and its practical implementation, recognize 'pressure groups' which influence educational policy making in Cyprus and critically sketch the basic characteristics of international educational discourse.

(j) Identify the factors which influence the effectiveness of the school organization, discuss theoretical models for improvement of school effectiveness, in addition to studying the findings from quantitative and qualitative research which study the factors which influence the effectiveness of an organization and the process for

improving school effectiveness.

(k) Employ technology as a means for management organization and to modernize the school.

The Special (Inclusive) Education program, is also a labor market oriented and aims to offer knowledge in the field of educational, political, philosophical, theoretical and historical, aspects of integration and a single special education and to offer knowledge and skills for the identification, evaluation and effective treatment of children with disabilities (special needs). Its general objectives are to:

1. Examine closely various issues related with the disciplines of educational, political, philosophical, theoretical and historical aspects of Special and Inclusive Education in Cyprus and abroad.

2. Advance student's knowledge and abilities for identifying, evaluating, and responding to the needs of children with disabilities who are part of the regular school.

3. Impart knowledge and develop dexterities/abilities in research, in the discipline of Special (Inclusive) Education.

The above objectives can be achieved through the following specific ones:

(i) To broaden students' knowledge and support critical thinking related to the various philosophical approaches regarding the education of children with disabilities.

(ii) To extend students' knowledge and support critical thinking related to the various policies used regarding the education of children with disabilities.

(iii) To develop students' knowledge, understanding and cultivate abilities for the effective inclusive education of all children.

(iv) To widen students' knowledge and cultivate dexterities for handling the needs of children with disabilities attending the regular classroom

(v) To cultivate and promote positive attitudes towards the education of children with disabilities who attend the regular school.

(vi) To enhance and develop students' knowledge and abilities in creating, implementing and critically evaluating research designs and models in the Special (Inclusive) Education field, so as to actively pursue and exert their role as teachers and/or researchers.

Finally, it is expected that students who finish this program with success will be able to:

(a) Design, implement and present educational research at the level foreseen in carrying out postgraduate research and that they will evaluate research projects in Inclusive education.

(b) Develop their design and analysis of data with

statistical techniques which are used in the research of Inclusive Education or in the design, implementation and presentation of advanced Qualitative Research.

(c) Carry out post graduate research in a specialist topic of Inclusive Education.

(d) Analyze and explain the relationship between philosophy and education or understand the institutions, procedures and results of contemporary educational systems from a sociological perspective or examine/comment on/ discuss the theories and research questions of educational psychology and implement various theories of psychology in educational practice or develop essential attitudes as teachers in order to respond competently to multicultural differences.

(e) Identify and analyze the factors which lead to the development of the perception of disability, which is created by society and eventually reaches school systems, as well as the political, historical and sociological aspects of the development of Inclusive Education in Cyprus and abroad in addition to the basic characteristics of children with various disabilities and children who constitute minorities in a school setting.

(f) Differentiate teaching and materials in order to offer effective support to all the students of an inclusive class.

(g) Design and implement programs, which can respond to the individual needs of children with disabilities and the wider demands of the curriculum and its approach to Inclusive education.

(h) Analyze and implement contemporary educational approaches suitable for children with physical and sensory disabilities and/or approach children with cognitive or mental disabilities within the school unit and/or identify the characteristics of children with psycho-emotional disabilities and design and implement techniques for the timely diagnosis and handling of such issues.

(i) Develop further advisory and communication skills for use with parents of children with disabilities in order for effective cooperation with them.

(j) Analyze and discuss contemporary theoretical opinions, trends and practices and/or specialist topics which concern or impact the theory and practice of Inclusive Education in Cyprus and abroad.

(k) Employ technology as a means to differentiate their teaching in an inclusive class and in educational practice organized in a school unit, and as a tool for disabled people to access knowledge.

(l) Become familiar with the school environment of Inclusive Education and acquire school experience through the implementation into practice the contents and core ideas of their studies.

On the other hand, the MBA program is academic, but also equips students with the labor market skills and knowledge and prepares them as managers for today's increasingly complex and multidimensional work environment. It includes a strong focus on leadership,

teamwork and integrative management activities.

The MBA program aims to develop in students multi disciplined management knowledge and skills and create well-rounded business leaders that can work across organizational boundaries in today's business world with entrepreneurial skills and a clear vision for the future.

Remaining in constant close contact with the business world, the School aims at reacting quickly to changes in the business climate in setting the content of its MBA program. A synopsis of the general objectives is given as follows:

1. To provide an education leading to an academic degree, namely a Master of Business Administration (MBA).
 2. To develop the student's capacity to think, write and speak effectively and creatively.
 3. To develop an appreciation of and respect for social, moral and ethical values as the foundation of man's relationship to his fellow-man and his responsibilities to this community and country.
 4. To build breadth of perspective and provide sufficient specialization to meet basic professional and career requirements.
 5. To provide the student with the basic requirements for academic and/or career advancement.
- The above objectives can be achieved through the following specific ones.
6. To produce graduates who have the education and ability to assume leadership roles and undertake responsibilities.
 7. To ensure a learning experience that will provide students with the necessary academic and professional know-how to enter any sector of the business community as a key person.
 8. To introduce students to theories of business behavior and the relation of an organization to its internal and external environment as well as to management skills such as the ability to make decisions, analyze and solve business problems and communicate effectively.
 9. To provide an overall view of the management of an enterprise in a complex and changing environment.

By the end of the program, students are expected to have developed or further improved:

- (i) A systematic critical understanding of organizations, their management and their external context.
- (ii) The ability to apply relevant knowledge to complex situations.
- (iii) The ability to respond to and manage change.
- (iv) Conceptual abilities and analytical skills that enable them to:

- (a) Evaluate the rigor and validity of published research and assess its relevance to new situations;
- (b) Extrapolate from existing research and scholarship to

identify new or revised approaches;

(c) Practice a critical awareness of current issues in business and management informed by leading edge research and practice in the field;

(v) An understanding of techniques appropriate to detailed investigation into relevant business and management issues the ability to acquire and analyze data and information, evaluate their relevance and validity, and synthesize information in the context of new situations.

(vi) The ability to conduct research into business and management issues.

Organizational issues

Duration: The two education programs have 90 ECTS credits, while the MBA has 120 ECTS. The minimum duration to obtain these master degrees is 18 and 24 months, respectively. Students can combine their studies with work and other activities by studying part-time as well (EUC has not established a maximum duration for these courses).

Resources: Students work with updated learning materials made exclusively for the distance education pedagogical model or adapted for this purpose by the instructors. All learning materials are provided electronically to the students. The learning resources are of different types (Videos, PDFs, Web Pages, e-books, etc.). The teaching and learning process is supported by the videoconference tool «Elluminate Live».

Semesterization: Even though the two Public Open Universities in Greece and Cyprus offer, basically, thematic Units (courses) that last a whole academic year, the EUC considers that it is more effective for both students and instructors to divide the academic year in two semesters. In this context, it has distributed the ECTS in such way that a full time student can be enrolled up to 30 ECTS/semester. During the first semester the number of credits is smaller, since it is believed that the students needs more time to get to know the virtual campus and understand the functioning of the distance education model applied.

Application and enrollment: The European University Cyprus has developed the necessary technological applications in order to facilitate the information, application and enrollment procedure without the presence of the students at the EUC. More concretely, the future students can receive complete information about the programs (tuition fees, structure, admission requirements, etc.) through the web page of the Distance Education Unit, where they can contact with the administrative staff or even the director of the Unit. In

addition, students can send and receive the necessary documents for their admission and enrollment through the EUC's webpage. Finally, there is the possibility for electronic (online) payment of the tuition fees.

Face-to-face meetings: The students have the opportunity to meet with each other and their instructor twice every semester. These meetings have as main objective to explain in a more detailed way some difficult content of the courses but also for socialization reasons, which are considered very important for the personal development of the students. These meetings are usually held at the EUC Campus or in other cities, where an important number of students is living. For the students who are unable to attend these face-to-face meetings, the instructor can organize videoconferences through the Elluminate Live tool. The face-to-face meetings are organized during the weekend. The face-to-face meetings calendar for the whole academic year is announced at the beginning of the course in order to help students organize their agendas on time.

Final examination: As it was mentioned before, for the recognition of the distance education programs in Cyprus and Greece, it is obligatory to organize a final face-to-face examination every semester. This examination is taking place at the EUC Campus or in other cities, depending on the geographical distribution of the students. The final examination is also organized during the weekend. The final examination calendar is announced at the beginning of the course in order to help students organize their agendas on time.

DISCUSSION

The application of a distance education pedagogical model by a face-to-face university implies different challenges in all levels: course design, human resources and quality assurance.

As the number of distance education courses grows at the EUC there is an increasing need for instructors. To achieve and maintain quality in human resources is an important challenge, since teaching through distance education methods requires some new competences (e-skills) and experience that not all academics have developed. Currently, all online instructors at the EUC have realized a 6 month training program on e-learning design and course delivery, organized by the Open University of Catalonia. But the increasing number of students in the distance learning programs leads to the search of external teaching collaborators. People with no stable working condition with the EUC will be difficult to train. So, it is very important to have a very clear plan for the development of new courses and the need for specialized teaching staff in order to maintain the quality assurance criteria applied at the EUC. The distance

education unit has prepared the quality assurance research project «e-QADeSHE» (e-learning Quality Assurance Design Standards in Higher Education), which will take place on January 2014 until January 2017.

The fact that for many instructors and students this distance learning programs will be the first distance education experience obliges the EUC to develop some strategies in order to avoid important usability and course delivery problems. In this context, it is recommended to start each course with less complex activities, such as posting relevant documents in the virtual platform (Blackboard), watching audiovisual material and interact through the online forum. After some weeks instructors begin to introduce more complex activities focusing on more pedagogical aspects and considering how to best use the learning platform. The complexity of the activities is growing gradually and always according to the students' response and competences. A «Foundation Seminar in Open and Distance Education» is offered to the students who do not feel comfortable with the use of ICT in teaching and learning or who don't have previous experience in distance education and need an additional support.

For instructors and administrative staff who are new in the distance education «world», a very important challenge is the amount of time required to develop and maintain each course. For this process the EUC Distance Education Unit hires technical staff that provide technical or/and pedagogical support to the instructors during the academic.

During the design a distance education program, the instructors should consider students' usability problems and lack of knowledge concerning the pedagogical model applied. To avoid possible problems, it is important to offer the basic and necessary resources of each course (basic learning material) in a format that students are familiar with (text or videos). Finally, the «Foundation Seminar» aforementioned is also aiming to give students a clear image of the needs, philosophy and characteristics of the pedagogical model.

Finally, another important challenge for the Distance Education Unit of the EUC is the task of determining whether the course is having the intended effect. Evaluating the effectiveness of the courses is fundamental for the improvement of quality of the studies and the satisfaction of both students and instructors. A detailed strategy needs to be designed in order to gain important information from all participants after the completion of every semester. Students and instructors should be asked for their opinion and evaluation of the teaching and learning process. The academic coordinator should evaluate the adequacy of the content of each course and the performance of each instructor. The research project «e-QADeSHE» includes various activities on this issue.

By looking over the range of different approaches for e-learning, we reach the conclusion that more similar studies are needed in order to facilitate research and understanding between the different sectors of distance education. These different studies could create the concept's roadmap and help institutions chose adequately the approach that fits most to their needs and philosophy.

REFERENCES

- Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture (2012). Cyprus Higher Education. Retrieved on the 9th of February 2013 from <http://www.highereducation.ac.cy/en/che-introduction.html>.
- EUC (2013). Member of the Laureate International Universities. Retrieved on the 5th of February 2013 from <http://www.euc.ac.cy/easyconsole.cfm/id/239>.
- EUC (2012). Bulletin 2012-2013. Nicosia: European University Cyprus.
- EUC (2011). University Charter Annexes and Internal Regulations. Nicosia: European University Cyprus.
- Garrison, D. R., and Anderson, T. (2003). E-Learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Government of Cyprus (2005). The Private Universities (Establishment, Operation and Control). Retrieved on 6th of February 2013 from http://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/enop/non-ind/2005_1_109/index.html.
- LIU- Laureate International Universities (2013). Centers of Excellence. Retrieved on 6th of February 2013 from <http://www.laureate.net/CentersofExcellence>.
- Moore, M. G. (1989). Three types of interaction. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 3(2), 1-6.
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (2009). *El model educatiu de la UOC. Evolució i perspectives*. Barcelona: Open University of Catalonia.
- Vlachopoulos, D. (2008). The perceptions of the academic staff of classics of the use of ICT in learning activities: A case study. V International congress of University Teaching and Innovation. Lleida.
- Vlachopoulos, D., González, L. and Gómez, P. (2010). Online tutoring in classics: a way of familiarizing the students with the use of Technologies in learning activities. *Ágora. Estudos Clássicos em Debate*, 12, 115-132.