

## Distance Learning – An Educational Bridge among Albanian Universities and their Filials in Distant Communities

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**Abstract** *The public higher education in Albania continues the traditional method of "in site" teaching. Under global crisis and surviving conditions in the Albanian society a new phenomenon is taking place; the emerging of new educational policies such as opening new filials by the main city universities to the distance communities. This phenom positively impacts not only the economic performance but also the global and social integration of distance, rural and poor communities. But on the other hand, this scheme requires constant mobility of the lecturers and very compressed modules of teaching. This article introduces a new hybrid scheme of off site learning by building a permanent educational "bridge" for the students of the filials, providing also the most economic way with the hardware and software use. The novelty stands in matching Lecturers "D-lecturer or distance-lecturers" in the main university with Assistants "A-lecturer ose assistant-lecturer" in the filials, enabling a permanent communication by exploiting all the efficient means with the help of the information and communication technology. The large-scale cultural and educational impact for remote communities and a full economic solution for poor communities in terms of global crisis are described in this paper. There are many issues to be discussed but one thing is certain: The future belongs to the alternation of teaching methods and experiences facilitated by digital technology in the Albanian High Schools.*

**Key words:** *distance learning, technology of information and communication, university, filial*

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### 1. Introduction

Education for all ages and higher education in particular, is one of the main pillars of the Albanian society.

A.Gjonaj (2009) explains that "The main objective of the higher education and scientific research is the integration in the European area of higher education and research, aiming to grow a new generation of graduates with qualitative scientific and professional knowledge, able to compete in an open and developing economy... "

The research system is completely reformed in the last years. The reform optimized the use of the infrastructural, financial and human recourses by integrating them in a unified system of the higher education and research.

Hundreds of scientists and researchers, many laboratories and other research facilities joined the universities. Today we count 12 public university centers, in Tirana and other cities that employ thousands of lecturers and researchers and host thousands of students.

In its whole, the reform also aims to increase the value and contribution of research in the development of the country as well as to increase the quality of knowledge dissemination in the higher education institutions to better serve the formation of a new Albanian generation. Thus there is an increase in the subsidies and financements for the higher

education and the research.

But the higher education in Albania still suffers from old concepts, for instance the the government is still responsible for the education, and the prevailing method is still “the lecturer explains and the students listen” concept. Thus the higher education keeps following the “in site” tradition. The analysis done to the education system in Albania by A.Gjonaj (2009) shows that: “The investments done to improve the teaching, especially regarding the application of contemporary methods, are clearly insufficient. There is yet no system for the management of the performance of the academic staff, even though the Albanian law (2007) requires it”.

Implementing such system would help to identify the academic personnel that still use old teaching methods and that need updating teaching qualifications.

In order to achieve the above mentioned objectives; we can identify the following strategic priorities for the upcoming seven years:

- Extending the system in order to meet the needs of the country under the perspective of EU integration and reaching the European standards (in terms of tertiary education indicators), while paralelly *granting access to the higher education to all those who demand it.*
- Assuring a variety of formation offers that match the needs of the perspective development of the country.
- Improving the teaching and learning quality in the higher education system, through continuous development of the human reasources and the culture of the quality. ...”

## 2. Research Literature

### 2.1 “Education for all” policy and the phenomenon of opening filials by the universities in the far communities; the socio-economic impacts

Under the framework of the government’s program to keep the economic growth, decrease the regional disparities and adhere in the EU, the main challenge for the education sector is the development of a system and institutions that prepare professionals that effectively fit in the labor market, that become active citizens and contribute to strengthen the Albanian ability to compete.

This project will increase the quality of education in all levels and will provide the continuity of the current reforms in the education sector.

The project “Quality and Equability in Education” will for the first time adopt a multi-sectoral approach (SWAp) in Albania, in order to emphasize the governmental ownership of the reform, to facilitate the cooperation and coordination among the partners and to strengthen the managerial capacity of the education system.

The Education Policies “Life long and Equal Education for all” impose to the Albanian universities a new focus: their enlargement, since it is foreseen that: “The enlargement of Higher Education is a priority to be pursued consistently, but without compromising the quality...”

The objective regarding the higher education is that: Up to 2017, over 85% of the enrollment graduated from the high school, shall enter one of the cycles and programs of Higher Education. This implies that the number of students in all cycles of tertiary studies (post-secondary, bachelor, master and doctorate) and forms of study (full time, part time, distance learning) in 2013 shall be over 120 000, compared to around 90 000 (in 2008)...”

Together with the development of the country, the needs of the labor market will also change with a faster pace than before. This means more people will need to return to learning in a given moment in their life, for instance with summer courses or evening courses. The opportunities for “life long learning” are limited right now, partly because of low demand, but also because there are no encouraging mechanisms for the Higher Education Institutions to offer such service.

Hence, the higher education in Albania keeps expanding addressing the increasing demand (around 5000 more students/year) and reaching the needs of the community by “establishing new public universities, faculties, departments or their filial”. A.Gjonaj (2009)

The University “Aleksandër Moisiu” Durrës (UAMD) is the newst Abanian public university, firstly established in 2006-2007 and in third year time established its filial in the northeastern edge of Albania, in Peshkopi.

Through its studying-research programs of a contemporary theoretical, methodological and practical standard, UAMD aims to “professionally educate high specialists in fields that match the needs of the individuals and employers by preparing the graduates for diverse carriers in a competitive labor market in accord with the demands and needs of a dynamic and developing society”.

Today Peshkopia feels appraised by the establishment of this decent university pole with 14 studying programs, 4 in Economy and Administration, 7 in Education and 3 studying programs by the High Professional School.

The phenomenon of filial establishment in Albania is precocious ... Thus various filials were established in different cities such as Shkodra, Elbasani, Gjirokastra, Korca and later on in further edges of the country, such as new branches opened by the University of Tirana in Kukes and Saranda.

Some private institutions also followed the same path by establishing new branches in cities such as Berat, Fier, etc.

Such phenomenon has its positive impact also in the economic aspect of the social and global integration of the distance communities. Especially in this area it is crucial to understand the need to detach from the old mentality, to change the learning culture, not only of the formal but also informal learning.

The small and distance communities must also understand that learning is for all, that the government provides the learning infrastructure but the responsibility for his own personal development stands to the individual. Obviously learning is not just a survival tool of employment but also serve to the citizenship.

The extra-curricular environment in these communities also must understand that learning has not only to do with the intellectuals; it is not just the Youngs' business and doesn't end with the graduation. Albania faces difficulties with the digital technology in the major cities let alone the distance communities.

### *2.2 The current scheme of traditional teaching in university filials with "fragmented and compressed" modules*

Referring to the National Strategy of Higher Education, it is stated that: "The content of teaching, besides the teaching methods, must be updated with the newest developments of the XXI-st century within the national framework of qualifications and matching the general HEAL framework". The higher education institutions are moving in adopting a modular approach and a credit transfer system for the studying programs, that is one of the priorities of the Bologna system. The higher education institutions must understand that the modular and credit transfer system is not done for administrative purposes, but for the benefit of the students. This system aims to expand the opportunities for the students, providing real alternatives and transfer options, within the institution and among higher education institutions.

So far the filials have been under the custody of the primary universities that indicated them the curricula, organizing schemes and sent the lecturers from the universities to the filials.

In order to better explain the "in site" traditional teaching scheme in filials, let's consider Peshkopia case which is familiar to us.

The filial employs qualified local staff, but the staff is still incomplete and there is an obvious need to receive training from the "center".

This requires a constant mobility of the lecturers from Durres to Peshkopi and the application of "compressed and fragmented" modules among three lecturers, as follows:

The first lecturer teaches the first part of the course module and at its end organizes the first intermediate evaluation (test).

The second lecturer during the second week the second part of the course module and at its end organizes the second intermediate evaluation (test).

The third lecturer teaches the third part of the course module and at its end organizes the final evaluation (test), calculates the results of the students and posts them to the filial.

The first lecturer gives the assignment and the third one evaluates it.

To speak the truth, because of the distance, climate, familiar obligations, etc, the elected lecturers are usually the youngest, the healthiest or single males and females.

This is clearly not the right way to re-structure the filial.

### *2.3 Distance learning – a contemporary idea for universities open towards knowledge*

Weber teaches us that there are no successful policies without respecting the principles of honesty and this very outstanding person implies that without aiming at the impossible we can't reach the possible.

"First of all, the higher education system doesn't yet sufficiently satisfy the future needs of the country's society and economy. Many aspects of the higher education, especially the level of teaching and research in higher education institutions didn't match the dynamics of the Albanian society and the European disposition..."

This article introduces the idea of drawing an hybrid scheme of learning "off site" by building a permanent "bridge" of "distance" education for filial students and provide a complete and more economic solution, in hardware and software.

“Open and Distance Learning” ODL enables learning off the auditoriums independently. Due to information and communication technology (ICT), it is possible to improve the teaching quality by facilitating exchange and cooperation.” Some universities and institutions in Europe offer this service beside the traditional teaching; as there are also universities that offer only learning by ODL.

The diversity of institutions and networks, languages and graduate courses, features the European distance learning. The diversity of cultural environments, education policies, employment needs, professional trainings and massive internet for students, are the main factors to develop distance learning.

The ODL idea became popular in Europe after the '90, following the British experience.

In 1999, the World Bank established the ODL center in South-Eastern Europe, located at Sofia University to promote regional ODL services, to provide pedagogical support for videoconferences, internet materials, online exams and print materials. The center opened the “Distance Class Learning” DCL, a multimedia video-interactive e-class in a computer lab with a main computer and PCs, microphones, etc, for each student as well as the online communication among the “peers group” and the instructors. The staff of the center includes a manager, a PR, a technician, tutors and coordinators.

The South-Eastern Europe University of Tetovo that teaches also in Albanian language offers “Distance studies” in Law, Business Administration, Science and Technology, Languages, etc, using the following ODL scheme:

At the beginning of the semester the students personally meet their lecturer in the auditorium. Some courses take place once in 2 weeks in the auditorium. Using the “Book” – a technology aided system of learning management; the students are guided towards self-teaching, with evaluation criteria, assisting materials and the possibility to participate in electronic forums. By the end of the semester an intensive workshop takes place in the auditorium with the lecturer finalized with the evaluation test (in the auditorium).

ODL is improved in time, eliminating the segregation and learning only by technology means. Today's ODL students are able to participate in projects with their consultants in network “peers group”, constantly communicating with their instructors and read “offline” materials, therefore perceiving the bond with the “e-class”.

#### *2.4 The digital bridge of distance learning in real time for filial students and the economic hardware and software solution*

So far no distance university is established in Albania. Wisdom University completely licenced for ODL didn't work.

Meanwhile Albanian lecturers teach for a global auditorium in real time through internet.

While foreign lecturers from all over the world come and teach “in site” modules in the auditoriums of public and private universities.

The lecturers of the main universities keep going to filials according to a weekly based schedule and traditionally teach modules in auditorium. The novelty in this article is the idea of using ODL in Albanian filials according to the “Couples scheme”:

A Couple of lecturers must be established the “D-lecturer or distance-lecturer” in the main university and the “A-lecturer or assistant-lecturer” in the filial that will enable a permanent communication student-lecturer by exploiting all the effective means of learning through technology.

The D-lecturer is a qualified and interactive lecturer at the main university. At a specific time (after the formal working time of the filial students), he/she sits in his office in front of a computer equipped with webcam and explains in real time through the monitor and the camera, interacting with the A-lecturer and the e-class in the filial. The students may re-watch his/her recorded lectures any time they need through internet. He prepares week assignments online for the students and also compiles and evaluates online projects or assignments. The D-lecturer prepares the evaluation tests for the students, send them to the A-lecturer on-line, who controls the tests and bills online the intermediate results or the final grade through a coded system.

A-lecturer or the tutor might be a DNP – filial inhabitant, who assisted by the filial's technician enables the connection in real time with the D-lecturer in the video-interactive e-class.

A-lecturer checks the week assignments during the e-class or online, distributes the printed lectures, supervises the tests and sent their scanings to the D-lecturer.

The Students form the third pillar of the ODL triangle scheme. They can have different ages, cultures or professions. They can work and follow after work a studying program as “evening courses”.

They must be familiarized with the digital technology. They should then download the lectures and the assignments of the D-lecturer, and interact online with him.

We believe that the attendance at the e-class is not obligatory but is strongly recommended as the attendance in the auditoriums. In this way they can ask and converse with the D-lecturer through the cameras and the monitor.

The A-lecturer assists them step by step as a tutor in computing the week assignments and approaching the technology. The technology used in distance learning is classified as asynchronous and synchronous. The asynchronous technology is a way of online studying applied by students that study apart or individually. The “message board”, e-mail and recorded videos are examples of such technology. This method might be used by students for further individual studies. The synchronous technology of distance learning is applied by students that simultaneously attend the e-class according to a well-defined time schedule. Web conference is an example of this technology.

The technology of these “Web-conferences” incorporates the use of audio VoIP to enable a completely “web-based” communication. This performance includes:

- Power Point Presentations of the topics and the use of mouse-remote for the students in the auditorium
- Video Live or Stream with webcams used by both: the lecturer and the auditorium
- VoIP (audiocommunication in real time through headcuffs)
- Webture in different websites
- Meeting Recording – the recording of the lecture in order for the students to be able to watch it later
- Whiteboard for notes
- Multiple choice tests to assess the comprehension

Web-conference is the most economic option hosted by a webserver in internet.

The Filial is an all-inclusive education bridge for the community; all the main local actors must enable the well-functioning of knowledge transfer and cover the costs.

### 3. Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the positive impact of introducing digital technology in contemporary teaching. This study aims to argue that the involvement of *the “couple” scheme* in teaching process, particularly in high education will help:

- To promote a more high educational and cultural impact for the distant communities
- To create a new social dimension due to the larger number of students and the variety of ages and professions
- To approach to digital technology by the communities far from the main nuclei high;
- To offer the most economic solution for the poor communities in the conditions of the global crisis
- To implement low hardware and software costs
- To use better unified curricula and better implementation
- To approach to education opportunities for the adults through lifelong learning
- To choose the lectures by the best lecturers of the main universities
- To teach in real time and in an interactive way with the e-class
- To facilitate the lecturers work without interrupting their other commitments
- To create access anytime the downloaded lectures
- To offer high accessibility of the online lectures by the rest of the community as well
- To give a crucial impact in increasing the employability rate
- To reach the unserved citizens that show great will for studying

Some of the disadvantages of ODL schemes are: not all courses can be delivered by this scheme; the evaluation in distance always leads to discussions; and the human and social dimension of face to face meetings is very important.

### 4. Methods

Methods we have used in this paper to process the data are: analysis, comparison, and observation.

#### 4.1. Subjects

The study was conducted in a public Albanian university that is named “Aleksander Moisiu” University of Durres and in Filial of Peshkopi. 200 people (40 lecturers, 100 students in Peshkopi, 60 students in Durrës).

To carry this study, we share experiences with our colleagues of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences in UAMD that are actually teaching in the filial.

Furthermore, the students of “Aleksander Moisiu” University, Albania, more specifically, those who study in Durres

and in filial were part of the survey. The target- groups included in the survey were: lecturers and students of “Aleksander Moisiu” University in Durres and in the filial of Peshkopi.

#### 4.2. Instruments

The instrument used to collect the data was a Likert type questionnaire, which consisted of eight questions. The people surveyed express their view concerning the implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching process.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis

We will analyze only three of the questions of the questionnaire.

Then we compiled 3 different Questionnaires (check Annex I, II, III) filled in by 200 people (40 lecturers, 100 students in Peshkopi, 60 students in Durrës).

##### *Survey of UAMD lecturers (check Annex I)*

The first questionnaire was addressed to UAMD lecturers as they are very interested on this topic, directly related to their current and future activity.

The group of interviewees includes 40 lecturers, 30% out of which taught at the filial. The outcome of this survey indicates that the lecturers:

- Know the contemporary teaching methods and slightly used them
- They partially agree on the idea to deliver some of the courses in distance, through ICT, and half of them think these should be the theoretical courses
- Few of them would prefer “distance” examination
- Partly believe it is time to start implementing this method at UAMD

##### *Survey of UAMD students - center (check Annex II)*

60 students of different years and branches were randomly chosen.

The outcome of this survey indicates that the students:

- Consider the traditional education “in auditorium” the best option
- Know little on contemporary teaching methods and are mainly informed on the issue by the media
- The students never benefitted by these teaching methods
- Mostly agree on the idea to have some of the courses in filial, through ICT, and not to come to the auditorium
- Mostly believe it is time to start implementing this method at UAMD

##### *Survey of UAMD students – Peshkopi filial (check Annex III)*

100 students of different years were randomly chosen.

The outcome of this survey indicates that the students of the filial:

- Consider the traditional education “in auditorium” the best option
- Are not very satisfied with the teaching of the lecturers from the center
- Would prefer lectures in distance by noted lecturers rather than come to the auditorium
- But do not prefer “examination in distance”
- Unanimously think it is time to start implementing this method at the filial

Question: Do you know “E-Learning” and “Distance-Learning”? – 20% know it well, 60% know it a little, 20% not at all

Question: How did you know? – 1% Friends, 30% Media, 60% Internet, 0% UAMD 0% Reading.

Question: Students around the world benefit from this teaching methods, have you ever had such experience? – 0% often, 60% few, 40% never

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

After a thoroughly elaborating the idea, we conclude that ODL and e-learning are generally little familiar to lecturers and students. It is the responsibility of Higher Education Institutions to advertise these contemporary methods already tested in Europe. Initially the traditional universities and later the new established ones must start experimenting this way of

teaching that helps life long education.

The applied strategy must be "... in accord with the main trends of the development of higher education in Europe and world, and especially with the Bologna process; its objective is to improve the higher education in Albania".

Albania like elsewhere in Europe is going to need skilled people, flexible, critically thinking, analytical and creative. Providing these abilities is the most important reform required by the higher education system. It will clearly be a continuous need for specific professional knowledge, but the general skills will be more and more important and for many graduates will be much more worthy than the specific knowledge." SKALA (2008-2013)

This is evident for small and poor communities located far from the main urban centers, which are eager to learn but face objective constrains. It would be an event for this places; the world is getting closer through technology.

E-classes, built through a governmental project to equip all the computer labs of pre-university education, might be of great use. This article was prepared referring to the avantguard experience in Europe for distance learning, which of course faced its own problems in implementation. On this regard there are obviously many issues to discuss but one thing is certain:

The future of teaching belongs to the alternation of methods and experiences assisted by the digital technology. Sooner or later everyone will take it on and perform better than today, be it students or lecturers.

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### ANEKS I

*Questionnaire for UAMD students in Durres*

*Dear Interviewee, please carefully fill in the questionnaire we prepared to improve teaching in higher education in Albania for distant communities or filials of Albanian universities.*

Put X in the box that matches your answer.

1. Are you satisfied with the lecturer's teaching in your university?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
2. Do you consider the traditional education "in auditorium" the best option?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
3. Do you know "e-learning" or "learning through technology"?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
4. Do you know "distance-learning"?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
5. How did you know?  
Friends  Media  Internet   
UAMD  Reading
6. Students around the world benefit from this teaching methods, have you ever had such experience?  
Many times  Few times  Never
7. Would you prefer lectures in distance by noted lecturers rather than come to the auditorium?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
8. Which courses would you prefer to have in distance?
9. How do you prefer "on-line" exams?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
10. Do you think it is time to start implementing this method at UAMD  
Yes  No

#### ANEKS I

*Questionnaire for UAMD students in Peshkopi Filial*

*Dear Interviewee, please carefully fill in the questionnaire we prepared to improve teaching in higher education in Albania for distant communities or filials of Albanian universities.*

*Put X in the box that matches your answer.*

1. Are you satisfied with the lecturer's teaching in your filial?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
2. Are you satisfied with the teaching in "modules" by the lecturers coming from Durres ?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
3. Do you consider the traditional education "in auditorium" the best option?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
4. Do you know "e-learning" or "learning through technology"?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
5. Do you know "distance-learning"?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
6. How did you know?  
Friends  Media  Internet   
UAMD  Reading
7. Students around the world benefit from these teaching methods, have you ever had such experience?  
Many times  Few times  Never
8. Would you prefer lectures in distance by noted lecturers live from Durres?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
9. Which courses would you prefer to have in distance?
10. How do you prefer "on-line" exams?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
11. Do you think it is time to start implementing this method at UAMD  
Yes  No

## ANEKS I

*Questionnaire for lecturers*

*Dear Interviewee, please carefully fill in the questionnaire we prepared to improve teaching in higher education in Albania for distant communities or filials of Albanian universities.*

Put X in the box that matches your answer.

1. Did you teach at Peshkopi Filial?  
Yes  No
2. Do you agree to send lecturers from Durres to the filial?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
3. Are you satisfied with teaching in modules with lecturers from Durres?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
4. Do you think traditional teaching "in auditorium" is the best option?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
5. Do you know "e-learning" or "learning through technology"?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
6. Do you know "distance-learning"?  
Yes  Little  Not at all
7. How did you know?  
Media  Interneti  UAMD  Reading
8. Elsewhere it is benefitted from these teaching methods; have you ever had such experience?  
Many times  Few times  Never
9. Would you like to teach some courses "in distance – live from Durres" rather than go there?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
10. Which courses would you like to teach in distance?
11. Do you agree with the lecturers' evaluation from Durres?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
12. Are familiar with the evaluation online?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
13. How do you prefer "on-line" exams?  
Very much  Little  Not at all
14. How do you think online examination must be?
15. Do you think it is time to start implementing this method at UAMD?  
Yes  No

