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**THE ROLE OF ONLINE LEARNING IN THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER
EDUCATION:**

CASE STUDY OF THE UNITED STATES

Technological progress impacted higher education in the US. Over the past ten years, there has been a gradual increase in the online learning in. It became a critical part of long term strategy for many universities. Postgraduate doctoral/research institutions in the US have the greatest number of online programs due to increased demand in the last several years (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Overall current educational process in the US could be divided into several types: traditional, web facilitated, blended/hybrid, online.

Schools in the US offer online learning for graduate and undergraduate programs in a variety of ways. Web Facilitated Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course; it uses a course management system (CMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments. Blended/Hybrid - Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has some face-to-face meetings. Online - a course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings. Abbreviations like E-learning, CBT (Computer-Based Training), IBT (Internet-Based Training) or WBT (Web-Based Training) have been used as synonyms to online in the US (Sloan Report, 2009).

The 2010 Sloan Foundation Report of Online Learning reveals that enrollment rose by almost one million students from a year earlier. Approximately 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in fall 2009. Online education becoming part of long-term strategy for many schools in the US. According to the national Sloan survey (2010) more than 96 percent of the very largest institutions have some online offerings. Public institutions were the first among other types of US higher education institutions to enter the online education market, put this method of education

on the strategic development agenda, and continue to hold a leading position on the number of online course and program offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Online learning programs are offered to students in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Doctoral/Research institutions in the US have the greatest penetration of offering online programs. The Sloan report, based on a poll of academic leaders, offer an interesting profile of online learners. Online students tend to be older, and often hold additional employment and family responsibilities, as compared to the more traditional student. Online students, like the overall student body, are overwhelmingly undergraduates. Based on this profile, universities apply adult education approach to the overall curriculum development, focusing on andragogical learning theory (Reischmann, 2005).

Recent economic downturn in the US has increased demand for online courses and programs. According to 2010 Sloan Report, there is widespread agreement that higher fuel costs will lead to more students selecting online courses. In addition to that institutions that offer programs to serve working adults (adult learning programs) registered overall enrollment growth driven by rising unemployment in the US. Decreased availability of good jobs encourages more people to seek education.

Online learning is implemented in the universities with the help of specific software platforms (Angel, BlackBoard, etc) used for delivering, tracking and managing education within programs. A learning platform helps universities set up virtual programs and classes and allows professors and administrators track attendance, time on task, student progress, deliver live chats, conduct online discussions in the discussion boards, organize group work, take quizzes, submit written assignments and projects. The most popular online schools in the US according to different ratings are: University of Phoenix Online, Liberty University Online, Colorado Technical University Online, Capella University online, Walden University.

Trained faculty must be hired to work with students on-line. Staffing for online courses does not come at the expense of core faculty. According to the research,

institutions use about the same mixture of core and adjunct faculty to staff their online courses as they do for their face-to-face courses. Instead of more adjunct faculty teaching online courses, the opposite is found; overall, there is a slightly greater use of core faculty for teaching online than for face-to-face. (NASULGC-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning Benchmarking Study: Preliminary Findings, n.d., APLU, 2009)

Public institutions have been the leaders in the online education market and academic leaders at public institutions have the highest opinion of the quality of online instruction, compared to traditional classroom environment. Public institutions are most likely to report that «their faculty accept the legitimacy and value of online instruction» (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p.7). Seventy-six percent of public institutions academic leaders surveyed consider online to be as high quality or even better than face-to-face instruction. Leaders of for-profit (private) institutions support this claim in that sixty-seven percent of such institutions surveyed agree to the high quality of online instruction. Private non-profit institutions have the lowest confidence in this claim, with only fifty-five percent of the leaders agreeing that online instruction is good or better than the face-to-face (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, private institutions are gaining confidence in the quality of online instructions, as the national Sloan survey reports that in 2010 for-profit institutions had the greatest year-to-year change with regards to including the online learning as a critical part of their institution's long-term development strategy (from 51% in 2009 to 61% in 2010) (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Over the past ten years, there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of academic leaders who believe that online education is «at least as good» as the traditional face-to-face education, and a corresponding decrease in the number of academic leaders who consider it an inferior method of instruction and learning. In the 2010 national Sloan survey, two-thirds of the respondent academic officials rated the online education as the same or superior quality to face-to-face education (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Another trend in perception of the value of online education that is clearly seen through data collected by the national Sloan survey is that academic officials at higher

education institutions with existing and running academic online programs generally have a much more positive perception on the relative quality of online learning outcomes than leaders at institutions without online programs. It is also projected that future growth in online education courses and programs will come from schools that have such programs in place already, while increase in involvement of schools that currently don't have such programs in place will be insignificant (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Online education attempts to be recognized as the truly student-centered quality method of instruction, in spite of its virtual nature (NASULGC-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning Benchmarking Study: Preliminary Findings, n.d., APLU, 2009). «Flexibility in meeting the needs of students» was recognized as the greatest motivation for teaching online, both as a result of surveying faculty opinions and perceptions of faculty opinions by chief academic officers. The lowest motivation, recognized by both groups of faculty and academic leaders, was being required to teach online. Compared to the academic officers, faculty didn't rank additional income as a motivation for teaching online as high, and emphasizes increased engagement in stressful student-centered issues during the online instruction experience (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Online education inevitably opens new doors of opportunities for higher education institutions, teachers and students, however, there are important challenges to its greater integration in the educational process in the United States. Students must be more disciplined in order to succeed in the online educational environment. Both faculty and academic leaders recognize that it takes more time and effort to develop and facilitate a successful online course (Allen & Seaman, 2005, 2006, NASULGC-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning Benchmarking Study: Preliminary Findings, n.d., APLU, 2009). It is important to note, however, that there have been no problems with acceptance of online degrees by potential employers and there's a continuous demand in online education among potential students. (Allen & Seaman, 2006).

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