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Learning Management Systems for higher education - an overview of available options for Higher Education Organizations

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview, based on a theoretical research, of the Learning Management Systems (LMSs) options available for the Higher Education Organizations (HEOs). The first part of this paper is presenting the main challenges which have to be faced by HEOs when select and implement a LMS as well as the second part of the paper it is dedicated to a rundown of the main alternatives available for HEOs from the main families of LMSs. Also, this paper is looking to provide a more clear picture of the challenges and alternatives in the domain taking into consideration the differences existing between cultures, countries, and ultimately between HEOs.

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Keywords: cloud-based LMS; Higher Education Organizations; Learning Management Systems; open-source LMS; proprietary LMS.

1. Introduction

In the late 1990s when the boom of the ICT was impacting significantly the society in all its aspects the specialists from various domains have decided to take the advantage from this evolution of the software and hardware resources. This happen in all domains of activity, from oil & gas industry up to automotive industry, in fact being impossible to name a single domain of activity which has not being touched by the ICT boom. Even more important, the ICT development has impacted and irreversible influenced the education of all grades as well.

Nowadays the Higher Education Organizations (HEOs) have to face more challenges, and more complex issues, starting from an increase number of students enrolled in their educational programs up to the limitations imposed by

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the infrastructure available to accommodate the students and the curriculum classes. During the past two decade a hope to solve, at least partially, the challenges face by HEO was brought by the developments achieved by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The HEOs have totally changed their position towards the use of technologies and equipment made available to the masses of user by ICT, and here have to be mentioned the boom recorded by the mobile devices development. Based on the ICT developments, and on the large and easy access facilitated to these developments, the HEOs have got the time and the possibility to look to a variety of solutions for managing the learning, giving a more substantial attention to LMSs use within their educational programs. However, in the opinion of the author of this paper, there is still a lack of information about LMSs in terms of which types of LMSs are available, which the challenges to select and implement a LMS are etc. It is sufficient to consider a simple answer to a possible question, why the HEOs do need using a LMS, and answer which is given in same simplicity by the ultimate goal of any HEO, that being the achievement of the customer satisfaction. Considering as main customer the student, the ultimate goal will be a successful student, which is nevertheless, the student who not only graduate a faculty but who is able to be employed immediately with an employment package considered satisfactory for the junior grade.

According to Davis, Carmean, & Wagner (2009), end of 1990s represents the border between traditional and future in education. At that time, the learning management has been transferred from the classroom as we all know and which is still existing at present, to a new level of development. As per the same researchers, at that time, the “*traditional classroom experiences were being “ported” online, redesigned (or at least reconfigured) for computer-mediated delivery, and distributed via the Internet.*” (Davis, Carmean, & Wagner, 2009, page 4). At the beginning the learning management experience in the new form, computer assisted and via Internet, was reduced to the management of messages sent and received. But, Davis, Carmean, & Wagner (2009) shown that, in 1997, the first leading companies in LMS development, which were at the time, Blackboard and Saba have developed LMSs fit to be used at enterprise level and server-based, these being at the time the most advanced proprietary LMSs. Known also as commercial LMSs, the purpose of those early proprietary systems was to create digital materials for teaching and learning, to distribute these materials to the users, to manage the teaching materials and the users data and ultimately to assess the users knowledge achieved at the end of the teaching-learning process.

In fact, among all definitions given to LMSs by various researchers and specialists into the domain, the one provided by Berking, & Gallagher (2013) was defining the scope of the LMSs as “*...a key enabling technology for “anytime, anywhere” access to learning content and administration*” (Berking, & Gallagher, 2013, page 6). In the author’s opinion, the LMSs could be defined as a set of software platforms, delivered to users by instructors through internet and by the use of various hardware means, having as purpose the delivery in the shortest time possible a high level of knowledge into a domain assuring in the same time a full management of the entire educational cycle, including data and information.

HEOs have been involved since the beginning in the use of the proprietary LMSs, and, in fact, the HEOs played and are also playing at present a very important role from this point of view. Why is that? Just simple, because of the fact that the students are mostly teenagers in the age range of 18 to 29.

2. HEOs, Teenagers, ICT Technologies and LMSs Connections

The research performed by the author has revealed several important aspects which could be considered as causes or contributive factors to the development of a direct and very tight connection between HEOs, students (teenagers), ICT technologies and LMSs. The various types of LMSs could be split in three main families and these families are: open-source LMSs, proprietary LMSs, and cloud-based LMSs. Regardless the type of LMS in use by a HEO, the interfacing between people and system is done through electronic (computer/tablet/mobile/smartphone/networks) and virtual means (Internet, Cloud computing etc.). This involves the use of ICT technologies. Below, the author is presenting several statistical data and graphs which are deemed to bring a clarification in terms of available ICT technologies and especially of the mobile ones and the penetration/use of these by the people.

In 2013, a study has been carried out by a team of researchers from USA (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013), with the purpose to understand where the spread and use of Internet is and also, where the smartphones adoption have arrived. The conclusion the researchers arrived should not be at any surprise looking to the development of ICT technologies, “*Smartphone adoption among American teens has increased substantially and*

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