

A Brief History of E-Learning in Post-Soviet Armenia

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970s, distance education has gained unprecedented popularity, grounded in a system of science, methods, and technology (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). It became the most dramatic of the technology-based innovations influencing education (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). One form of distance education, electronic learning or "e-learning," is widespread, developing as a new learning environment using Internet technologies and multimedia applica-

tions. With the advancement of the technology, the electronic environment enables learning activities in a convenient way with access to information in time and space independently.

The source of the term *e-learning* is uncertain; however, it has been suggested that it originated in the 1980s about the same time that the term *online learning* was coined (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2010). According to Hall (as cited in Orellana, Hudgins, & Simonson, 2009), e-learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills through a variety of technological means. The National Center for Supercomputing Applications (2000) adopted as its the definition of e-learning, "the acquisition and use of knowledge distributed and facilitated primarily by electronic means." Saba (2011) reported that e-learning is an inadequate concept for building a comprehensive theory of distance education and e-learning courses cannot be presented as fully implemented distance education programs. Simonson et al. (2012) stated that "distance education should not be confused with e-learning, which is considered an outdated term" (p. 83). However, with all this explanation of e-learning, it should be noted that all definitions of e-learning are differentiated by applications, programs, or websites as forms of e-learning that afford a learning opportunity to learners.



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In post-Soviet countries, the terms *e-learning* and *distance education* were confused (Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchkina, 2012). In post-Soviet Armenia, the concept of e-learning follows the perception of online learning and distance learning. The purpose of this article is to briefly explore the adoption of e-learning activities implemented in the Armenia over a period of more than a decade that have become popular among many of its citizens. To understand e-learning activities in Armenia, it is necessary to explain the transformations of the country's educational policies and processes, which are closely related to the political system. The history of education may be divided into two stages: the Soviet period and the post-Soviet period. E-learning as a form of teaching and learning was established in Armenia after separation from the Soviet regime. Armenia became an independent state and, in the post-Soviet period, transitioned with the educational modifications.

In Armenia, with a history of literacy going back 1,600 years, education has always received priority and is a central factor for maintaining national identity and heritage (Melik-Baxshian, 2012). Armenia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922. During nearly 70 years under the Soviet regime, the country has enhanced its educational system beginning with population illiteracy elimination, establishing a 10-year public school system, 2-year education colleges, and advancing universities in the country's capital and in remote cities. Armenia advanced its educational priorities and enabled the population to become higher educational professionals and scientists in a variety of spheres. In 1960, Armenia had a literacy rate of 100% (Curtis, 1995).

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN ARMENIA

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990, Armenia declared its independence,

and, according to the Armenian Declaration of Independence (1990), "the Republic creates its own system of education and of scientific and cultural development" (Article 10). Armenia's citizens declared its sovereignty and its country as an independent and democratic state. As a first priority, Armenia began making modifications in the inherited Soviet educational system.

In the years after gaining independence, the people of Armenia experienced a painful transition process from a centralized planned economy to the free market, ethnic conflicts, a war with Azerbaijan for the Armenian enclave Nagorno-Karabakh, economic crisis and economic blockade, broken energy resources, and industrial life. All these reasons were multifold in cutting state financing (Melikyan, 2004). The routine lives of the citizens were completely disrupted and the state did not have any allocations for education, which had a catastrophic impact on the education system of Armenia. There was a need to implement tremendous changes in all spheres of life in the country. It started with educational changes and reforms. On December 14, 2004, Armenia adopted *The Law on Higher Education and Postgraduate Professional Education*. The basic principles of the law were to regulate legal, organizational, and financial relations in the sphere of higher and postgraduate education in the country (Armenian National Information Center for Academic Recognition and Mobility, 2005).

Armenia is located in Eastern Europe and its citizens wanted to become a part of European higher education. Because the structure of Soviet-type education was different and incompatible with the European educational standards, Armenia's educational leaders were interested in making the country's academic degrees and education quality assurance standards compatible with the higher education system of other European countries. Armenia signed an agreement with the European Union to become a part of the

European Neighborhood. However, though Armenia became a part of the European area, its incompatibility in some spheres of society relations prevented the building of full relations with the western countries. In 1999, European education ministers from 28 countries gathered at the University of Bologna and signed the Declaration of Bologna (The Bologna Declaration, 1999), thereby agreeing that the European Higher Education Area countries had to adopt a system of comparable and compatible degrees, the education system had to be based on two main cycles, a credit system in education had to be established, focus was on lifelong learning, and adaptation of doctoral degree studies and synergy between the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. This agreement was based on a stringent set of guidelines. Biannual ministerial meetings were arranged so the members could check on the condition of work completed and set guidelines for upcoming years. A framework of three cycles of higher education qualifications was adopted: bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctoral degree.

In 2005, Armenia joined the European Agreement of Higher Education, which was called the Bologna Process (Bologna Process, 2005). The goal of the Bologna Process was to provide responses to the issues of the public responsibility for higher education and research, higher education governance, and roles for individuals in higher education and research with the demanding qualification needs (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). By 2010, Armenia had to develop its national qualifications framework and to combine it into one efficient system compatible with the main framework of Europe, according to the European standards (The Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, 2005).

Armenia made overall changes and reforms in its post-Soviet transition period, which included the extension of school

years, changes to the grading system, and creation of separate high schools. The country started transitioning its 10-year schooling system to a 12-year education cycle, by changing to 11 years in 2001 and to 12 years in 2006, where primary, intermediate, and high schools were created. Changes to the grading system consisted of shifting 5-point grading to a 10-point grading system, and helped to ensure pupils' assessment results were more accurate. They became effective in September 2012.

The meticulous information on the educational reforms confirmed the large and beneficial transformation made in the post-Soviet transitional period. Due to this transformation, Armenia was invited to become a participant of the European educational programs, such as *Tempus* and *Erasmus Mundus* among others (National Tempus Offices, 2014). Participation in those programs gave the Armenian specialists an opportunity to gain experience in the European quality assurance system, and to be involved in the students' exchange and training programs. Based on these programs, training, as well as e-learning and distance learning programs were implemented.

BEGINNING OF E-LEARNING IN ARMENIA

Beginning in 2004, with the partnership and collaboration of the European Union countries and the U.S. educational institutions—the Open University in United Kingdom, the University of Connecticut School of Social Work in the United States, the International Institute of Sociology in Sweden, and the Irish Association of Social Workers in the Republic of Ireland, Armenia was able to establish the Distance Learning Laboratory at the Yerevan State University. This laboratory was created in the framework of the Tempus Joint European Project. Simultaneously, branches of the Distance Learning Laboratory were

organized at regional centers in Gyumri, Vanadzor, and Ijevan. The mission of the distance learning centers is to provide the population with accessible and affordable education and training prospects (Mkrtichyan, 2007). The faculty at the Distance Learning Laboratory provides 1-year distance learning programs in a range of subjects: social work, social pedagogy, public relations and marketing, human resources, sales and services, sociology, psychology, philosophy, economics, international relations, Armenian studies, and English language. The programs are taught in the Armenian and English languages (Distance Learning Beyond Any Limit, 2016).

At the Yerevan State University (2007) with the help of New York University and the U.S. Agency for International Development, assistance was established for the next learning center, including distance education—the Information Technologies Educational and Research Centre. The center serves as a hub for educational programs with traditional education, online distance education, and scientific research. Staff at the Information Technologies Educational and Research Centre is involved in the implementation of education e-governmental and quality assurance systems.

In the last decade, Armenia has witnessed rapid growth of online activities through varied learning programs; online learning was becoming an increasing part of the education sphere. Armenians became more interested, they were able to purchase technological equipment and establish an Internet connection, and distance learning has become more positively regarded. Traditional universities and colleges began to offer online courses in a variety of subjects, such as business, education, Armenian and foreign languages, history, art, and psychology.

With the collaboration of the European Union Tacis Project in Armenia in the period of 1999–2000, a project was developed to enhance skills in business, govern-

ment, agriculture, and civil society (Commission of the European Communities, 2000; Tacis Project in Armenia, 2000). In the background of the Tacis project, a distance education pilot project course was implemented in preparation for the Association of Accountants and Auditors of Armenia. The course was organized as the basis for the Armenian Legal Framework for Accounting, and simultaneously created the newly formed Association of Accountants and Auditors of Armenia. The entire package of this accountancy training program was covered by learning materials designed in accordance with the International Standards for Distance Education (Commission of the European Communities, 2000; Tacis Project in Armenia, 2000).

The Armenian Distance Learning Network was one of the first Armenian e-learning projects, which was created in 2002 and updated in 2006. This network e-learning project had a focus on the business of involving Armenian-speaking learners and developing e-business in the country. The first course was Electronic Commerce and used a book, *E-Commerce*, written specifically for it. The course was launched in 2004 with 50 e-learning participants. The second course had an enrolment of 150 participants and was welcomed by interested e-commerce learners.

One of the oldest and largest Armenian organizations, the Armenian Benevolent Union, was established in 1906 and actively operated in 28 countries. Its members have organized diverse educational programs in Armenia through the Armenian Virtual College. The Armenian Virtual College was launched in 2009 and is the country's first online Armenian college providing e-learning courses in Armenian and five other languages of instruction. Staff at the Armenian Virtual College have implemented teaching courses of Armenian culture and history by focusing on architecture, geography, fine arts, and music, as well as a chess program. They are

unique programs enabling any learner to take online classes by choosing the language of instruction according to the language of choice (Western Armenian, Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and Russian). Students from various countries can participate in online courses. Teaching programs of the Armenian Virtual College are based on using the basic principles of the e-learning process (McLaren, 2009). College programs are implementing verbal, written, or graphic forms of teaching that make information interesting, vivid, and attractive, thereby avoiding the learning process passively conveying information. The learning theory is intended to allow the learners to store and retrieve that information easily, when needed, from working memory. The Armenian Virtual College (2016) includes an introduction for students with an interactive multimedia e-book series, presented by images and videos on different themes of Armenia's history, culture, economy, and more.

The Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University, established in 1999, is in the joint authority of the Russian Federation and Republic of Armenia. It also collaborated in the European Commission Tempus Project with the involvement of universities in three countries of the South Caucasus: Armenian, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The project included in its master's program in migration studies the establishment of the National Migration Competence Centers in each country. In Armenia, the framework of the Distance Learning Center was organized for 20 online learning courses covering a wide variety of programs by offering foreign languages, management, law, economics, information systems and design, among others (Russian-Armenian [Slavonic] University, 2016).

In Armenia, some centers of training and consulting services were organized in collaboration with the U.S. Agency for International Development through the Armenian private sector. The centers have online training courses and assessment

and consulting services for the various spheres of the Armenian economy's private businesses to assist in organizing professional and quality assurance services for successful businesses.

The portal of the E-Learning Centre was established to support and develop e-learning programs at the Armenian educational institutions, and to enhance the quality of educational and scientific activities of distance learners and teachers. The list of online courses of this portal includes history of education, education, and computer learning (E-Learning Center, 2016).

The Enterprise Incubator Foundation (2014b), which was established in 2002, is a business and consulting services company that is supporting the development of the information and communication technology sector in Armenia. It is operated as a consulting service for business development and advisory services for country's instructional technology companies. Professionals of the company have organized online learning of Java, web, network foundations, and software programming for beginners in different regions of Armenia. The Enterprise Incubator Foundation (2014a) cooperates with Microsoft Corporation, Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems, Hewlett Packard, Intel, and many other technological companies.

In 2009, Union of Armenian Medicine Producers and Importers, with the collaboration of the U.S. Agency for International Development, established the GXP Centre for Excellence. The GXP Centre for Excellence is a company involved in the area of manufacturing and distributing Armenian pharmaceutical and biotechnology production. It offers distance learning courses on professional topics developed by the international professionals in the pharmaceutical industry that have been approved by the Armenian Ministry of Health. In distance learning training courses, the staff at the center utilize a variety of types of instructional and educational technology with the cooperation of Armenian and

international experts for its programs (GXP Centre for Excellence, 2014). The implementation of e-learning courses was organized as online courses in the state-owned and private educational institutions and learning centers with a mission to improve and develop the basic knowledge of the Armenian business and economy.

SUMMARY

E-learning was established and developed in Armenia in various ways. Some were organized on the basis of cooperation with the international higher institutions of the European Union countries by opening distance learning centers and offices at the universities or other higher education institutions in Armenia. Some were developed with the help of the U.S. Agency of International Development or the World Bank Services. Because the Armenian government is not able to finance all the organized e-learning centers and courses, most projects were based on European financial grants programs given to Armenia. Studies at the establishments of E-Laboratories and Centers included confirmation that not all classes are based on the seven principles for good practice in education. Seven general principles that are essential components for effective learning follow: (a) encourage student-faculty contact, (b) encourage cooperation among students, (c) encourage active learning, (d) give prompt feedback, (e) emphasize time on task, (f) communicate high expectations, and (g) respect diverse talent and ways of learning. To organize e-learning courses according to the seven principles of good practice, there is a need for good research on how to design those courses that will keep the learners active, because the active learning incorporates past experiences and allows students to talk and write about what they are learning (Sorensen & Baylen, 2009). Though all the points of seven principles of good practice were created for the traditional classroom

instructions rather than the web environment, they can be used in the online environment by developing new strategies.

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