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Learners Preferences in Mobile-Assisted Higher Education

Ivana Simonova[a,]*, Petra Poulova[a]

[a]*University of Hradec Kralove, Faculty of Informatics and Management, Rokitanskeho 64, Hradec Kralove, 500 03, Czech Republic* [a]

Abstract

This paper presents the case study of the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. The study reflects results of the research conducted at the institution to discover learners´ preferences in higher mobile-assisted education. Particularly, it focuses on two didactic questions: (1) whether all students, not only of those enrolled in IT study programs, are sufficiently equipped with mobile devices so that they were not limited in their exploration for educational purposes, and (2) how mobile devices are exploited within the teaching/learning process there. More than two hundred students administered the questionnaire of 12 multiple-choice questions. The results proved students owned various types of mobile devices with different operation systems, which brought some limitations, and exploited them for both the educational and non-educational purposes.

1. Introduction

The university education has changed substantially within last decade but various problems still exist. In developed societies efforts towards increasing the amounts of educated people is emphasized. Making the education open to everyone and developing the system of further, lifelong education are the topical issues. In many cases, the part-time and/or distance education are the only ways to meeting employers´ requirements and increasing the qualifications. With adult students a high level of motivation and mature personality make pre-conditions for applying autonomous learning enhanced by information and communication technologies (ICT) implemented into

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 * Corresponding author. Tel.: +420-493-331-111.
  E-mail address: ivana.simonova@uhk.cz

the process of instruction. Lately, reflecting the latest technological and technical development, the mobile-assisted learning (MAL) has been widely applied in the higher education. Material and technical problems been solved, the time came we dealt with didactic aspects of MAL. The main questions solved at the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM), University of Hradec Kralove (UHK), are as follows: *Are all students sufficiently equipped with mobile devices so that they were not limited in their exploration for educational purposes? How are the mobile devices exploited within the teaching/learning process?*

2. From the history of ICT-enhanced education at FIM

According to the Education Law No. 111/98 Sb., §21, par. b) since 1999 Further Development Plans of all Czech universities have had to be introduce on their web pages. The Centre for Higher Education Studies, Prague, made the analysis which shows that most universities emphasize the ICT implementation in the instructional process – currently the ICT also include mobile devices; technical universities, which are a close relation to technical development results, express a keener interest in this field compared to non-technical institutions; technical and non-technical universities differ in their approach to the ICT/MAL problem –technical universities focus on material and technical issues of the process, i.e. they put emphasis on equipment and its technical characteristics, faculties of education pay more attention to didactic aspects.

Czech universities applied and researched various approaches towards e-learning and its implementation, as seen in annual reports of Czech public universities from 1999 to 2008. Totally, twenty-five universities were included in the research and more than 180 annual reports were analyzed, data on e-learning been presented either in separated chapters, or searched from the text. Most frequently, the topic of e-learning was described within the chapter on information and communication technologies, which is an obligatory part of annual report structure given by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The collected data underwent the process of critical analysis and evaluation.

From the chronological point of view the electronic support of instruction was first mentioned in 1999 in the Annual Report of University of Ostrava. There existed a database of approximately 60 CD-ROMs available from university network, and the learning management system (LMS) LearningSpace containing interactive educational courses. In 2000 the Annual Report of University of Hradec Králové presented the use of distance courses in the virtual learning environment WebCT, University of Economics, Prague, described their e-learning project on designing a course for academic staff in LMSs WebCT and LearningSpace, University of Ostrava mentioned the LMS LearningSpace where interactive courses were placed and used to support the management of instruction. One year later, in 2001, e-learning was mentioned in ten annual reports. In 2002 the number of educational institutions using e-learning increased. Other five universities joined the e-learning community and made some references to e-learning in their annual reports. Since 2003 e-learning was mentioned in annual reports of most universities instead of those of art. University of Pardubice and University of West Bohemia did not have their 2003 annual report available on their public websites. College of Polytechnics, Jihlava, was established in 2004 as non-university public institution, and e-learning was mentioned just in the first year. Academy of Performing Arts, Prague, first mentioned e-learning in 2005. Janacek Academy of Performing Arts, Brno, and Academy of Art, Architecture and Design, Prague, did not mention any e-learning activities. University of Pardubice and University of West Bohemia provided the 2007 annual reports only; e-learning was mentioned in both of them.

In the process of e-learning implementation it was crucial to pay attention to academic staff education in the field of new methods, both from the technical point of view, and pedagogy and didactics. That is why universities often present ways and results of this process in their annual reports. The first mentioned training of academic staff in methodology of the distance education can be found in 2000 annual report of University of Economics, Prague. In 2001 the same information appeared in reports of University of Hradec Kralove and University of Ostrava. One year later, in 2002, other five universities joined this forward-looking group - Czech Technical University, Prague, Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Silesian University, Opava, Tomas Bata University, Zlin, and VSB-Technical University of Ostrava.

Several universities established special e-learning centres or departments, either as parts of IT centres, or working independently. Their names may differ, e.g. Virtual Education Laboratory, Centre for Electronic (or technological)