



## Distance Learning Implementation at Preschool Teacher Training Colleges in Serbia

Dejan Savičević, Maja Cvijetić, Mirjana Nikolić

Preschool Teacher Training College (Serbia)

[maja.cvijetic@gmail.com](mailto:maja.cvijetic@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Abstract: Higher education plays an important role in our society, but overall potential of vocational colleges has not been fully realized. Serbian colleges often lack the management tools and funding to match their goals, but they are constantly working on modernization and harmonization of their curricula. European Union-level actions help higher education institutions throughout Serbia in their efforts to modernise, both in terms of the courses they offer and the way they operate. The challenges facing higher education are similar across the European Union and there are clear advantages in working together. In order to improve preschool teachers' education and training and make it responsive to new demands of this type of educational provision Preschool Teacher Training Colleges in Serbia have participated in project of Distance Learning implementation. General idea of the project is to harmonize and modernize curricula for preschool teachers so that they would gain functional knowledge and competencies, as well as to improve cooperation between Preschool Teacher Training Colleges and labour market and strengthen their links with local communities. Over the past decade vocational colleges have sought opportunities to enroll new students and provide their service to wider student population. The authors of this paper discuss how implementation of Distance Learning at Preschool Teacher Training Colleges positively broadens and deepens these efforts. Distance Learning has become one of the means of more effective teaching worldwide and innovative use of technologies has created more effective techniques to distribute learning in non-traditional ways. Implementing distance learning programs requires new technical and pedagogical skills, but its implementation makes vocational colleges responsive to new educational demands.*

*Key words: distance learning, higher education, curriculum modernization, ICT practice.*

### 1. Introduction

Higher education plays an essential role in society, creating new knowledge, transferring it to students and fostering innovation. European Union-level actions help higher education institutions throughout Serbia in their efforts to modernize, both in terms of the courses they offer and the way they operate. Significant improvement has been undoubtedly noticed but, overall potential is not being fully realized. Serbian colleges often lack the management tools and funding to match their ambitions. Therefore, further effort is needed so that Higher education in Serbia would achieve higher efficiency of study programmes, as well as more thorough work on defining learning outcomes and distribution of credits for the study programmes, development of quality assurance systems and accreditation process.

In the light of these challenges, government and higher education institutions are looking for ways to create better conditions for colleges in Serbia. National governments are responsible for their education and training system, but individual institutions organize their own curricula. However, the challenges facing higher education are similar across the European Union and there are clear advantages in working together. In addition, a stronger link of higher education and society will need to be considered. As recognized by Schmidt (2005) and Dumas-Hines et al (2001) [1] [2] [3] many institutions of higher learning are facing the challenges of finding ways to diversify their campuses. Colleges in Serbia have to answer the challenge by creating philosophical statements that reflect a national consensus, examining best practices, and implementing activities and action plans.

In order to improve preschool teachers' education and training and make it responsive to new demands of this type of educational provision at preschool institutions in Serbia and Europe-wide, Preschool Teacher Training College in Sremska Mitrovica has participated in Tempus project suggestion for Distance Learning implementation together with Preschool Teacher Training colleges in Vršac and Novi Sad (Autonomous Province of Vojvodina). General idea of the project is to harmonize and modernize curricula for preschool teachers so that they would gain functional knowledge and competencies, as well as to improve cooperation between Preschool Teacher Training Colleges and labor market and



strengthen their links with local communities. The authors of this paper discuss how implementation of Distance Learning at Preschool Teacher Training Colleges would positively broaden and deepen these efforts.

## **2. What does Distance Learning imply**

Distance education or distance learning is a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom. It has been described as “a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both.” [4] Distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason (including taking examinations) have been referred to as hybrid or blended courses of study [5] [6].

Nowadays Distance Learning has become a pervasive and growing phenomenon. Innovative use of technologies has created more effective techniques to distribute learning in non-traditional ways. As a result, new organizational structures and learning arrangements are appearing throughout higher education. Preschool Teacher Training Colleges are pooling course offerings through distance learning so students have opportunities to create a degree program that uses course offerings from multiple schools. General idea is that students from participating colleges within the framework of the project choose elective courses from other colleges than their own. Since remote access to learning materials, databases and libraries, electronic communication, computer-connected workgroups and archived lectures has been already familiar to most of students, the implementation of Distance Learning process should be easier. Bearing in mind that Distance Learning places additional responsibilities on students, participating colleges are willing to communicate student responsibilities and the nature of the commitment students must make to succeed in a distance learning program.

## **3. Implementation of Distance Learning at Preschool Teacher Training College**

Developing and setup of special parts of Distance Learning system for informal learning in formal environment involves numerous issues, such as: defining of criteria for optimal number of students and continual monitoring of students included in Distance Learning system, recognition and definition of project milestones and crucial elements, defining of features of educative materials for Distance Learning, Distance Learning system programming, purchasing of equipment, software and professional literature, scanning of Information Technology infrastructure and possibilities of this kind of learning. These efforts would reform study programs at Preschool Teacher Training colleges in Serbia and harmonize their structure and contents with the examples of the European Union countries. However, some of the initial problems included: shortage of professional literature in Serbian language, inadequate equipment at the market, problems with internet connection, insufficient number of technical staff for new equipment training, as well as a lack of time for infrastructure of Distance Learning preparation.

Due to mutual efforts of teachers and technical staff at Preschool Teacher Training Colleges in Sremska Mitrovica, Vršac and Novi Sad, these problems were successfully solved and core modules for elective courses were developed (Elective courses at Preschool Teacher Training College in Sremska Mitrovica included Motor Activities for Preschool Children and Multimedia Activities in English Language Teaching). General idea was to pilot Distance Learning provision for selected elective courses, as well as to introduce innovative elements in teaching methodology. Therefore, modernized text books and manuals were prepared.

Elective course Multimedia Approach in English Language Teaching provides an introduction to the theory, the methods of english language teaching, language systems and language skills. It has three goals: to expand students' knowledge on language systems, to provide students with training in language skills and to prepare students for subsequent individual work. Course material included lecture notes, exercises, and sample exams distributed on the course webpage. The course grade is based on individual quizzes, assignments, a midterm exam, a final exam. The final grade is determined using the following weights:

- Individual quizzes: 20%
- Individual assignments: 20%
- Midterm exam: 30%
- Final exam: 30%



Electory course Motor Activities for preschool children was chosen since motor activities represent a very important aspect of children's growth as their thinking abilities are developed through them. Motor skills means the abilities that are acquired by children in their infancy or early childhood and are a part of their motor development. Since preschool is just the right time for children to develop these skills, future preschool teachers should be familiar with basic postulates of children motor development, as well as trained to apply different games and physical activities which improve child's body awareness, balance, laterality, co-ordination of major muscle groups and spatial orientation. Therefore, course material included PowerPoint Presentations with lectures on motor development at an early age, but also numerous videomaterials presenting outdoor and indoor activities appropriate for preschool children.

After the educational objectives of electory courses have been harmonized with distinctive aspects of the student population to be served, the following steps toward organizational commitment were taken. Integrated team of computer service technicians, counselors, site administrators, distribution clerks and information resource (library) personnel assisted faculty members and administrators to manage logistics of distance learning and helped them fulfill the necessary standards. Distance Learning implementation also required significant financial resources for technology and support since certain inputs had to be obtained, such as high speed Internet connectivity, codec, web camera, laptop, projector, microphone arrays, headsets and loudspeakers in order to enable two or more locations to communicate by simultaneous two-way video and audio transmissions.

Even though substantial resource requirements and expenditures were huge, program quality, unique program attributes and program access were primary reasons for enrollment in this project, not a search for financial windfall. It was also taken into account that students would have to assume greater responsibility for their learning, take more initiative in asking questions and obtaining help, be flexible and be prepared to deal with technical difficulties. To foster student achievement, Preschool Teacher Training Colleges had the responsibility to identify students' needs and problems associated with the distance learning environment. Therefore, the colleges adapted a proactive stance for monitoring student progress to address barriers and difficulties students encounter. Since Distance Learning requires students to work independently and to use distributed learning technology to fulfill course requirements, Preschool Teacher Training Colleges provided proper student training and support.

Bearing in mind that Distance Learning Implementation requires new technical and pedagogical skills, Preschool Teacher Training Colleges in Serbia understood and embraced the change from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered environment, with learners, rather than students, and with facilitators and designers of learning experiences, rather than teachers. The former concentrates on achievement of learning goals and seeks the most effective means to accomplish them. The latter focuses on the organization and delivery of information. Therefore, teachers included in Distance Learning project implementation had to ensure:

- effective creation and delivery of instruction
- evaluation of instructional effectiveness and student achievement
- the development of appropriate assessment strategies
- continued improvement of instructional programs
- innovation in instructional processes
- accessibility to students consistent with the school's expectations and student demands

Distance Learning programs and courses, regardless of the mode of instructional delivery, should enable students to attain appropriate educational outcomes.

Students had to be in advance familiar with:

- curriculum, course, degree and admission requirements
- availability of academic support service such as counseling, advising, tutoring and placement
- technical competencies and equipment requirements
- performance expectations concerning deadlines, study time requirements and attendance

The choice of strategy was not governed by the availability of technological solutions, but by the needs of the program, learning and communication approaches chosen and desired learning outcomes.



The choice of assessment methodology supported intended learning outcomes, but it was also consistent with desired learning approaches. Assessment policy set out the need for formative assessment of students (e.g., projects and assignments and encouraging students to learn through application), but it also applied summative assessment through formal examination or testing, to measure the attainment of knowledge and skills at specific points in the program.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In sum, quality distance learning requires careful attention to learning design, effective training, organizational commitment to adequate program support, selection of appropriate delivery technology, and a focus on student learning outcomes. To accomplish desired outcomes this focus brings with it a change in the roles of students and college, as well as needed support services. Over the past decade vocational colleges have sought opportunities to enroll new students and provide their service to wider student population. Distance Learning has become one of the means of more effective teaching and educational services consistent with the school's stated mission.

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