

ONLINE LEARNING IN ROMANIA

Part of a Nation's Transformative Experience

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The QRDE International Section is pleased to present in this issue the third in our series on the current state of distance education within select countries from around the world. This series is designed to serve as a sample of the state of online learning as it currently exists in a wide variety of disparate countries in an attempt to broaden distance learning experts in their understanding of the state of online learning outside of the North American context.

Our first entry in the series, published in QRDE Volume 18, Number 2, was based on a major Middle Eastern country, Saudi Arabia (Alahmari, 2017). In that inaugural article, Alahmari examined the use of distance learning in a notable Saudi higher education setting to address a specific cultural requirement of that institution. That inaugural article therefore served as a specific example of how higher education institutions can successfully apply distance learning technologies—in this case, closed-circuit television and learning management system-based systems—alongside face-to-face courses even when cultural issues (i.e.,

a requirement for the separation of genders during instruction) are a significant factor.

The second entry in the series, published in QRDE Volume 18, Number 3, was focused on a major Asian country, Japan (Nakamura, 2017). In that second article of the series, Nakamura highlighted some key national distance education initiatives that have been implemented in one of the world's most technologically advanced countries. That article provided demonstrable evidence, among other factors, that an extremely sophisticated technological infrastructure—such as the one present in Japan, one of the world's technology leaders—is not a singular guarantee of successful online learning programs if the requisite training in online learning methods and development of an understanding of distance education's theory and application are not present.

In this current issue of QRDE, we shift our attention from the Middle and Far East to the easternmost part of the European continent. The country examined, Romania, though now a member of the European Union (EU), has

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nevertheless only in the past half century emerged from historical of alignment with the now-dissolved Warsaw Pact, eight countries under communist rule (i.e., Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union) that were signatories to the “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance,” and, more specifically, a difficult and extended period under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu (Baryshnikov, 2004; Deletant, 2007). Today, Romanians are able to point to their 2007 accession to the European Union (Cleveland, 2006; Stan & Zaharia, 2007) as well as their 2004 entry into the NATO defense organization (Leonard, 1999) as documentation of their formal alignment with the ongoing European project* in spite of the nation’s previous opposing political alignment in the mid-20th century.

The case of Romania provides a very different setting from the first two countries represented in this series on the current state of distance learning around the world. Romania, a country historically constrained by an economic background linked to its past political alignment, is now undergoing multiple processes associated with the transition to a modern state within the EU, and therefore provides the interesting and important case where a previously undersupported educational system under a command economy undertook a significant cultural shift towards a free market and a pluralist democracy—including the use of online learning—to prepare Romanian learners with the 21st century skills required in today’s world economic context. It also serves as an entry into the ongoing discussion on how online learning may change the nature of higher education (Amirault, 2012; Amirault & Visser, 2009).

Beyond the fundamental changes associated with accession to the EU, a plethora of regulations originally specified in the *Lisbon Treaty* but revised and expanded over time (“Allons, citoyens de l’Europe,” 2010; EUR-Lex, 2018), are similarly imposed upon Romania as they are with all EU member states.

Attention to the EU’s many educational policies and programs such as those outlined in the *Joint Technology Initiatives*, which specify methods and joint approaches for implementing the Lisbon Treaty, and the *Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development*, an EU program for funding research and technological advances (CIRO, 2018; The European Commission, 2008), are educational programs and regulatory requirements of great significance to Romania as it seeks to remain in harmony with and aligned to EU standards.

As with many geopolitical issues surrounding the evolution of the EU, the wide variation in socioeconomic backgrounds of the current 28 EU member countries can present significant challenges in arriving at a uniform and acceptable level of conformity. The realm of education is no exception. Romania is a salient case of an EU country that, while possessing an undeniably rich history, has nevertheless emerged from an economically difficult period during its membership in the Warsaw Pact, and has thus undergone an immense shift in orientation from a command political/economic system to a democratic political structure and a free-market economy.

This makes the story of Romania’s move into online learning of great interest to nearly any distance learning researcher. The country provides an excellent case of a country essentially “starting from scratch” in moving toward a sophisticated, modern, technology-based educational system that incorporates online learning. Contrast this case to, say, that of Japan, where that country has for decades *manufactured* the advanced technological devices implemented in all online learning efforts due to the country’s extended investment in technical, scientific and manufacturing education. Romania, in contrast, has had first to overcome basic economic, cultural, and educational barriers to even begin considering incorporation of online learning into its educational curriculum. Our author for this issue, Luminita C. Hartle, a Romanian native, provides a doorway into examining this transition,

and further posits the role of online learning as it can be envisioned for the future of the country's national educational system.

The lessons witnessed in the Romanian context can be abstracted to nearly any country moving between such different worlds of existence. The echoes of hope Romania feels when considering what online learning can bring to the nation's present and future workforce is clearly evident in this article. QRDE readers are encouraged to consider this story of the Romanian experience, and thereby more fully recognize that, for many nations, distance learning represents not just another *variant* of learning, but a doorway into modernity and a pathway to social and economic prosperity.

*It is somewhat ironic that any such opposing thought could be made of Romania: the root name of the country is, after all, "Roman," harkening back two millennia to the Roman Empire, whose vestiges eventually made up what we know today as "Europe." Nevertheless, the questions of Romania's "European-ness" had, in the past, been an ongoing historical discussion. (cf. Johnstone, 1978)

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